

Advocates say Taskforce on Uni sexual violence needed to realise change on immediate reform priority on student safety

Joint release: Fair Agenda & End Rape on Campus Australia

Student safety advocates have welcomed the recognition by the Universities Accord Expert Panel, and the Government, that student safety is an immediate priority for reform in the tertiary education sector.

During today's National Press Club address, Education Minister Jason Clare announced that in response to the five immediate actions identified by the Expert Panel in their Interim Report, the Government would:

"Work with State and Territory governments to improve university governance. This includes university governing bodies having more people with expertise in the business of universities, and a focus on student and staff safety and making sure universities are good employers."

Key advocates have warmly welcomed the Minister's stated commitment on this issue - and called for intervention to provide immediate change, alongside the long-term systemic interventions floated in the Interim Report.

Amongst dozens of proposals for consideration raised by the Interim Report as potential reforms, are:

- 1) Strengthening the role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman to accept and respond to complaints by both international and domestic students
- 2) The development of a student charter to ensure a nationally consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students.
- 3) The development of a national Tertiary Education Commission that could work with the Minister and Department for Education, and would provide independent, expert advice and coordination across the higher education sector.

Fair Agenda & EROC Australia say these reforms offer potential for improving student safety years into the future - but after six years of university failures on this issue, urgent action is needed to facilitate short-term change for current and future students.

They say critical to realising improvements to student safety and wellbeing is an oversight mechanism that can deliver transparency and accountability.

"Critical to addressing sexual violence in universities is transparency around institutional failures; and consequences when universities fail to meet appropriate standards around violence prevention or response." said Renee Carr, Executive Director of Fair Agenda.

"Under the current approach, based on National Student Safety Survey figures, at least 275 students will be sexually assaulted in university contexts each week – that's 14,300 students each coming year." she added.

"For many student survivors, the university's response will compound their trauma, and adversely impact their academic outcomes, often preventing them from completing their career and pursuing their chosen career. Right now, there is no mechanism for a student whose university is putting their safety and education at risk to seek redress; and there are no

consequences for universities who harm students - even in the most heinous examples.” said Sharna Bremner, Founder of End Rape on Campus Australia.

“We need an expert-led Taskforce to act as a circuit breaker on this issue. For six years student safety data has made very clear that universities cannot be trusted to mark their own work in this area. For years we’ve seen countless university press releases about supposed commitments to action and reform in this area; but the reality for students is that many universities are still actively causing harm with their responses to sexual violence.” added Ms Bremner.

“We encourage the Government to establish a Taskforce on campus sexual violence as an immediate next step that can begin driving the major changes needed to improve university prevention and responses to violence; while the longer-term structural reforms discussed today are developed and built.” added Ms Carr.

“Right now students don’t have any avenue to raise complaints about university inaction or harmful responses to reports of rape. The Expert Panel acknowledged in their report how bad these options are. We hear from students who aren’t able to even get basic adjustments to sit their exams without seeing their rapist. A Taskforce could help drive and incentivise university action on this while this long-term reform gets underway.” added Ms Bremner.

“In the almost six years since Commissioner Kate Jenkins made major recommendations for university reform, an estimated 85,800 students have been subjected to sexual assault in university contexts. Every month another 1,190 students are added to that list. By the end of this year, student safety data suggests another 5,775 students will have had their educations impacted by sexual violence.” Ms Carr concluded.

The groups reaffirm their call for the government to establish an **independent oversight and accountability mechanism with a mandate to address sexual violence at universities.**

They affirm this must:

- Be independent of universities and residences;
- Be led by experts in sexual violence who can assess the quality of university approaches;
- Have authority to compel institutional transparency around incidents and responses; and
- Be able to implement meaningful sanctions when basic standards are not met.

The call for such a mechanism was last week backed by more than 40 advocates and services, including the National Women’s Safety Alliance, the Australian Women’s Health Network and Women’s Legal Services Australia.

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