

Take action:

Empowering bystanders to act on sexist and sexually harassing behaviours in universities Report Summary

Actions to reduce incidents of sexist behaviour and sexual harassment will have a large impact on both women and society. Mobilising individuals who observe or hear about sexist behaviour and harassment is critical to achieving this.

Sexism and sexual harassment often take place in front of an audience, or are later described to others. These people – the ‘bystanders’ – have an opportunity to take action. When they do, they protect and support the person targeted, discourage the perpetrator, and contribute to perceptions that sexism and sexual harassment are not acceptable in any setting – whether a workplace, a university campus, or the broader community.

Bystanders often say they wish they had intervened after seeing sexist or sexually harassing behaviour. But in the majority of cases, they do not take any action.

VicHealth, the Behavioural Insights Team, and the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet’s Office for Women are working together to better understand the gap between intention and action, and to develop new approaches, informed by behavioural insights, that inspire and empower ‘active bystanding’.

This document provides an overview of two bystander interventions trialled at two universities in Victoria. Both interventions were focused on strengthening the capacity of individuals to become active bystanders.

VicHealth encourages communities and organisations throughout Victoria to use the findings and implications contained in this overview, the full report and the Take Action guide (www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander), to inform the development of their own ‘active bystander’ initiatives.

What does it mean to be an ‘active bystander’?

A bystander is someone who witnesses an incident of sexism or sexual harassment without taking part in it, or someone who is later told about or shown images of an incident. An ‘active bystander’ is someone who responds to the incident with some sort of action that communicates their disapproval. It could be something that prevents the incident from continuing, or a response to the incident after it happens. It could involve saying something to the perpetrator, checking in with and supporting the target, making a formal report to a relevant authority – or a combination of these actions.

“.....she didn’t want to say anything because she didn’t think it was a big enough deal. She never went back to that tute, skipped her assessment and ending up failing the subject”

[Student]



What is sexism?

- Making assumptions about someone's abilities or attitudes based on their gender.
- Responding differently to the same behaviours when they are exhibited by women and men.
- Making sexist comments or sexist jokes.



What is sexual harassment?

- Staring at someone in a way that makes them feel intimidated or uncomfortable.
- Making sexual comments or jokes that make someone feel uncomfortable or offended.
- Asking questions of a sexual nature that make someone feel uncomfortable or offended.
- Using unwelcome physical contact, including touching, hugging, kissing and blocking someone's way.
- Pestering someone to go out on a date or to have sex.
- Sending inappropriate sexual emails, phone messages or social media comments to someone.
- Sharing private images of someone on social media without their consent.

"I did not know what to do. I didn't engage but didn't condemn it. It was a difficult situation with a power imbalance"

[Bystander]

Why universities?

In 2017, the Australian Human Rights Commission published *Change the Course*, a report into incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault at Australian universities. The report concluded that the prevalence of these incidents was unacceptably high, and that under-reporting was a serious issue. It recommended that universities should be more proactive about building a culture of respect, and improve how they respond to incidents when they do occur.

The report was the subject of much public discussion, not least among university students, staff and administrators. VicHealth, the Behavioural Insights Team, and the Office for Women felt there was a readiness for change within university populations, and that university campuses would be a responsive setting for a trial of bystander interventions. There was also a belief that interventions in university settings had the potential for high impact, as they would reach young Victorians at a formative point in their lives, with the potential to positively influence their attitudes and behaviours into adulthood.

"I ended up dropping out of the class so he wouldn't follow me around and text me anymore... I left the class and blocked his number but I couldn't retaliate any other way... I wish I had never even sat near him he took a toll on my life"

[Student]

THE APPROACH: Two trials at two universities

The two interventions, developed by the Behavioural Insights Team and co-designed with The University of Melbourne and Victoria University, trialled two different approaches for equipping individuals with the information and skills they need to be active bystanders, and motivating them to take action.

One approach was to communicate with staff and students through a series of emails. The other was to involve student volunteers in an online training program. Both interventions were informed by behavioural insights and tested through randomised control trials.

TRIAL ONE: Normative community emails at The University of Melbourne

In 2018, staff and students at The University of Melbourne were surveyed about their experiences with sexism, sexual harassment, and bystander action. The survey indicated that the majority thought it was right to take action after witnessing sexism or sexual harassment.

For five weeks 22,138 staff and students received one email a week. Some participants were sent emails containing straightforward 'knowhow' content, outlining strategies they could take in response to witnessing sexist or sexually harassing behaviours; others were sent knowhow content framed by social norm messaging (see page 4, *Which message is most effective? Comparing majority vs minority norms*). All the emails in this 'normative community email' intervention were informed by behavioural insights, specifically:

- **Establishing social norms for bystander action**
'Social norms' are an expression of what is widely understood to be the appropriate attitude or behaviour in a given situation. People are social creatures and can be strongly influenced by what they understand to be the social norm. Before the trial commenced, staff and students were surveyed to assess their attitudes and behaviours in relation to sexism, sexual harassment, and bystander action (see the Bystander behavioural survey tool for universities www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander).

