A Multi-Divisional Collaborative Approach to Student Safety and Behavioural Management: Safer Community

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Abstract

Safer Community provides a centralised reporting service for La Trobe University students and staff to report "concerning, threatening, inappropriate or uncomfortable behaviour" they may have witnessed or experienced at the university. Safer Community utilises a systems-based approach to explore all areas of an individual's university experience to mitigate risk, increase psychological and physical safety, and decrease unwelcome behaviour on campus. Whilst navigating Victorian state statutes and governing legislation, Safer Community applies risk management and de-escalation strategies to promote the safety of all on campus. This includes targeted education and resources directed to high-risk cohorts, such as students living in on-campus accommodation and international students. It also involves supporting staff to manage problematic behaviours, both online and in the classroom, and empowering them to understand, recognise, and respond to distressing behaviours. When reporting to Safer Community, individuals share their experiences in a trauma-informed and confidential environment where the team collaboratively mitigates risk, conducts safety planning, and empowers students to participate in the response. Respondents to the concerns are offered natural justice and encouraged to engage with the investigative process. Individuals with complex psychosocial needs are offered a multidisciplinary approach, with referrals made within the Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion division or to external stakeholders such as the police. This proactive approach to early prevention is informed by data collected by Safer Community to allow for a university-wide response. This paper describes the significance of adopting a circular, holistic, multi-divisional, collaborative approach aimed at fostering the wellbeing of the university community, encompassing both physical and psychological safety. This paper also explores effective strategies to achieve this through the presentation of a case example and service model.

Keywords

Conduct, Behaviour, Case management, Tertiary education, University, Student services

Introduction

The higher education sector in Australia is comprised of public and private institutions, including universities, local branches of internationally-based universities, university colleges, and other higher education institutes (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2022). One of the key standards set by the regulatory body for tertiary education in Australia relates to wellbeing and safety (TEQSA, 2022). The standard states that providers must facilitate timely and accurate access to student support services and promote a safe environment on campus and online (TEQSA, 2018). Safer Community services have been introduced at many Australian universities, including La Trobe University. Their purpose is to provide support to staff and students who experience any threatening or inappropriate behaviours while going about their interactions related to the university. Campus threat assessment and behaviour management in Australia largely originate from North American practice; however, changes in legislation have led to the development of guidelines using the Australian tertiary context (Darwinkel et al., 2020). As the

Safer Community service model has evolved over the past seven years, there is still room for developing and refining practices to adapt to ongoing changes and demands for support and services. This article aims to describe the Safer Community service at La Trobe University, Australia through the presentation of a case example and service model which demonstrate the ongoing need for such a service. La Trobe University is a higher education institution which serviced 34,386 students in 2022 (La Trobe University, 2023).

Inception and core function

In August 2017, *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) was released. This led to the introduction of sexual harassment reporting services at tertiary institutions across Australia. In 2018, La Trobe created the "Speak Up" service. Speak Up receives reports of student conduct concerns (including reports of sexual harm) and investigates these, while also providing health and wellbeing services to students involved in those investigations. The aim of the service was to provide a pathway for university community members to report sexual assault and harassment, alongside any other uncomfortable or concerning behaviour. It was also designed to provide diverse support options for managing the after-effects of such.

During the review of Speak Up, it was identified that there was a concern with the same person managing students' wellbeing and conducting a simultaneous investigation. It was determined that Speak Up was not achieving all its intended goals. In response to this, and as part of a wider institutional organisational transformation in 2021, Speak Up was divided into two new teams: Student Wellbeing Connect and Safer Community. Student Wellbeing Connect addressed the mental health and wellbeing of students and was offered as a separate service to students involved with Safer Community. Safer Community specifically focused on the management of conduct investigations. This allowed students to speak to someone confidentially about their experience without it affecting any investigation. This split in responsibilities also ensured procedural fairness during the investigation while supporting students' needs.

As of today, the core function of Safer Community is to provide a free confidential service for staff and students to report "concerning, threatening, inappropriate or uncomfortable behaviour" related to the university. The reports can be varied in nature, including bullying, harassment, aggression, discrimination, stalking, sexual harm, and violence. The setting of the concerns can be in person, online, on or off campus, on placement, or within their personal lives and can be perpetrated by anyone within the university community.

Multi-divisional collaboration

The goal of Safer Community is to provide a local-level response to manage conduct concerns whilst collaborating with internal university and external community stakeholders to provide holistic support. This provides a wraparound service to support students, staff, and the broader La Trobe community whilst promoting safety and behavioural management. Safer Community aims to support La Trobe University community members to feel safe and supported to report their concerns about uncomfortable behaviour whilst staying engaged with their studies and/or work.

