

PRACTICE GUIDANCE: A VICTIM/SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH TO RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

This short guide is written to support implementation of *Educating for Equality*, a whole-of-university approach to preventing gender-based violence.

It helps you by providing information on:

- what is meant by a victim/survivor-centred approach to responding to violence
- how universities can incorporate this approach into their individual response structures and practices.

A VICTIM/SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH

Responding safely and effectively to violence requires two elements:

1. A clear, accessible response system that meets legal and regulatory obligations, including reporting and support structures, policies and practices.
2. A victim/survivor-centred approach that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of staff and students interacting with this response system.

This means that anyone who discloses or formally reports an experience of violence is supported by and through a system that prioritises their safety and wellbeing at every step.¹ Every experience of violence is different, so each individual case requires a response tailored to the needs, experience and choices of the victim/survivor.

A victim/survivor-centred approach considers both *what* a response system looks like and *how* it is delivered. It prioritises the safety, wellbeing and wishes of victims/survivors in determining what actions are taken, and how. The more robust a victim/survivor-centred approach is, the more confident staff and students will be to trust in and engage with the response system and it's more likely that this experience will help in their recovery.²

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES: WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN A UNIVERSITY

Every university is different and will have its own system, policies and procedures to respond to disclosures or formal reports of violence experienced by staff and students. The following practice principles will support universities to embed a victim/survivor-centred approach across their own unique response systems.³

Victims/survivors feel safe, believed and respected

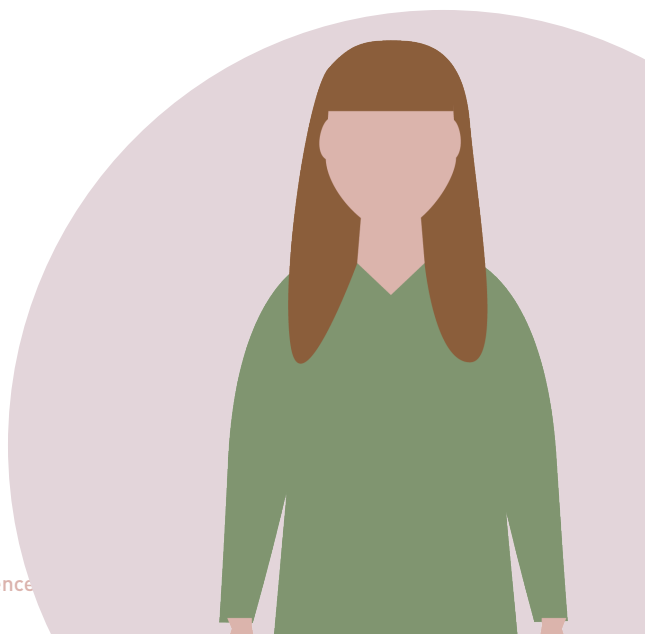
- Key staff across all domains have the skills and confidence to respond appropriately and sensitively to disclosures, including:
 - listening to and believing victims/survivors
 - prioritising victim/survivor safety and wellbeing
 - explaining options such as reporting to police and formal university reporting
 - connecting victims/survivors to appropriate support services and options for special consideration or changes to working arrangements.

This should include a majority of staff with student-facing roles, including student leaders and security.

- Victims/survivors are supported to feel in control and make decisions about how to deal with the violence, including whether, when and whom to report to. Mandatory reporting requirements for people under eighteen explained at the outset and underage victims/survivors are supported to have their voices heard and are kept informed throughout the reporting process.
- Victim/survivor confidentiality and privacy is protected and any information sharing requirements are made clear to them from the outset.
- Formal reporting and investigation procedures minimise the number of times victims/survivors need to recount their experience, clearly explain their rights and options, allow support people, and operate in a timely manner that keeps victims/survivors aware of developments.
- Victims/survivors, advocates and experts from the violence prevention and response sector are consulted in designing and updating university procedures and protocols for better handling of disclosures and undertaking investigations, including interviewing techniques.

Response systems and practices reflect a strong understanding of violence experienced by all members of the university community

- There is a strong understanding of gender-based violence that is achieved by providing information on:
 - different types of violence experienced by women, including, but not limited to, members of the LGBTIQ community, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those with disability, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and international students
 - the effects of this violence, including changes in behaviour such as withdrawal from work life or study and the associated implications
 - how trauma and fear shape how victims/survivors may (or may not) present and how they engage (or may not engage) with the service system.
- Policies, procedures and support mechanisms reflect this understanding, including streamlined provisions to accommodate the impact of violence on victims/survivors' work or study life.



Response systems can respond appropriately to violence experienced by all members of the university community

- Policies and procedures cover all forms of violence experienced by women and LGBTIQ people, including family violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, bullying and discrimination.
- Policies and procedures consider victim/survivor immediate safety and justice, as well as their longer-term recovery.
- Policies and procedures include clear timeframes for responding to reports, as well as communication guidelines for keeping victims/survivors informed about progress.
- All staff and students are aware of how to access response services, what is involved, and feel safe and supported to do so.
- Appropriately trained interpreters and communication aids are available to assist in disclosures and reporting.
- Consider a specially trained single point of contact for making reports that minimises the amount of times victims/survivors need to recount their experience. Where possible, allow multiple reporting methods such as online, face-to-face or telephone.
- Response services are consistent and accessible to all staff and students, including those in residential accommodation independent of the university.
- Data collection mechanisms are in place to capture de-identified disclosures and formal reports to assist in tracking progress and continual improvement.
- All policies, procedures and support mechanisms reflect cultural competency and inclusivity, ensuring victims/survivors do not face discrimination or disadvantage based on gender, gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, disability, sexuality, visa status or any other characteristic.

Responses systems hold perpetrators to account and maintain the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness

- Processes, policies and procedures are designed and reviewed to ensure they hold perpetrators to account while recognising the rights and safety of the victim/survivor, alleged perpetrator, and any witnesses or bystanders.
- Assessments or investigations are implemented in a fair, impartial and equitable way that supports and empowers the victim/survivor while ensuring the alleged perpetrator/s right to safety, confidentiality, information and support are also maintained.
- A different support officer is assigned to the victim/survivor and the alleged perpetrator/s to avoid conflict of interest.
- A continual improvement process is in place that includes input from victims/survivors and their advocates on how to ensure the response system effectively manages a victim/survivor-centred approach that balances natural justice and perpetrator accountability.
- Response systems reflect the understanding that holding perpetrators to account is part of broader primary prevention efforts because it sends important messages about what is and isn't acceptable in the university's culture and community.

Language used across policies, procedure and practice supports and empowers victims/survivors

- Use language that acknowledges the strength and resilience of people who have experienced violence or are currently living with violence (such as 'victim/survivor')
- Where possible, allow individuals to guide the language used to describe themselves.
- Recognise how certain legal terminology might negatively impact victims/survivors, including dissuading them from reporting or pursuing a complaint by making them feel they are over-reacting or 'making a fuss' (for instance, 'complainant') or disempowering them (for instance, 'victim').

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1800RESPECT provides information and resources for professionals supporting people impacted by sexual assault, domestic and family violence, including online or telephone secondary consultation and support for work-related stress and trauma. Call 1800 737 732 or use their [online resources for professionals](#).

NOTES

- ¹ Universities Australia, *Guidelines for university responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment*, Universities Australia, 2018.
- ² P Sen, *What will it take? Promoting cultural change to end sexual harassment*, UN Women, 2019.
- ³ Universities Australia, *Guidelines for university responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment*, Universities Australia, 2018; P Sen, *What will it take? Promoting cultural change to end sexual harassment*, UN Women, 2019.

