

Sexual harassment and assault on campus: What can Aotearoa New Zealand learn from Australia's 'Respect. Now. Always.' initiative

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Abstract

On 4 September 2018, the University of Auckland hosted a hui on preventing and responding to sexual assault and harassment on university campuses. The hui was organised by the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA), and included speakers from the University of Sydney and Universities Australia. The speakers outlined new initiatives recently launched across the tertiary sector in Australia. After explaining the 'Respect. Now. Always.' and 'Safer Communities' initiatives, this report considers lessons the Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary sector could learn from them. This report was prepared with the written assistance and approval of Renee Hamilton (Policy Director for Safety and Wellbeing, Universities Australia), Amber Colhoun (Project Manager for Student Support Services, University of Sydney), and Jordi Austin (Director of Student Support Services, University of Sydney).

Keywords

Sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape prevention, campus rape, student support, student services, University of Sydney, Universities Australia, ANZSSA

On September 4 2018, the University of Auckland hosted a hui on preventing and responding to sexual assault and harassment on university campuses. The hui was organised by the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA), and included speakers from the University of Sydney and Universities Australia.¹ In February 2016, Australian universities had launched a coordinated effort to address campus sexual assault and harassment, and this hui served as a space for sharing their experiences and for Auckland staff and students in attendance to learn from them.

The half-day event consisted of two presentations followed by a student-led panel discussion, all of which were received by an attentive audience. The first presentation gave an overview of recent developments to address campus rape and sexual harassment undertaken as the 'Respect. Now. Always.' initiative. It was offered by a representative from Universities Australia, the peak body and lobbying group for all 39 universities in Australia, working primarily with the Vice-Chancellors at these institutions. The second presentation was by University of Sydney staff, talking about the 'Safer Communities' initiatives – most notably the 'Consent Matters' training module – recently launched there. Finally, the hui concluded with a panel of University of Auckland students discussing what they would like to see happen to improve local responses to sexual assault and harassment on campuses, especially their own. Both 'Respect. Now. Always.' and the 'Safer Communities' project have been massive undertakings. The hui emphasised both the human and economic resources involved and a sense of hopefulness that a new commitment to student respect and safety was truly underway. While these changes give cause for real optimism that Australian universities are tackling serious, structural problems, they are not without their potential pitfalls and blind spots. After detailing

highlights of the Australian experience as presented at the hui, this report will close by considering what, if anything, New Zealand universities can learn from our Australian neighbours.

Context for the changes in the Australian approach

Sexual assault on campus – and student demands for campus leaders to address it seriously – has a long history, so what has enabled these changes to take place now? The presentations highlighted a mix of internal (to the Australian higher education sector) and external forces over the last five years that culminated in the nationwide ‘Respect. Now. Always.’ initiative, trainings, and policy shifts.² Awareness about rape culture, and campus rape in particular, was heightened by the release of the 2015 US documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which was shown at a number of Australian universities and was aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Australian Netflix.³ International conversations about campus sexual assault were accompanied by persistent, highly vocal local student pressure. In 2015, the National Union of Students conducted the ‘Let’s Talk About It’ survey to raise awareness of experiences of sexual assault and harassment. In 2016, students on some campuses started requesting that consent education be provided at their universities. Individual universities, of course, had been addressing violence in different ways; now the time was ripe to address the problem collectively. Once the results of the ‘Let’s Talk About It’ survey were released, all Australian Vice-Chancellors made it clear that they had heard what the students had reported. They acknowledged the pain students shared and committed to responding with compassion and care. In February 2016, the ‘Respect. Now. Always.’ campaign was born.

‘Respect. Now. Always.’ and the ‘Safer Communities’ initiative

The goal of the ‘Respect. Now. Always.’ initiative is ‘to build a safer, more respectful community’. To do this, it works to raise awareness, gather national data, and develop evidence-led, supportive, consistent, and transparent practices and policies. The programme recognises that changing culture is necessary for both the prevention of sexual violence and better interventions after-the-fact.

