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Preventing and Responding to Drivers of Harm in Tertiary Residential Communities

Duty of Care in Practice: Meeting National Standards for Student Safety in Residential Communities

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Abstract

Tertiary residential communities are central to the student experience in higher education in Australia. They can provide connection, belonging, and opportunities for leadership, but also create conditions that increase risks of harm. In light of the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence (2025)*, this white paper examines the drivers of harm in residential settings, with gender-based violence (GBV) as a central focus. It outlines the legal and regulatory context, particularly Standards 3 and 7 of the Higher Education Standards Framework, and highlights how tertiary providers can meet their duty of care. Accredited online courses, and skills-based training and capability portfolio are showcased as scalable, evidence-based solutions to build knowledge, prevent harm, and foster safe, respectful, inclusive student communities.

Introduction

Residential communities play a formative role in the lives of university students, particularly those aged 18–24 who are navigating the transition to independent living.

These environments provide opportunities for friendship, belonging, and academic support. However, they also carry unique risks. National surveys consistently highlight the prevalence of gender-based violence, unsafe traditions, and high levels of psychological distress among students in residential settings (Universities Australia, 2022; Orygen, 2022). The recent *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to GBV (2025)* has placed a new level of accountability on residential communities, requiring them to embed prevention, establish clear pathways for response, and demonstrate their commitment to student safety. Additionally, residential communities must also comply with obligations set by Comcare, the national work health and safety regulator, under the *WHS Act 2011*. These duties now explicitly extend to managing psychosocial hazards, guided by Safe Work Australia's *Model Code of Practice*.

This white paper reviews the key drivers of harm, situates them in the broader compliance and policy context, and provides evidence-based recommendations for how residential communities can meet these obligations. It makes the case that compliance alone is insufficient, residential communities should also invest in prevention education capability uplift, and culture change to ensure safe and thriving residential environments.

Drivers of Harm in Residential Communities

While residential communities offer opportunities for connection and support, they also present distinct risks that require systematic management. Evidence consistently identifies recurring risks and drivers of harm, including gender-based violence, discrimination, unsafe traditions, substance use, digital abuse, power imbalances, and mental health challenges. Addressing these drivers is critical to meeting obligations under the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to GBV (2025)* and the *WHS Act 2011*, which now explicitly includes psychosocial hazards. Uplifting maturity will require assessments and proactive steps be undertaken to ensure safe, respectful, and inclusive student communities.

Power, Hierarchy and Leadership Dynamics

Student hierarchical and power-based dynamics in residential communities, can heighten risks of coercion and abuse. International evidence demonstrates that power asymmetries amplify risks of sexual exploitation, hazing, and retaliation against those who report harm (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2020; Mellins et al., 2021). Embedding accountability and transparency into leadership structures is critical to mitigate this driver of harm.

Unsafe Traditions and Hazing

Research highlights that some residential community environments perpetuate exclusionary or harmful traditions. Unsafe initiation practices and hazing rituations can normalise coercsion, bullying, and alcohol misuse, undermining psychological safety (Redmond et al., 2022). These behaviours are now recognised as psychosocial hazards under workplace safety legislation (Comcare, 2024).

Beyond visible traditions, many residential environments also contend with a ‘shadow culture’, the informal rules, norms, and loyalties that operate beneath official policies and stated values. Shadow cultures can reinforce secrecy, silence, and complicity, making it harder for students to speak out against harmful behaviours or challenge unsafe practices. They often perpetuate patterns of privilege, gendered power, and group loyalty that protect misconduct from exposure. Addressing shadow culture requires not only auditing traditions but also creating transparency, accountability, and leadership practices that actively disrupt hidden norms of harm.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual harassment, assault, and coercive behaviours, remains a risk in residential colleges. Women and gender-diverse students report disproportionately high levels of victimisation (Universities Australia, 2022). Beyond immediate harm, experiences of GBV have deep impacts on mental health, academic performance, and a student’s sense of safety and belonging. The new Code explicitly requires providers to prevent and respond to GBV with clear accountability measures.

Substance Use and Risk Behaviours

Excessive alcohol and other drug use remain key contributors to unsafe cultures in residential communities. Alcohol consumption is strongly linked with increased risk of sexual assault and harassment, impairing consent recognition and heightening aggression (Mellins et al., 2021). National surveys confirm that alcohol is present in a significant proportion of GBV incidents in higher education (Universities Australia, 2022; AHRC, 2021). Party culture, hazing practices, and peer norms often reinforce heavy drinking and risk-taking behaviours, while also reducing protective bystander action (Capone et al., 2021). Emerging patterns of stimulant and drug misuse among young adults further compound these risks (AIHW, 2023). Addressing substance use is therefore an essential element of compliance with the National Code (2025) and workplace psychosocial hazard management obligations (Comcare, 2024).

Digital and Technology-Facilitated Harm

Technology-facilitated abuse, including non-consensual image sharing, cyber harassment, and coercive control via online platforms, has become a growing driver of harm in residential communities. Australian research highlights the overlap between digital abuse and GBV, with young women and gender-diverse students disproportionately targeted (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). The high use of social media and messaging apps in residential environments increases both exposure and impact. Prevention and response strategies should extend to digital contexts (UN Women, 2022).

Discrimination and Exclusion

Racism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia continue to impact students' sense of safety and belonging. Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, international students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds face layered challenges of discrimination and cultural adjustment (Baik et al., 2019).

