

“CHANGE THE COURSE” REPORT – CHANGE THE COURSE AT COLLEGE:

Ms Natasha de Silva, Director Major Projects, Australian Human Rights Commission

Overview of the key findings of the AHRC report, followed by recommendations and ideas for the future.

Key findings

The Change the course report is based on over 30,000 responses to a national survey that was conducted last year by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The survey examined the prevalence, nature and reporting of sexual harassment at Australian universities.

The report also contains quotes and case studies drawn from more than 1800 written submissions received by the Commission.

Students from all 39 Australian universities responded to the survey and made submissions about their experiences. The level of engagement from students, as well as the wider public interest in this work, demonstrates the magnitude of these issues and desire for change.

Overall, our research revealed that:

- 21% of students were sexually harassed at university in 2016
- 1.6% of students were sexually assaulted at university in 2015 or 2016.

Women were significantly more likely than men to have been sexually assaulted or sexually harassed.

LGBT students also reported higher rates of assault and harassment than heterosexual students.

Reporting

Significantly, the survey found that reporting of incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment was very low.

The majority of students had little or no knowledge of how to make a formal report or complaint of sexual assault or sexual harassment to their university.

We found that only 2% of those who were sexually harassed and 9% of those who were sexually assaulted at university made a formal report or complaint to their university.

One of the most common reasons for not reporting was that people did not know where or who to report to.

Another common barrier to reporting was shame or self-blame about what had happened.

When people did report to their university, they were often dissatisfied with the response or level of support provided.

Colleges

It was clear that sexual harassment and assault occur to varying degrees across most areas of university life: including on university grounds, in teaching spaces and, of course, in colleges.

No doubt you will be aware of our findings in relation to colleges:

- Those who were sexually assaulted or sexually harassed at university were more likely than the rest of the student population to live in a college. This suggests that college residents may be at higher risk of being sexually assaulted or sexually harassed.
- Colleges and college social events were also a common location where sexual assault and, to a lesser degree, sexual harassment occurred. Universities with a larger number of colleges also tended to record higher rates of sexual assault.

These issues are not new, and probably not surprising to those of you working in colleges. However, this is the first time we have detailed, reliable information about the nature of university students' experiences, and this provides a powerful point in time to assess where we are and if our places of work are as safe as they can be for all students and staff.

Through the submissions we received, we identified some common factors contributing to sexual assault and sexual harassment within colleges. These were:

- **Hazing practices and other college traditions** involving elements of sexual assault and sexual harassment.
- The **residential setting** of colleges, that can provide opportunities for sexual assault and sexual harassment to occur, for example in shared bathroom facilities or in college bedrooms.
- People described a **culture of excessive alcohol consumption** and social pressure to drink at college parties and social events.
- Related to this, a particularly large number of submissions identified **alcohol as a factor contributing to sexual assault and sexual harassment** that occurred in colleges.
- Lastly, some submissions reported RAs abusing their position of power to perpetrate or facilitate abuse.

Of concern was a *perception* among some students that their college was aware of these behaviours and did nothing to prevent them.

These issues were similar to those identified in the Commission's 2011 Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force Academy, and while I recognise that ADFA is not directly comparable – as a residential training facility, there are inevitably some shared characteristics with university residential colleges.

Recommendations

Universities, and residential colleges, are not of course alone in grappling with ensuring a positive and inclusive culture where all can thrive. Our work with the Australian Defence Forces, and the experiences of other organisations – such as the Victorian Human Rights Commission and its examination of Victoria Police – are illustrative of this challenge.

Essentially in our report we recommended five key areas for action:

1. Firstly, the need for a strong and visible commitment to change from senior leadership.
2. Second, targeted measures aimed at preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment, by challenging the underlying drivers of these behaviours.

3. Third, ensuring adequacy and availability of support services and clear, accessible reporting processes.
4. Fourth, monitoring and evaluation of steps taken, to ensure improvement over time.
5. And lastly, an independent, expert led review of residential colleges to address the high prevalence rates of sexual assault and harassment in this setting.

This last point I will come back to. Generally, however, it is our view that the recommendations made to universities in Change the Course are also of direct relevance to colleges. For examples, as a minimum, application of the first eight recommendations in the college context would in summary look like this:

1. A clear demonstration of leadership and commitment;
2. The establishment of a leadership advisory group that includes students and preferably a sexual assault expert from the local community;
3. A thorough examination by the advisory group of college policies as they relate to sexual assault and harassment to ensure that they place the victim in the centre of the response. A useful learning exercise would be to examine how reports were responded to in the past. Who was responsible for what? Did the college support the student as well as it could have or should have? Understanding past practice is critical to informing future practice;
4. In the audit of policies, ensure that a clear line of accountability and responsibility is articulated so that people can have confidence in the process;
5. Ensure students know of college policies, where to access the policy and where to report and/or seek help following an incident. Accessibility of policies is critical;
6. Ensure the support provided is expert, trauma informed and readily available;
7. Finally, report in these matters on a regular basis and in a de-identified manner so that the response can be tracked and improved upon over time.

However, we note that there are additional issues that colleges must grapple with – and examine - which have not been explored in detail in our report, for example:

- Access to and use of alcohol in the residential setting;
- The purpose of residential based social events, what supervision is provided and who is invited/has access;
- Management of situations where a person reports being sexually assaulted by a fellow college resident;
- The role of RAs – how are they selected, what criteria exists for selection and what training is provided to them to undertake the role;
- To whom should students report in the college and will students have ownership of their report?;
- The role and configuration of the student leadership council – is it a truly representative body?;
- Is the college physical environment conducive to safety? What are the shared spaces? And who has access to what?

These are all difficult questions, which will no doubt be discussed at length over the course of the next two days.

It is for this reason that we have recommended an independent expert led review of residential colleges which considers these specific factors and can make recommendations specific to the college.

We believe that a national approach to this work, acknowledging that different colleges have their own particular context and challenges to deal with, is the best way forward.

A national approach and the development of a national model and standards for addressing the issues raised in the Change the Course report would facilitate a sharing of information and resources, learning from successes and establishing good practice between colleges.

We know that many colleges have embarked on this path, even before the release of the Change the Course report, and that different colleges will be at varying points along that path.

We also know that there will be a backlash to this work by students themselves. This doesn't mean there isn't a problem or that colleges – and universities for that matter – shouldn't push through. It is difficult to open your place of work to scrutiny – but it is essential in achieving cultural change.

Through this project, we have seen the strength that comes from organisations standing together in facing up to the problem of sexual assault and sexual harassment. All 39 universities through Universities Australia, requested the Commission to undertake this work and have collaborated throughout the project.

We are encouraged by the fact that colleges are already tackling these issues together, as evidenced by the time you have dedicated to this conference.

Although much of the discussion to date has focussed on the challenges faced by colleges, it is also clear that you are in a unique position to effect positive change and contribute to action to prevent sexual violence on a national level.