

Australian students report high rates of sexual harassment and assault

One in five say they have been harassed in university settings.

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Lukas Coch/EPA

Australian students protest following the release of a survey on sexual harassment.

Students at Australian universities are experiencing “unacceptable rates” of sexual harassment and assaults, according to the Australian Human Rights Commission, which on 1 August released the first national report charting the extent of the problem.

Of more than 30,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students who answered an online survey, 21% said that they had experienced sexual harassment, such as unwelcome touching or offensive comments, on a campus or a location related to a university.

The survey also revealed that 7% of students were sexually assaulted in 2015 or 2016; about one-quarter of them said it happened on campus, at a university-organized event or while travelling to or from a university. But the vast majority of those harassed or assaulted did not report the incidents to their university.

“The impact of these events can be devastating, affecting [people’s] health, studies and future careers,” said Kate Jenkins, sex-discrimination commissioner with the Australian Human Rights Commission, at a press briefing. “Universities owe [students] swift action to address these issues. It cannot wait.”

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The results of the Australian study echo data on sexual assault collected at universities in the United States. A country-wide survey of sexual misconduct by university staff towards students at UK universities will be released next year by the National Union of Students.

The Australian report follows years of pressure from student representatives and those who have experienced sexual assault calling on universities to acknowledge and address the issue on campuses. Universities Australia, which oversees universities in the country, asked the commission in 2016 to conduct a national survey.

Results from the survey show that women were almost twice as likely to be sexually harassed, and three times more likely to be sexually assaulted, as men. Students who identified as gay, lesbian or homosexual, as well as trans or gender-diverse students, were the most likely to be harassed. Perpetrators of sexual harassment or violence against undergraduates were most commonly men who were students at the same university; postgraduate students were twice as likely as undergraduates to be harassed by a lecturer or tutor.

Individual reports

Each of the country's 39 universities also released figures on 1 August of sexual assault and harassment at their institution, the first time that such information has been made public. Sophie Johnston, president of the National Union of Students in Melbourne, urged universities with lower rates not to use the results as a way to promote themselves. "There is nothing to revel in having a few less sexual assaults or rapes than the university next door," she said at the press conference.

Michael Flood, a researcher on gender, sexuality and violence at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, says that the findings reflect research on some of the risk factors of sexual violence in the broader population. The survey found that four major factors increased the chances of sexual violence or unwelcome behaviour at universities: negative attitudes towards women and sex; alcohol use; abuse of positions of power; and perpetrators having easy access to bedrooms in university settings.

The report recommends that universities help to prevent sexual violence through education programmes that address the drivers of sexual assault, as well as initiatives that support victims and give them access to counselling and clear procedures to report events. It also recommends that an independent body repeat the national survey every three years.

Flood says that pressure on universities to act may lead them to introduce ineffective measures. "If universities are serious about responding to victims, and lessening rates of sexual assault and harassment on campus, then they need to adopt comprehensive and robust measures," he says. Reviews of several programmes in US secondary schools have found that education programmes that address attitudes and social norms and develop healthy relationship skills over multiple sessions can reduce violent sexual behaviour.

Responding to the report, Universities Australia announced evidence-based education programmes for students, training for staff, leaders and first responders, and a temporary support phone line for victims of sexual assault or harassment. It also committed to developing guidelines for interactions between supervisors and postgraduate students.

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Corrections

Corrected: An earlier version of this story erroneously stated that postgraduates were twice as likely to be harassed by a lecturer or tutor than by undergraduates.