

**Clarissa J. DiSantis  
Graham J. Towl**

**ADDRESSING  
STUDENT  
SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE  
IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

**A Good  
Practice Guide**

**2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION**

ADDRESSING STUDENT SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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# ADDRESSING STUDENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Good Practice Guide

Second Edition

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan  
India – Malaysia – China

## REVIEWS

The second edition of *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education: A Good Practice Guide* by Clarissa J. DiSantis and Graham J. Towl is a crucial and timely resource for higher education providers committing to combatting sexual violence in their communities. The authors provide actionable advice and guidance on critical areas such as policy development, prevention education and institutional responses, paving the way for a comprehensive, institution-wide, survivor-centred and trauma-informed approach. DiSantis and Towl's intersectional approach ensures that their guidance is practical and effective across diverse educational settings. This book is a must-have for higher education professionals working towards safer and more supportive environments for all students.

—*Sharna Bremner* is the Founder and  
Director of End Rape on Campus Australia

The first edition of this book has become indispensable to anyone working to combat gender-based violence in UK higher education. This second edition, with cutting-edge new material and case studies, is also set to become an instant classic. Its recommendations on good practice should be read and acted on by everyone – activists, practitioners, researchers, and leaders – trying to change their university for the better.

—*Anna Bull* is a Senior Lecturer at the University of York  
and a Co-Director of the 1752 Group

This is a very timely new edition of a book that should be essential reading for anyone seeking to tackle sexual misconduct in universities. New chapters on matters such as the impact of technology provide vital new evidence and guidance. This includes setting out the growing prevalence of technology-facilitated sexual misconduct, as well as the

benefits of using technology to investigate cases and support students. This balanced approach infuses the whole book, working towards a system and policy approach that works fairly for all.

—*Professor Clare McGlynn KC (Hon)*, Professor of Law at Durham University, Expert on Violence Against Women & Girls

A necessary and critical blueprint for Higher Education Institutions to incorporate in their efforts to tackle sexual violence and to change culture and attitudes. Socially relevant, this guide will be useful to anyone committed to embracing and normalizing safety, security, accountability and equality for those who are vulnerable to sexual predatory behavior. It is a comprehensive guide on what to do and what not to do with respect to preventing and responding to sexual violence written in the best interests of the student and without shying away from the gendered realities of who is more likely to be a victim. At the same time there is an explicit call to action that provokes a sense of urgency to reduce the prevalence of sexual violence coupled with a sober assessment of measured progress against the backdrop of resistance, stubborn biases and institutionalized failings. The broad scope of this guide makes this a useful tool for leaders, practitioners, policymakers, student services administrators, case managers, educators, investigators, adjudicators, activists. Additionally, its narrow focus makes this updated guidance an essential lifeline to those responsible for receiving sexual violence disclosures and those drafting and revising the policies.

—*Furaha-Joy Sekai Saungweme*, Founder of the Africa End Sexual Harassment Initiative (AESHI)

In *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education*, DiSantis and Towl draw on their extensive experience to provide this thorough and practical guide for universities looking to improve campus safety. The book offers insights into best practices for prevention, intervention and support in relation to gender-based violence, making it an essential resource for anyone working in this field. I highly recommend it as a vital tool for all practitioners aiming to create lasting, meaningful change on campuses.

—*Fiona Drouet MBE*, Founder and CEO of EmilyTest

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE COUNSELLING CENTRE (RSACC)

The RSACC was established in 1990 and is the only free and specialist provider of services for survivors of sexual violence in Darlington and County Durham. RSACC is a feminist, women-led charity working to end rape and sexual violence by supporting and empowering survivors.

Support for survivors of sexual violence is desperately needed within Darlington and County Durham. Sexual violence has significant and lasting consequences on survivors, including impacting individuals' mental and physical health, leaving women feeling isolated and disconnected from their community. Other long-term consequences can include posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and panic attacks, depression, social phobia, substance abuse, obesity, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide. Often survivors are involved in the criminal justice system, which has the impact of increasing stress and anxiety, even re-traumatisation, as clients describe not feeling believed or experiencing victim-blaming.

Over the decades, demand for RSACC's support has grown, and they now support more than 1,000 survivors each year. RSACC's services include specialist counselling, group support and an anonymous telephone and email support line. They also offer Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, who support survivors going through the criminal justice system.

