



Qualitative research on experiences
of sexual harassment and sexual assault
among university students in 2021.



Social
Research
Centre

**NATIONAL
STUDENT
SAFETY
SURVEY**

NATIONAL STUDENT SAFETY SURVEY

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This report has been prepared by the Social Research Centre for Universities Australia. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of Universities Australia.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Wurundjeri People who are the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our research team is located, and we recognise the ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations peoples around Australia and the world. We also acknowledge the numerous students who gave their time to participate in the research. We further acknowledge the lived experience of victim/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault. This research hopes to contribute to a future free of violence and abuse for all Australians.

Suggested citation

Nisbet, L., Halse, G., van Esbroek, E., Heywood, W., Powell, A. & Myers, P. (2022). National Student Safety Survey: Qualitative research on experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021. Melbourne: The Social Research Centre.

Caution to the reader

Please note that this report contains descriptions of sexual harassment and sexual assault, as well as mentions of self-harm, drug use and suicide ideation.

If you feel you would like to speak to someone for support or information in relation to these issues, you can contact these free support services:

- 1800RESPECT
(1800 737 732 or 1800RESPECT.org.au)
- Lifeline
(lifeline.org.au or 13 11 14)
- QLife
(1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au)
- Relationships Australia
(1300 364 277 or relationships.org.au)
- Mensline Australia
(1300 789 978 or mensline.org.au)

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Prepared by the Social Research Centre

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Executive Summary

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) was funded by Universities Australia (UA) through the *Respect. Now. Always.* initiative – a sector-wide program that aims to prevent sexual violence in university communities and better support those who have been affected. It builds on an important legacy of previous research and advocacy – informing the ongoing efforts of Australian universities in building equitable, safe and inclusive learning experiences for their students.

The NSSS was undertaken online in September – October 2021. A total of 43,819 students from 38 UA member institutions across Australia participated in the survey during this period. Accompanying the NSSS was a qualitative research component consisting of three open-ended questions. These questions provided victim/survivors an opportunity to disclose their experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault in their own words, describe the impact of these experiences on their university student life and to make their own recommendations for reform. The qualitative component was open to all students who had been enrolled in an Australian university in the past five years. Students were invited to complete this component through a link provided at the conclusion of the survey and via a link on the Social Research Centre's website. In total, 1,835 students participated in the qualitative component of the NSSS.

Nature of incidents

Students reported a range of incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault in a university context, which involved catcalling, receiving sexualised comments or sexist commentary, being inappropriately touched, groped, 'up-skirted', stalked, kissed without permission, and being sexually assaulted. Sexual assaults involved instances where victim/survivors did not consent to the sexual activity, withdrew consent during the sexual activity and the perpetrator continued, or were too intoxicated to consent. Perpetrators were typically known to victim/survivors and were often fellow students, with lecturers and other university staff also being flagged as perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Intimate partners and strangers were listed as perpetrators to a lesser degree. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced many university institutions to shift to remote learning, students noted an increase in sexual harassment online. Student accommodation or residences were also commonly mentioned as locations of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Many students reported witnessing acts of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault while at university, or of knowing a close friend or colleague who had experienced it while at university. These experiences had then gone on to affect the witnesses' understanding of safety at university and informed how they navigate their university's physical and online spaces.

Non-university-related incidents

Many students noted that they had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in settings unrelated to university, or prior to being enrolled as a student, but reported carrying the impacts of their previous trauma with them into their university experience. For many, this existing trauma had a detrimental impact on numerous aspects of their university life.

Reporting

The majority of victim/survivors had negative experiences when reporting incidents of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault to their university. In general, students' views on their university's response protocol to sexual harassment and sexual assault indicated a perception that policies were inaccurate and reporting mechanisms slow. Students cited several barriers when it came to reporting. For some, a lack of awareness about what constituted sexual harassment and sexual assault resulted in a considerable delay in reporting the incident, with some not reporting it at all. Other students found that, after having filed a report, the process was too slow. For many, the trauma of the original incident of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault was compounded by their university's mishandlings of their report, discouraging victim/survivors from pursuing the reporting process to its conclusion.

Impacts of sexual harassment and sexual assault on students

Significant mental health impacts were the primary effect of experiencing sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in a university context, which often led to long-term impacts on self-esteem, self-confidence, and unhealthy relationships with substances. Students reported that these effects often corresponded with difficulties socialising and negatively impacted their relationships with those close to them. Students also reported having difficulties trusting others, particularly men in cases where the perpetrator was male; a sense of hypervigilance when in public; and self-policing their behaviour. Reduced mental wellbeing proved detrimental to students' capacity to not only perform academically, but also to engage in the social aspects of their university experience. In some cases, these mental health and social implications caused students to consider putting their studies on hold, to move universities, or to drop out of university completely. This was particularly the case where the perpetrator remained at the respondent's university.

Implications and conclusion

The combined findings of the NSSS and qualitative research demonstrate not only the prevalence of experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students, but the profound impact of these experiences on victim/survivors' university lives.

The qualitative component of the NSSS demonstrated that both the victim/survivor and broader student communities see a need for change in the way sexual harassment and sexual assault is spoken about, reported and prevented on Australian university campuses and in other university-related settings.

Students encouraged universities to consult with victim/survivor-led organisations to create better support programs for these communities more broadly, rather than just those who have experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in a university context. They suggested these sorts of systems would work towards reinforcing universities' commitment to prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Students called for increased transparency of reporting processes that have an emphasis on believing victim/survivors' experiences, as well as awareness campaigns about the avenues available to students who wish to report an incident. They also recommended that there be visible and proportionate disciplinary action for perpetrators to show that universities take sexual harassment and sexual assault reports seriously.

Their recommendations called for a cultural shift away from values that condone sexual harassment and sexual assault and the silencing of victim/survivors, and rather, one that moves towards an environment that perpetuates nuanced understandings of gendered violence and respectful relationships. Victim/survivors said this environment could be created with campaigns that have inclusive and positive views of sexuality and sex. It was perceived that campaigns tailored to cohorts who are less knowledgeable, as well as those likely to be more vulnerable to these forms of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and the staff delivering this support, would be most effective.

The findings show that there is a desire among students and victim/survivors for universities to continue playing a role in the prevention of sexual violence and the building of a more equal society. These results, as well as the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children* and existing international policy instruments provide a compelling set of resources to assist Australian universities to continue their work in this important area.



1. Background on the research

Sexual violence is widely recognised as an urgent human rights issue – one that disproportionately impacts women and girls, as well as gender and sexuality minorities. Globally, governments and independent agencies have increasingly recognised the dual importance of action to both respond to and prevent sexual violence. For instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations (UN), the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) have all endorsed frameworks that seek to improve support services and justice outcomes for victim/survivors of sexual violence, as well as strategies that seek to prevent such violence before it occurs through the promotion of gender equality, respect and inclusion (Our Watch, 2021a). To achieve this goal requires coordinated effort across all sectors of society; to respond to and prevent sexual violence everywhere that we live, work, play - and *learn*.

In Australia, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men over the age of 15 have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence, with 1 in 2 women and 1 in 4 men having experienced sexual harassment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Available data furthermore indicates that it is young adults who are most likely to be represented among both victim/survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence. For example, in the 2016 Personal Safety Survey, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that young adults aged 18 to 24 years were among those most likely to report experiencing a sexual assault in the previous 12 months. Criminal justice data repeatedly demonstrates that the majority of victim/survivors of sexual assault are targeted by a male perpetrator known to them (such as a partner, date, friend or acquaintance) and that many such assaults occur in private dwellings, with public spaces less common sites for sexual assault (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, AIHW, 2020). Sexual harassment commonly occurs in organisations and institutions such as workplaces, educational settings, as well as in public spaces (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Universities are key institutional settings for responding to and preventing sexual violence. The importance of university settings for the prevention of sexual violence has been recognised not only by the advocacy of Australian organisations such as the National Union of Students (NUS), End Rape on Campus (EROC), and The Hunting Ground Australia Project, but also the Australian Human Rights Commission's (2017) report – *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* (the *Change the Course* report). A result of decades of advocacy by women, students and non-government organisations (NGOs) demanding action (see Durbach & Grey, 2018; Hush, 2020), the report detailed results of a 2016 survey conducted with students at Universities Australia's 39 member institutions.

In addition to gathering survey data on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault, the Universities Australia-funded initiative conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission also reported on over 1800 written submissions received that disclosed university students' experiences of sexual violence. The submissions covered a wide range of experiences of both sexual harassment and sexual assault, and importantly these submissions described the impacts of these harms, barriers to reporting and the outcomes of help-seeking or reports made. These provided much needed context to the nature of student experiences that cannot be gathered through quantitative survey methods alone. The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) was funded by Universities Australia through the *Respect. Now. Always.* initiative – a sector-wide program that aims to prevent sexual violence in university communities and better support those who have been affected. Like the 2016 survey, the NSSS collected data on the scale and nature of university student experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

A qualitative research component consisting of three open-ended questions accompanied the NSSS. This enabled victim/survivors to disclose their experiences of sexual violence in their own words and, crucially, give their thoughts on what universities could do to improve.

This report provides the findings of the qualitative component's written data. The quantitative component and the qualitative components are reported separately. However, the reports are designed to be read alongside each other.

1.1. Giving voice to victim/survivor experiences

Much existing international research has explored the needs of victim/survivors of sexual violence whether through formal justice responses, or alternative, innovative and/or community-led responses. In particular, Daly (2014) identifies five key elements of victim/survivors' justice interests, arguing that 'participation, voice, validation, vindication, and offender accountability' (p.387) are each important in how victim/survivors themselves experience responses to their disclosure of sexual violence (see also Clark, 2010; Herman, 2005). Similar themes are evident in the emerging literature on trauma-informed care in responding to sexual violence. For instance, Davidson (2017) identifies core values of safety, trustworthiness, choice and control, collaboration, and empowerment (see also Rich, 2019). Trauma-informed care recognises that responses to disclosures of sexual violence can either help or hinder in the healing process for victim/survivors, and that service delivery reforms may be needed to take account of the effects of trauma. This can include being mindful of the power imbalances that frequently feature in abuse, and actively design reporting processes and staff training so as to avoid replicating power imbalances and disempowerment of victim/survivors relative to response authorities (Kulkarni, 2019). Trauma-informed care is arguably central in the design of university responses to, and prevention of, sexual violence victimisation (see e.g., Conley & Griffith, 2016; Davidson, 2017; McCauley & Casler, 2015). The justice needs of victim/survivors and trauma-informed care are also increasingly recognised as vital considerations when designing research with sexual violence victim/survivors (see Mortimer et al, 2021).

Among the key limitations of quantitative survey research is that it rarely affords space for victim/survivors to share their experiences of violence, as well as their recommendations for future change, in their own words. Further, the nature of the NSSS methodology to ensure a representative sample of the Australian university student population meant that many victim/survivors would not be provided with the opportunity to participate in the survey and have their experiences represented in the research. For these key reasons, the qualitative component of the NSSS was designed in line with best practice in written-response interview protocols for sexual violence (see Heydon & Powell, 2018) to facilitate victim/survivor participation and voice in the research.