The insights generated by that survey were used to establish social norms, for example: *"Most of us studying on campus think it's right to take action if we witness someone receiving unwanted attention... and 78% said they themselves would intervene if they saw sexism and sexual harassment on campus."*

- **Presenting knowhow and specific examples**

Terms such as 'sexual harassment' and 'sexism' can mean different things to different people. Presenting specific and familiar examples of those behaviours makes it easier for people to identify them – and be ready with a response.

Informed by those insights, the emails presented staff and students with scenarios that were relevant and recognisable, and offered some practical suggestions on how to respond. For example, one email dealt with sexist jokes. Under the heading *"Here's what you can do,"* staff and students were provided with some specific tactics and phrases that could be used in the moment, or afterwards. For example, they could respond by asking the joke-teller a question: *"Sorry, I don't get the joke. Can you explain it?"*

Three weeks after receiving the last email in the series, staff and students were emailed a follow-up survey, with 2557 email recipients completing the survey. These were the results:

- among all participants, the emails with 'majority' social norms messaging were the most effective at increasing active bystanding in response to sexual harassment
- the emails with social norms messaging increased active bystanding in response to sexism among female participants, but not male participants
- there was broad-based acceptance of the emails overall – with just 0.85% choosing to unsubscribe.

Impact on active bystandanding from normative community emails trial

Rates of bystander action increased significantly as a result of our best-performing intervention: a series of five emails based on social norms messaging.

Bystander action against sexual harassment

32% 

of participants receiving no emails reported taking action after witnessing sexual harassment.

42% 

of participants receiving communications with majority social norms messaging reported taking action after witnessing sexual harassment.

“I have faced sexism and harassment and therefore know how helpful it is when someone is able to diffuse a situation. However, when it has come to helping others in the same situation, I feel quite helpless. I believe it is imperative that more people like myself learn how to handle these situations.”

[Anonymous]

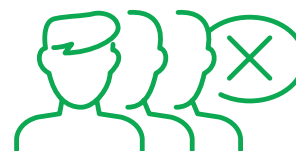
Bystander action against sexism

35% 

of women receiving no emails reported taking action after witnessing an incident of sexism.

48% 

48% of women receiving communications with majority social norms messaging reported taking action after witnessing sexism.



Among men, the social norms messaging emails were not effective in encouraging action against sexism.

Which message is most effective? Comparing majority vs minority norms.

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that drawing attention to positive social norms is an effective way to drive behaviour change. Countering that, however, is the ‘bystander theory’, which argues that bystanders may be less inclined to act when they think it is likely that someone else will take action instead.

To test these schools of thought in the context of bystander action against sexist behaviour and harassment, the participants in The University of Melbourne trial were randomly divided into three categories:

- those who received only straightforward ‘knowhow’ content
- those who received knowhow content plus a ‘majority norm’ message, for example: *“Most of us studying on campus think it’s right to call someone out for making sexist jokes or comments ... And 78% said they themselves would intervene if they saw sexism and sexual harassment on campus”*

- those who received knowhow content plus a ‘minority norm’ message, for example: *“Most of us studying on campus think it’s right to call someone out for making sexist jokes or comments ... But only 46% of us actually do”*.

By the end of the trial, the **emails using majority social norms messaging had driven the greatest increase in bystander action against sexual harassment** – despite generating lower engagement than the other two categories. This demonstrates the importance of robustly testing your communications when you have two valid competing hypotheses. It is also a good reminder that ‘click-throughs’ in email communications should never replace the measurement of actual behaviour change in the evaluation of interventions.

A guide to implementing a university-wide bystander email campaign is available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander

TRIAL TWO: Volunteer eLearning at Victoria University

An existing 'Bystander Awareness and Action' eLearning program, co-designed by students and staff at Victoria University, was adapted for use in the second trial, which was undertaken by students on a voluntary basis. The emphasis on gender-based violence in the existing program was decreased – making sexism and sexual harassment the focus – and the content was adjusted to incorporate a number of components based on behavioural insights, specifically:

- **Using simplified language and specific examples**
Using everyday language to describe incidents of sexism and sexual harassment makes it easier for people to identify problem attitudes and behaviours. Providing practical examples of how to respond makes those actions seem less daunting and more achievable. The eLearning program gave students some simple strategies for bystander action, including supporting the target of the behaviour, challenging the perpetrator, and getting support from other bystanders. Participants were then presented with some real-life scenarios and, in a Q&A format, were asked to write down some actions they could take. For the trial, the program then followed up by providing more specific examples of other appropriate responses.
- **Highlighting the value of intervening**
People are more motivated to learn new skills when they can see how they might apply them in the future, and the benefits of doing so. In the eLearning program, students were asked to think about how this training could benefit them: *"Take two minutes to think about your future. How will the ability to handle sexism and sexual harassment be useful to you?"* They were also shown quotes from people who had successfully completed the program in the past, and who appreciated the impact it had in their lives.
- **Asking for a commitment**
Formal commitments can be powerful. Towards the end of the eLearning program, students were asked to make a commitment about a specific action they would take the next time they saw sexist or sexually harassing behaviour. Later, after the training was completed, they received an email documenting their commitment to bystander action.

