

# Making sexual consent matter—one-off courses are unlikely to help

February 15 2018, by Bianca Fileborn

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In the wake of the findings of the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2017 national [report](#) on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities, a number of universities have introduced

mandatory courses on sexual consent for new students.

Of all students who participated in the AHRC inquiry, 26% experienced some form of [sexual harassment](#) in a university setting in 2016. Just over half had experienced sexual harassment at least once in the year prior to the survey.

To date, most of these universities – including the [University of Melbourne](#), [University of Sydney](#), [ANU](#) and [La Trobe](#) – have implemented the [Consent Matters](#) online module.

[Epigeum](#) developed the course with advice from [academic experts](#). The one-off session takes around one hour to complete and covers a range of topics relating to sexual consent and communication, bystander intervention, and seeking support for [sexual assault](#).

But the introduction of Consent Matters has [met with criticism](#) from groups that claim the online module is tokenistic and unlikely to be effective, and that it has not been evaluated.

If universities introduce educational programs that don't meet criteria for effective practice, these programs will be useless at best, and counterproductive at worst.

## **'What works' in education about consent?**

There is a growing [body of evidence](#) from literature reviews of sexual ethics and respectful relationships education that informs some best practice principles for [program](#) delivery.

This evidence has consistently indicated one-off programs [are not effective](#). These have been identified as an example of [what not to do](#).

In comparison, programs that run over a greater number of sessions [can be effective](#) in shifting attitudes, knowledge and behaviours. But even for longer programs, these positive benefits can drop [off over the longer term](#). This means there is a need to ensure key messages are consistently repeated and reinforced.

[Evaluation of programs](#) is an essential component of best practice in respectful relationships education. This makes it particularly concerning that the Consent Matters module is being widely implemented, apparently without any rigorous and systematic evaluation.

It's also curious universities have decided to implement an un-evaluated module when well-evaluated and effective programs for university-age students, such as [Sex & Ethics](#), have been developed.

A [whole-of-community](#) approach is a fundamental aspect of effective respectful relationships education. This means the promoted values and behaviours are modelled throughout and integrated into all aspects of community (or university) life.

In this sense, a one-off module is far from sufficient in the absence of widespread and systemic changes within a university. Likewise, if universities fail to take sexual harassment and assault seriously when they happen, this undermines the messages delivered through programs.

## **Taking consent online**

Another claim levelled against Consent Matters is that an online course is unlikely to be an effective means of delivering this type of education. This critique is perhaps less well founded.

Online modules on sexual consent are under-evaluated to date. Some researchers have argued that, if [well designed and informed by theory](#),

online sex education modules have the potential to be effective. This arguably applies to respectful relationships as well.

That said, evaluations of violence prevention programs have also found young people [value the opportunity](#) to talk with their peers and share opinions. Providing opportunities for in-person participation and engagement are best practice principles of respectful relationships education. Together, this suggests these programs are likely to benefit from face-to-face components.

It's important there is a [clear rationale and theory](#) for the design and delivery of such education. If online delivery is included, this should be because it's an effective way of delivering aspects of the course. It should also [meet the learning needs](#) of the intended audience, not because it's a cheaper or seemingly easier option.

## **Getting enthusiastic about consent**

Overall, the evidence suggests Consent Matters is unlikely to achieve long-term changes in students' knowledge, attitudes and practices when it comes to sexual consent. A more long-term, evidence-based and whole-of-community approach is required in universities.

Importantly, by the time [young people](#) get to university, it's far too late to be initiating education on sexual consent.

Universities do have a role to play in reinforcing important messages about sexual consent and in ensuring they're part of a broader community that encourages ethical and respectful practices. But [education](#) on sexual consent and ethics must [start at a much younger age](#). It should be treated as a lifelong learning endeavour if we hope to generate meaningful change.

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