Mental Health and Stigma

Rising levels of psychological distress among young people presents a significant concern in residential communities. Despite being surrounded by peers, some students experience loneliness, social disconnection, and barriers to help-seeking. Stigma continues to reduce the likelihood of engaging with support services (McGorry, 2024). Academic and personal pressures intensify these challenges. Many students struggle to balance study demands, social life, extracurricular commitments, and personal wellbeing in the context of high expectations from themselves and others. This is often compounded by perfectionistic tendencies, where students feel pressure to excel across all areas and fear making mistakes. Such patterns can lead to overcommitment, chronic stress, anxiety, burnout, and difficulty setting boundaries (Baik et al., 2019; Curran & Hill, 2019; Orygen, 2022).

In residential communities, these pressures are amplified by transitions from home to independent living, the absence of established support systems, and the competitive cultures of certain disciplines. Left unaddressed, these factors significantly increase vulnerability to psychological distress, risky coping behaviours, and disengagement from academic and social life. Embedding proactive mental health promotion and destigmatising support pathways in residential community cultures is therefore critical to preventing harm.

Policy and Compliance Context

The current regulatory and policy landscape places a duty of care on providers to actively prevent and respond to harm in residential communities.

- **National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to GBV (2025):** Requires universities and residential providers to embed prevention strategies, establish clear response pathways, and deliver trauma-informed support services.

- **Australian Universities Accord (2024):** Emphasises whole-of-institution approaches to student wellbeing, recommending skills-based interventions and wraparound support.
- **Higher Education Standards Framework (2023):**
    - **Standard 7: Safe Student Accommodation** requires that accommodation is safe, inclusive, and supportive of wellbeing.
    - **Standard 3: Knowledge and Capability to Prevent and Respond to GBV** mandates building institutional capacity to safely and effectively prevent and respond to gender-based violence.
- **Comcare Code of Practice (2024):** Obligates institutions to proactively identify and address psychosocial hazards such as bullying, harassment, and GBV.

This policy environment signals a shift from reactive responses to proactive prevention, requiring cultural change as well as compliance.

Meeting Duty of Care: Practical Strategies

Fulfilling duty of care requires embedding safety into everyday practice through prevention-led training and culture change. Key strategies include:

1. **Student Leader Upskilling**
   Student leaders play a critical role in shaping residential culture and community safety. Comprehensive capability development should encompass:
    - Mental health literacy and response capabilities
    - Connection and belonging skills including cultural awareness and allyship
    - Communication and interpersonal skills for challenging situations
    - Understanding of psychological safety and harm prevention
    - Leadership competencies that promote inclusive, respectful environments
    - Personal wellbeing and burnout prevention strategies

2. **Pastoral Care and Wrap around Support**
   Residential communities should create systems that enable early identification of

risk, clear escalation pathways, and integrated supports across academic, wellbeing, and residential services.

3. **Culture and Tradition Audits**
   Regular review of traditions and practices can help identify unsafe behaviours, prevent hazing, shadow culture and align culture with safety and inclusion standards.

4. **Inclusive Practices and Targeted Support**
   Tailoring services to the needs of diverse groups, including Indigenous, international, LGBTQ+, and neurodivergent students, is essential for diversity, equity and safety.

5. **Data-Driven Monitoring**
   Wellbeing surveys, incident reporting, and feedback loops provide accountability and ensure continuous improvement.

Recommendations for education and training

Identifying accredited provides of evidence-based training is critical to meet compliance and cultural needs. The **Skills-based leadership training capability should** directly address psychosocial hazards and the requirements of Standards 3 and 7, through six core capability areas:

- **Mental Health Essentials:** Understanding mental ill-health and risk factors, stigma reduction, boundaries and role clarity, trauma-informed care, and escalation pathways.
- **Connection and Belonging:** Values in action, cultural awareness and allyship, power dynamics, and addressing peer pressure and risk behaviours.
- **Psychological Safety:** Identifying psychosocial harms and unsafe traditions, respectful relationships and consent, ethical and responsible behaviours including bystander intervention.

- **Communication Skills:** Emotional intelligence, active listening, courageous conversations, conflict resolution, and navigating friendships.
- **Adaptive Leadership:** Self-awareness including managing bias and triggers, problem-solving and decision-making, role modelling behaviours, and teamwork competencies.
- **Burnout Prevention:** Stress management, wellbeing habits, boundary setting, balancing demands, self-compassion, and growth mindset.

Sourcing prevention education that combines accredited self-directed online learning, combined with workshops, and supported learning are recommended best practice approaches to ensuring leadership capability uplift is sustainable and embedded in practice.

Implications for Policy and Practice

To meet regulatory obligations and create safe student communities, residential communities should:

- Treat safety as a core leadership responsibility, not an ancillary service.

- Build institutional capability in prevention and response to GBV.

- Ensure that compliance frameworks are linked to practical, everyday behaviours of student leaders and staff.

- Move beyond individual self-care to collective responsibility and culture change.

- Partner with evidence-based providers to ensure training is impactful and sustained.

Conclusion

The wellbeing and safety of students in residential communities is both a compliance requirement and a moral imperative. The introduction of the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to GBV (2025)* marks a turning point for the sector, signaling that residential communities must not only respond to incidents, but

proactively prevent harm. Meeting this duty of care requires investment in knowledge, skills development, and culture change.

This is not simply a wellbeing issue, it is a governance, compliance, and risk management priority that should be embedded within the broader policy environment. It makes the case that compliance alone is insufficient, residential communities should also invest in prevention-led capability development, and culture change to ensure safe and thriving residential environments. The cost of inaction is high: legal exposure, reputational damage, and, most critically, the safety and trust of students. Residential communities should therefore treat this agenda as a call to action to integrate compliance with culture, invest in preventative training, and ensure their residential communities are places of safety, respect, and inclusion for every student.

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