

6 April 2022

Professor Mary O’Kane AC

Chair Australian Universities Accord Panel

Dear Chair,

Re: the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper Consultation

My name is Angela Griffin and I am a recent graduate from UNSW Sydney. In my time studying I was a student activist and representative and participated in many university governance processes including my university’s Academic Board. In particular, I was involved in governance processes related to the implementation of the Australian Human Rights Commission’s ‘Change the Course’ report, which in 2017 exposed the prevalence of sexual violence on Australian university campuses.

This submission will respond to questions 39 & 40 of the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper and will make one major suggestion to improve student experience on university campuses: the Australian government and the university sector must establish a national independent body to oversee universities’ consistent implementation of sexual violence prevention and response initiatives.

I really appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to this process. Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Angela Griffin

Contact: angela.griffin@unsw.edu.au

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel

Introduction

In 2021 I completed an honours thesis titled 'Beyond Change the Course: Genuine & Meaningful Sexual Violence Student Activism & Representation'. This thesis asked the question:

What are the perceptions and experiences of student activists of their universities' implementation of the 'Change the Course' report recommendations and the extent to which students have been meaningfully engaged in this process?

From this research I discovered that student representatives who were in their roles immediately following the release of the 'Change the Course' report (the report) had a far different experience than those who subsequently held those roles.

Immediately following the report's release, students felt meaningfully listened to, part of a change process and could see real action being taken. Those more recently involved no longer felt a part of governance processes and felt that the pace of change had stalled. Some could not even identify what their universities were doing to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

Following the release of the report universities were spurred into action by poor media coverage and pressure from student and staff feminist groups. While some universities have continued their efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence, this is not equally the case across the sector. Without national oversight, many students in my research reported watching their universities de-invest in these efforts.

In response to questions 39 & 40 of the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion, I suggest that, in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students studying at Australian universities, the Accord Panel must include a focus on sexual violence focus in their considerations and recommend the establishment of a national independent body to oversee continual university response to the issue of sexual violence on campuses.

Background

According to the 2021 National Student Safety Survey, 16% of university students have experienced sexual harassment and 2.5% have experienced sexual assault in a university context since starting university¹. Previously, the Australian Human Rights Commission found that 51% of university students experienced sexual harassment and 6.9% experienced sexual assault in any context during their time as a university student².

As stated in the Accord Discussion Paper, Australia's higher education providers "underpin and contribute to the intellectual, cultural, community and economic development of the nation." As such, they have a moral responsibility to ensure that higher education is a safe environment for all to enter. This includes a responsibility to take initiatives towards the eradication of sexual violence on campuses.

Experiences of sexual violence can have long term health (both physical and mental), financial and emotional impacts on a victim-survivor's wellbeing³. In a university context, students are also impacted academically. Research shows that university student victim-survivors experience a decreased ability to study and participate in university life⁴. It also shows that this sexual violence incident can continue to impact victim-survivors' future career prospects⁵.

Research also shows that victim-survivors who have experienced sexual violence whilst at university are far more likely to recover from this event if the process of reporting and seeking support at university is swift and responses are affirming⁶. Students who do not receive this response experience higher rates of anxiety, sexual dysfunction, and other trauma-related outcomes⁷.

¹ Heywood, W., P. Myers, A. Powell, G. Meikle & D. Nguyen (2022) *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*, Melbourne: The Social Research Centre.

² Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) *Change the Course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian Universities*, Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

³ Boyd, C. (2011) *The Impacts of Sexual Assault on Women*, available at: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/rs2_1.pdf.

⁴ Potter, S., R. Howard, S. Murphy & M. Moynihan (2018) 'Long-term impacts of college sexual assaults on women survivors' educational and career attainments', *Journal of American College Health*, 66(6): 396-507.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Smith, C. & J. Freyd (2014) 'Institutional betrayal', *American Psychologist*, 69(6): 575-587.

⁷ *ibid*

For this reason, in response to questions 39 & 40 of the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, it is imperative that the Accord include a component requiring national oversight of universities' activities to prevent and respond to sexual violence on campuses.

Relevant findings from my research

In 2021, I completed my honours thesis at the University of New South Wales. For this piece of work I received 12 submissions from students from four higher education institutions in metropolitan Sydney. These students were all in formal student leadership positions, such as SRC or student union Women's Officers, or were involved in their university's Women's Collective. From this research I found the following:

1. *Without oversight, Universities have differing levels of prevention & response to sexual violence*

The 'Change the Course' report made nine recommendations for universities to improve their sexual violence prevention and response processes. These recommendations required universities to establish an implementation working group with student representation, ensure students and staff knew how to engage in respectful relationships, and provide accessible and easily locatable support and reporting options, among other actions⁸.

As a part of my research, I conducted an analysis of the public websites of NSW universities. From this analysis I determined a huge disparity in the ways in which universities had implemented the report's recommendations. While some had clearly put in place education and training, both online and in person, aimed at understanding consent and how to engage in respectful relationships, others were not doing so. This was similarly the case when analysing whole of university communication campaigns and student engagement on sexual violence governance arrangements.