In order to tackle the problems of sexual assault and harassment on Australian campuses, the sector first needed to understand their scope and form. Universities Australia – on behalf of Australia’s 39 Vice-Chancellors – asked the Australian Human Rights Commission to undertake a national survey of university students, asking them about their experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Over 30,000 students responded to the survey, which was deployed across the country in late 2016. The Australian Human Rights Commission released a national report on the survey results on 1 August 2017, and all 39 universities publicly released their institutional reports on the same day.

What the Australian university sector learned was depressing but unsurprising: sexual harassment and sexual assault are widespread problems in Australia. Looking only at violence or harassment in campus settings across 2015 and 2016, the survey found that one in five students had been sexually harassed, and 1.6 percent of students had been sexually assaulted during that period.⁴ Very few reported these crimes to either their university or the police (where appropriate), and no trans or gender-diverse students did, either because they did not know to whom they should report the incident or were unsure if their experience would be deemed ‘serious enough’ to warrant a report.⁵ Also unsurprising is that vulnerability to assault or harassment is not evenly shared: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning,

and intersex (LGBTQI) students, students with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Islander students are particularly susceptible to assault and harassment. Likewise especially vulnerable are international students, who often mistakenly believe their visas will be revoked if they report an assault. For some international students, their parents have access to all of their records – including medical records – making them less likely to seek medical help if they are targeted. In short, the survey confirmed that assault and harassment are gendered, and gender is intersectional: significantly more cisgender and transwomen than men are sexually assaulted, while reported assailants are typically cisgender men.

Useful for understanding the culture of harassment on campuses, the survey also asked about bystander intervention. One-quarter of respondents said they witnessed sexual harassment or assault on campus. One in three bystanders intervened in cases of assault; only one in five intervened when they witnessed harassment.

As an initial response to the survey results, Universities Australia released its 10 Point Action Plan on 1 August 2017, which outlined a long-term programme of work spanning prevention, education, and support. In 2018, several pieces of work under the 10 Point Action Plan were released. First, a set of guidelines for universities responding to sexual assault and sexual harassment was announced in July 2018. The guidelines state that universities need to move away from a purely legal response to these behaviours to one that prioritises the needs of the person who experiences the violence. In addition to this point, the guidelines make a series of other suggestions to universities, including:

- Consider creating a standalone policy to address sexual assault and sexual harassment;
- Ensure the majority of student-facing staff have first-responder skills;
- Consider providing a specialist-trained single point of contact for students making reports;
- Consider a data collection mechanism that captures de-identified disclosures and formal reports;
- Offer an interpreter to students who prefer to provide information in their first language.

In July 2018, Universities Australia – in partnership with the National Tertiary Education Union, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, and the Australian Council of Graduate Research – also released a set of principles to guide postgraduate student–supervisor relationship. At the core of these principles is that a romantic or sexual relationship between a supervisor and their student is never appropriate. This statement is important for a number of reasons, notably in signalling again that sexual assault and harassment are not just perpetrated by young, drunk men behaving badly.

The University of Sydney has developed and implemented a multifaceted approach to prevent and respond to sexual assault and sexual harassment as part of their ‘Safer Communities’ project and their commitment to the ‘Respect. Now. Always.’ campaign. ‘Safer Communities’ implements key suggestions outlined above. Notably, they have developed a *stand-alone policy* for students that addresses rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. It is not buried in an anti-bullying or ‘academic integrity’ framework. The significance and uniqueness of sexual assault and harassment are acknowledged, and the problem is addressed on its own to further demonstrate commitment to a solution.

A second critical support initiative from the University of Sydney is the provision of a *single point of contact* for students seeking help, here offered in the form of a team of Student Liaison Officers. These staff, with expertise in supporting survivors of sexual assault, provide case management and advocacy for students who have experienced assault or harassment. They can offer tailored support to any student. There are no complicated flow-charts to work through, no impenetrable websites with relevant information buried and often inaccessible.