To ensure the effectiveness of Safer Community, staff actively cultivate relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. This network of supports contributes to increasing Safer Community's efficiency when responding to any incidents. An example of this ongoing collaboration includes the twice-weekly Incident Triage Meeting which includes Safer Community, Student Health and Wellbeing, accommodation services, and academic services. These meetings

provide the opportunity for broad case discussions, within the bounds of privacy and confidentiality, on recent cases. The triage meetings also allow for distribution of information and workshopping a collaborative approach from all services. Outside of this meeting, emergent issues can be communicated directly to ensure that incidents are managed according to the proportionate risk.

Depending on the individual incident, Safer Community may also need to collaborate with external stakeholders, such as local police, Orange Door (a Victoria-based family violence support service), or mental health crisis teams.

Safer Community also seeks secondary consultations when further expertise is needed to manage complex cases. In several instances, the team has been able to support students displaying problematic behaviour while also identifying underlying support needs. Sometimes, problematic behaviour is clearly resultant from underlying issues, such as mental ill-health, and a health response rather than a conduct process is a more appropriate way to manage this behaviour.

Systems-based approach

Safer Community employs a systematic approach to comprehensively assess various aspects of an individual's university experience with the aim of mitigating risks, enhancing psychological and physical safety, and reducing instances of unwelcome behaviour within the campus environment. Adopting a systems-oriented perspective, Safer Community examines different levels of the university ecosystem. At the micro level, the focus is on individual actions or interactions. For instance, when a student reports a physical altercation occurring between themselves and another student in campus accommodation, Safer Community conducts an assessment of the incident. Within the meso level, Safer Community extends its examination to encompass broader university considerations, including legal, regulatory, and safety obligations. This entails investigating the specific physical altercation and offering internal wellbeing and advocacy support to the students involved. At the macro level, Safer Community integrates institutional policies, occupational health and safety guidelines, and the *General Misconduct Statute* (La Trobe University, 2009), which serves as the overarching disciplinary framework for the university. By incorporating these macro-level elements into its approach, Safer Community ensures alignment with broader institutional and regulatory requirements, fostering a cohesive and compliant campus environment.

Investigation process

There are four primary stages in the investigation process: triage, initial inquiries, case investigation, and outcome. Safer Community commences its investigation by triaging the behaviour(s) of concern using a suitable risk assessment tool to ascertain the immediacy of the case. The designated case manager commences initial inquiries, encompassing an internal database review for historical cases, review of the student information system to evaluate academic progress, examination of the customer relationship management database for previous complaints, and assessment of accommodation history (if applicable) to ascertain current or historical issues. The complainant and/or reporter, as appropriate, are invited to meet with Safer Community to provide further details about the nature of the concern(s) and may be offered referral to wellbeing services for additional support. Information gathering and interviews are geared towards eliciting specific information about the incident, including the type of behaviour, pattern or escalation, timing, individuals involved, and location. Safer Community may conduct secondary consultations with relevant parties, such as wellbeing services, academic staff, or other stakeholders within the university community. The investigation stage entails initial meetings with witnesses to collect evidence and/or corroborate raised concerns. The case manager collates and analyses all requisite

evidence, encompassing physical or digital evidence like emails, screenshots, CCTV footage, IT reports, and social media content. During the analysis phase, various considerations arise including:

- addressing any identified discrepancies;

- assessing whether, on the balance of probabilities, sufficient evidence has been garnered to substantiate the alleged incident;

- identifying additional support services required for all parties involved in the investigation (e.g., disability support, wellbeing services, academic support);

- identifying and mitigating potential risks;

- evaluating potential outcomes while considering the Briginshaw principle (i.e., in civil cases, the standard of proof is on the balance of probabilities, but the evidence must be clear, cogent, and convincing, particularly in serious matters);

- determining whether the threshold for general misconduct has been met; and

- evaluating the reasonableness of the outcome requested by the reporter or affected party.

Subsequently, the respondent is apprised of the allegations concerning their behaviour and invited to discuss the allegations and present their perspective. Reasonable directions may be issued alongside the allegations as interim risk mitigation measures to protect the integrity of the investigation and/or safety of the complainant and respondent. Following a comprehensive review of all information, Safer Community determines the outcome of the investigation. This may involve educative measures such as reminders of behavioural expectations aligned with relevant policies. Alternatively, they may be directed to participate in a respectful behaviour program that addresses issues such as problem behaviour, everyday sexism, sexual harm, and gender-based violence through one-on-one psycho-educational approaches. Other potential outcomes include issuing reasonable directions for a specified period (e.g., 6 or 12 months), being placed on accommodation probation (further breaches may result in eviction) for a specified period (e.g., 6 or 12 months), or referring the case to general misconduct if the threshold has been met. The respondent is informed of the outcome and the case is closed. Respondents have the option to appeal the outcome through the university's ombudsman.

