



Case Study

Approaches to the implementation of **Consent Matters** at the University of Newcastle, Australia

Background

The University of Newcastle, Australia (UON) has a number of educational initiatives, reporting processes and services in place to raise awareness of inappropriate behaviours, and ensure that students who experience sexual violence have access to physical, emotional and academic support. UON regularly, proactively reviews its support and education services in this area, including developing a variety of education programs for both staff and students, with a set of international partners.

UON is clear that sexual assault is a crime and sexual harassment is completely unacceptable in any context, on or off campus. Ensuring students and staff are educated on consent, reporting options and support available is critical in preventing sexual assault and harassment. In 2015, UON joined an international online course development group coordinated by Epigeum to develop Consent Matters, an online training course specifically designed to help UON students understand how to seek consent, how to recognise it, and how to identify situations where it can't be given. Developed in consultation with Student Living Leaders, this is now a compulsory course for all UON students.

Following on the success of the Consent Matters course, we have now developed another online course with Epigeum to support staff in responding to disclosures of sexual violence. UON is proud to be leading the way in Australia in development of these courses for students and staff.

Liz Burd, Pro Vice-Chancellor Learning & Teaching, University of Newcastle

The Consent Matters collaboration

In December 2015, UON worked with Epigeum, part of Oxford University Press, to develop **Consent Matters**; a course that is designed to help students understand how to seek consent, how to recognise it and how to identify situations where it can't be given. The development phase included consultation with leading experts, staff and students across the UK, US, and Australia.

UON was instrumental in the adaptation of the **Consent Matters** course for the university context. Since publication the course has met with wide acclaim and many Australia universities, as well as residential colleges, have launched the course as part of their online and face-to-face training for the students and staff.

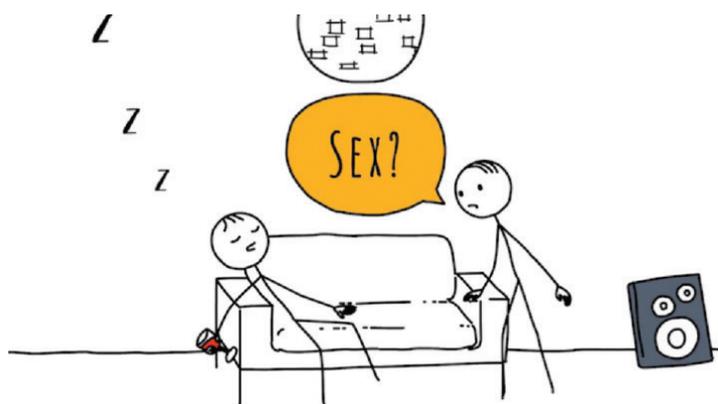
The wider context in Australia

UON is part of the Universities Australia (UA) led initiative Respect. Now. Always. which is a whole of sector program to prevent sexual assault and harassment and provide greater support for survivors through safety programs, prevention and education initiatives and counselling and support services. As part of this initiative, UA commissioned the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to conduct a large-scale prevalence survey to understand more about the nature and scale of these issues.

The survey was implemented by the Commission and Universities Australia across all 39 Australian universities on an anonymous, confidential and voluntary basis between September and December 2016. The AHRC received 30,930 responses in total. The findings of this survey were released on 1 August 2017.

The findings revealed that 51% of student respondents were sexually harassed at least once in 2016, and that 6.9% of respondents were sexually assaulted on at least one occasion in 2015 or 2016. In response to the findings, the AHRC has made a total of nine recommendations which focus on five areas of action:

1. Leadership and governance
2. Changing attitudes and behaviours
3. University responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment
4. Monitoring and evaluation
5. Residential colleges and university residences



Implementation

At the start of 2017, UON implemented the **Consent Matters** course as part of the admission process for all UON students living on campus and made the course available to the wider UON student population as an extra-curricular online course through their Blackboard Learning Management System.

Approach one: mandatory for new students living on campus

In 2017, all UON students living on campus were required to undertake the course as part of their Campus Living application. Students were required to complete the course within the first four weeks of the semester commencement, and students who do not complete the course by the end of their first semester were not offered an opportunity to extend their Student Living contract.

The course implementation has been supported by Student Living staff and Residential Mentors who are available to support students when taking the course and encouraging completion.

At the beginning of August 2017, over 1700 students living on campus have completed the course.

Approach two: Optional for the wider UON population

The second approach UON took in the implementation of the course, was to make it available to wider student population through an extra-curricular blackboard course. The course required students to sign up through blackboard, with registration details available on the UON website.

The course was not made compulsory, however, completion was encouraged and promoted at university events such as Sexual Health Awareness Week, and through student clubs and societies. Students could complete the course at their own pace and certificates were then issued upon completion for student portfolios.



Results

In the first year of implementation students undertaking the course were encouraged to provide their feedback through an online survey. Overall students indicated high satisfaction, with 94% of students indicating the course was adequate or above.

- 82% of students felt the course was relevant to their needs.
- 94% of students found the course easy to follow and reported satisfaction with the quality and frequency of activities.
- 26% of students reported accessing the course more than once.

53 students provided comments in the free text. Of these 81% of the comments were positive or advised that they had nothing further to add. Positive comments thanked the University for providing the resource, commended the activities, the relevance, the inclusivity, and simplicity of the content.

Challenges

The biggest challenge that was experienced in the initial implementation was in regard to the technical challenges of making the course a compulsory module for students living on campus.

To monitor course completions, non-completions by a defined date, were linked to prohibiting students from future enrolment and accessing their grades. Once the course was completed the system utilised did not allow for an automatic lift of this restriction. As this was not an automatic process, frustrations arose from students, and expectations needed to be managed. These technical challenges continue to be explored to find alternative options to make the process more streamlined for students.



Next steps

Following the success and feedback from students of the course in its first year of implementation, UON will make the **Consent Matters** course mandatory for all students, from 2018. Continuing students who have not completed the course in 2017, will be asked to complete the course in the first six months of 2018. Commencing students will be requested to complete the course as part of the enrolment processes into UON moving forward.

The course now forms part of the larger UON strategy to raise awareness of inappropriate behaviours, and ensure that students who experience sexual violence have access to physical, emotional, and academic support.