Third, supporting the move away from a primarily legal response to sexual assault, the ‘Safer Communities’ project takes a *broader cultural, social, health-and-well-being approach*. This

includes meeting student demand (and need) for consent education. For example, in Semester 1, 2018, the University of Sydney launched ‘Consent Matters’ as a compulsory online education module. It includes multiple quizzes related to questions of consent and harassment, delivered to students through the Canvas learning management system. In its inaugural semester, 85 percent of incoming undergraduate and postgraduate students completed the module. An option is provided for survivors to be excused from completing it if doing so would be triggering or traumatising. In these cases, support resources are immediately made available to the student. To deliver ‘Consent Matters’, the University of Sydney took an externally developed module and tailored its delivery with university-specific information and resources to meet the needs of their community. Thus, the training module was still a significant amount of work – especially for IT services – but they weren’t starting from scratch.

Fourth, and complementing consent education, the ‘Safer Communities’ project also works on building *bystander awareness skills* in select student groups. This provides an in-person training component to prevent violence. The training has been delivered to groups at higher risk, such as residents in university-owned accommodation and student leaders of groups who attend social camps. The bystander training programme has been run in partnership with external providers, such as the non-profit Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia.

A fifth component of the University of Sydney ‘Safer Communities’ initiative is the building of *first-responder skills* among all student-facing staff. First-responder training can be extensive and resource-intensive, but its emphasis on the need for empathy and avoiding victim-blaming renders it critically important. This training defines sexual assault and trauma impacts; it workshops different scenarios so participants can discuss how to respond appropriately; it explains the legal situation for bystanders and victims; and it debunks rape myths. Importantly, while a student may be unlikely to lodge a rape or harassment complaint directly with a member of the university’s senior leadership team, many senior leaders at Australian universities have undertaken first-responder training. This signals the seriousness with which they are approaching the problem, and they have reported finding it useful training for active listening. Listening seriously to what students need from universities is essential if effective sexual assault interventions are to get off the ground.

Understanding the significance of a national approach to campus assault and lessons shared

Building a better response system to handle assaults and harassment after-the-fact is critical, but so is building a culture that works to prevent assault and harassment in the first place. These two goals go hand-in-hand. And to make any real headway on either front, everyone has to be committed, particularly campus leadership. Collaboration is key. In response to the results of the national survey of students, Universities Australia’s Chair, Professor Margaret Gardner, Vice-Chancellor of Monash University, held a press conference where she spoke directly to students: ‘We are listening. We will act.’ Her sentiment was echoed by VCs across the country. By being open and transparent about reflecting on the survey results and changes that would ensue, they made it clear that the shame is not with victim-survivors but with perpetrators. They made it clear that it is okay to talk about rape and sexual harassment. It is okay to seek help.

Perhaps understandably, senior leadership teams at some universities have historically been reluctant to talk in a sustained way about the level of sexual assault and harassment on campuses, aware of their central role of promoting and building on the positive contributions

their campuses are making in the community. But being out in front of the issue, proactively acknowledging what students are experiencing, and showing them that the university is on their side is part of what it means to be a student-centred university. Here is where the coordinated public efforts of all 39 Australian VCs have been particularly notable. Students can have bad experiences anywhere; how universities handle those experiences is what makes them exceptional. Further, since a primary function of universities is to provide broad social and cultural leadership, there is a natural role for universities to play here. As the presenters made clear, this is about communicating what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

But given that universities are also complex financial and political institutions, it is perhaps not surprising that one key recommendation from Universities Australia – that universities move away from a purely legal response to sexual assault and sexual harassment – presented a challenge to some parts of the sector. Legal responses centre legal concerns; they do not focus on the causes of rape and harassment. Rape and harassment are, primarily, social issues, and to cope with these interrelated problems adequately, universities need to see and treat these issues as such: as socio-cultural problems. This is part of what it means to make the shift to putting the safety and well-being of students and the larger community at the core of university responses. And this brings us back to prevention.

