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Ignorance is not Innocence

Implementing Relationships and Sex Education to safeguard sexual wellbeing

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Sexual violence and harassment is a prevalent public health issue with enormous social consequences. It is not enough to hope the imprisonment of perpetrators will do anything to slow the rates of sexual violence.¹ If Australia and its jurisdictions are to be champions of human rights and gender equality, the right to live free from sexual violence must be defended before it is violated.

Comprehensive Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE) from an early age is a proven measure for mounting such a defence, but Australia has traditionally struggled to implement it at scale. Long-term policy commitments are key to ensuring prevention begins at the school gate, and those commitments depend on political will. The embers of that will are fanned by increasing media and community attention, alongside recent recommendations for preventative education by the Human Rights Commission, state Law Reform Commissions, Royal Commissions and legislature inquiries.²

Stubbornly high rates of sexual violence in Australia in recent decades³ show that:

- one in five Australian women have experienced sexual violence and more than half have experienced sexual harassment since age 15;⁴
- one in 20 men have experienced sexual violence and one in four have experienced sexual harassment since age 15;⁵ and
- one in six women and one in nine men have been physically or sexually abused before age 15.⁶

Sexual violence and negative sexual experiences carry significant health, social and economic cost,⁷ and can have a devastating impact on individuals, their families and communities. Long-term physical and emotional health, the capacity to undertake education, contribute to society and otherwise lead a fulfilling life can be severely affected,⁸ and the incidence of premature death increased.⁹

“Sexual and reproductive health is a crucial factor in the quality of human life, and cannot be achieved without education.”¹⁰ ”

The right to freedom from all forms of violence, including sexual violence, must be protected before it is violated. Sexual violence weakens Australia's credibility as a bastion of gender equality in our region,¹¹ and as a global advocate for human rights.¹² Preventative action must be taken, to support the Australian Government's "steadfast and ongoing commitment to be at the forefront of efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls"¹³ and to "advancing human rights globally".¹⁴

This article makes recommendations for the implementation of RSE in Australia as a protective factor against sexual violence and harassment.

The case for comprehensive RSE

Comprehensive RSE empowers young people to understand their bodies, pursue emotional and sexual wellbeing as they get older, and engage in respectful and healthy relationships. It is also a proven method for protecting against negative sexual experiences and sexualised violence. For example, a review of sexual violence intervention programs provided evidence that schools-based programs reduced physical, sexual, and emotional violence in adolescent relationships, while longer term, repeated exposure to such interventions achieved better results than single awareness-raising or discussion sessions.¹⁵

"Sexuality education is an effective life-course intervention that increases the health and wellbeing of children and young people. It can enable them to expand their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights, develop communication, decision-making and risk-education skills, and adopt positive and responsible attitudes to sexuality and relationships."¹⁶

Far from just a few classes a year where students learn how to put condoms on bananas, comprehensive RSE must be age appropriate, evidence based and holistic. For it to be effective, it must commence in early childhood and continue throughout life.

Starting RSE in early primary school, then building throughout high school, allows young people to be gradually equipped and empowered with relevant "information, skills and positive values"¹⁷ long before they will act on their sexuality.¹⁸ This is the example set by the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, where the school is prioritised as the central (although not sole) site for RSE delivery, thereby reaching most young people.¹⁹

Design standards for what best practice RSE programs look like are well established and need not be repeated here;²⁰ rather, this article focuses on overcoming the stumbling block of implementing comprehensive and effective RSE in schools throughout Australia.



RSE implementation: the need for public policy

Despite evidence justifying its use as a protective factor against sexual violence,²¹ implementation of RSE in Australia is inconsistent between, and even within, states and territories.²² While the Australian Curriculum provides some guidance with respect to RSE,²³ individual jurisdictions—and often the schools within them—are vested with significant autonomy as to delivery.²⁴ The lack of “clarity in the [curriculum] may also cause teachers to teach in an inconsistent and variable manner, resulting in varied sexual and relationship knowledge among students across different schools.”²⁵ Regardless, successful RSE implementation requires much more than a sound curriculum.

Evidence from overseas shows that strong public policy frameworks are the key to ensuring successful and ongoing implementation of RSE programs at scale. The unmatched capacity of governments to drive policy initiatives which protect community wellbeing, to resource and mobilise their executive arm, and to ensure implementation, is vital to safeguarding sexual wellbeing for all of society.

“You always need ... government to drive sexuality education and sexualised violence prevention. If you try and use bottom-up strategies to drive it, you will never be successful.”²⁶

Without government buy-in, implementation failure will persist. Accordingly, two major contributors to successful RSE implementation and outcomes are political will and a coordinated strategy to create an enabling environment.