RSACC is an accredited member of Rape Crisis England and Wales National Service Standards and actively supports campaigning both locally and nationally to end violence against women and girls.



**All author royalties for the 1st and 2nd Edition of this book are donated in full to RSACC.**

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AMOSSHE	The Student Services Organisation
ATIXA	Association of Title IX Administrators
BLOG	Believe, Listen, Offer Options and Resources, Get Support for Yourself
BRAG	Blue, Red, Amber, Green (Traffic Light System)
CJS	Criminal Justice System
CPS	The Crown Prosecution Service
CUC	Committee of University Chairs
DARVO	Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender
DfE	Department for Education
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
FE	Further Education
FOUR	Fixated, Obsessive, Unwanted, Repeated
FT/FTE	Full-Time/Full-Time Equivalent
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IDVA	Independent Domestic Violence Advisor
ISVA	Independent Sexual Violence Advisor
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NASPA	Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
NUS	National Union of Students
OfS	Office for Students
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (England and Wales)
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PTSD	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
RJ	Restorative Justice
RMA	Rape Myth Acceptance
RSE	Relationships and Sex Education
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SARC	Sexual Assault Referral Centre
SLII	Surveillance, Life Invasion, Intimidation, Interference
SU	Students' Union
SVLO	Sexual Violence Liaison Officer
TFSV	Techology-facilitated Sexual Violence
UUK	Universities UK
VAW/VAWG	Violence Against Women/Violence Against Women and Girls
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the 4 years since we wrote the first edition of this book, we have watched the higher education sector recognise that sexual violence cannot be ignored. Student activism has remained strong, practitioner networks to share good practice and seek guidance have developed and more resources have been dedicated to addressing sexual violence within university communities. We take this time to thank each person who has supported this development and kept sexual violence on the agenda. Thank you to the students, staff, activists and advocates from external organisations who have worked diligently to ensure that university leaders could not ignore this issue.

There are key people within our personal and professional networks that have helped develop our own thinking in this area, that have been sounding boards for evolving our ideas and practice, and who have supported us to sustain this work. With too many to name, we know you know who you are – we say thank you.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the victims and survivors whose human rights were violated at university. We hope this second edition will aid in this fight for the basic human rights of safety and equality. We see and hear you, and most importantly, we believe you. Thank you.

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# PART 1

## WHY

*All students have the right to live and study in an environment of dignity and respect, free from the fear of harassment or violence.*

~Olivia Bailey

NUS National Women's Officer, Hidden Marks, National Union of Students, 2011

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence in higher education (HE) is pervasive. It is akin to a wildfire burning through the HE forest causing students to leave their universities and for some lose their lives. It is destructive, devastating and costly both in human and financial terms. Without prevention measures in place, sexual violence will keep happening, destroying any semblance of safety, especially for women, in universities. Without the proper tools, those working to put out the fires might as well only have a small fire extinguisher in their hand. Maybe they can help put out one fire, but the trauma and devastation has occurred. Putting out one fire is good, but we strongly argue that preventing the fire to begin with is better. We must put prevention measures in place. In the same way that higher education institutions (HEIs) dedicate resource and training to the prevention of real fires, we need to dedicate resource and training to prevent sexual violence.<sup>1</sup> Universities appoint fire officers with expertise on fire safety. Given the potential for harm and relatively high risk of occurrence of sexual violence in HE, we invite university leaders and governing bodies to employ those with expertise in addressing sexual violence. Just as fire safety is a specialist area so is addressing our challenging problem of sexual violence at universities. We need proper tools and resources to respond when

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this book, we use the terms ‘higher education institution (HEI)’, ‘university’ and ‘institution’ interchangeably to represent all types of institutions of higher learning or tertiary education.

sexual violence occurs. We need to address sexual violence from a comprehensive institution-wide approach to prevent harm in our communities.

A root cause of sexual violence is power and domination (Linder et al., 2020). Sexual violence is gendered and markedly so. In terms of occupational groups most likely to be subjected to sexual violence, there are no other groups with a higher level of risk than students and especially young women students (ONS, 2023). Gender inequality and rape culture play large roles in terms of the environmental backdrop to a culture which largely protects perpetrators while doing comparatively little to support those subjected to sexual violence (Linder et al., 2020). In terms of risks to student wellbeing, we would hope that sexual violence in a university community would be high up on institutional risk registers.