Victoria University undergraduate and TAFE students were invited to participate in the behaviourally-informed Bystander Awareness and Action eLearning module, with the incentive of a prize draw and academic support unit credits for those who took part.

Eight weeks after completing the program, students were emailed a follow-up survey. These were the results:

- Participation in the voluntary training was low, with a relatively small proportion of students (2.6%) opting in to the trial.
- Incentivising students through the offer of course credits or gift vouchers and a strong marketing push did not impact sufficiently on recruitment and retention during the trial.
- Among those who did undertake the program, 87% completed the eLearning and many reported finding the content valuable.
- The Q&A section of the program collected valuable insights into why the participants wanted to develop active bystander skills. Many wrote about the importance of intervening, protecting, supporting or watching out for other people, in their own lives and in the community more broadly. As one wrote: *"As a person coming from an underprivileged background, I believe speaking out against discriminatory remarks to be important in order to maintain social equity and avoid hatred"*.
- The small sample size meant it was not possible to measure whether the online training had increased active bystanding within the trial group.

"I've been more aware of my surroundings and trying to gauge how people are feeling. One day on public transport there was a man pestering and I intervened... Without the knowledge of this module, this is something I wouldn't have done."

[Male, 22]

“I have a 13-year-old daughter who I want to be able to teach to stand up for herself more than I have. I want to be able to show my daughter that women are strong and women can be and do anything they want to do... I want to be able to stand up to sexism and harassment for my future students, as well when I finally become a teacher.”

[Anonymous]

Recommendations

These trials have generated valuable recommendations for universities as they implement, improve and expand their own active bystander initiatives.

1. Use emails to share clear messages about bystander action with the wider community, and emphasise that being an active bystander is the norm.

These trials have shown that sharing information on bystander action through emails is an easy and cost-effective way to drive an increase in bystander action on campus. Information should be simple, relatable and actionable, and accompanied by clear messages indicating that being an active bystander is something most people on campus think is right – and they would do. Surveying staff and students before the initiative begins will produce social norm data for these messages, and provide a baseline from which to measure impact. A Social Norms Survey Tool is available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander

“In retrospect I should have said something to my tutor or reported the student but there was so many other things on my mind and I didn’t know what would happen if I did report it”

[Bystander]

2. Use more intensive training approaches to build skills and advocacy in motivated individuals.

Emails are an easy and effective way of reaching large numbers of students, but eLearning offers a more intensive experience for skilling up motivated participants. Initiatives such as the Green Dot Bystander Intervention Program rolled out in campuses across the United States suggest there could be value in recruiting influential participants, such as prominent students, elected student leaders, and staff members. There only needs to be one active bystander in the room to send a powerful message that sexism and sexual harassment are not acceptable.

3. Evaluate initiatives and only implement them more broadly if they have generated an increase in bystander action.

New bystander initiatives should be trialled and evaluated on a small scale to see if they genuinely increase bystander action, before being rolled out across campus. Many organisations, including universities, continue to implement initiatives with limited evidence of their effectiveness. While it is encouraging to see participants sign up to such initiatives, and heartening to record an increase in intention for bystander action, these indicators should not be mistaken for evidence of genuine behaviour change. The Behavioural Survey Tool developed for these trials

measures participants’ behaviour as well as their intention to act – providing a more useful assessment of the value of these interventions. The Behavioural Survey Tool is available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander and is recommended for the evaluation of any bystander initiative.

4. Design initiatives that specifically target men, and make sexism a focus.

The community emails trial increased the likelihood of men taking bystander action against sexual harassment. However, men were still less likely than women to recognise and respond to sexism. Universities could benefit from involving men more deeply in the co-design of initiatives that target sexism on campus.

5. Make changes in the physical and digital environment to make active bystanding normal and easy.

These trials were focused on increasing the capacity of individuals to take bystander action when they see acts of sexism and sexual harassment. Universities should also look at how to create environments and cultures that make bystander action an easier, safer and more comfortable option for staff and students. This could include using digital tools designed for simple and secure reporting, and ensuring that offenders – including high-profile offenders – face meaningful and substantial consequences.



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