



Leading student safety advocates welcome draft Action Plan as potentially transformative on sexual violence in unis

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End Rape On Campus Australia, Fair Agenda, The STOP Campaign and National Union of Students are issuing their joint support for the government's new Draft Action Plan to address gender-based violence in higher education - which has just been released for 'consultation and detailed design work'.

The leading national advocates on sexual violence in university communities - who draw from more than two decades of collective experience on this issue – helped to shape the proposed Plan, through the Department of Education's Gender-Based Violence Stakeholder Reference Group.

The groups say that the Plan has the potential to be transformative for students and victim-survivors; and to finally disrupt the system that has allowed universities and residences to put student safety and wellbeing at risk. They say the Plan could deliver the systemic interventions so desperately needed, by providing: oversight and monitoring, transparency, an effective complaints mechanism, and actual accountability.

The [Draft Action Plan](#) includes:

- **New Standards:** the introduction of a National Code that would put in place rules for universities and residences related to: evidence-based prevention, management of sexual violence reports, provision of student support and academic adjustments.
- **Oversight and monitoring:** with a proposal to enhance oversight of student accommodation providers; and implementation of that new National Code being led by a new expert unit, initially within the Department of Education.
- **Complaints avenue:** The establishment of a new National Student Ombudsman that would have the power to handle student complaints about their providers' policies and processes - including on student safety, adjustments and HECS administration; and to recommend to university leaders that they should refund or re-credit fees to students, or change their policies, practices and processes.
- **Transparency:** as part of the National Code, universities and residences could be required to regularly report on disclosures, reports, satisfaction with reporting pathways and processes, disciplinary processes and outcomes - with that information being reported to both the federal Education Minister, and parliament. It also proposes an annual report from the Student Ombudsman about complaints received, actions of providers in response to recommendations and opportunities to improve the student experience.
- **Accountability:** The proposed Plan includes a specific action to "strengthen provider accountability for systemic issues relating to gender-based violence"; and a focus on the

proposed Student Ombudsman being able to provide the basis for further compliance action and to ensure accountability. The new expert unit focused on implementation of the Code also provides a promising avenue for experts to have a mandate to hold unis and residences to account.

“The process of shaping this draft Action Plan is the first time in six years of speaking out about this issue - as a victim-survivor, residence leader and campaign advocate - that I have felt heard. The first time I haven’t been told that I need to be quiet, that I need to get over it, and that it’s not that bad. This Action Plan has the potential to make a massive difference for students, and help move us towards a system where victim-survivors can get the support they need to continue their studies, no matter which uni they go to.” said Camille Schloeffel, Founder of The STOP Campaign.

“I’ve supported 200 students who have been harmed by their university’s response to their sexual assault. They deserved so much better - but their universities were never required to do anything differently. This proposed Plan could change that, and stop universities causing further harm to rape survivors.” said Sharna Bremner, founder & director of End Rape on Campus Australia.

“For years we have been calling for the government to deliver transparency, oversight and accountability of university and residences failures in this area. We’re pleased and relieved to see a pathway to deliver these, through the Draft Action Plan put forward. Students deserve so much better than what they’ve been getting from universities and residences. This Plan finally offers a viable strategy to change that.” added Renee Carr, Executive Director of Fair Agenda.

“If universities really do take this issue very seriously, as they have claimed to for the past seven years, they won’t have anything to worry about and will endorse the Plan in its entirety, without any changes.” said Bailey Riley, President of the National Union of Students.

The groups say that while the specific sanctions available for universities and residences who put student safety at risk are not specified in the Plan; they are encouraged that the Action Plan provides a pathway to finally holding those institutions to account.

As the government conducts consultation and design work - the groups remain focused on ensuring the promise of the plan is realised - particularly through meaningful sanctions and accountability for residences and universities who don’t do what a Code or Ombudsman requires.

The Stakeholder Reference group involved in shaping the Plan included representatives from universities, Universities Australia, colleges and other accommodation providers. Safety advocates say they hope universities won’t attempt to water down or undermine these important systemic interventions contained in this proposal.

The groups concluded: for seven years Universities Australia has said “we have listened and we are acting”, while failing to do what’s needed to improve the experiences of students. Individual universities and residences will say they ‘take this issue very seriously’ and take a ‘zero tolerance approach’, while student experiences prove the opposite. It’s time they were held accountable - and this Action Plan provides a pathway to that.