We wrote the first edition of this book because shockingly but unsurprisingly, there was an absence of practical and detailed guidance on how to address issues of sexual violence in universities. Four years later, we see limited change, resourcing and enforcement of preventing sexual violence in HE. In fact, our current assessment from our combined experience is that universities may be happy to do tick box exercises to appear to be addressing sexual violence, without resourcing or attempting meaningful change. This was partly what has inspired us to renew our efforts in contributing to addressing the problem. We decided to provide updated guidance and tools to support the ever-evolving landscape that is HE with the same goal – to prevent and respond to sexual violence. We hope this edition is of use to the sector and particularly to the activists who have led the way in pushing this on university governing bodies' agendas. Whereas in the first edition we very much focused upon practical solutions in a handbook format, this second edition goes beyond that. We go into more detail on the contextual nature of the problem – in other words how the HE environment contributes to enabling sexual misconduct and how the reliance on student and staff activists for leadership in this area seems to us to reflect an abrogation of responsibility from highly paid senior leaders whose role it is to – lead. Chapters 6 and 13 of this book give more detailed coverage on the nature of some of our key problems, but as with the first edition, we focus on solutions too.

But our solutions are predicated on leaders wishing, authentically, to reduce sexual misconduct at universities and to ensure that those subjected to sexual misconduct receive the care and support that they deserve.

This book is intended for leaders, practitioners, policymakers, student services administrators, case managers, educators, investigators, adjudicators, activists and all of us who may receive a disclosure of sexual violence. We want this to be a useful resource and tool for all of us who care about making a difference in reducing sexual violence in HE.

Although there has been some progress in addressing sexual violence in HE, it seems to us that at very best it has stalled, and there remains much to be done, and that as a sector, we have done little more than take the first few steps needed to address this pervasive issue in HEIs. Some have gone backwards. One illustration of this is when senior leaders make the implausible claim that one reason for a lack of progress is a lack of funds. We think that this may more accurately be described as a lack of prioritisation. Compared with other areas of the public sector, such as Further Education (FE), universities seem comparatively well funded and overall relatively wealthy notwithstanding current concerns around the financial viability of the sector. One concern that we have is that with the current talk of difficult funding models, there is a danger that tackling our problem with sexual violence will be relatively low on the list of institutional priorities. We argue that executive leaders and governing bodies can make the choice to prioritise investing in this work. Indecision is not neutral. Indecision supports the existing situation, which is that young women students, in particular, are likely at the highest level of risk of their lifetimes of being subjected to sexual violence while enrolled in our courses. Indecision maintains the status quo. Or we can choose to address the problem.

The lack of sufficient HE senior leadership prioritisation in this area continues to be a part of the problem and can reflect a narrow view of the potential of HE communities. Successive generations of HEI governing bodies and executive leaders have not seen fit to make fundamental changes to address sexual violence. Increasingly, we are seeing the human cost of such failures of leadership (Towl & Paske, 2017). Research and teaching are key to HE and so are

broader notions of education, learning and making a positive impact in wider societies.

The UK Criminal Justice System (CJS) seems to us to be a very blunt, and largely ineffectual, system in tackling sexual violence, although we note recent improvements through Operation Soteria (2024). In 2018/19, rates of rape prosecutions and charges in England and Wales were at the lowest levels in a decade with only 1 in 65 rapes reported to the police resulting in a charge or summons (Barr et al., 2019). In 2022/23, charges for sexual offences increased by 18% (National Police Chief's Council, 2024). Despite this slight improvement, we note that there are still many barriers to reporting to police and/or universities for student victim-survivors (NUS, 2011; Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018).

This is a key point that we would pick up as tapping into the broader educational purpose of HEIs to do something good and useful in wider society sometimes viewed as our 'civic duties'. We are uniquely well placed to contribute to addressing the problem where the CJS has historically failed victims and continues to do so. We have the ability to get our own house in order in the academic world.

