

## **Universities can't be left to mark their own work: Expert Panel told reform must include independent oversight to interrupt universities ongoing failure on sexual violence.**

### **For immediate release | Fair Agenda & End Rape on Campus Australia**

Major changes, and independent oversight are urgently needed to address sexual violence in universities, or another 8,800 students are expected to be sexually assaulted in Australian university contexts by the end of this academic year, say advocates.

Intervening to address university failures to meet basic standards in relation to sexual violence must be a priority for any reform agenda that cares about student wellbeing and educational outcomes, say women's safety advocates Fair Agenda and End Rape on Campus Australia, in their submission to the national 'Universities Accord' reform process currently underway.

The groups say most universities are failing students at every point of responsibility:

- Failing to provide evidence-based interventions to prevent rape on campus.
- Failing to ensure tutors and other staff with positions of influence and access don't have a history of using sexual violence.
- Failing to support students who report rape on campus with timely access to trauma-informed counselling.
- Failing to provide timely responses to urgent requests for basic safety and academic accommodations.
- Failing to provide basic on-campus safety measures such as ensuring that student survivors don't have to sit in the same classroom as the person who raped them.
- Failing to enable minor adjustments to ensure students don't fail out of their course while dealing with the trauma impacts associated with sexual assault.
- Failing to take action to ensure staff or students known to be using violence aren't given the opportunity to cause further harm in university contexts.

"Students who are sexually assaulted or harassed in a university context have needs that can only be met by their university. Court processes can take years to deliver any kind of outcome - students can't wait that long for the basic support they need, and that could make the difference between graduating or failing out. When you want to change your tutorial so you're not in class with someone who raped you - you need the university to act. When you need an extension on your assignment because you're dealing with PTSD from a violent sexual assault - you need the university to act." said Sharna Bremner, Founder of End Rape on Campus Australia.

"Despite saying the right things, many universities are still actively causing harm with their response to sexual violence by their students and staff. Five years on from the landmark Human Rights Commission Inquiry into this crisis - National Student Safety Survey data shows very little has changed. Students are paying the price; and universities are not being held accountable." said Renee Carr, Executive Director at Fair Agenda.

Ms Bremner added: "The problem is not just universities failing to prevent potential sexual violence. Although many still do. Frequently university administrations also choose not to protect

students when rapists are reported at their institution. We've had cases where multiple young women have reported the same offending student to their university, and he's been allowed to remain on campus, which has enabled him to harm other students. If he'd been copying an essay, instead of violently violating another student's body - university policy would have seen him expelled."

"While students who are recovering from the trauma of a violent crime are forced to jump through hoops to stay in uni - often including forking out money to get multiple psychologist letters confirming their trauma is enough to get them an extension - we know of multiple students with sexual assault complaints against them getting brought onto university staff." added Ms Bremner.

"Most of us would think that having active sexual assault complaints against you at an institution would hurt your job chances. At many universities that doesn't appear to be the case" she added.

"In the five years since the Australian Human Rights Commission confirmed the scale of sexual violence and its impact at universities, many universities haven't made the substantive changes recommended. They can't be trusted to mark their own work in this area. We need the federal government to ensure independent oversight - and deliver accountability when universities decide to put student safety and wellbeing at risk." Ms Carr said.

"Universities are expecting students to be back on campus full time; but many haven't made the changes students need to actually be safe from sexual violence when we are. Violence prevention work is still laughably bad, and survivors who come forward aren't getting the support they need to continue their studies" says university student and Fair Agenda Campaigner Dani Villafañá.

"We know that sexual violence is hugely damaging to someone's overall wellbeing, and the impacts on a student survivor's education can be devastating. When you're too scared to go to campus, that means you can't go to class, or to the library, or to academic support services. When you can't safely access the things you need to learn, the chances of you being able to succeed academically are almost zero. And if you don't graduate, you can't fulfill your dream of being a doctor, or a teacher, or an engineer." Added Ms Villafañá.

"While student rape survivors learn that their university will not take genuine steps to allow them to continue their education safely, perpetrators learn that their university will take more severe action against them if they cheat on an exam than if they harm one - or more - of their classmates." Ms Bremner added.

Fair Agenda and End Rape on Campus Australia have called on the Universities Accord Expert Panel to support the creation of an independent, expert-led accountability and oversight mechanism, such as a Taskforce on University Sexual Violence, with a mandate to ensure compliance with minimum standards in prevention and response; investigate complaints; facilitate transparency; and deliver enforcement where basic standards are not met.

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