Risk assessment tools

There are two main tools used by Safer Community to assess risk. The Quadrants of Aggression and Intrusion Concern (QuAIC) is a screening tool for behaviours of concern. It is designed for organisations or institutions to promptly quantify the level of aggression, how often and for how long the behaviour has been occurring, and how disruptive the behaviour has been (Bartlett & Chan, 2020; Darwinkel et al., 2020). The QuAIC indicates a level of concern from low to moderate, high, and highest. The level of concern may prompt varying action from Safer Community and high/highest risk cases are prioritised.

For stalking-related matters, the FOUR screening tool is utilised (College of Policing, 2020). The FOUR is a mnemonic for assessing whether the behaviour is fixated (i.e., disproportionate investment of time, effort, and/or resources) or obsessed (i.e., unhealthy and persistent occupation with the target), and whether the behaviour is unwanted and occurring repeatedly. Safer Community may use the FOUR in conjunction with the QuAIC when assessing stalking- or harassment-related matters.

Safety plan

When a level of risk has been identified by Safer Community, the case manager works with the complainant and develops a Personal Safety Plan, adaptive to the individual's specific circumstances. Safety planning involves the development and use of strategies by individuals to protect themselves (Campbell, 2001). Utilising an Exposure Reduction Framework, the safety plan involves minimising the risk of exposure to an abuser and lessening the abusive factors, to effectively increase victims' safety (Dugan & Nagin, 2003). The Personal Safety Plan draws upon options available to the student, analysing and utilising their micro environment. This includes questions, such as "What strategies/tools can I use to keep myself safe off campus?", "Where can I go to feel safe?", and "What strategies/tools can I use to be safe online?" Importantly, a safety plan is adaptive, recognising the barriers to safety and that situations can change (Kohtala et al., 2023). An effective safety plan utilises support that is readily available for the complainant, validates their experiences, and acknowledges their concerns. This includes planning for safety at home, on campus, at work, in public areas, and safety during a violent incident, or when/if preparing to leave the home. Safety for drug and alcohol use, emotional wellbeing, and psychological safety are also included in a comprehensive safety plan. Safety plans may also utilise external supports, such as the police, emergency services, The Orange Door, Safe Steps (24/7 specialist support services for anyone in Victoria who is experiencing or afraid of family violence), and the eSafety Commissioner.

Internal risk mitigation processes

Safer Community is underpinned by a victim/survivor-centred approach, placing the needs and priorities of victims/survivors at the forefront of any response. The team's response prioritises the needs of the victim/survivor: being treated with dignity and respect; access to a safe, supportive, non-judgmental environment; access to appropriate information; being enabled to make an informed choice; and the right to privacy and confidentiality.

To achieve this, Safer Community manages, supports, and helps mitigate risk by implementing, monitoring, and creating interim measures, including issuing reasonable directions. Reasonable directions are temporary health and safety and/or investigation integrity measures. They may include a directive that a student does not contact another individual or attend the university or any part of it for a reasonable period. Reasonable directions are not intended to be punitive nor part of a formalised disciplinary process. They are implemented to protect wellbeing under the university's relevant occupational health and safety obligations and internal policies. These directions are sometimes put in place for the period of investigation or as part of a resolution process for low risk/level outcomes.

Re-directions are another integral part of effective risk mitigation. When appropriate, Safer Community can request through the Information Computer Technology (ICT) team a redirect of emails sent either from a particular La Trobe University email address or to a particular person's email. This includes emails from external accounts or sources. In some cases, Safer Community will request a complete block. At other times, to monitor continuous risk, emails may be redirected to the shared Safer Community inbox or to a different staff member as part of an agreed safety plan.

Collaborative response to safety

La Trobe University employs a comprehensive, university-wide approach to safety, encompassing both prevention and strategic management initiatives. Safer Community collaborates closely with the Respect and Prevention team to inform and support these endeavours. Situated within the

Strategy, Prevention and Education team under the Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion division, Respect and Prevention assumes broad responsibility for health and wellbeing prevention, with a particular emphasis on combating sexual violence and unacceptable behaviours in all their forms. Leveraging data provided by Safer Community, initiatives such as training programs (e.g., Bystander Action Program, Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Harm), communication strategies (e.g., signage and messaging promoting respect and safety across the university), and targeted interventions (e.g., Unisafe security escort service, Respectful Behaviour and Culture module) are developed and implemented.

