

Anonymous Register for Inappropriate Behaviour



Update report August 2019

Background

On August 1st 2017 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) published *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities*. This report - based on the survey responses of 30,930 students nationally (2,305 of whom were from the University of Melbourne) - provided the first detailed information about the prevalence of sexual misconduct at Australian Universities. Further surveys will be carried out nationally every three years to allow us to continue to monitor and evaluate the problem, and the effectiveness of responses made to prevent these behaviours. The next survey will be conducted by the Social Research Centre (SRC) in 2020.

The University was provided by the AHRC with localised findings on the percentage of respondents who reported being victims of sexual assault or sexual harassment or witnessing sexual assault or sexual harassment in a university setting or elsewhere. It was not possible, however, for the AHRC to provide the University with findings on the nature of the perpetrators, locations, and whether or not incidents were reported, or formal complaints were made.

The report did highlight, however, that very few students who had experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment sought support or assistance or made a formal report or complaint – typically because they did not believe the incident was serious enough or they did not feel the need for help. Further, well over half of Melbourne respondents indicated they had little or no knowledge of University policy on sexual harassment and assault, of where to seek support/assistance and of where to go within the University to make a complaint. Melbourne respondents showed lower levels of awareness of support and courses of action than other students across the higher education sector.

For the past few two years the University has been working to combat these problems. Using a range of physical and digital media we have been striving to raise awareness of both the different pathways for reporting sexual harm, and the range of internal and external support services available. Significant work has been undertaken to make information more visible and more accessible. We have introduced additional specialised training, and additional counselling staff have been employed. Changes have been made to reduce waiting times for counselling services, and material has been developed to help direct staff and students to available support and reporting options. We have commissioned an external expert to evaluate the work undertaken by the University of Melbourne to date, and to provide advice and recommendations on what work is still required to improve our policies and procedures.

Focussing the work – why have an anonymous register?

Having laid this foundation, our next step is to develop a more targeted response, and for this to be effective we need a finer granularity of detail than is provided by the AHRC report or the small number of formal reports which the University currently receives. Thus, after consultation with student groups and experts from across the University, on March 14 of this year the University launched an anonymous register for inappropriate behaviour. As part of this consultation it was agreed that the register's scope should encompass more than just behaviours related to sexual harm, and instead take advantage of this opportunity to gather data about, and in turn address, a wider range of inappropriate behaviours affecting our community such as bullying and discrimination.

The register is not designed to replace the reporting process - and we still strongly encourage anyone who has experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviours to make a report. The data collected is being used to allow us to better understand the scope and nature of these behaviours within our community, and to develop, implement and evaluate preventative efforts.

Anonymous submissions give victim/survivors a way to be heard, without having to expose their rawest emotions, or relieve their trauma through recounting the details to another person. It also gives the victim/survivor a way to share their stories, without fear of disbelief or allegations of vexatious complaints as neither victim nor perpetrator is named. Further, it allows those who witness these behaviours a way to let the University know, even if they do not have sufficient information to be comfortable reporting formally. We continue to encourage formal reporting wherever possible. We appreciate, however, that both formal reporting and completing the anonymous register can be immensely challenging and must be a decision for each individual. We are extremely grateful to all those who have

submitted forms for their time and willingness to help us in combating inappropriate behaviour in our community.

Initial data and next steps

In the first four months since the register was launched (March 14 – July 13, 2019) there were 277 forms submitted to the register. Of these 40% were incidents involving sexual harm.¹ The most common type of incident or behaviour documented was controlling or coercive behaviour (including belittling, bullying or cyberbullying) which was referenced in 47% of the submissions (noting that multiple types of behaviour or incident can be included on each submission so there is an overlap between each category, and percentages do not total to 100). The specifics of these submissions are being analysed, to shape our ongoing response. Work is already underway to provide education and training for the University community about power and rank imbalance, how to recognise where this occurs, and how to avoid abusing this imbalance. The submissions make clear that these inappropriate behaviours are affecting staff and students at all levels of the University and on all campuses, as well as off-site and socially. Since the register places no restriction on the date of the incident being documented, and a significant proportion of the submissions pertain to historical events, we are still working through the data to build a picture of trends and patterns. Where found, these will be included in the annual reports.

The safety and privacy of those who have submitted forms remains a central tenet of the management of this data and this will continue to determine the content which is included in these reports – individual events will not be reported on – rather the focus will be on overarching trends and patterns which can be addressed through education, training and policy or procedural changes.

The usage rate of the anonymous register is encouraging as it indicates that some in our community have confidence that we will use this data to drive positive change. The data supports the results of the AHRC survey, and our own belief that we have a significant cultural problem which much be addressed. Challenging these behaviours, and changing the culture is essential work for the wellbeing of all of our community, not just those directly affected.

The anonymous register is just one tool in combatting sexual harassment and coercive behaviours, and we will continue to work on improving our policies and processes as well as our prevention, support and reporting mechanisms. This work is far from over, as the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Surveys² show. We will continue to provide reports to the University community on the Respect Taskforce page about the work that is being done at the University of Melbourne to challenge and combat inappropriate behaviours.

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¹ These included: being made to watch pornography, sexually explicit comments, repeated or inappropriate advances, requests, accompanied by pressure for sex or sexual acts, unwelcome touching, hugging, cornering or kissing, indecent exposure, engaging or attempting to engage in sexual intercourse or a sexual act without consent and sharing or threatening to share intimate images or video of another person without consent.

² Webster, K., Diemer, K., Honey, N., Mannix, S., Mickle, J., Morgan, J., Parkes, A., Politoff, V., Powell, A., Stubbs, J., & Ward, A. (2018). *Australians' attitudes to violence against women and gender equality. Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)* (Research report, 03/2018). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.