First, strong public policies depend on sufficient political will, and no small measure of political courage, to ensure that:

- RSE is established as a fundamental public health measure designed to prevent sexual violence and promote wellbeing, rather than being considered as an ‘optional extra’;
- Real impact is achieved through long term commitments aimed at preventative action and cultural change, rather than reactive approaches that merely respond to sexual violence, such as criminal justice reform; and
- Bipartisanship is sought to create a sensible, evidence-based debate that informs the public of the benefits of RSE to safeguard young people, rather than political discourse that fuels controversies around outdated and unfounded fear that RSE ‘sexualises’ children.

Second, sexual violence and harassment is a distinct issue that requires a specialist and sophisticated response.²⁷ Bottom-up approaches are not powerful enough to confront the enormity of the task at hand, nor to protect RSE implementation from the headwinds of ignorance, apathy or opposition.

International lessons

Creating an enabling environment for widescale RSE implementation, with a view to cultural change, is achievable. I discovered this in 2019, when I travelled to Europe and North America on a Churchill Fellowship. Initially, I sought to discover whether the practical perspective would testify to the power of RSE to equip children and young people with the skills they need in order to pursue wellbeing. As I travelled, my focus was increasingly drawn to the issue of implementation: how can jurisdictions turn the best intentions into action? How can communities be mobilised to take up the fight for their young people’s wellbeing?

Examples in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Canada demonstrate that the key to successfully implementing RSE at scale is a public policy framework that deploys several, mutually reinforcing instruments across multiple sectors.²⁸ Those instruments must provide both the mandate and the means for universal access to comprehensive RSE, including:

- A legislative mandate that all children and young people access comprehensive RSE with content based on scientific inquiry;
- A mechanism ensuring development of RSE programs/curricula is expert-led and evidence based—such as creating an intersectoral (e.g. health and education) government body, or funding an appropriate non-government agency;
- Equipping schools adequately to implement whole-school policies and roll out RSE—including through funding, training teachers (at qualification stage and beyond) and using appropriately qualified external providers;
- Engaging and educating parents/caregivers;
- Evaluating RSE programs and their implementation;
- Identifying additional sites for intervention, such as youth groups, sporting clubs, television programs, and online resources; and
- Preemptive public health/media campaigns about the need for and nature of RSE.

Policy options for Australian governments

1. The mandate: compulsory RSE in schools

Overseas, a legislative mandate is a common instrument for successful implementation of RSE, and is a strategy deployed in the United Kingdom ([case study 1](#)), Germany and the Netherlands.²⁹

2. The means: mobilising executive resources effectively

Executive resources must be mobilised to deliver on the mandate, and any mechanism to achieve this must be intersectoral because,

"Inadequate cooperation between responsible governmental authorities [is] a strong [obstacle] to effective sexuality education."³⁰

Germany and the Netherlands provide instructive examples of governments mobilising their executive arm to deploy the instruments outlined above³¹—and both have proved effective ([case studies 2 and 3](#)). For example, studies have shown that RSE participants' first sexual experiences tended to occur later and were less likely to be negative, with students reporting improved confidence in protective behaviour.³²

3. Mitigating political risk

The public's perceived risk that RSE will sexualise children and the perceived backlash it could bring to political parties has, to date, been a deterrent for governments to make RSE compulsory in schools. Debunked by evidence,³³ the paranoia of sexualising children is unfounded—as is the perception of the severity of the political risk it presents.

The outcry over the Safe Schools program that sought to work with schools to create safe and inclusive schools for LGBTIQ students, families and staff is a painful memory for many,³⁴ but is not unique to Australia: vocal opposition to RSE is faced in all jurisdictions that enjoy successful implementation.³⁵ With steadfast commitment to protecting sexual wellbeing, those jurisdictions have insulated their RSE policies with strong, mutually reinforcing frameworks as described above.

It is also fundamental to engage parents, caregivers and the community with information sessions and public facing resources educating about the nature and purpose of RSE—as exemplified in the case studies from Germany and the Netherlands. A Canadian politician who campaigned for RSE reform in Ontario suggested harnessing the media with proactive, evidence-based information campaigns, highlighting the dangers of not providing RSE, as well as its benefits, may help forestall propaganda and misinformation.³⁶

Case study 1: The United Kingdom's Legal Framework for RSE

In 2019, the United Kingdom introduced legislation mandating the delivery of Relationships Education (RE), RSE and Health Education in primary and secondary schools.³⁷ While the regulations largely vest discretion in schools as to modes of delivery and content, some key factors were mandated:

- Relationships Education is compulsory for all pupils receiving primary education;
- Relationships and Sex Education is compulsory for all pupils receiving secondary education; and
- Health Education is compulsory in all schools except independent (private) schools (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education [PSHE] remains compulsory in independent schools).