1.2. Objectives

The overall aim of the NSSS was to establish the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment experiences among university students at Australian universities. The more specific objectives of the qualitative component included:

- providing victim/survivors a clear opportunity to have their individual experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault heard and captured in the research process
- providing richer data about experiences (as compared to a quantitative prevalence survey alone), as well as how victim/survivors want universities to respond
- providing an opportunity for those not selected to take part in the prevalence survey to have their experiences heard
- exploring the context within which sexual harassment and sexual assault occurs, including the setting, connection to the perpetrator and pattern of abusive behaviour
- examining awareness and behaviours towards help-seeking and reporting in relation to sexual harassment and sexual assault

Ultimately, the findings from this component will help to understand the context in which these behaviours occur, understand help-seeking and reporting behaviours, and inform universities' services and responses for student safety and wellbeing.

1.3. Methodology

The qualitative component of the NSSS involved an anonymous online web portal consisting of three open ended questions. The web portal was open to all students who had been enrolled in an Australian university in the past five years.

Students were invited to complete questions on the anonymous online web portal through a link provided at the conclusion of the survey and via a link on the Social Research Centre's website.

The open-ended questions enabled students to disclose their experiences of sexual violence in their own words, through written text without word limit, and make their own recommendations for reform. The open-ended questions were:

- **What would you like the research team to know about your experience(s) of sexual harassment and sexual assault? Please tell us anything you feel comfortable writing about.**
- **How has your experience(s) of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault impacted on your university student life? Please tell us what you feel comfortable sharing. Remember, your responses are completely anonymous.**
- **What would you like to see your university do to address sexual harassment and sexual assault?**

1.4. Respondents

In total, 1,835 students participated in the qualitative component of the NSSS. The profile of students participating in the qualitative component largely reflected trends in the prevalence of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault found in the NSSS. Students who participated in the qualitative component were predominantly female (75%), undergraduate (70%), domestic students (81%) who were aged between 18-21 (41%) and identified as heterosexual (67%). Gay, lesbian or bisexual students made up approximately 23% of the sample; while students aged 22-24 and 25-34 made up 20% and 21% of the sample, respectively. Students with disability comprised approximately 27% of respondents, and students who spoke a language other than English made up approximately 37% of the sample.

1.5. Analytical and reporting approach

A single analytical framework, which organised data into 'themes', was formulated from the survey questionnaire and an initial review of the written data from the open-ended questions.

Using this analytical framework, 500 randomly selected written answers were manually 'coded' using NVivo software to enable a thematic analysis of the data. The remaining answers were automatically coded on themes and sentiment according to the analytical framework. The use of this thematic coding technique ensures that findings are directly traceable back to the raw data.

Verbatim quotes are provided to illustrate themes identified in the findings. To protect participants' confidentiality, quotes have been kept anonymous and de-identified where necessary.

While the verbatim quotes illustrate the themes of this issue, the research team has also carefully compiled excerpts from various respondents whose experiences shared similar themes to create what is known as 'composite case studies.' These composite case studies should not be read as a single student's account but as a combination of several students' experiences. This is done to protect students' identities and to bring to the fore important demographic factors and students' unique characteristics and contexts that the verbatim quotes may not capture.

1.6. Interpretation of results

Qualitative research is not designed to be statistically representative of the wider population from which participants are drawn. However, the purposive sampling of the randomly coded 500 written answers ensured a wide variety of student responses were included. The approach to qualitative sampling means that caution should always be exercised when expanding the findings of qualitative research to the wider population.

The use of quantitative measures, such as statistical averages, within reported findings is generally avoided within qualitative research. Indeed, one of its defining features is that numbers are not used to indicate prevalence or patterns. However, it is common practice in qualitative reporting to provide some indication of the commonality of themes, issues, or experiences, using terms such as nearly all, most, some, or a few/on occasion.

This provides the reader with some indication of the nuance of themes or findings, and how widespread they were across the sample, while also giving voice to the lived experience of victim/survivors. This provides some insight into the critical importance that can be attributed to such findings.

The findings from this report should be interpreted alongside the prevalence data presented in the NSSS in order to contextualise the demographics to which this research pertains.

1.7. Ethical conduct of the research

All stages of the NSSS were reviewed and approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref 22399, 22470, 22528 and 24259).

All data collection activities were undertaken in accordance with the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth), the Australian Privacy Principles, the Research Society's Code of Professional Practice, the Market and Social Research Privacy Principles, and ISO 20252 standards.



2. Sexual harassment and sexual assault

This section details the experiences of university students and the types of sexual harassment and sexual assault they had faced, as well as the most common contexts of perpetration and locations where the incident/s occurred.

It is important to note that while instances of sexual harassment and sexual assault have been separated here for analytical purposes, many students had listed experiences of both in university contexts and over the course of their lives. This report focuses primarily on incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault that have taken place at, or in situations connected to, university activities. Incidents that occurred prior to or outside of the university context have also been included in places.

Many students also reported witnessing acts of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault while at university, or of knowing a close friend or colleague who had such an experience while at university. These experiences have then gone on to affect the witnesses' understanding of safety at university and informed how they navigate their university's physical and online spaces. We have distinguished these incidents below as indirect but nonetheless impactful experiences.

2.1. Sexual harassment

The Australian *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) defines sexual harassment as:

any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favours or conduct of a sexual nature in relation to the person harassed in circumstances where a reasonable person would have anticipated the possibility that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.

This includes behaviours such as unwelcome touching, staring, following, sexually explicit communications (whether in-person or via technologies), as well as nude or sexual images taken or shared with others without permission.

Students were not provided with a definition of sexual harassment or sexual assault and were free to include any experience they identified as either sexual harassment, sexual assault, or unwanted sexual behaviour. Nonetheless, many of the experiences described were consistent with behaviours that are unlawful in settings such as workplaces and educational institutions under the *Sex Discrimination Act*.

2.1.1. Nature of incidents

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Zara*, an international student, was repeatedly harassed by a non-academic university staff member during her time on campus. The staff member sent her unwanted texts commenting on her appearance and stereotypes about women from her country of origin.

Zara said that as a woman from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, she was unsure she would be listened to if she reported the staff member to the university. While shame and stigma around her experience reinforced this reticence, Zara proceeded with bringing the issue to the Head of Department.

Two weeks later, I was told by the Head of Department to block the phone number of the accused and asked to no longer attend school seminars or social events as no one could guarantee my safety from this person.

This occurred over two years ago and since then I have not attended an academic seminar on my campus.

Zara felt extremely unsupported by her institution, and that she had been left with full responsibility for her own safety while the university had continued to protect their staff member.

Students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment described it in many forms. For example, some students noted that the perpetrators had physically touched them or made unsolicited sexual advances.

 *Despite clearly mentioning that I was not interested, my colleague approached me. It was an invasion of personal space, and we were in my room prepping for an exam. He tried to kiss me, and I pulled back in shock. He said, "But you were talking so openly about wanting romantic and sexual freedom".*

Similarly, some students were harassed by others' attempts to invade their personal space and privacy in sexualised ways.

 *I was at a college event at the bar ordering drinks, and this guy came up to me, clearly drunk. He tried to look under my dress. I felt very self-conscious and walked away as fast as I could.*

Others reported being "cat-called", having people yell sexualised insults from afar, whistling, or beeping their car horns at them while on campus and in transit to and from university. Some students noted that harassment came in the form of stalking, both online and in person.

 *Going to university I dealt with men stalking me online and following my class timetable at uni to know where I was when I [tried to] avoid them.*

For some students, sexual harassment came in the form of invasive questions or comments about one's body and/or sex life, inappropriate jokes, and commentary.

 *There have been times where a student at my university has made me uncomfortable with how he approaches and speaks to me or other female students. While his comments thus far have not been overtly sexual, he has made comments including "you should be a model" and has implied that if women are sexually harassed or [sexually] assaulted, that they are at fault to an extent. Additionally, he has, on multiple occasions, attempted to isolate female students after class to ask them to help him with assessments.*

 *Some of my group [assignment] members also made me feel uncomfortable (making sexist comments about women, asking inappropriate personal questions, unwanted physical contact) but when I told the lecturer, nothing was done about it, so I just dropped the course.*

 *I was asked extremely private, personal, and uncomfortable questions about my sex life by a uni bus driver when he used to drive me around the campus late at night.*

Such an experience is an important finding as night transport services across campuses have been implemented specifically to protect student safety in light of historic physical and sexual assaults. One of the improvements made at universities since the *Change the Course* report has been to increase the frequency and coverage of free night-bus campus transportation (see Universities Australia, 2017).

Sexual harassment often intersected with racism, ableism, 'body-shaming' and other kinds of discrimination for students who did not identify as white, able bodied, or cisgendered, among other characteristics. This often led to a compounding of abuse for these students.

 ***I have been the victim of unwanted sexual and physical harassment and assault by a staff member, and it also included racism. I felt unable to complain as I felt shamed. I also was made to feel by a colleague that I "should be grateful for the attention as you are a big girl. Perhaps you are his type".***

In another example, one woman detailed receiving prolonged harassment from a fellow staff member, which involved, among other things, commentary about women from her country of origin.

Some students noted that, in cases where there existed an underlying and unequal power dynamic between themselves and their harasser, they were more likely to feel disempowered and uncomfortable. This typically played out in instances where teaching staff or working supervisors made advances upon their students or employees.

 ***I received inappropriate messages from someone who was in a position of power in the past (lab demonstrator).***

Other female students noted that this unequal power dynamic was particularly salient when they were in situations where they were one of the few women in university contexts with male colleagues.

 ***I am a young woman who has studied in a massively male-dominated field. I often faced comments from fellow students and lecturers about my physical appearance, ranging from unnecessary compliments to sexual and degrading comments. At times, when I have rejected the romantic advances from other students, I have been threatened to have my name slandered, which has the potential to be greatly harmful to my academic career. I have also had men engage in intimidating behaviours after my rejection of them. I constantly fear of being "too nice".***

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Rob* has had numerous experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault at university.

As a young queer man, Rob said that being sexualised and fetishised is a hallmark of his university experience. He has been inappropriately touched by fellow students, had his drink spiked, as well as being subjected to queerphobic language.

Rob also had difficulty with elected student leaders, several of whom he said felt entitled to behave inappropriately due to the altered power dynamic created by their position.

As a queer man, I sometimes feel it's engrained in my experience to be harassed and placed in negative/unsafe environments. In an age of Grindr and intense fetishisation, I find being a young queer person in a big social environment draining. There was one instance where another student leader who was elected with me, became extremely aggressive, forcing himself onto me.

Rob spoke of other students he knew in the LGBTQI+ community who had been victim/survivors of similar experiences and received little support.

He said that it was difficult to establish what university support systems were in place for queer victim/survivors of sexual violence.