The prevention arm of this initiative is where the larger cultural dynamics that produce sexual assault and harassment are acknowledged and addressed. Assaults on and harassment of students (and staff) breed in an institution that fails to take gender equality at all levels seriously. The whole institution, in all of its practices, has to model non-bullying, consent-driven, and equitable hiring, enrolment, language, and curricula. Thus, the presenters noted a key challenge: combatting unfounded views of gender equity. So long as members of the university communities (and the community at large) persist in the unsubstantiated belief that gender equity has already been achieved, they will not see sexual harassment as a problem or recognise sexual assault and harassment as a gender-based issue. Assault and harassment will continue to be perceived and addressed as an individual problem or a one-off event, rather than as the systemic, institutional issues that they actually represent.

How Aotearoa New Zealand can learn from and build on the Australian example

Different universities are in different places in their knowledge about this issue and their willingness to invest the resources that addressing it demands. To bring everyone on board in Aotearoa New Zealand will require, as it did in Australia, a combination of media, student, and other stakeholder pressure. The presenters noted that *The Hunting Ground* helped move the dial on thinking about this issue. This is one resource we could think creatively about using to help raise awareness here in Aotearoa.

But we are also already having our own national conversation, in addition to the conversations taking place locally, at each individual tertiary institution. In 2017, Thursdays in Black Aotearoa New Zealand (a student group campaigning to end campus rape) and the New Zealand Union of Student Associations released their *In our own words* report, outlining the results of their survey of university students in Aotearoa New Zealand. The more than 1,400 respondents reported shockingly high rates of sexual harassment and assault at universities across the country (Thursdays in Black Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). While the incidents recounted in the report include events prior to students' entry to university, this report does provide a starting point for understanding the scope of the issue for those attending university.

In addition, this year we have been celebrating 125 years of women's suffrage and contemplating how far we as a nation have come in achieving gender equality. To quote the current exhibition at Auckland War Memorial Museum, now is a prime time to ask 'Are We There Yet?' As the exhibit makes clear, from (un)equal pay to high rates of sexual assault, we are not. According to the Ministry of Justice, 24 percent of cisgender women in New Zealand, and six percent of cisgender men, will experience sexual assault in their lifetimes (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Those aged 16-24 are at the highest risk – making tertiary students particularly vulnerable.

As too many of us are aware, from our own conversations with students and colleagues – and often from our own experiences – universities in New Zealand, as everywhere else, are rife with sexual assault and sexual harassment. Gender-based harassment is a systemic, persistent problem that requires concerted, coalitional, transparent, and multi-pronged efforts if we are to support victim-survivors now and reduce the rates of harassment and assault in the future. This approach must take seriously the varying needs of victims: international students have different concerns from domestic students; cisgender male survivors have needs and concerns that are often effaced in these conversations; genderqueer, trans, and LGB students, and students with disabilities face additional threats and hurdles to help-seeking; student-focused initiatives render invisible staff who are victimised in the course of doing their jobs. At the same time, underlying all of these concerns is an understanding that sexual assault and harassment are phenomena driven by gender power: bullying and domination by those with power wielded against those without it.

An anti-sexual violence effort like the one launched in Australia is past due here. If we were to undertake a similar initiative, we could learn from what has been critical to the Australians' success. First, move away from a purely legal approach and focus instead on education, raising awareness, and promoting a culture shift through an emphasis on prevention. Second, resist the pull of the flowchart in telling students where they can get help. Fliers and posters across campus modelled on the 'Respect. Now. Always.' initiative's clear and effective materials are a good idea; an app students can download to their phones that can put them directly in contact with resources would be even better, or at least a useful addition. Similarly, a single data collection mechanism to capture disclosures and formal reports would help different responders have a similar sense of the problem and provide decision makers with better data.⁶ Third, use resources that complement those we already have (where we do have them), such as using existing learning management systems to reach students with educational modules.

