

Organisational spotlight:

Universities as a setting for violence prevention

Since 2015, Victoria University has been actively working to educate its students and the broader community about gender equality and prevention of violence against women. We talked to Marian Cronin, Senior Manager, Respect and Responsibility, about VU's commitment to preventing violence against women.

Tell us about the work VU has done to date to prevent violence against women.

Victoria University is a very young, vibrant university located in the west of Melbourne. The majority of our students are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and many are the first in their family to go to university.

In 2016, we established the Preventing Violence Against Women Ten Point Plan, which outlines the university's commitment to reducing violence against women. There's a whole range of things that we do as part of this plan, but all of our work is generally based on addressing the four key drivers of violence against women. Challenging attitudes is really important, particularly with the young cohort of students.

The plan is part of a three-pronged approach that incorporates students, staff and the community. We understand that our students are a microcosm of what we see in society, and so we work with community partners, particularly in the west of Melbourne, to challenge existing attitudes and work towards societal change.

We've participated in the UN's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence since 2017, which has involved staff and students in activities ranging from art exhibitions to participation in rallies. International Women's Day events have included painting a mural inspired by Malala Yousafzai's words 'I am stronger than fear' and a singing event.

All of these events, in their different ways, make our voices really loud and really clear, that we can't keep quiet about sexual harm or violence against women any more, that we've had enough. We do these kinds of events to build engagement and collaboration between our staff and our students and the community.



VU students and staff on the Walk Against Family Violence, as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.



Staff and students sing out loud for gender equality at Victoria University on International Women's Day 2019.

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What is unique about VU's prevention work? What's the university's long-term approach to preventing violence against women?

Our approach is one that is collaborative, trauma-informed and aims to be gender-transformative. We deliver face-to-face training to student leaders and key staff in gender equality, responding to disclosures of sexual harm and being an active bystander. We have also developed an innovative suite of e-learning modules in this space, using a co-design process with students. We were very aware that there was nothing that had been done before in an online setting that would work for us. We wanted to do something that was more collaborative; that wasn't just 'here's the training, tick the box', rather than changing behaviour and then eventually changing attitudes. A diverse group of students were the authors of the scenarios we've developed, in which the user is asked to be an active bystander against sexism.



Marian Cronin (right) with Achol Arow (left) a VU graduate of the AMES Preventing Violence Against Women leadership course.

What we're looking at now is really embedding the work in the University's own transformational agenda. We've started to have conversations about including prevention of violence against women in the curriculum, right across the board. The long-term vision is that, regardless of your starting point, by the time a student leaves university they will have the skills to operate in the dynamic world of work. In the twenty-first century, that requires you to understand gender equality, to know how to help prevent violence against women and how to be an active bystander.

What about in the university as a workplace? How is this work influencing that space?

I sit on the Gender Equity Committee, which is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and includes university senior leaders. It meets quarterly and has a rigorous gender equity plan that's led by People and Culture. Through this committee, the Vice-Chancellor receives pay equity data, so that's happening at the top of the structure. The university has also just implemented a revised sexual harassment prevention and response policy and procedure, and a new sexual assault policy and procedure.

This is the last year of the Ten Point Plan. What's next?

We have started conversations around developing the next iteration of the plan, which will be from 2020 to 2023. It will build on what we've already achieved and will be linked to the latest research in this space. It will focus on transformation, because now we've done a lot of the grassroots work – though of course we have a new cohort of students come in every year, so building

prevention into all student-facing curriculum and activities is really important.

By the end of the year we will have a complete Respectful Relationships online training program, complemented by face-to-face training for student leaders, embedded in the student leadership area. From there, it's all about mobilising and activating both men and women to be involved, to be agents for change, to keep the momentum going. ■