2.1.2. Locations

For the most part, students chose not to disclose the specific location of their harassment, which may be due in part to the generalised nature of the sites such as 'on the street' or 'on campus'. Some students noted that, as COVID-19 restrictions saw most universities shift to conducting their classes online full-time, the instances of sexual harassment that they experienced in person decreased. However, many students noted that, while the frequency of in-person incidents had decreased, other types of harassment had increased. Notably, students mentioned an increase in online sexual harassment.

 *The only experience I have had is where a couple of males “gate-crashed” our Zoom lesson and asked different females to flash them.*

 *I've had numerous male students use the Zoom chat box to message me inappropriately during online classes. Yet I've not made any indication that I'm interested in them prior to the messages.*

Such instances demonstrate that in-class sexual harassment has not stopped as many universities engaged in more remote learning throughout COVID-19. The displacement of sexual harassment into online environments is not itself new, with many studies identifying the challenges of preventing and responding to online sexual harassment in university settings (e.g., Cripps & Stermac, 2018; Mishna et al., 2018). However, various forms of online harassment also reportedly increased throughout the COVID-19 restrictions, including image-based abuse (Powell and Flynn, 2020), as one student further describes below.

 *The majority of my experiences of sexual harassment occurred online. Scenarios where men have pestered me into sending them nude photographs and have said inappropriate things when I've continually expressed my discomfort with their behaviour. I have also been sent nude photographs without my consent, time after time.*

Other students noted that their harassers took to social media to gain access to them outside of typical university communication avenues. One participant described what she initially thought was a platonic exchange via email with one of her lecturers.

 *Soon after our initial conversations he started emailing late at night saying that he had “stalked my social media pages” and proceeded to ask me questions about my relationship status. I was a little concerned but thought that... he was a teacher after all, he was nice and didn't seem malicious, so why not? However, this only prompted more questions and a discussion about his love life and failed relationships, as well as him giving me his personal phone number and telling me to call him anytime and that he is usually up late. I expressed that I wasn't interested in a way that I thought would be both respectful and also protective of the fact that he was still my teacher at this point, and he didn't take it well. He told me that I had wasted his time, that he “was getting old and grey and didn't have time to waste” ... and that I should not have been talking to him if I wasn't interested. It all took me by surprise because on my end I was just talking to an acquaintance, maybe even someone who could supervise my Masters.*

Offline, a common place that students mentioned having experienced sexual harassment was on campus, with incidents on or in connection to student accommodation or residences being mentioned by many students.

 *An example of this encouraged behaviour [at college] would be 'lunging', i.e., grabbing someone's head/face and pulling their mouth onto your own to kiss. This was described by second- and third-year students as a 'last resort' after having repeatedly failed to get another to kiss you.*

 *A boy I had met on a night out with my friends at a college in Sydney put his hand under my shirt and was feeling around while we were on a public bus in front of my friends and several strangers.*

 *I was sexually harassed while living at a residential college. The perpetrators lured me up to my room where they had hung a massive condom... It was blocking my entrance to my room.*

 *I have been sexually harassed on campus when a stranger attempted to pull down the dress I was wearing. I have also been cat called a number of times both on around campus and in my local area.*

Another common theme in the responses relating to sexual harassment was students' transit to and from university, typically when walking or taking public transport.

 *I have also been 'catcalled'. I cannot describe the intense fear I have felt walking home to my apartment in the city at a reasonable time and [being] yelled at by men from a car, or by men passing by making suggestive commentary.*

Some students noted that they had experienced sexual harassment in settings where other university students and/or staff were present, or in settings that were connected to the university but not strictly on campus, such as through university-affiliated clubs and societies.

 *I was sexually harassed on a separate occasion when at a university club partner dance class. A man I did not know deliberately stroked my hand repeatedly while we were waiting from instruction from the teacher. This made me feel uncomfortable.*

Many students also noted that they had been sexually harassed at some point during their time as a university student in locations and situations not associated with the university (such as non-university bars, pubs and clubs), and where nobody from university was present. These students noted that, despite their experiences of sexual harassment taking place in a non-university context, the fact that it occurred while they were studying still had impacts upon their university experience and informed how they interacted with others (see Chapter 4).

2.1.3. Contexts of perpetration

Many students who had experienced some form of sexual harassment indicated it was their fellow students who were the harassers. For some, the student was known to the victim/survivor, but for many, the student was a stranger. For example, one woman described being physically stalked both on and off campus, by a classmate that she did not know.

 *This student has made very disturbing comments about my physical appearance and has used university-related excuses to contact me unnecessarily. This student has told me that she enjoys listening to my assignment presentations when she is feeling sad. She has also repetitively followed me to my workplace and outside of the university premises.*

Some students also noted that the teaching staff and other faculty members, including tutors, had made inappropriate comments or persisted in pursuing them romantically and/or sexually.

 *I also had a young male tutor in my first year of university make suggestive comments towards me throughout the semester in front of a predominantly male class. This made me very uncomfortable at the time.*

 *Have had comments directed [at me] that have been quite shocking. Generally coming from fellow students, occasionally from a senior lecturer. Comments on appearance, put downs.*

The above example further illustrates the vulnerable position that students may be placed in when experiencing harassment from an academic staff member, in particular from current or prospective research supervisors (see also AHRC, 2017). In such instances, there is an inherent power imbalance, whereby a student's study outcomes or emerging academic career can be damaged by falling out of favour with a senior expert in the field (e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Young & Wiley, 2021). At the same time, the nature of one-to-one supervision creates opportunities for exploitation by harassers who may target victim/survivors through off-campus settings and communications. In 2018, Universities Australia released guidance for respectful supervisory relationships, including a clear statement that sexual or romantic relationships between a supervisor and their student is never appropriate.

One student highlighted her experience with a man who was once a PhD colleague but had become a staff member at the time of the harassment:

 *In 2020, this colleague started to become overly familiar with me: standing inside my personal space and putting his arm around my waist with his hand resting low on my hip bones. This progressed to him sharing sexual innuendo content with me on Facebook - when I told him to stop, he started incessantly contacting me through phone calls, SMS and Facebook messages. When I blocked him on these channels and told him to leave me alone, he emailed me through university email, and SMS messaged my husband. When I saw him on campus, he was openly hostile: glaring at me, watching me through windows whilst I worked, and trying to "run into me" in the carpark.*

For some, the sexual harassment they experienced was perpetrated by a non-academic university staff. In some cases, these were workers hired by the university, such as construction and security staff:

 *Because I study art, I have access to a private studio (the equivalent of a private office space). One morning, I unlocked the door to my studio and there was a security guard (employed by the university) sitting at my desk masturbating. I was in shock and asked him to leave and he left the building.*

 *Construction workers making sleazy comments at young uni students, particularly females as they walk past.*

In another case, non-university-affiliated staff performed sexually explicit acts on campus in full view of students and other passers-by.

 *No issues on campus apart from a taxi or Uber driver masturbating near a main pathway in his car, lots of people walking by, not just me. He was promptly reported to the uni and the police with his licence plate number.*

2.2. Sexual assault

While Australian laws and policies set out definitions of indecent assault, sexual assault and rape, these can vary across states and territories. For the purposes of this research, we draw on Australian legal and policy frameworks to define sexual assault collectively as:

any unwanted sexual acts or sexual contact that happened in circumstances where a person was either forced, threatened, pressured, tricked, or no effort was made to check whether there was agreement to the act, including in circumstances where a person was asleep or affected by drugs or alcohol.¹

Qualitative participants were not provided with a definition but rather self-identified as having experienced some form of sexual harassment, sexual assault, or unwanted sexual behaviour. Nonetheless, many of the experiences that were described by victim/survivors were consistent with the definition of sexual assault as described here and featured many of the key elements of criminal sexual assault and/or rape.

2.2.1. Nature of incidents

While we have provided verbatim examples of sexual harassment in the above section, we have chosen to summarise the more explicit details of victim/survivors' sexual assault here for two key reasons. Firstly, many accounts contained a level of detail that may indirectly identify the victim/survivor and/or perpetrator, and these victim/survivors have provided this information about their experiences with the guarantee of their anonymity. Secondly, we acknowledge that reading about sexual assault in explicit detail may be distressing for some readers. We have included verbatim responses where victim/survivors do not give details that might reasonably lead to the victim/survivor being identified.

For the most part, accounts of sexual assault while at university described one or several acts of rape, as well as unwanted physical touching such as groping and other sexualised advances. As outlined above, many victim/survivors had experienced both sexual assault and sexual harassment, oftentimes in the same incident.

 *I was catcalled, stared/leered [at], touched without my consent/permission (unwelcomed and unnecessary touch, brushed up), unwanted requests for sex/intimate dates, being asked private questions, received unwanted sexual/pornographic content through messages and social media. Forced to have sex without my consent.*

 *I have been sexually assaulted several times throughout my university experience.*

 *I have experienced both sexual harassment and I have experienced sexual assault at least 3 times in my life.*

¹ See e.g. *Crimes Act 1990* (NSW), S.61HE; *Crimes Act 1985* (VIC), S.36; and Commonwealth of Australia (2019). *Fourth Action Plan—National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. Canberra: Department of Social Services.

-  *I was raped when I was 17 and first enrolled at university.*
-  *Was groped at a uni camp.*
-  *I experienced sexual assault in the form of overly sexual hugs [from fellow students]. I would consent to a hug, then be held in place while felt up and hands put under my shirt.*
-  *I have been both sexually harassed and [sexually] assaulted by two male peers in my medicine course. Medicine is supposed to be full of people with integrity but here I was put in non-consenting situations twice.*

One victim/survivor described an incident where she had met a student at an event hosted at her university's on-campus bar in early 2020. The student bought her a series of double-shot drinks while choosing to remain relatively sober himself. The student suggested she lie down in his room at a nearby student accommodation when she said she felt unwell. She lost consciousness in his room and awoke to find him on top of her, and despite her verbal and physical protests and general lack of engagement, he proceeded to rape her.

Another victim/survivor met with an academic supervisor in the latter's office to collect her letter of recommendation. Instead of a letter, the supervisor had written sexually explicit content and asked the victim/survivor to read it in front of him. He then blocked the door and professed to having fantasised about the victim/survivor and that he saw this encounter as his chance to have sex with her, pointing out that the other academic staff had left for the day. After explaining that she did not reciprocate his feelings, the victim/survivor tried to leave but the supervisor grabbed and forcibly kissed her. The victim/survivor managed to push him away and dodge his next advancement before escaping.

Another victim/survivor attended a party off campus with a mixture of university and non-university friends. She met a young man at the party and went into a room with him to kiss. After some time, he began to take her clothes off despite her not having provided consent to do so. He proceeded to rape her despite her verbal protests and engaged in 'stealthings', a practice whereby a perpetrator removes a condom during intercourse without the other's knowledge or against their express wishes.²

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Yasmin's* friends were sexually assaulted at a student accommodation or residence party that followed an event that they attended with their fellow residents.

Her perpetrator was our RA [Residential Advisor]. She got into the middle of the queen-sized bed between him and another person who lived with us, after drinking. She verbally told him no, moved his arms away, kicked him off. When he still didn't stop, she got out of the bed and moved to the other side of it, so he was in the middle. He then rolled over and did the same to the other girl in the bed. In the morning he said to my friend "I thought it was you the whole night".