We could also expand on a few key lessons learned or areas missing in the Australian data-gathering, response, and prevention phases. One discussion point on the day of the hui was the importance of the timing of data-gathering so that response rates can be optimized. If we were to undertake a mission in Aotearoa New Zealand similar to Australia's 'Let's Talk About It' survey, distributing the survey closer to the beginning of the school term rather than, say, late-term or summer would be crucial for gathering data we could have confidence in and gaining a fuller appreciation for the nature and scope of our students' experiences.

While students here, as there, are in desperate need of assistance, staff also face high levels of sexual and gender-based harassment – and sometimes assault – at work. Bringing in staff well-being, and including staff as victims of assault, is critical in the whole-of-institution approach that is required to change a culture of gender-based harassment and sexual assault on campus. Here it is important to remember that staff do not only sometimes harass their students: sometimes they harass their colleagues as well, and sometimes they are harassed by their students.

Further, as the University of Auckland students' panel noted, some of the rape myths that need particular debunking here involve drinking and sex, given the high rates of alcohol consumption in Aotearoa New Zealand. They also noted that life-skills training – e.g. on consent, appropriate and non-harassing behaviour, and first-responder best practices – needs to be designed for students living off-campus as well as those in residence halls, given the diversity of places our student populations live.

In thinking both about responding to violence and preventing future violence, Auckland students noted that holding people accountable – which is different from just pursuing criminal justice responses – is a critical part of creating a safe environment and *changing norms* around sexual harassment. Those who enable harassment to occur need to take responsibility as well. Real justice helps people become better members of a community, rather than just punishing individuals for past bad behaviour. *This* is what cultural change involves.⁷

As well, we will need to consider how to embed any response to sexual harassment and violence on campuses in our collective responsibilities to live better and more fully our commitments under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Pākehā and Māori need to work together to make sure that any prevention and response programmes we develop centre Māori world views and needs, rather than add them after the fact as a separate, special category of responsibility. This might mean talking explicitly about the rhetorical and material connections between a stance of domination that underlies sexual harassment and violence, on the one hand, with domination that facilitates the ongoing effects of colonialism, on the other. Taking responsibility for past behaviours with the aim of building a stronger, more inclusive community, as noted above, is also a model for how we can move forward on multiple issues.

It was a privilege to be able to attend this hui and to share here what we learned in that space. I left the presentations feeling optimistic about the possibilities for real change in how campuses approach the seemingly entrenched problem of sexual violence. The primary messages that the hui drove home are that both transparency and a systemic approach are key to addressing students' desperate need for a change in the conversation about – and responses to – sexual assault and sexual harassment, on campus and off.

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Notes

- 1 ANZSSA sponsored the University of Sydney representatives present at the hui, and Universities New Zealand sponsored the Universities Australia representative. The hui was part of a series of events running across two days, which enabled the participation of staff and senior representatives from all eight New Zealand universities.
- 2 External pressure continues. In April 2018, Al Jazeera's 101 East programme ran a 25-minute documentary titled, 'Australia: Rape on Campus' about the plight of international students and sexual assault in Australia. The documentary can be viewed for free on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGGRdXCpHz0>
- 3 For more information, see <http://thehuntinggroundfilm.com/>. The film and discussion packets for public screenings are available from the website. The film is also available from Netflix and iTunes.
- 4 One in two respondents had experienced sexual harassment in some context at some point in their lives, but the survey only reported on-campus experiences in the 2015-2016 period.
- 5 Two percent of those sexually harassed reported; nine percent of those assaulted did.
- 6 On this point, Project Calisto (<https://www.projectcalisto.org/>) is an on-line reporting tool for campuses that gives more power to student victims and increases reporting rates.
- 7 Students spoke specifically about the possibilities of restorative justice. For more on the importance of a restorative justice approach to sexual violence among young people in particular, see Baliga (2018).

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