Background

University of Technology Sydney (UTS) is the top-ranked young university in Australia and is well-known for its innovative teaching. Research, engagement and innovation are central to UTS’s core and purpose, as is their commitment to driving social change both on campus and beyond.

UTS has run several sexual violence prevention initiatives in recent years, focusing on shifting attitudes and changing behaviors to promote a safe and respectful university community. The suite of initiatives undertaken ranges from education about consent to campus security enhancements, all of which are underpinned by six guiding principles: Honesty. Integrity. Authenticity. Transparency. Inclusivity. Respect. While progress has been made over the years, UTS wholeheartedly acknowledges that there is still much more to do.

For this case study, we spoke to Catharine Pruscino, UTS’s Program Manager of Respect. Now. Always., about the university-wide approach to education around consent.

The wider Australian Context

UTS is part of the Universities Australia (UA) led initiative Respect. Now. Always., a sector-wide campaign that aims to eliminate sexual assault and harassment on Australian campuses.
As part of this initiative, UA commissioned the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to conduct a large-scale survey to understand more about the nature and scale of these issues.

Released in 2017, the Change the Course report revealed concerning findings on the prevalence and nature of sexual assault and harassment at Australian universities. It was followed by the Universities Australia 10-point Action Plan, which responded to the national student survey on sexual assault and sexual harassment and outlined a range of university-specific measures around awareness, prevention and improved supports.

UA has funded a second national student safety survey as part of their Respect. Now. Always. initiative which took place in September 2021. This survey builds on and extends the foundational survey conducted in 2016. 10,000 students from each of the 39 universities across Australia were surveyed, with results due to be released in March 2022.

**Solution**

Catharine acknowledges that UTS students have expressed a desire to better understand consent and to have a more open conversation about sexual assault and sexual harassment. This desire was compounded by the Change the Course report, and the Consent Matters training program from Epigeum was introduced in 2018 as part of a suite of initiatives to help promote a safer university community.

According to Catharine, the program plays an important role in the university’s overarching strategy to build and maintain a culture of respectful behaviour and eliminate sexual violence of any kind.

“We require every single student and staff member to complete Consent Matters and as of October 2021, nearly 80,000 students and staff have successfully completed the module. We see it as one part of UTS’s efforts in helping reduce unwanted sexual behaviour and encouraging healthy relationships within our community.”

Ms Pruscino also highlights the recent cultural shift in conversations around sexual assault and consent in the media, which she believes will have a lasting positive effect.

“There has been an absolute shift toward the positive in terms of people having these conversations. What people in 2017 and 2018 were comfortable with is fundamentally
different from what people in 2021, 2022 and 2023 are going to be comfortable with because they have the language, they’re comfortable using it and they are happy to engage, and I assume that will have a flow-on effect.”

Consent Matters: Boundaries, Respect, and Positive Intervention is an online course from Epigeum that draws on the latest developments in culture, law, and global best practices to encourage good communication, clear boundaries, mutually respectful relationships, as well as exploring ways that students can support others and make a positive impact in their community. The course is designed to form part of a comprehensive approach to consent training, with the accompanying blended learning material intended to support in-person initiatives. The student voice sits at the fore of Consent Matters; with the course development process drawing insights from an expert panel that featured Australian student reviewers.

At UTS, Consent Matters is a mandatory course for all students and staff. Every student from undergraduate to postgraduate level and staff member must complete the online training. The three modules cover what constitutes consent, communication skills and relationships, and what it means to be an active bystander. It’s estimated to take about 60 minutes to complete, and UTS students have to complete it once and achieve a 100% pass mark. Students have the option of returning to the course at any time during their enrolment if they want to refresh their knowledge.

The implementation of institution-wide training on sexual consent was supported at the highest level of the university, with senior leadership embedding a model of expected respectful behaviour and clear communications to students about their responsibilities in completing the training and adhering to respectful behaviours.

Support

There are 3 support streams to assist students completing the course:

Technical Set-up and Support

Epigeum worked closely with UTS’s IT specialists and Learning Designers to ensure that the course is fully accessible to users that identify as having access requirements and those using screen readers. The course has been set up in a way so that students must open each page before navigating to the end-of-module quiz, thus ensuring they view every page before completing the quiz.

Counselling Support

Counselling support is available to all UTS students and staff, and an exemption process exists for those people who have a valid reason for not completing the course. While the Consent Matters course provides links to national support organisations and related information, the UTS customised Consent Matters program also links to UTS-specific supports and resources within and outside the university.

Language Support

UTS’s Higher Education Language and Presentation Support (HELPs) provide facilitated support sessions to assist non-native English English speakers to complete the course. In addition, Epigeum ensured Consent Matters content was reviewed by a Language Accessibility Expert to cater for students who speak English as a second language.

We see it as one part of UTS’s efforts in helping reduce unwanted sexual behaviour and encouraging healthy relationships within our community
Promoting Consent Matters

The UTS RNA program and Consent Matters regularly feature in UTS’s internal and external communications. Catharine has been coordinating campaigns over the past four years to build program awareness across the university. These campaigns aim to raise awareness around consent and emphasise the university’s unwavering focus on shifting attitudes and changing behaviours to ensure everybody is committed to respectful behaviour. Key campaign elements include, educating the student populous about consent through experiential learning activities, embedding student input and feedback, and signposting further support and training resources.

Campaign messaging is regularly shared across multiple channels, including student and staff newsletters and social media. Catharine also gets support from the university’s key student engagement teams, including UTS Library who promote the course and run Consent Matters training sessions for students, as well as UTS Housing, and ActivateUTS’s sporting clubs, social clubs and societies.

Merchandise such as pens, bags, stickers, and t-shirts which showcase campaign messaging provide a fun, physical prop to encourage people to engage with the topic and ultimately help build a better understanding of consent. “We are keen to avoid the notion that we’ve just ticked a box by running these initiatives and campaigns. Instead, we want the work we do around consent to be woven through all fibres of the university.”

We are keen to avoid the notion that we’ve just ticked a box by running these initiatives and campaigns

Bold, colourful campaigns combined with guerrilla-style implementation tactics provide an engaging approach to tackling such a complex topic. Engaging visuals and unique designs help educate students and staff in a meaningful way. In fact, in 2020, UTS’s Respect. Now. Always. campaign was recognised as one of Australia’s most successful design projects for driving societal change at the Australian Good Design Awards.

Outlook

As of October 2021, almost 80,000 students and staff have successfully completed the Consent Matters module. While it’s difficult to measure the impact of these initiatives, Catharine acknowledges that three years isn’t long enough to see a cultural change. However, she recognises that there are indicators of a desire and intent for change across the university:

“The social settings around consent are dynamic. We are just one player in that space, and there is still a lot more to do. Anecdotally what is evident is that the tolerance both within and outside of the university community for how the world was set up, and the implications of that in terms of transparency, reporting and support, is waning”.

Find out more about Consent Matters and how it can help promote positive cultural change in your university community.

www.epigeum.com
epigeum@oup.com