When Yasmin and her friends reported the incident to another RA, they cautioned against impacting the perpetrator's future at the student accommodation or residence. The perpetrator was required to attend some educational seminars but largely faced no disciplinary consequences.

Yasmin believed that that the event's environment of excessive drinking and its sexually explicit theme gave the impression that her friends' sexual assault was tolerated. Senior residential students were also running a number of challenges that involved having sex in different places, including in first year students' rooms while they were present.

² The removal of a condom during sex without consent has been criminalized in the Australian Capital Territory (*Crimes Act 1900* (ACT), S.67H; with similar laws due to be introduced in Victoria in 2022).

2.2.2. Locations

Victim/survivors listed a number of general locations where they had been sexually assaulted while at university. Many victim/survivors who had been sexually assaulted said that it had occurred on campus, and most of these on-campus experiences took place at a student accommodation or residence.

-  *I was raped/sexually assaulted at my residential college on campus by another student at the college.*
-  *Experienced sexual assault at a college on [university] campus by an older man involved in the college.*
-  *The most recent time, I was at an event on campus where these two older men started touching me inappropriately and trying to push drugs onto me - the defence was that I was asking for it.*
-  *I was sexually assaulted whilst living on campus at college. The “counsellors” on campus threatened to breach my privacy and I was subject to months of targeted bullying and abuse as a result of my assault. I have PTSD as a result.*
-  *I got sexually assaulted at a university student accommodation and I did report it to the management. The person was also living at uni accommodation. The management handled my case so poorly that I have more trauma from that rather [than] the actual incident. I was tricked into a meeting with the management without any support person [present].*

Some victim/survivors noted that they had been sexually assaulted on campus at university but did not disclose where it had taken place.

-  *I was also raped on my university campus. I was highly intoxicated and was falling asleep and waking up multiple times during the assault.*

Many victim/survivors noted that their experiences of sexual assault took place off-campus, often in settings such as private houses and other non-university-affiliated locations, such as bars and clubs, in many cases where there were no other university students or staff present. As with incidents of sexual harassment, however, there were many accounts of sexual assault that took place in off-campus settings that involved a mixture of friends, peers or staff from university.

-  *I went on my first ever date with a guy from my university and he sexually assaulted me on the date.*

Some victim/survivors described being sexually assaulted at events held by the university or in association with the university.

-  *I was sexually assaulted at Indigenous Nationals.³*
-  *I was attending an off-campus university event in my undergrad. It was a pub crawl with the student law society... At one of the venues a group of us were standing around chatting and two males (who were a part of the law society) came up and grabbed my chest and butt, I pushed them off and told them to go away, they laughed and walked off.*
-  *I was attending a [university] ball... There was one instance where another student leader became extremely aggressive, forcing himself onto me - licking my face, biting my ear, touching me inappropriately. No one helped, except for two people, but my ‘friends’ and other elected members saw and instead egged it on.*

As with sexual harassment, some victim/survivors noted that they experienced sexual assault while in transit to and from university, particularly on public transport.

-  *Due to COVID-19 I only had a couple of weeks on campus, during which I was fortunate not to experience any sexual harassment or sexual assault on campus. However during these weeks on days I had later classes at university, I was groped on trams travelling back into the city from university.*

³ Indigenous Nationals is a week-long sporting competition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary student-athletes.

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Monita* was excited to attend a first-year student camp held off-campus by her course's student society. At this camp, first years were supervised by students on the society's committee, who ran mingling activities such as drinking games, dance-offs and scavenger hunts.

Following a night of drinking games, Monita awoke on her third day to find out from people in her dorm that she had been sexually assaulted by another first year student.

I didn't recall the night at all, and was told about it afterwards by second hand accounts from the "partner's" perspective and from others in the dorm, despite having camp "parents" who were there to ensure all the camp participants were ok... on the same camp a year later, I was put in a position of protecting my female "kids" from unwanted sexual advances from an older, male committee member who had a reputation for going for first year students.

Monita felt very uncomfortable that the onus of physical safety was placed on students running the camp, and on camp attendees themselves. She felt this left all students unsupported by the university, particularly when it came to society committee members themselves being accused of sexually inappropriate conduct.

2.2.3. Contexts of perpetration

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Sonya*, who identifies as queer, was sexually assaulted by her same-sex partner on campus. While this was a traumatic event for her that went on to trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, she didn't feel that she could report the incident or name the perpetrator.

For Sonya, the language that conversations about sexual assault typically used, did not accurately describe her experience as a queer victim/survivor of queer-perpetrated sexual assault.

I did not ever formally report my sexual assault to the University or name my perpetrator because I felt it would lead to nothing. Because my sexual assault occurred in the context of a same-sex relationship – for a long time I found it really difficult to process my assault. While I understand the importance of viewing sexual assault in the framework of the patriarchy, I wish that education at university would incorporate queer relationships. I felt very alone when I was assaulted, because of the narrative that women aren't perpetrators.

This experience has made it difficult for Sonya to embrace her identity, despite having an initially positive 'coming out'.

Victim/survivors who had experienced sexual assault while at university listed a variety of perpetrators, namely other students, teaching staff, and friends and intimate partners that they knew outside of university. A recurring location that students noted having experienced sexual assault was at student accommodation or residences, either as a resident or as someone who had attended an event at these sites. Student accommodation and residences have been identified as sites of concern for sexual assault both in Australian research and advocacy (AHRC, 2019; EROC Australia, 2018), as well as internationally (see Fedina et al., 2018; Hines et al., 2012). Such sexual assaults reportedly occur within a broader culture of sexism, bullying and harassment, as well as fear of reprisals against those that speak out against their student accommodation or residence communities (EROC Australia, 2018).

For those who had experienced sexual assault at student accommodation or residences, fellow students were most often named as the perpetrators, however members of residence staff were also mentioned. In some cases, students in student accommodation or residences who held positions of authority within the residence were also named as perpetrators.

 *My second instance was by a student in a position of power over me (a leader in college), who forced me into having sex with them – I even called people to get a duty Resident Advisor to help – which never arrived.*

 *It happened in student accommodation for university when I was physically touched inappropriately by a support officer...on the night of the incident, I was touched a few times.*

In some cases, victim/survivors detailed that the perpetrator would target more than one student within their student accommodation or residence.

 *I go to an all-girls college but there are male postgrad students that also reside there. I know that most of my friends have been sexually assaulted by another university student, and I personally have been raped by another member of my own college. It was very traumatising and everyone I told constantly invalidated my experience and victim blamed me. I wouldn't want my sister to live on campus at my university for fear that this could happen to her too.*

Some victim/survivors noted that these sexual assaults at student accommodation or residences would start as sexual harassment and escalate over time to sexual assault and other forms of assault.

 *One man in our [university] dorm was very charismatic and charming, myself and other girls always just laughed at his sleazy behaviour as him just being a typical boy. Locker room talk. It started off with sly comments, then he started grabbing me, when I walked to the kitchen or bathroom he would grab my butt and make more sexual comments. It started happening to other girls in our dorm. One girl in the dorm got grabbed and he tackled her to the ground, a week later she had to go to the doctors because her shoulder was so bruised/swollen... He started pushing his way into my room trying to kiss me, forcing me to do stuff and hitting me... I told my [residential supervisor] – the person responsible for keeping people in the dorm safe. It still continued, he became more aggressive. None of the other girls spoke about what he did to them but one day a girl in our dorm was bashed [by the man].*

Both inside and outside of student accommodation or residences, some victim/survivors noted that the sexual assault they experienced was from an intimate partner while they were studying at university, and typically involved being coerced or forced into having sex. These victim/survivors typically noted that the sexual assault they experienced was not necessarily an isolated incident or series of incidents but comprised part of a broader pattern of abusive behaviour, particularly when the victim/survivor was in a relationship with the perpetrator.

 *While at university I was in a violent relationship, which included sexual abuse. My former partner ... forced me to change my degree and move universities so that I could be at the same university as him (presumably so he would have even more control over me). ... Once I did finally leave the relationship, my former partner stalked me and harassed me at university on campus. He sporadically showed up at my lectures and tutorials or would find me in the library. He made my university experience hell.*

2.3. Bystander experiences

There is evidence that sexual harassment and sexual assault have ripple effects throughout university communities. In this research, there were a considerable number of students who pointed out that, while they themselves had not been the direct victim of sexual harassment or sexual assault, they had witnessed it while at or in connection to university.

 *Observing harassment (a female student chased by a car) on campus.*

 *One of my friends had her drink spiked and had to be physically dragged away from a boy who kept trying to grab and kiss her.*

 *While I haven't experienced it personally, I have seen/heard other friends have unwanted or inappropriate advances made to them during or between classes. I have gone out of my way to actively avoid the person they have had these experiences with... I have vicarious trauma from the negative and traumatic experiences with sexual assault people have had at other universities.*

 *At uni I have witnessed a lecturer describe sexual assault in an offensive way.*

While many students might not have directly witnessed an incident of sexual harassment or sexual assault, they indicated that they knew of someone close to them at university who had experienced one or both of these types of abuse.

-  *I did have a past friend who was sexually assaulted, and she discontinued her studies.*
-  *I have had classmates who have been stalked and followed by fellow students who have had some interaction on campus.*
-  *My friend was raped on a university campus yet felt so ashamed she was unable to find the confidence to go to the hospital nor tell her parents. This upset me so greatly that I realised the shame stemmed from an acceptance or culture that rape is bad, yet what can be done about it? Who would believe her? The male would have done it again and again, as he was not reprimanded. This is so disappointing.*
-  *I haven't personally experienced either of these at university, but having experienced them outside of university, I am now more cautious of university life. For example, the college sexual assault scandals at [university name] made me feel discomfited and wary, even though I wasn't personally a victim (sub-lethal effects).*
-  *I don't know a single woman in my life that hasn't been made to feel uncomfortable and been at the very least verbally sexually harassed by a man.*

Notably, some students who lived in student accommodation or residences said that even if they were not directly targeted by sexual harassment or sexual assault themselves, they were surrounded by examples of sexual harassment and were privy to reports of sexual assault among their peers. In many of these cases, students pointed to an inherent 'culture' of sexual harassment and sexual assault in residential settings.

-  *The culture needs to be addressed. I have overheard men saying vile, and derogatory things about sex with women. The college setting perpetuates rape culture, and online consent modules depict sex as so cartoonish that men dismiss any lesson they could learn from them regarding "ambiguities" of consent.*
-  *Witnessing the extent to which other college (i.e., student accommodation) students blatantly engage in behaviour constituting sexual harassment and sexual assault, and yet manage to remain in good stead with their peers (both male and female) who were undoubtedly aware of this behaviour, concerns me as to the kind of community I find myself in. I often times find myself thinking "Is this really where I want to live? Are these really people I want as my friends?"*
-  *I was very concerned as a college resident. I had heard of girls being [sexually] assaulted and harassed, but nothing was formally done about most incidences. I heard of a guy who openly was in possession of roofies, which was incredibly scary. A pattern of behaviour at college was having discussions about sexual harassment and [sexual] assault, someone doing the wrong thing to someone under the influence of either drugs or alcohol, then having another 'stern discussion' with the entire group, rather than the people directly involved.*

It is often friends and roommates who are the first point of disclosure and potential support for many student victim/survivors – the majority of whom do not report to police or their university (AHRC, 2017). In effect, it is these 'informal helpers' who can have the most impact on victim/survivors, as their initial response to receiving a disclosure has the capacity to be either validating and supportive, or to induce a secondary victimisation if the survivor is left feeling shamed or disbelieved (Banyard et al., 2010; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2016).