Universities' activities to prevent and respond to sexual violence was also difficult to locate and, in some cases, not publicly reported at all. This is despite recommendation 3 of the report requiring universities to widely disseminate information about support and reporting

⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) *Change the Course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian Universities*, Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

options. Without oversight, initiatives to address sexual violence on campuses will continue to be driven by the universities themselves. As such, some universities will continue to implement evidence based and trauma informed initiatives into the future, and others will not. This disparity amongst the sector creates a significant inequality in student experience.

2. The pace of change diminished with less media attention

In submissions made to my research, university student representatives and activists described their experiences in which, immediately following the release of the report, universities made significant progress on the issue of sexual violence on campuses. Students involved in governance process in 2017-2018 reported feeling positively about the directions their universities were taking. For example, a participant in my research stated:

“[My university] ensured that the women’s officers and collective members were invited to many different consultations and working groups when discussing things like the online reporting portal and different issues as they arose.”

Others spoke highly of new reporting pathways being created:

“This portal was designed to allow victim survivors the opportunity to decide what happened with their report (offered counselling, report to the police, etc) and for the university to publicly share the data...”

Further spoke about the benefit of introduced education modules:

“[My university] got the Consent Matters module and this training could have been more engaging but it is a good step forward.”

In subsequent years, however, student representatives and activists began to identify diminishing engagement with students. One participant summed this point up when they stated:

“At first, it appeared that the university genuinely wanted our input and valued contributions from students living the university experience... however, it slowly became more of an exercise to tick a box that they were doing student consultation and then not actually take our contributions on board.”

Other participants argued that university actions were taken largely for reputational management purposes:

“My university was extremely savvy at protecting their reputation ahead of this crisis. They did that particularly smart white-anting where they announced some measures really early on in this national conversation. Those measures were not done in consultation, nor were they in any way adequate, but it meant the university had something to put in media releases as ongoing stories rolled out.”

“[My university implemented the recommendations of the report] essentially with lip service, window dressing, and, as they always have, only to serve their own interests of protecting their bottom line: PR and money.”

While students in 2017 and 2018 benefited from increased university investment in sexual violence prevention and response, newer students were totally unaware of these activities.

One participant who was in her role in 2020 stated:

“I personally had very little contact with the University regarding the implementation of the Change the Course report... The minimal contact I had with the University was related to providing feedback on other projects unrelated to the topic of sexual misconduct.”

Without the oversight of national media attention, universities took their foot off the accelerator and seem to be resting on a job done. However, sexual violence prevention and response is not a job that can be done with one round of investment. We need consistent re-investment in order to continually update education, communications, and reporting and support options.

In the time since the release of the ‘Change the Course’ report, many states have implemented new consent laws, and students are much more exposed to newer forms of sexual violence such as coercive control⁹ and violence on dating apps¹⁰. This demonstrates the importance of consistent updates to university prevention and response initiatives to ensure continued relevance. While many universities continue to strive towards improvement, without effective governmental oversight this has not been consistent and relies on the good will of individual universities.

⁹ Boxall, H. & A. Morgan (2021) *Experiences of coercive control among Australian women*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

¹⁰ Wolbers, H., H. Boxall, C. Long & A. Gunnoo (2022) *Sexual harassment, aggression and violence victimisation among mobile dating app and website users in Australia*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Sexual assault	<p>“An act of a sexual nature carried out against a person’s will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion and includes any attempts to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape, aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), indecent assault, penetration by objects, forced sexual activity that did not end in penetration and attempts to force a person into sexual activity. For many victim-survivors of sexual assault the effects can be wide-ranging and lifelong, including but not limited to physical injury and ongoing difficulties with mental health and relationships.¹¹”</p>
Sexual harassment	<p>“Sexual harassment is any unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour, where a reasonable person would have anticipated the possibility that the person harassed would feel intimidated, humiliated or offended.¹²”</p>
Sexual violence	<p>“In the ABS Personal Safety Survey (2016), sexual violence is defined as the occurrence, attempt or threat of sexual assault since the age of 15. However, many researchers and clinicians in the field conceptualise sexual violence more broadly to encompass child sexual assault, sexual harassment, street based sexual harassment and image-based abuse.”¹³</p>
SRC	Student Representative Council
Student activist	A student activist is someone that engaging in claim-making outside of official university structures. Often student activists

¹¹ National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence (2021) *Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence*, available at <https://www.nasasv.org.au/resources>.

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

	will agitate using tactics such as protest, boycotts and campaigns to push university institutions to make change. ¹⁴
Student representative	A student representative engages in claim-making from within official university structures. These representatives are often elected and in official roles within a form student organisation. In a sexual violence context, a student representative is often the student organisation's elected Women's Officer ¹⁵ .
Women's Collective	An activist or advocacy group of students at universities aimed at creating a safer environment for women at their university.

¹⁴ Klemencic, M. & B.Y. Park (2018) 'Student politics: Between representation and activism', in B. Cantwell, H. Coates & R. King (eds) *Handbook on the Politics of Higher Education*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 468-506.

¹⁵ *ibid*