

Changing the Culture of Gender at ANU

Last year in responses to the “Change the Course” The Australian Human Right Commission Survey into Sexual Assault and Harassment at Australian Universities our Vice Chancellor Brian Schmidt said, “The results are shocking and we should all be shocked”.

I did not find the results shocking, for me they are reflection of what I have come to understand as business as usual during my time at the university.

As a student who spent two years living a university residential college it comes as no surprise to me that “The Red Zone Report”, recently released, details endemic bullying, hazing practises and predatory sexual behaviour. “Change the Course” found that across 2015 and 2016, one in ten female university students were raped or sexually assaulted and that residential college students were seven times more likely than non-college students to have been raped or sexually assaulted on campus. This is not shocking to me, but the logical result of norms that are upheld through the deeply entrenched and revered traditions and attitudes of college culture.

As a student advocate who regularly hears disclosures, it came as no surprise to me that “Change the Course” indicated that international, disabled, indigenous, and queer students experience a higher rate of sexual violence than the rest of the student population.

As someone who has experienced misogynistic bullying, having my subject matter and intellectual authority belittled in front of my class by a colleague when I was working as a lecturer, it comes as no surprise to me that we see the same problematic behaviours detailed in the “Change the Course” at the student level, reflected in the experience of academic staff.

As someone who has witnessed misogynistic bullying in my graduate student cohort. It comes as no surprise to me that the school receives few female applicants to its graduate program and at departmental seminars there is often only a single woman in the room.

In the discipline of philosophy more broadly, I am yet to meet a single woman who has not been sexually harassed by a more senior academic at a conference. Given this and the marginalisation of feminist and other approaches to philosophical enquiry that result in a highly gendered rubric of what counts as research excellence, it comes as no surprise to me to me that the drop-out rate for women in the field is vastly higher than it is for men, and that there are few women occupying senior academic positions in this discipline.

These experiences are not the result of a few bad eggs, they are indicative of the academic and campus culture we all participate in. Sexual harassment, assault, and misogyny, are not shocking for me as they are for Professor Schmidt. For me, and people like me, this is the status quo. This speaks to the vastly stratified experience of the university that occurs on the basis of our bodies, gender identities, and sexual preferences. This disparity produces a gap in mental health, academic and professional outcomes. I think if there is anything surprising, shocking or new about this (the #metoo) cultural moment, is the public discourse surrounding it and the widespread professed commitment to change.

I find myself cautiously hopeful that this moment may bring about accelerated and meaningful cultural reform. We have an opportunity here, but the results we profess to desire is far from inevitable. History has taught us that this will not be an issue that resolves itself, if given enough time.

It is easy to say that you support gender equity, it is harder to stand up to a senior academic in your field who says something sexist at a conference dinner. Too often it is the victims of this misogyny who are tasked with intervening. It is easy to publically commit to a zero tolerance policy on sexual assault and harassment, it is harder in a competitive economy, to prioritise providing the adequate funding, expertise, and sustained motivation that is required to make meaningful change at an institutional level to these deeply entrenched cultural norms. I echo Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkin's comments that law and policy may be necessary but that they are far from sufficient for bringing about cultural change. To my mind, we need both top down and bottom up reform, if we are to tackle to this issue.

The standard you walk past is the standard you accept. To make progress towards gender equity, our community will have to make uncomfortable changes to our daily practises. This will involve giving up privileges that many in our community benefit from, and for those who experience privilege, equality can feel like oppression. Crucially we need to recognise that our lived experience of campus culture, is vastly different from the experiences others, with bodies, identities and backgrounds that are different from our own.

As the suffragette's proclaimed we need "deeds not words" and we need them from all members of our community.