Research also demonstrates that being an 'informal helper' for someone who has experienced sexual violence can result in distress for the person receiving the disclosure (Banyard et al., 2010), particularly if they themselves are not sure how best to respond.



3. Actions taken

This section details the actions that students took after experiencing sexual harassment and/or sexual assault while at university or in a setting connected to university, and experiences of universities' reporting systems.

Many institutions across several countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, have already sought to improve university responses to sexual violence and to improve safety in campus environments. As such, there are a number of guidance documents which provide insights into emerging good practice in responding to sexual harassment and sexual assault in university settings. This guidance seeks to address acknowledged limitations in institutional responses to sexual violence in higher education settings (see AHRC, 2017), and a well-documented need to improve justice and support outcomes for victim/survivors.

Despite such progress, the accounts provided by students in this research indicated that much more remains to be done. In particular, students suggested that there was a lack of knowledge of reporting avenues at their university, that such avenues were not always effective, and that there were many barriers to pursuing the reporting process.

3.1. Reporting

Some students indicated that they had reported or attempted to report their experience of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault to their university after the incident. Some reported the incident immediately after it occurred, while others took time as they figured out the best approach for themselves and the options available to them.

3.1.1. Experiences

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Amina* was the victim/survivor of sexual harassment and sexual assault perpetrated by a university staff member. The staff member copied her phone number and sent unwanted texts about her appearance, as well as leaving gifts on her desk and constantly visiting her office. They accused her of 'playing hard to get', as well as addressing her using racial stereotypes.

When Amina mentioned these incidents to another staff member, they said that she should feel grateful for the attention.

Amina said that she was unsure about whether reporting the perpetrator would be worthwhile. She felt that as a first-year student originally from a rural background, her lack of support networks in Melbourne would make the process difficult. Amina also found that it was hard to establish how to report the sexual harassment and sexual assault, especially given that the staff member that she initially told brushed off the experience.

However, she followed through with the reporting process and the perpetrator was terminated from their role – she found that this was sufficient action and felt reassured that she would no longer see the perpetrator on campus.

Positive experiences

A small number of students remarked that their experience of the reporting process had been positive and pointed to an efficiency in their university's system, as well as the presence of empathetic support personnel available to assist them. In some cases, these support personnel were not formally linked to the university's reporting system, and some students felt as though it may have been a risk to speak to a potentially indifferent staff member to initiate or progress their reports. Nonetheless, some students managed to succeed in this regard.

 ***The people I have formed the strongest and most trusting relationships with at university are my tutors. If I were uncomfortable regarding the inappropriate behaviour of staff or students, I would approach my tutor and report it to them first, and ask them how to navigate the university system.***

One student had experienced harassment and stalking from a student she had briefly dated. Years later, she realised he was in the same university class as her and found her tutor to be supportive in finding flexible solutions to her university attendance.

 ***A tutor advised me that the guy in question had submitted a short story using my name (with one letter changed). The tutor told me she noticed because I had privately asked her not to work with him. When I told her I felt so uncomfortable as to not feeling like I could come to class, she told me I could participate from home and recommended uni counselling. I think her response was very helpful and kept me enrolled in the class which was a necessary capstone course.***

One respondent was a tutor at a university and described acting on his suspicions about a fellow tutor.

 ***While I was a tutor at [university], I noticed inappropriate behaviour by one of the other tutors. I talked with the students after and was told he had been acting inappropriately towards them since the previous semester. They were afraid to report it and didn't know who to tell. I reported it to my supervisor, and we reported to the dean of the department.***

However, this approach was generally based on perceived 'luck', or the victim/survivor's own perseverance. Indeed, international research suggests that many students turn to a trusted lecturer to informally disclose their experiences of sexual harassment or sexual assault, either before or instead of seeking more formal university supports (see e.g., Durbach & Grey, 2018; Hayes-Smith et al., 2010).

Some victim/survivors were satisfied with their university's response to their report because there were direct consequences for the perpetrator that the victim/survivor deemed to be appropriate and adequate.

 ***Eventually, when I reported the staff member to the university, after days of keeping silent, the worker was, to narrow things down, stood down from their job and after months of the university investigating, the worker has lost their job.***

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Sarah* was sexually assaulted by another student when living in her university's student accommodation or residence during her second week on campus.

After choosing to report the incident to her student accommodation or residence director and other faculty members, Sarah was told that the report process may take months to be resolved because the residence had to wait to hear the perpetrator's response to the allegations. The length of the reporting process also meant that security camera footage of the incident had been deleted – without this evidence, Sarah had to resort to mediation as an alternative.

Sarah found that the reporting process lacked accountability and anonymity, and that she constantly felt retraumatised as a result.

I can't even begin to explain how bungled the whole thing was, from the director of residences disclosing personal information about me to the perpetrator... to the director basically stalking me, to the vice chancellor demanding my confidential counselling records. And none of them ever experienced any consequences.

Due to this experience, Sarah said she will never feel safe again. She moved towns and universities, and continues to deal with the mental health impacts of her sexual assault.

In many cases, victim/survivors had negative experiences when reporting their sexual harassment and/or sexual assault to their university. Many of the responses from students on their university's reporting processes for sexual harassment and sexual assault indicated a lack of trust and a perception that their university was slow in implementing meaningful policies, and that those that were already in place were inadequate.

 *[My university] only just developed a stand-alone sexual assault policy, this is about four years after recommendations for universities to implement these policies were handed down.*

 *I have felt that my university has had a pretty lacklustre response to sexual assault and harassment.*

More specifically, some students sensed a reluctance from their university to take their reports seriously, and cited instances where they had been disbelieved or doubted throughout the reporting process. This notion was particularly strong for students who had reported sexual harassment, as they perceived that these incidents were not considered serious enough for the university to take action, especially in comparison to sexual assault.

 *[I] felt like I wasn't taken seriously or believed, and felt like I was the only one scared for the safety of other students as [the perpetrator] continued to be allowed in the environment that he first approached me in. I was told repeatedly that they were taking it seriously, but their actions didn't match... honestly, I regret reporting in the first place.*

 *[Sexual harassment] sometimes gets brushed off as "[the perpetrator's] just not good with people", "they don't understand social cues" especially within a small department. Sometimes the bottom line of a university doesn't line up with justice for those affected.*

Influencing this sense that universities deprioritised reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault was the perception that, for many who reported their experiences, the university's follow-up was slow and, in some instances, mishandled. For many, the trauma of the original incident of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault was compounded by these mishandlings and served to discourage victim/survivors from pursuing the reporting process to its conclusion.

 *It was difficult to navigate the university's formal complaint procedure and to find assistance... the system needs revision as many people in this already confronting situation would not have the energy to navigate the process. It was frustrating to have this background stress.*

Many students also found the structure of the reporting process inadequate in sensitively accommodating victim/survivors' trauma while simultaneously progressing the report.

 *No consequences were ever implemented as the only way anything could have been implemented was if I sat down and addressed the man in a meeting, with both of us saying our own version of events to each other. The idea of facing the man who had hurt you and then listening to his version of events is not remotely compassionate or reasonable, so no action was ever undertaken. I was also told in detail how great this man was by staff mid-way through my meeting [where I was asked to explain] what he had done to me.*

 *[A victim/survivor friend and I] went to our [designated reporting] officer and formally reported the issue. I was told that [the perpetrator] would only receive details of our personal statement and was shocked to learn that he received the whole thing. I also learned he was discussing the issue with other students in our course when we weren't allowed to.... When the committee reached a decision, we were told we weren't allowed to know the details due to confidentiality despite ours not being maintained by him at any point of this process. He has not been removed from our lectures either but rather we have been asked to not attend them... The university emailed us his apology letter without warning – this sent me into a deep state of shock, and I had a breakdown after receiving it– he even talked about how the situation was stressful to him in this letter which infuriated me. I'm now looking to seek police help.*

Some students found that their university's response to their reporting placed the onus on them as victim/survivors to navigate and manage any dealings with the perpetrator, and to ensure their own personal safety. This included instances where victim/survivors were asked to confront the perpetrator themselves, and to change their own behaviour and actions in order to avoid coming into contact with the perpetrator.

 *When taken to the course coordinator, we were told to confront the issue personally as official involvement may be 'unsafe' if the man found out who made the complaint. I fail to see how confronting the issue personally is any safer.*

One victim/survivor was satisfied that her university showed a willingness to take action against the perpetrator but was ultimately asked to act as the decision maker in the matter and felt compelled to consider the positions of others who were not connected to the incident.

 *I told the University immediately and they asked me if I would like him to be 'let go' or continue for the rest of the semester. Because some of my friends were being supervised by this teacher, I didn't want them and their research to be disrupted by him leaving.*

Another criticism of universities' handling of sexual harassment and sexual assault reports lay in the lack of consequences for perpetrators. This occurred in some cases where the university had taken reasonable steps to progress the report and follow through on its protocol. In these instances, students reported that, despite these protocols, they perceived no intention to effect any meaningful change for victim/survivors, and pointed to a broader culture of universities protecting perpetrators.

 *I've applied multiple times with [backup] from doctors and psychologists for extensions and yet still get knocked back by my university. Knowing that [my university] does not care about sexual assault – but do everything to make it seem like they do – has really impacted my university life. They will put sexual assault support numbers, posters and pamphlets around campus, in bathrooms mostly, but when it comes down to it, the perpetrator often just gets a slap on the wrist or suspension, and no further action is taken.*

 *In general, staff appease abusers, rather than reprimand them. There is a culture of complacency in some uni environments being "don't ask, don't tell".*

In other cases, some students felt as though there was a lack of consequences for perpetrators, and this was often seen as a direct result of the way their university handled the report.

 ***Although the superiors I told treated me with respect and consideration, no tangible actions were put in place to support our cohort after I submitted an informal report.***

 ***Limited follow up and action taken by college, despite several other college members stepping forward with their own experiences with the same man.***

 ***I submitted an informal report about the sexual assault to our sexual misconduct unit, my school and the student clinic, however, had limited to no supports put in place to help students feel safe within the student psychology clinic.***

 ***I also told a staff member and all they responded with was “That’s horrible”. Staff members need to be trained.***

3.1.2. Barriers to reporting

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

Hana*, was sexually assaulted by a trusted friend when she was in high school.