We need to invest to increase reporting, support victim-survivors and ensure the quality of internal investigations and decision-making processes. We need to create environments where students and staff can access education and employment free from the fear of sexual violence. A central argument of this book is that if disclosing and reporting becomes the 'new norm', this may very well contribute to prevention through deterrence for some, alongside a robust comprehensive prevention programme. Every year, university communities have the opportunity to share what we are doing to address our problem with sexual violence when we have prospective students with their parents' visiting on our much vaunted 'open days'. Talking about our problem with sexual violence and what we are doing to address it at open days sends out clear and positive messages to prospective students. To those who may be subjected to sexual violence, it conveys the values of the institution and in particular that if they come forward, they will be believed and supported. For prospective perpetrators, it lets them know that we want reporting to become the 'new norm' in HE, and we will hold perpetrators accountable for any such

behaviours, including using sanctions like expulsion. Above all what it conveys to prospective students and their parents alike is that we are transparent about our problems, and we are doing something about it. And that may be a question that they can ask at other university open day visits they have planned. They may well conclude that it is surely safer to be at a university that is transparent about the problem and taking it very seriously in tangible ways that can be articulated on open days along with any other student safety issues.

If we can make a real and tangible difference to the prevention of sexual violence in HE and potentially within wider society, why would we not do it? We argue that we can and should do what we can as a sector to make a difference. In doing so, we are seeking to protect the long-term interests of all of us.

As we will discuss throughout the book, it is important how we discuss and frame these issues. In this book, we use the term ‘sexual violence’ as an umbrella term to capture a range of non-consensual, unwanted, forced and/or coerced sexual behaviours including, but not limited to, rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault, sexual harassment, indecent exposure, image-based sexual abuse, stalking and domestic abuse, including coercive and controlling behaviour. These are all forms of gender-based violence identified as part of what is considered the ‘sexual violence continuum’ (Kelly, 1987, 1988). In Chapters 2 and 4, we highlight why sexual violence is considered gender-based violence. We note that internationally, particularly in the United States and Scotland, the term ‘gender-based violence’ is preferred in HE prevention efforts. For the purposes of this book, we have chosen to use ‘sexual violence’, as sector guidance in England and Wales predominantly uses this language.

We use the following terms to refer to those subjected to or perpetrating sexual violence:

- **Victim-survivor/Survivor:** individual subjected to any form of sexual violence.
- **Perpetrator/Offender:** individual who committed any form of sexual violence.

- **Reporting Party:** individual disclosing or reporting to an HEI that they have been subjected to any form of sexual violence.
- **Responding Party:** individual reported to have committed any form of sexual violence within an HEI.
- **Subjected to (Sexual Violence):** we prefer the epithet ‘subjected to’ rather than ‘experienced’ because it more accurately reflects the power dynamic involved. The term ‘experienced’ implies a level of neutrality that does not reflect this power dynamic and ignores the aggressor of the violence.

The language is purposeful in that we choose not to use ‘victim’ as a standalone label even though ‘victim’ along with ‘injured party’ or ‘witness’ are used in the CJS. HEI administrations may enact civil justice-based procedures and processes but not criminal justice-based investigations, and we aim to reflect this in our language. Where appropriate, we would use ‘survivor’ as a standalone label; however, from our joint clinical experience working with victim-survivors, we recognise that the labels of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ take on different meanings and purposes at different points in recovery. Therefore, out of respect for the autonomy of individuals to choose a label that supports their recovery at a specific point, we have chosen this double-barrelled label to use throughout our book only abbreviating to ‘survivor’ on occasion. The use of victim-survivor takes on the meaning of moving from victim to survivor and on to thriving in the recovery process highlighting an individual’s resilience and strength. In our experience, excluding the use of the term ‘victim’ may have the impact of individuals feeling as if their victimisation by the perpetrator was ignored or minimised, and that they were only asked to survive or pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In addition, we acknowledge the brutal reality that not all individuals subjected to gender-based violence survive. The sobering, but necessary, tragic truth is that in England and Wales, an estimated 1 in 10 women subjected to sexual violence attempt suicide (Office for National Statistics, 2021). In the United Kingdom, ‘the number of women and girls killed by men every year remains depressingly consistent. The average number of women and girls killed annually since 2009 is 142’ (Allen et al., 2024, p. 6).