The policy was ultimately introduced by a conservative government and a Statutory Guidance was also produced by the Education Department³⁸ to assist in guiding the implementation process for local authorities, councils and individual schools. The move was supported by funding commitments,³⁹ as well as accountability and evaluative mechanisms which will be key to ensuring quality, comprehensive RSE delivery in the absence of specifications in the legislation. A legislative mandate is representative and formal, demonstrating government buy-in and ensuring prioritisation of RSE at scale. It can also operate to 'future-proof' RSE programs by better withstanding a shifting political landscape, and provides greater accountability.

Case study 2: Germany's 'Department Four' — a dedicated public agency for sexual violence prevention and RSE delivery

Germany's federal government created a department dedicated to sexual violence prevention and RSE ('Department Four') within their Federal Centre for Health Education (the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung [BZgA]).

Department Four employs appropriately qualified professionals to conduct research, develop teaching packages, resources, materials and curricula, as well as online platforms and a theatre play ('Trau Dich!'). Taking an intersectoral approach, Department Four maintains relationships with: non-public sector partners; academia; the European Union and international organisations including the World Health Organisation; public sector partners such as federal and state ministries, and state-based education departments and institutions. This approach ensures RSE is expert-led and evidence-based.

Department Four is an example of the federal executive function being mobilised across both the health and education sectors to ensure rollout at the state level. They are responsible for working with state education departments to roll out the programs they develop, including training resources for teachers. For example, BZgA has developed a 'General Concept for Sexuality Education'⁴⁰ for states to adhere to when delivering RSE, which covers tasks, goals, target groups, strategic communication approach, main topic areas and actions. Department Four also create public-facing resources to educate parents and the community about the importance and nature of RSE being delivered, as well as managing evaluation of RSE measures.

The magnitude of Department Four's achievements domestically and abroad reflects the German government's commitment to safeguarding sexual wellbeing. With highly comprehensive policy documents and resources and well designed RSE lessons, activities and teaching packages, it is unsurprising that they play such a significant role on the international stage when it comes to RSE.

Policy recommendations

1. Introduce legislation to mandate universal access to RSE. Human rights jurisdictions should enshrine the right to access such information in their human rights legislation.
2. Create mechanisms for the delivery and evaluation of comprehensive RSE in schools and beyond, for example, by the creation of an intersectoral government body or by funding an appropriate NGO to undertake the task.

That mechanism must provide for:

- Developing evidence based RSE programs, curricula (e.g. with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]) and resources by appropriately qualified people;
- Equipping schools adequately to implement policies and roll out RSE, including through funding, training teachers, and using appropriate external providers;
- Evaluating RSE programs as well as their implementation; and
- Identifying additional sites for intervention.

3. Develop action plans anticipating potential sources and nature of RSE opposition, and prioritise engaging parents/caregivers and community in RSE policy and rollout.

4. Engage governments in preemptive media briefings and public health campaigns highlighting the evidence-based need for, and nature and content of, RSE delivery.



Stakeholder consultation

Stakeholder consultation is key to achieving the recommended intersectoral approach. Preliminary consultation should include, but is not limited to, the following groups (some of whom I have commenced consultation with):

- Federal and state/territory government health and education departments
- The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Family Planning organisations and Sexual Health services and peak bodies
- Parent and community representative bodies
- Statutory authorities (e.g. federal and state/territory Human Rights Commissions)
- Professional and workforce representative bodies (e.g. education unions, the Society of Australian Sexologists)
- Academic institutions undertaking relevant social research and impact evaluation
- Organisations providing victim/survivor perspectives.

Conclusion

Political courage to act on the evidence of the protective power of RSE is needed, and—when taken—has been shown on the international stage to be successful. By choosing inaction or action by halves for the

sake of political expediency, governments condemn young Australians to the likelihood that they will experience sexual violence and harassment. Governments must ensure universal access to comprehensive RSE—after all, in matters of great consequence for the safety and rights of individuals, history looks kindly on those in power doing what they know to advance community safety and wellbeing, even in the face of resistance.

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Case study 3: Public-civil sector partnerships for sexual violence prevention and RSE delivery — the Netherlands

The Dutch model closely mirrors that in Germany, however, instead of creating a public department, the Dutch government funds a civil sector organisation, Rutgers, to do the same work. Rutgers' dedicated departments for RSE and sexual violence prevention cooperate with government Municipal and Regional Health Services known as GGDs that are responsible for preventative healthcare. GGDs, in turn, engage their region's schools in the roll-out of Rutgers' RSE programmes and curricula, and assist in training teachers and organising information sessions for parents and care givers.

Rutgers also contributes to the development of resources such as picture books and television programs, as well as evaluating the efficacy of their RSE content. Evaluation has demonstrated later first sexual experiences as well as a decreased likelihood of negative sexual experiences among participants.⁴¹

In addition to successful cooperation and partnership with a non-government organisation, successful RSE implementation in the Netherlands is due to the commitment of government for funding and rollout at the municipal level.



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Katrina Marson (pp 52-57)

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Owen Churches (pp 58-61)

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