In conjunction with Respect and Prevention, a yearly Community of Practice is facilitated, engaging internal stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, including wellbeing, Safer Community, and academic staff. This collaborative platform serves as a forum for sharing insights and strategies aimed at addressing and managing problematic behaviours within classroom settings. Efforts within this community include the development of classroom management tools to bolster the skills of teaching staff and provide them with necessary support.

As part of ongoing strategy management, regular quarterly reviews of data are conducted to identify any underrepresented cohorts in reporting. Recent statistics have revealed low reporting rates among international students. Through consultations with International Student Support, it has been discerned that figures of authority can be perceived as intimidating or daunting to international students due to cultural disparities, language barriers, fear of consequences, and/or lack of familiarity with reporting procedures. Collaborative efforts involving multiple stakeholders have been initiated, with Safer Community actively participating in international events to raise awareness about the importance of reporting concerns, address communication barriers, and foster trust among international student communities.

Case study

This case study illustrates the theories, frameworks, and approaches to clinical practice utilised to work with a complex student presentation. For privacy and confidentiality reasons, this case has been de-identified, and the student will be referred to as "Student A" throughout. Student A is a young adult female who was referred by a university-based senior mental health clinician for case management support in the context of a longstanding history of family violence and academic concerns.

From a family violence perspective, various family members were engaging in high levels of coercive control towards Student A. This abuse was multifaceted and encompassed several forms of abuse, including financial, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. This occurred through high levels of monitoring of the student's whereabouts and monitoring of her electronic communications. Student A reported that she was fearful of leaving her family, as she had heard stories of other females in similar situations later being found and reprimanded by their families in extreme ways.

Safer Community worked closely alongside the Student Wellbeing Connect team, utilising theoretical frameworks that included person-centred ideologies, ecological systems models (Bronfenbrenner, 2009), family violence analysis, and trauma-informed care. On a few occasions, Student A was able to leave a lecture early (that could be watched later online) to meet with a worker in person and complete a MARAM (Multiagency Risk Assessment and Management framework for family violence; Family Safety Victoria, 2018) risk assessment. Further meetings were set up during this time, so there was no active email trail. The student was also linked with The Orange Door, with a leave/departure date set up and extensive planning undertaken around this.

Housing was obtained through the assistance of The Orange Door. La Trobe University emergency housing was deemed too high risk as there was a likelihood that the family would attend campus to look for the student. Safer Community worked internally with Security, providing details about the perpetrators, including photos provided by the student, car registration, and other identifying information. The student administration team was also notified, and a block was put on her account with a secure password that only the student would know, due to concern that the student's relatives would attend university to try and access information. All passwords were changed through ICT and an email redirect was put in place for all external emails, as per the student's request. The police were informed of the situation, but Student A had chosen not to apply for an intervention order due to concerns this might escalate her family's behaviour. However, due to ongoing levels of risk and harassment, the police issued one on her behalf.

Student A later returned to her studies. This was made possible with support from Safer Community, the security team, and careful timetable planning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Safer Community initiative at La Trobe University exemplifies a pioneering approach to fostering a safe and supportive environment for all members of the university community. By integrating a multi-divisional, collaborative framework, Safer Community has effectively addressed concerns of concerning, threatening, or inappropriate behaviour through a systematic and compassionate approach. This initiative not only meets regulatory standards but exceeds them by prioritising both physical and psychological safety through proactive risk management and comprehensive support services.

The success of Safer Community lies in its holistic assessment of the university experience, employing a systems-based approach that considers individual incidents within the broader context of institutional policies and legal obligations. Through rigorous investigation processes, tailored risk assessments, and personalised safety plans, Safer Community ensures that all concerns are addressed with sensitivity and efficiency.

Furthermore, the collaboration with internal university stakeholders and external community resources underscores Safer Community's commitment to providing wraparound support. By fostering partnerships and engaging in ongoing training and data analysis, Safer Community continuously evolves to meet the dynamic needs of its diverse student body.

Ultimately, Safer Community stands as a testament to La Trobe University's dedication to student welfare and safety. As it continues to refine its practices and expand its reach, Safer Community remains steadfast in its mission to create a campus environment where all individuals can thrive, free from harm and intimidation.

Acknowledgements

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