



Bloom-ED is committed to ensuring evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is offered to all young people in their homes, schools and communities. Successful RSE has many positive outcomes that result in healthier hearts, minds, bodies and people.

We are a collective of teachers, researchers, sexologists, students, parents and activists who operate as an alliance - in conjunction with other organisations - to advocate for comprehensive RSE.

<https://www.bloom-ed.org/>

Addressing gender-based violence in higher education

General feedback

1. What do you see as the opportunities or challenges to implementing the proposed whole-of-institution approach?

It is fantastic to see a whole-of-institution approach is being considered. Considering Bloom-ED's area of expertise, we acknowledge that in regard to sexuality education, a whole-of-school approach is considered best practice in allowing for every stakeholder involved to drive home the same messaging. Therefore, we can appreciate that a whole-of-institution approach might also seem like an effective strategy to addressing gender-based violence in higher education. However, members in our group who have worked in higher education settings for extensive periods of time acknowledge there will be challenges to implementing a whole-of-institution approach. Primarily, higher education campuses tend to operate in sections or silos, and there is often little communication between sections, departments, and offices. Indeed, as is highlighted in the action plan, there are various different settings that occur within a higher education context, and in order for a whole-of-institution approach to truly be implemented, all these departments (i.e., businesses, teachers, external contractors etc.) must all be equipped with similar training and procedural knowledge. Ensuring there are clear policies, frameworks, and processes, as well as developing opportunities for staff who work in various sectors to network, communicate and meet regularly with one another, will facilitate a whole-of-institution approach—in effect, cross campus collaboration is required. Additionally, key staff members should be sufficiently trained to be champions of change within their community, to represent their sectors within the university. Furthermore, one incredibly important aspect that is often overlooked when addressing gender-based violence, is the need for extensive evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the whole-of-institution approach. This should be considered as a requirement and vital component of the implementation.

In addition to the ombudsman, we also advise that a champion staff member such as a Sexual Violence Responder or Respect Officer, should be encouraged and financially supported for each education provider versed in disclosure training and can act as a conduit between departments and necessary outside stakeholders (particularly in times or when a case of sexual violence has occurred). This same staff member could either facilitate or manage training within the institution (holding a background in sexology, education, social work, and or/counseling). Currently, some universities do not possess someone in this role, instead referring students to 1800 RESPECT or similar services. There needs to be someone in-house who can offer support, possesses knowledge, and can also assist smooth communication within the education provider so that a whole of institution approach may be achievable.

2. Are there additional considerations a new National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence could include?

In addition to implementing a specialised role in each university as outlined above, it is encouraging to see the recognition of “embedding evidence-based primary prevention activities and respectful relationships education”. Indeed, Bloom-ED are obvious advocates for the use of Relationships and Sexuality education as a prevention strategy. However, there are several key considerations that should be made. Firstly, there must be the inclusion of evidence based and trauma informed secondary and tertiary prevention initiatives to address gender-based violence. Focusing solely on primary prevention will not be effective enough to address this issue, as people attending higher education settings may already have lived experience of trauma or may have perpetrated gender based violence. In this way, there is a need to consider not only how gender-based violence will be prevented and responded to in the way of how the victim is considered, but also how perpetrators are as well. Secondly, as we have seen in Australian news media and beyond, relationships and sexuality education has been propelled into the forefront of sexual violence prevention. In light of recent surveys and high-profile cases of sexual violence, higher education sectors—alongside schools, work environments etc.—have scrambled to provide training to fill this space and, arguably, “tick the box” of sexual violence prevention. This has caused training to be implemented that is inconsistent, significantly differing in quality and operating as eLearning modules that are not informed by evidence informed best practice. Where possible, extensive research shows that in-person training that is developed and conducted by experts in the field of sexual violence prevention is most effective to engaging groups. Education providers need to be appropriately qualified, competent, and confident to discuss matters of sexuality and reproductive health in an evidence-based, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate way. Education should also be affirming and inclusive of all gender identities, sexual orientations, and experiences. It should be based on human rights and reinforce everybody’s right to safe and pleasurable sexual experiences. This not only operates as a sexual violence primary prevention strategy but also enables young people and adults alike to have healthier relational skills and increases individual wellbeing. Cultural awareness must be applied and considered.

Additionally, this cannot be a one-time training of a short duration as this is known to be ineffective, some ongoing training and information is necessary to ensure prevention and management of sexual violence. We understand that in person training of this scale may not be viable. So, if online modes are to be used, there should be the consideration of a “one-size fits all” primary prevention training program, which has the potential to be edited, adapted, and built upon to suit and be applied to differing university contexts. As we know, universities across Australia differ in their ethos, context values and culture and utilising the adaptability of online modules to develop content that is attentive to these various aspects, while also being informed by best practice and evidence-based knowledge.