The impacts of this sexual assault earlier in her life were long felt for Hana, particularly during her university experience. Anxiety and low self-esteem resulting from the assault made it difficult for her to meet new people and make connections with other students, while some subject matter from her coursework triggered troubling memories.

At a university event on campus, Hana was again sexually assaulted by a fellow student while she was intoxicated. Hana remembers falling asleep and waking up multiple times during the incident.

Hana faced a number of obstacles in reporting her assault, primarily feeling that the name of the perpetrator could be damaged in reporting him.

The main thing that stopped me from talking to someone in an institution i.e., counselling, staff, GP about what I had been through, was a crippling fear of being misunderstood, disregarded, and a fear of jeopardising or stigmatizing myself in my work and academic environment.

As a result, Hana did not report her sexual assault. She continues to see the perpetrator around campus, and feel the impacts of her experiences with sexual violence every day.

It is well documented that victim/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault can experience many barriers to reporting and support-seeking. Common among these are feelings of shame, fear of not being believed or taken seriously, and fear of repercussions either from the institution or the perpetrator (who may also be a student at the same institution) (Sable et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2017; Stoner & Cramer, 2019; Griffin et al., 2021).

Students cited several main barriers when it came to reporting. For some, a lack of awareness about what constituted sexual harassment and sexual assault meant that they came to the reporting process later than they would have expected, if at all.

 ***I didn’t report it because I didn’t know it was rape and I had no proof when it all sunk in. I felt disgusted and used. Then lockdown hit and I matured and realised I had been taken advantage of.***

This was particularly the case for victim/survivors of sexual harassment, for whom the gravity of their experiences was not always self-evident, or they felt that the harassment would not ‘count’ or be ‘worthy’ of reporting, particularly in comparison to sexual assault.

 ***I was hesitant to report anything because I felt that my situation didn’t class as [sexual] assault.... because I had never thought that harassment included these behaviours, it took a long time after the fact for me to accept that I had been harassed.***

Similarly, some students noted that they were unaware of their university's reporting infrastructure, nor its capacities to help victim/survivors.

 *I was not sure where I could go to complain or what they would be able to do.*

 *I found it hard to find resources within the university regarding the matter. Seems like it was all a bit hush hush.*

For some, a sense of shame and/or a fear of social stigma contributed to their reticence in reporting. The latter was particularly the case for students who were looking to pursue an academic career as they were concerned that reporting the incident might be detrimental to their career progression, especially if the perpetrator also worked for the university.

 *I was struggling with being harassed by an older, more advanced academic and I was fearful of reporting the situation. I feared that I wouldn't be believed and that reporting it would backfire and be harmful to my career.*

Some victim/survivors chose not to report due to concerns about their university's reporting system and a concern that the university would not have the victim/survivors' best interests at heart.

 *I did not ever formally report my sexual assault to the university or name my perpetrator because I felt it would lead to nothing.*

Other victim/survivors did not report their experience because they were of the view that they could not prove it and were concerned that their university reporting process placed the burden of proof on the victim/survivor. For many, this deterred them from coming forward.

 *I never reported my experiences as I didn't feel like there would be enough evidence for it and I didn't want the shame and stigma associated.*

3.2. Accessing support

Students listed a diverse range of supports within their university that they had either sought or been referred to following their experience of sexual harassment or sexual assault. While some students looked to staff members for support, others sought counselling via their institution. Some found assistance in university-run support groups such as campus safety teams. However, many of those seeking support did not receive it or locate it easily. One student who lived in student accommodation noted that its student leaders and other staff were untrained in how to manage reports of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault.

 *I think there is some active work going on. However, college support is abysmal - with student leaders taking the brunt of sexual assault reporting and not knowing how to deal with this. I also think it's counter-productive to encourage disclosure to other students particularly in a microcosmic student community.*

Similarly, victim/survivors who worked in a university setting found that support from their colleagues was inconsistent and varied.

 *Female colleagues were supportive, kind and compassionate and made me feel comfortable to speak with them about the situation. Many female colleagues shared with me their sexual harassment stories and genuinely understood how I felt, and my reactions to the event. The majority of male colleagues made me feel that what had happened to me was my fault, and that I could have done more to prevent it.*

4. Impacts of sexual harassment and sexual assault

In this research, students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault described a range of impacts that were detrimental to their university experience, including impacts on their mental health, their university attendance and performance, their ability to partake in university life, and their ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships with those around them. With regards to impacts of sexual violence on university students, international research demonstrates that sexual assault is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression for victim/survivors, as well as having direct impacts on students' academic performance and subsequent career progression (see e.g., Carey et al., 2018; Potter et al., 2018). Furthermore, mental health impacts such as depression and suicidality may be even greater for LGBTIQ+ students who experience sexual victimisation; with one study finding that, where students experienced a positive sense of belonging on their university campus, this acted as a protective factor against the mental health impacts of sexual assault (Backhaus et al., 2021).

Similarly, students who had been bystanders to others' experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault at university noted that knowing that these incidents occurred at their institution had caused them to be wary of their surroundings.

 *When one of my peers approached the course coordinator this harassment wasn't taken seriously at all and I would not feel comfortable approaching the course coordinator if I had a negative experience. I have vicarious trauma from the negative and traumatic experiences with sexual assault people have had at other universities*

 *I felt like every text I studied in my literature and theatre unit had some kind of explicit sexual overtone or even examples of rape, sexual harassment or [sexual] assault, even though there was such a wide range of texts to choose from ... I was extremely nervous, and even delayed my units that needed to attend university on campus because I felt very anxious about staying on campus. I didn't know enough about the campus' safety in order to feel truly comfortable.*

Of those students who experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in a non-university-related environment or prior to attending university, many listed the same impacts on their university experience as those who had been involved in a university-related incident. Victim/survivors reported carrying the impacts of their previous trauma with them into their university experience. For many, this existing trauma had a detrimental influence on many facets of their university life.

 *I'm a survivor of child sex abuse, which occurred when I was eight years old. I repressed the experience until I was eighteen and something triggered my memory. I was studying at the time.*

Other noted impacts for this group included fearfulness when travelling in public to and from university; an inability to connect with or trust others, including diminished capacity to make connections at university; a lack of confidence and difficulty focusing resulting in a diminished academic performance; and a disruption of work life, both in and outside of university.

COMPOSITE CASE STUDY

For Phoebe*, university life was extremely stressful. Although she did not experience a sexual assault related to university, Phoebe said that years of sexual harassment and some instances of sexual assault in other parts of life severely impacted her ability to succeed in her degree.

Phoebe suffers from anxiety and finds that she constantly polices what she wears, the spaces she enters and the people with whom she socialises.

Throughout my life I've been taken advantage of (sexually - mostly as a teenager) and made to feel uncomfortable in my own skin. As a conventionally attractive person, I find I can't escape the wolf-whistles and demeaning stares from men, which just make me feel dirty and disgusting. I struggle with my confidence on uni grounds because I fear that even just wearing my comfortable activewear, I will get unwarranted looks. I constantly fear what could happen if I wore something 'too revealing' and so I dress in ways I don't want to just to cover up and avoid any looks or danger. I'm scared that this, in the long run, will affect who I am able to become friends with or potentially even find relationships with as I can't express who I am in the fear of drawing attention to myself from sexual predators. I also fear that my constant worry and vigilance around sexual assault may distract me from my studies and make it harder for me to focus, negatively impacting my grades.

Phoebe felt that she would benefit from support from her university as a survivor of sexual harassment and sexual assault, despite these incidents not occurring in a university context.

4.1. Mental health

For students who experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, impacts on mental health were, for many, the primary effect of their experience. These tended to present as a series of interrelated impacts, with more severe conditions resulting in other mental health conditions, and vice versa.

Students spoke about the onset of mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, stress and flashbacks to the incident following their sexual harassment and/or sexual assault experience.

 *I continue to have mental reminders of the event which affects my mental health and at one point, I presented to the local hospital emergency department as my mental health was reaching crisis point. I don't want to go to sleep at night, the mental reminders continue to trigger my PTSD and I just don't have any other words to describe how I have and am currently feeling about the incident.*

Students also reported loss of motivation and concentration, trouble sleeping and a longer-term impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence.

 *Depression, lack of motivation, low self-esteem that leads to anxiety in social settings such as class.*

 *The low self-esteem makes it difficult to feel like what I have to contribute in class is valid and intelligent. I feel as though no one ever wants to hear what I have to say or [that] what I have to say is wrong, even though I know it is not true.*

As a result of their mental health impacts, some students had developed unhealthy relationships with alcohol and other substances, which in turn exacerbated the detrimental effects of their sexual harassment and/or sexual assault experience.

 *I'm terrified of alcohol now. I abuse it or I don't drink it at all, there's no in-between. Sometimes I'll be having a good time and I'll be transported, watching someone spike a drink, watching the perpetrator mix my drinks. It's always there.*

 *In my attempt to move through the confusion as fast as I could, I self-medicated with alcohol, drugs, people that were not a good influence.*

Incidents of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault also gave rise to a broader loss of faith in other people, an inability to trust, loneliness, powerlessness, hypervigilance, and exhaustion. Some students said they have resorted to self-policing their behaviour since the incident.

 *It has made me wary of being out at night for example going to the library at night to study. It has made me cautious about spending time with boys at university or anywhere. I tend to wear more conservative clothes in fear that I will be harassed.*

 *I take a lot of precautions for my personal safety including when and where I walk to the car alone, not getting drunk in public, wearing clothes that don't attract negative attention.*

4.2. University attendance and performance

For many students who experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, reduced mental well-being proved detrimental to their university studies.

 *Not a day goes by where I don't think about it. Sometimes I cannot sleep at night because I can't stop thinking about it, and I still have nightmares. Because I can't sleep, I struggle to focus on anything, whether it be assignments, classes or even exams. I struggle to keep up with the workload, and has caused me to consider dropping out as I'm not sure I'll be able to make it through the course if I can't complete the work because of my lack of focus.*

Some, particularly those who had been sexually harassed and/or sexually assaulted by a member of staff or a fellow student, felt their ability to contribute in class was significantly reduced. This was due to a related fear of being in the same lecture or tutorial as the perpetrator. Some students switched to remote learning as the online environment felt safer than on-campus learning.

 *The suggestive comments made by a tutor towards me made it hard for me to ask for help in class for fear he would humiliate me. To this day I continue to struggle with the skills from this class, and I believe it's partially because I felt I couldn't ask for help and didn't learn as much as I needed.*

 *It has also made me avoid classes at times to avoid some men and thus online study has felt safer.*

Some students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault found that they had difficulty with class content that triggered memories of or associations with their incident, and that they were not sufficiently warned or adequately supported by staff or fellow students when this occurred.

 *I began a subject of criminal law for my law degree and had my first flashback during the week about sexual assault which prevented me from attending the class (you could only miss two classes in the whole semester). The fact that it could come up in the exam was a cause of immense stress.*

Engagement with learning was reported as an impact, with students needing extensions on deadlines for assignments or degrees more broadly, as well as failing assignments or not performing to their fullest ability.