Furthermore, universities must be equipped with the tools and resources necessary to draft, develop, refine, and evaluate their policies and codes. This will help to ensure there are some consistencies across Australian universities, and that the fundamental requirements for addressing gender-based violence in higher education settings are being met. For instance, there could be a template available for universities to use to draft their policies, or a one-stop-hub of resources for education providers to refer to, which allows for some consistency.

3. How could we ensure the Code addresses the needs of different student and staff cohorts (e.g., LGBTQIA+, international, First Nations, people living with disability and higher degree research students)?

We are pleased to see an intersectional approach is considered and acknowledge the magnitude of this question as each community will hold its own lived experience and require differing resources and assistance to ensure that the Code is inclusive. While we appreciate that many different avenues

can be considered, it is critical that consultation with community groups is central to ensuring the Code addresses the needs of all students and staff. Collaborating with relevant community groups and their representatives is essential, and without this, the Code cannot be truly representative of what is needed by each group. In effect, we recommend utilising the slogan, “Nothing About Us, Without Us.”

From a practical perspective:

- For disabled and linguistically diverse students/staff, having a well-resourced and staffed interpretative or alternative communication specialist would be critical. Despite best intentions for codes and models to reduce experiencing violence/harm; if these populations do not have the adequate communication or support to express their needs and experiences, they may not feel heard, assisted, or safe.
- Furthermore, English versions of the code or in multiple languages would assist this service and for people to know their rights.
- Considering the higher prevalence of violence in all these minority groups, it would be important from a trauma informed perspective to provide resources (physical, online or staffed) that explain the entire process related to reporting or seeking help. Including information regarding privacy, where information goes, how it will be followed up, who will be involved in the process could assist individuals to feel informed and safe, encourages reporting and help-seeking behaviours.
- An awareness of the layered impacts of privacy/reporting for these minority groups should be considered. For example, do they live in the family home, is the abuser their carer/partner who if they learn that the violence has been reported, personal care or financial support may be restricted or violence increase. Of course, this is relevant for all people, but there are layered and compounding factors unique to each group which is why the co-design process of the code and support services should be practiced.
- Absolute clarity relating to privacy and confidentiality to people who report violence and no backlash or consequences for doing so. i.e. will not be punished or experience repercussions such as the issue reported to their immigration/support worker/parole officer/NDIS etc. This links to the clarity related to the process of reporting and where information goes. Due to potential cultural differences, this should be listed as early as possible in any and all communications (written, online, staffed etc.)
- The code should be accessible in various formats - i.e., online; able to be downloaded, read by an eReader, video/audio described (with closed captions), physical copies to be taken away and processed/reviewed privately.
- Social isolation and support - acknowledging the unique barrier related to PWD (People with Disabilities) who may be socially isolated and their abuser may be a friend who they don't want to lose. Could there be a focus on community support, post reporting processes etc. to highlighting that there is further support and an overall focus on the whole wellbeing of the person beyond the report/incidence.
- Support services and awareness for those supporting someone who has experienced the violence. Violence impacts friends, family, teachers etc. of an individual and of course while the individual harmed is the priority need in regard to services/support. Considering the community-based context of most minority groups, and especially from an on campus

perspective, the wider community impact or requirement of support would be helpful to consider in development/design.

4. How could student accommodation and higher education providers effectively partner to prevent gender-based violence and improve how they support victim-survivors?

- Residential hall leaders who are well-trained to receive and respond to disclosures of sexual violence from victim-survivors and perpetrators.
- Going beyond online tutorials/modules to include in-person training on how to be an active upstander/bystander in response to harmful behaviour and sexual violence.
- Ensure that there is always a nurse in student accommodation that students can go to, who is trained to respond to disclosures of sexual violence.
- Have resources available that provide information on what gender-based violence is, where to go for help, who is available for help within the student accommodation
- Could possibly promote self-care strategies within student accommodation.
- Ensure that victim-survivors who do choose to report are kept informed of their report progression, and are met with a trauma informed approach to responding to disclosures.

Thanks,



Giselle Woodley (Researcher and Co-Founder)

on behalf of Bloom-ED Team

team@bloom-ed.org

GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845

Submission additionally prepared by:

Sarah Vrankovich (Researcher)

Jordina Quain (Education Director - Sexuality Education Counselling and Consultancy Agency (SECCA)

Finn Wrigley - (Sexuality Educator)

Dr Jacqui Hendriks (Founder, Sexology Co-Ordinator, Curtin University)

Bibliography

The following publications summarise the benefits of comprehensive relationships and sexuality education, as well as provide evidence of a holistic approach.

- [UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education](#)
- [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#)
- [Katrina Marson Churchill Fellowship Report](#) (where she identifies excellent international examples of RSE). Katrina also wrote a separate policy guidance document for the Federal government available [here](#)

- The Case for Addressing Gender and Power in Sexuality and HIV Education: A Comprehensive Review of Evaluation Studies
- Teacher training organisations and their preparation of the pre-service teacher to deliver comprehensive sexuality education in the school setting: A systematic literature review
- Traversing TechSex: Benefits and risks in digitally mediated sex and relationships