 *Beyond this, it has extremely affected my studies... I find that sexual assault and harassment are issues I confront often in my degree, and it can both be cathartic almost but also incredibly draining. I have extended my degree by two years come end of next year – and I link a lot of my mental state being exacerbated by my experience and my handling of these events.*

 *I couldn't concentrate on my work, I lost motivation to work, and my productivity was really low. I was capable of maybe 50% of what I used to be capable of before it happened.*

Experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault have caused some students to consider dropping out of their course, to move universities or put their studies on hold.

 *Because I can't sleep, I struggle to focus on anything, whether it be assignments, classes or even exams. I struggle to keep up with the workload and has caused me to consider dropping out as I'm not sure I'll be able to make it through the course if I can't complete the work because of my lack of focus.*

 *I ended up dropping out of university entirely after taking a one-year leave of absence. Trying to process that trauma whilst going through huge educational changes was too much for me and I ended up trying to commit suicide multiple times over my first two years at university.*

4.3. University life

For students who were victim/survivors of a university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, the broader experience of university life was affected and their sense of safety in university spaces was reduced.

Many reported difficulties engaging in on-campus events, lectures, tutorials and social activities, with specific concerns related to student accommodation or residences' events being noted.

 *My university student life has been non-existent. Due to my experiences with the non-academic staff member, I have not attended any events or seminars on my campus. I do not engage with other students or staff. I go to the lab to do my research and all other work is done from home. I avoid campus and university life as much as possible.*

 *It has made me extremely concerned for the safety and wellbeing of friends, particularly female friends, at social events/parties held at residential colleges or at the university/through university clubs.*

 *There were many social events that I did not want to partake in and social spaces I did not want to be in. I had a less 'jovial' or carefree university experience than my male counterparts. I don't remember any of the men using the security busses or security guards to get to cars or to safely leave the campus. Women and girls are copping the consequences of men's behaviour.*

Students' sense of safety was also impacted in the online learning environment, due to experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in this space. Difficulty with attendance or engagement was the result.

 *It has made it difficult to contribute during tutorials. I have avoided some online classes after male students have made me uncomfortable during previous sessions.*

Female-identifying students in particular had become wary of being alone in rooms with men. Staff having access to all classrooms was reported as a concern for one student who had experienced sexual harassment by a staff member.

 *I'm in a male-dominated course and have been working on a lot of group projects. Before lockdown, lecturers and tutors would say that students who worked in the building every day until night-time would do better in their project, so I felt pressured to stay after hours even though I was uncomfortable being in a secluded room with just men around.*

 *Such experiences made me incredibly self-conscious and fearful of being around men, even when surrounded by others.*

Some students reported developing a different relationship with physical spaces and altered their behaviours as a result of their experience. This included changing the times they arrived at university, the routes they took to get around campus, the study spaces they accessed, an increased awareness of campus lighting and security measures and an avoidance of crowded spaces.

 *On campus, I took a friend with me everywhere – I was too scared to go into rooms or buildings alone in case this man accosted me. I would arrive and leave campus at times that I thought would minimise my chances of seeing this man in the car park – to the detriment of my workflow.*

 *I realised pretty quickly how the uni layout and study areas changed when they did renovations at my uni, and I would say not for the better. Now it feels like the spaces are more spread out, more secluded and separated and there are more of them, which makes me feel more unsafe, less able to see, get to know & rely on the people around me.*

4.4. Relationships and socialising

Students reported issues with relationships and socialising as a result of their university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault experience. This included first and foremost an inability to connect, followed by issues with meeting new people and developing new relationships.

 *It sometimes puts me in a really bad mood when the thoughts of it start to resurface, and that impacts my ability to study or even hang out with my friends – because I prefer to just be alone in those situations.*

Other impacts mentioned included problems with family and friends due to the stress of the experience, reporting and stigma around sexual harassment and sexual assault.

 *I lost all of my friends who didn't believe me. I was victim blamed; slut shamed.*

Those who had been sexually harassed or sexually assaulted by a staff member or someone in authority spoke of their subsequent caution around staff, reducing their engagement in their learning. One student had to change supervisors and delay their research as a result of their experience.

 *I do now exercise much more caution towards my relationships with my teachers, even though I am sure that 99% of them will never do me wrong in this way. As a result of how that one esteemed staff member treated me, I am cautious and do not generally speak to my teachers outside of class as I once did.*

5. Perceptions and attitudes

5.1. Awareness of definitions of sexual harassment and sexual assault

While university and broader community policies seek to establish definitions of sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault, students' own awareness and interpretation of the meanings of these terms varied considerably.

For example, many students who reported experiencing unwanted staring, following, catcalling or certain levels of touching, were unsure whether the incident qualified as sexual harassment.

 *I'm not exactly sure if you'd call it physical or sexual abuse but it happened in student accommodation for university when I was physically touched inappropriately by a support officer.*

 *Getting approached and touched on the shoulders and arms by male uni students while I'm standing waiting for class or sitting and studying. I believe these were ways of flirting, but I don't think that it was the appropriate time to be doing so.*

For some, the perceived subjective nature of 'discomfort' made it difficult for them to determine whether their experience was a form of sexual violence – others were unsure whether their experience would be accepted as such by figures of authority if they were to pursue a reporting avenue.

 *My main experiences on campus have been things that have made me very uncomfortable (e.g., staring, following me off campus) but aren't explicit or easy to report or recognise as harassment.*

 *I didn't realise that being stared at, having someone loiter around you and ask you personal questions was reportable conduct before now... but I now realise that I just sat in how uncomfortable I was for weeks just worrying that he might show up again out of nowhere... That should have been a clue that it wasn't ok.*

A number of students reported only becoming aware that they had experienced a form of sexual violence after the fact, upon speaking about the incident with others and developing a vocabulary to engage with it.

 *When I first began studying at uni, I had recently broken up with my high school boyfriend of 3 years. I later came to realise that a lot of our sexual interactions were not healthy and quite often he raped me via coercion and guilt tripping.*

 *I didn't really realise how serious this was until it came up in a conversation with that same friend (and another girl from that party), where they both described it as rape. Hearing that word really stuck with me after that.*

5.2. Perceptions and societal norms

When thinking about sexual harassment and sexual assault, students who had experienced it in a university setting discussed a range of perceptions and societal norms associated with sexual violence. International research evidence further suggests that particular university cultures and environments can be more, or less, conducive to abusive conduct among students. For instance, many studies have highlighted that 'pro-abuse peer support' is closely connected with higher prevalence of sexual violence in university student accommodation or residence settings (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Cultures within educational settings that have higher levels of hostility and sexist attitudes towards women, or that have high 'rape myth' adherence, tend to see higher rates of sexual violence (e.g., Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Trottier et al., 2021) as well as poorer staff responses to sexual victimisation (e.g. Holland et al., 2020). The concept of 'rape myths' refers to attitudes and false beliefs that minimise or excuse sexual violence, and/or that blame victim/survivors for their own victimisation (Burt, 1980; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1994; Powell & Webster, 2018).

Students said that experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in relation to university were common, largely due to a culture that is thought to normalise such behaviour. Students pointed to sexist and misogynistic attitudes, as well as an enduring stigma and shame around sexual violence that went on to prevent reporting and better education on the topic.

 ***[The] sexual harassment or [sexual] assault I have experienced are as a result of sexism and misogyny that is allowed to persist at university.***

 ***I've realised that there is a massive stigma around saying the words 'sexual assault' and 'sexual harassment'. I have been sexually assaulted on numerous occasions but have felt as though I can't say those words without people thinking you're just trying to cause an issue.***

 ***The male students I've encountered in my law cohort are extremely misinformed about every issue pertaining to sexual assault, from what it is, to who it impacts, to issues regarding reporting.***

The culture of student accommodation and residences was highlighted, with some students reporting that incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault were treated with blatant disregard and even condoned.

 ***I have found that within the college community of a major university, a subculture exists whereby second- and third-year students encourage first-year students to make unconstrained sexual advances upon others; this encouragement is given consistently, with the issue of consent either being entirely absent from discussion or indicated as being 'irrelevant'.***

Localised peer environments within education settings may also help to explain how rates of sexual violence victimisation can differ across different university contexts; including across some sporting or social club contexts for example (Crosset, 2015; Young et al., 2017), as well as in some student accommodation or residence settings (Armstrong et al., 2006; Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, 2012; Stotzer & MacCartney, 2016). Additionally, these peer norms have been further shown to impact on bystander intervention – reducing the likelihood that other students present or observing sexual harassment, or a potential sexual assault situation will take any active steps to intervene (McMahon, 2010).

Another noted form of normalisation was the perception that sexual harassment was 'not a big deal'. Experiences fitting into this category were often referred to as 'only' sexual harassment; sexual assault was broadly understood as unacceptable, but forms of harassment were spoken about by some as a part of life.

 ***I have only ever been verbally sexually harassed***

 ***I have been harassed so many times that I have lost count. It is just accepted in our society.***

The drinking culture of university events as well as student accommodation or residences, was also identified as a factor that normalised sexual harassment and sexual assault.

 ***I think the drinking culture really needs to change, not that going out and socially drinking is bad, but the experiences of women are not ok. It's so normalised to start touching a girl or following them around, and I don't think this is taken seriously enough.***

Some students felt that the accessibility of dialogues and language about sexual harassment and sexual assault at university had improved in recent years. However, others felt it was insufficient in describing the full range of sexual violence experiences, particularly those with queer-identifying victim/survivors.

 *I had one student sexually harass me on multiple occasions with my lesbian identity being the butt of the joke. She made jokes about lesbian oral sex (where I was the centre of it), along with antisemitic remarks and other homophobic microaggressions... I have had a mainly positive experience with coming out, however sex jokes come up from time to time and other uncomfortable remarks. Both of the people described above identified as straight, and cisgender. An important thing to note is that even “allies” can make homophobic, transphobic and otherwise discriminatory remarks to queer people which can be incredibly uncomfortable.*

Other students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault were unsure how to process the perpetrator’s actions when considering their cultural background or ‘social skills’ – such framing was used to justify the incident, either by the perpetrator or the victim/survivor.

 *I felt bad because the guy just seemed like he lacked social skills, not that he was trying to do anything malicious.*

 *He is from another country and been told that his comments are not appropriate although he says it’s culture.*

6. Student views on how to improve

Many students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault said that many of the current university approaches to targeting sexual violence were insufficient and made comments on how they think things can be improved. These recommendations were made for both the university and societal context, with students agreeing that there is much work to be done in properly preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault in both domains. For students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, their institution was an environment that represented wider, societal issues that need addressing. Students who experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in a non-university-related environment largely shared the concerns and potential recommendations of those who had had a university-related experience.

6.1. University level

At the university level, some students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault criticised a culture that, in their view, normalises sexual violence, and does not consider or seek to minimise the trauma of victim/survivors. For these students, more specific recommendations cannot be implemented without wider change to this culture.

-  *For staff to not set up a culture of unwanted sexual behaviour and comments, to talk to me rather than try to bully or disprove me constantly or have processes that actively retraumatised me any time I had to deal with them.*
-  *Address the drinking culture around 'O Week' and make it clear inappropriate behaviour would not be tolerated. Also be able to switch classes outside the allocation period without having to offer extreme details.*

Students also argued that the burden of prevention currently falls on female students and victim/survivors more broadly, with some criticising the reactive nature of their university's policies for this issue. While they understood that there was likely a zero-tolerance policy for sexual violence at their institution, many felt that their university's actions and rhetoric were not reflective of such policies, which were thought to fail in taking a victim/survivor-centric approach.

-  *If victims saw the university being clear that it is the perpetrators' fault and targeting campaigns at them (not placing responsibility on victims to take control of the situation & report/disclose, but, rather, on perpetrators not doing it in the first place), then victims would be more likely to report. It would actually create the culture of a zero-tolerance policy, rather than just saying the uni has one. Actions have to match.*
-  *We must be constantly vigilant that we won't say or do something that will draw attention to ourselves. The burden of feeling safe shouldn't only fall on the woman, but on the student community as a whole.*

Students suggested universities consult with victim/survivor-led organisations on implementing holistic, preventative measures that support survivors and fuel change in cultures that normalise sexual violence.

 ***I would like to see my university meaningfully engage with survivors and advocacy groups that represent them. I would like to see them adopt, in full, policies developed by survivor-led organisations. And I would like to see them implement practical measures not as a token measure but as one part of a comprehensive policy that aims to prevent sexual assault on campus and provides vital support to survivors.***

In addition to these broader critiques, students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault made recommendations across the policy areas of education and campaigns, reporting avenues, disciplinary action and university life.

6.1.1. Education and campaigns

Students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault called for more education about sexual violence and the factors contributing to it.

Although there was awareness of current campaigns and compulsory modules addressing the issue, students felt that their content lacked nuance, particularly around which acts qualify as sexual harassment and sexual assault, information about consent and advice specific to LGBTQI+ people and relationships.

 ***Hold more information stalls on what it actually is. I think some people don't realise they are being or have been sexually abused or harassed. Also, information stalls on where to go to get support.***

 ***More overt messaging about consent and what to do if we've been [sexually] assaulted (and what counts as [sexual] assault!). ConsentMatters does nothing, in my opinion. There needs to be more, including posters and social media campaigns.***

Some felt that male students need to be more effectively encouraged to engage with education and campaigns about sexual violence. Some female students perceived their male peers to be relatively disinterested when it came to this information, which went on to reinforce the normalisation of sexual violence and the silence of victim/survivors.

 ***Mandatory workshops directed at male audiences to increase awareness in a group that may not usually interact with these issues.***

 ***Educate men (specifically). I say this as a queer woman, I have never been sexually harassed by women, and all women are very on top of the topic because they have gone out of their way to learn these things. My uni currently has a compulsory very basic sexual assault module, which is great(!), but it needs to go a lot deeper. It mainly just covers if they don't explicitly say 'yes' to sex, then it's rape. But it doesn't really cover what is sexual assault/harassment.***

 ***Understand the gendered nature of sexual assault and harassment, provide education, early intervention and advocacy to support systemic change.***

 ***There needs to be more awareness as well as greater amounts of accountability. Awareness that digs down to the reality of gender-based violence and actively works to dispel prejudices, biases, and misconceptions. It needs to focus on victims and their experiences, and not be a platform for deflection and victimisation of the perpetrators.***

Students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault also called for more staff-specific education.

 ***Especially for staff mentoring, liaising and guiding student leaders – they need to start incorporating education about gendered experiences of sexual violence into leadership training.***

6.1.2. Reporting avenues

The most common suggestion regarding avenues for reporting incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault was that institutions raise awareness of their existence. Many students said they were unsure about how to go about reporting their experience, with a sense that this was common across the student community.

 ***Apart from that I don't think it's well known what the university can do in terms of helping students with these experiences. I don't even know where I would start if I wanted to make a formal complaint about this tutor, let alone if I would need evidence, etc.***

Other students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault felt that in their understanding of university reporting processes, the burden of proof on the victim/survivor was too high. Instead, they suggested that reporting processes better emphasise that victim/survivors will be believed, and their experience will be taken seriously.

 ***The university must believe the victims! Sexual harassment and stalking issues are taken too lightly and processed too slowly. It is very difficult to provide evidence in these situations as the perpetrator's actions are hard to predict and often occur when least expected.***

Students also suggested reporting processes be made quicker and more transparent, with the various routes that students can take made clear, and with immediate measures addressing the incident to be brought in while the reporting process continues. Anonymity was a high priority for students.

 ***Bring in interim measures from the date of reporting. Inform students of what processes are available at the university & what the uni can do vs a police/other investigation. Let students know they can report or disclose, and there's an anonymous option.***

Some students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault brought up more nuanced issues in this space, like how Australian legislation and individual university policies can or might support international students.

 ***Help international students as we know less about laws over here and how does it go when we need to report police against sexual harassment and how will be fight a case against someone for this. As we don't know much about it. Also, if there are monetary expenses involved in this, then help us and guide us all about it.***

6.1.3. Disciplinary action

In terms of disciplinary action following the reporting of an incident, students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault had mixed thoughts on where this action should come from.

Some students felt that police involvement could retraumatise victim/survivors, particularly those who have had multiple experiences of sexual violence.

 ***Don't force individuals to go to the police if they do not wish to. Many of us are re-victimised by the system (which is bullshit), and do not want to be constantly questioned or re-traumatised by dealing with the police.***

Other students did not want these issues to be handled internally as they did not have confidence in their university's capacity to prosecute their case. Issues with student accommodation or residences were mentioned in relation to this.

 ***Use the civil and criminal authorities /systems expeditiously amongst an allegation(s).***

 ***Stop protecting rapists in colleges and student accommodation.***

Students felt that transparency around reporting avenues and disciplinary action, as well as offering alternative routes of justice, would ensure that victim/survivors retained choice in how their experience was handled. They also felt that these mechanisms would ensure victim/survivors did not feel pressured to follow through with extensive legal proceedings if they did not want to.

Regardless of potential involvement of authorities, students who had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault called for clear consequences for every level of sexual violence that were more reflective of the 'zero-tolerance policy' that universities hold.

 *There also need to be consequences for harassment at every level. I don't want to officially report incidents every single time and go through an entire process that probably only takes major incidents seriously. Lecturers and tutors should step up and give consequences to students for minor acts of harassment too. Students need to learn that harassment of any kind at any level is unacceptable.*

 *If the university was also much clearer that perpetrators can be (insert consequences here... I don't even know them because they're not talked about) and that these consequences can be immediate. Then perhaps perpetrators would be less likely to do it.*

6.1.4. University life

When thinking about other aspects of university life, students who had experienced university-related sexual harassment and/or sexual assault made recommendations relating to student accommodation or residences, improved oversight and security.

Students who lived in student accommodation or residences believed an urgent cultural overhaul was warranted in order to address current systems and traditions that appear to justify sexual violence. Students criticised current reporting avenues at residences, asking for more transparency and oversight from authoritative sources outside of the residence. Consistent and accessible support for victim/survivors of sexual violence – whether university-related or not – was also suggested as a means of better centring victim/survivors' needs, as well as indicating residences' support of ending sexual harassment and sexual assault in their institutions.

 *Do more to address problematic college traditions that normalise sexual objectification and harassment and which increase the likelihood of [sexual] assaults occurring.*

 *I think providing support that is available after hours is incredibly important. This needs to be a priority, rather than an action item to work toward when it's convenient.*

 *Having a specific person at unis and college campuses that people can go to discuss sexual harassment and [sexual] assault.*

Improved moderation and advance warning of class content was mentioned by some, so that victim/survivors taking the class could choose to miss the lecture or more effectively prepare themselves to attend.

 *Personally, I think students should be notified hours before a class if sensitive subjects, like sexual assault, will be discussed during that lesson. It gives survivors time to mentally prepare and attend the lesson with comfortability.*

Students who had experienced sexual violence in the online environment noted that better oversight of this space was needed, with restrictions on direct messaging suggested as a means of limiting uncomfortable behaviour.

 *Institute a no private message feature across all Zoom and online platforms - this eliminates half of the problem immediately.*

Some students mentioned the responsibility entrusted to elected student executive members, particularly in the residential environment, as an area of concern for them. They suggested these representatives be better vetted in order to prevent perpetrators from gaining positions of power in these communities.

 *More thorough vetting and regulation of elected student executive members within college (i.e., student accommodation) communities.*

A sense of safety on campus was a priority for many students, who asked that lighting in public areas be assessed and improved and more open spaces prioritised. These students emphasised the importance of regular security patrols across campus.



More regular security patrols particularly at night/very early morning. Good lighting areas, awareness of pathways to and from buildings to car parks; noting bushes or dark spaces. Taking care with study spaces so that areas are more open, people can see each other easily without too many 'poky' areas - it gives students a chance to connect with people, look out for others.

7. Conclusion

Universities are key cultural and social pillars in the lives of many young adults, providing a basis for often life-long professional networks and friendships.

Universities thus play a crucial role both in the development of young adults and in providing opportunities for their futures. Yet what this research demonstrates is that for many students, their time at university will be marred by sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, with negative impacts that can be exacerbated by inadequate support and responses, as well as with lasting effects across a student's university career and beyond.

Crucially, students provided many clear recommendations as to what further actions need to be taken to better respond to and prevent sexual harassment and sexual assault. Many of these were directed at universities specifically, but several also noted that sexual violence is a shared societal issue within Australia and will require multifaceted efforts toward substantial social change in order to address and ultimately prevent these harms.

Among these key recommendations from students were:

- **challenge cultures that normalise or excuse sexual violence,**
- **improve awareness of sexual harassment and sexual assault, as well as the mechanisms for reporting and support,**
- **provide a range of response and support options for victim/survivors to meet their varied needs and preferences,**
- **increase scrutiny and accountability of student and staff leadership to prevent perpetrators from protection in positions of power,**
- **share the responsibility for addressing and preventing sexual violence, so that it does not fall disproportionately upon victim/survivors themselves,**
- **reinforce policy and processes with a range of targeted and proactive strategies to address the drivers of sexual harassment and sexual assault,**
- **ensure policies, processes and prevention programs take a victim/survivor-centric and trauma-informed approach.**

University settings are not immune to the prevalence of sexual violence that is experienced among young adults in the wider community. For those students who do experience sexual violence in the context of their university, it is clear that they are seeking their institutions to respond appropriately in order to prevent further trauma associated with the abuse as well as ensuring future safety for the student community. Yet regardless of whether an incident of sexual violence happens specifically in a university setting, the harmful impacts of victim/survivors' experiences carry over, affecting students' learning and futures.

The gendered nature of sexual violence, whereby women as well as sexuality and gender minorities are over-represented as victims means that it is these students who are at greater risk of interruption or cessation of their university studies as a result of sexual violence.

Ensuring equity of access to higher education requires both appropriate and trauma-informed responses to sexual violence, as well as proactive measures to prevent it within the university community.

Appendix

Reference list

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