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From Compliance to Stewardship: How University Executives Must Meet the Challenge of the 'New Misogyny' on Campus

Steven Roberts, Jayde de Bondt, Carmen Acosta, Stephanie Wescott, Naomi Pfitzner, Alexandra Phelan, and Sarah McCook.

Monash University, Australia

Abstract

Universities internationally are entering a new phase in their response to gender-based violence, shaped by shifting regulatory expectations and the growing influence of digitally-mediated misogyny among students. This commentary suggests the rise of the 'manosphere' (loosely connected online networks promoting misogynistic ideas) has reconfigured the conditions under which gendered harm emerges on campus, creating a mismatch between institutional responsibilities and existing responses. Drawing on Australian policy developments and school-based research, we argue that current approaches—which are largely compliance-oriented—are insufficient to address the diffuse and relational dynamics of this 'new misogyny.' We contend that universities must move beyond compliance toward enhanced stewardship capacity, requiring executive-level leadership to develop expertise in gender, masculinity, and digital culture, and to embed this across institutional strategy and practice.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Universities should recognise the 'new misogyny' as a distinct digitally-mediated harm shaping student behaviour and relationships.
2. Senior leaders need to develop multidisciplinary subject-matter expertise in gender, masculinity-inspired harms, and online cultures to inform institutional responses.
3. Whole-of-institution approaches must move beyond compliance and integrate prevention across strategy, teaching and learning, research and student experience.
4. Institutions should address misogyny within culture and identity formation, recognising it as a coherent and consistent ideology, rather than as an isolated attitude informing individual, interpersonal incidents and/or reporting processes.
5. Effective responses require sustained leadership stewardship to coordinate long-term, institution-wide change.

Keywords

Executive leadership, digital culture, misogyny, higher education.

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Introduction

Universities globally are facing a new landscape in relation to gender-based violence, shaped by changing regulatory expectations and the growing influence of digitally-mediated misogyny among student populations. While these dynamics are international in scope, Australia provides a particularly instructive case due to recent policy reforms that position universities not only as sites of response, but as sites where prevention of violence should also occur. A centrepiece of this agenda is the Universities Accord, a federal government-led review of the higher education system that seeks to reshape the sector through new policy directions and accountability mechanisms, including around student safety. These pressures are not unique to Australia, but are increasingly evident across higher education systems internationally, as institutions are called upon to take more active roles in addressing complex social harms within their student populations.

Australia's Universities Accord represents an important and welcome shift in recognising gender-based violence as a core issue for the higher education sector, and may offer a useful point of reference for other systems internationally. However, we suggest that the more substantive lesson for the international community lies in the need to critically examine whether current policy and institutional frameworks are adequately equipped to capture the changing forms of misogyny shaping student populations and corresponding experiences of gender-based violence.

In particular, the growing influence of the "manosphere" (online networks promoting misogynistic and anti-feminist ideas) is reshaping misogyny among young people into what has been described as a reconfigured "new misogyny" (Bates, 2025), characterised by more diffuse and culturally embedded dynamics. This creates a growing mismatch between what universities are being asked to do and the tools at their disposal, leaving institutions not yet fully equipped to respond effectively. The challenge, therefore, is whether executive leadership is equipped to engage with students' gender identities and perspectives, which are increasingly shaped by online cultures that normalise hostility towards women, promote rigid gender roles and male entitlement, and are amplified through algorithmically curated digital environments. As Schulz and McDonald (2025) observe, such content blurs the boundaries between humour and harm, with implications for how relationships and power are understood and enacted.

Evidence from school-based research suggests that whole-of-institution approaches are most effective when they include the active engagement and upskilling of senior leadership (Cahill & Dadvand, 2021; Dadvand & Cahill, 2021; Keddie & Ollis, 2020), rather than being confined to isolated programs, specialist teams or pastoral roles. Transposing this principle to higher education requires more than policy: it requires leadership with sufficient understanding of the new misogyny to steward institution-wide reform. This necessitates a step change in leadership knowledge and capability across executive teams, embedding this understanding across institutional strategy, decision-making, and culture, and ensuring clear recognition of misogyny and hostile views towards women as a distinct harm.

Elaborating this position, we begin by situating recent policy and regulatory shifts in higher education, particularly within the Australian context, to illustrate how universities are increasingly being tasked with the prevention of gender-based violence. Our aim is to first establish the scope and direction of current policy expectations and to show that while universities are now being tasked with more expansive responsibilities, these developments have largely proceeded without

sufficient recognition of how misogyny is being reconfigured through digital cultures, leaving institutions underprepared to respond effectively. We then introduce the manosphere in greater detail, to make visible the forms of digitally-mediated misogyny that, despite recent policy developments, remain largely unaccounted for within current institutional and regulatory frameworks, and to establish the significance of this gap for higher education institutions now tasked with preventing and responding effectively to gender-based violence. We then draw on school-based research to demonstrate how these dynamics are already shaping educational environments, offering insight into the challenges higher education is likely to encounter. This enables us to highlight a growing mismatch between the responsibilities placed on universities and the conceptual frameworks currently informing institutional responses. We conclude by arguing for a shift from compliance-oriented approaches to enhanced leadership stewardship as necessary to address these evolving conditions.

Gender Based Violence Policy Reform in the Higher Education Sector: Recent Developments

Over the past decade, gender-based violence has emerged as a central issue on the higher education policy agenda, driven in part by student advocacy, although initially framed largely in terms of sexual harassment and sexual violence. In Australia, following significant student advocacy on the issue of sexual violence, in 2016 the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) conducted the first national survey on sexual harassment and assault across Australian universities. The resulting *Change the Course* report (AHRC, 2017) revealed high rates of sexual harassment and assault across university campuses, and that most students who experienced sexual violence did not report it to their university, or seek support. A second sector-wide survey, the National Safety Student Survey (NSSS) was undertaken in 2021, again revealed consistently high prevalence rates in university contexts: 1 in 6 students had experienced sexual harassment, and 1 in 20 sexual assault, since starting university (Heywood et al., 2022). While these sector-wide surveys established the issue of sexual harm and the broader occurrence of gender-based violence within higher education, urgency has been sharpened by a recent and rapidly evolving policy and regulatory landscape.

While these developments are particularly visible in the Australian context, similar shifts toward institutional accountability, transparency and student protection are evident across higher education systems internationally. However, these shifts are refracted through different regulatory models, ranging from formalised, enforceable legal regimes to softer forms of oversight grounded in reputational pressure and institutional compliance (see Antolak-Saper 2026). In the UK and US, for example, policy settings reflect this broader trend, though they operate through different regulatory mechanisms. In the UK, the Office for Students Condition E6 establishes sexual harassment and misconduct as a core regulatory requirement for universities. It mandates that institutions maintain a single, comprehensive, publicly accessible policy framework and emphasises proactive prevention, transparency and ongoing evaluation, positioning harassment as a systemic institutional responsibility rather than a disciplinary issue (Office for Students, 2025). In contrast, in the United States, Title IX frames sexual harassment primarily through a civil rights and anti-discrimination lens. It prohibits sex-based discrimination in any federally funded education program, explicitly including sexual harassment and sexual violence. Institutions are legally required to respond to incidents, ensure equal access to education, and

prevent retaliation, with enforcement tied to federal funding compliance (US Department of Education, 2026). While these frameworks differ in design and legal basis, they share a common orientation toward accountability, reporting, and institutional responsibility for response.

In practice and across international contexts, university approaches to prevent and respond to what is now more commonly described as gender-based violence, have been largely institutionally led, variable, and shaped by leadership appetite and/or confidence. Accordingly, universities have relied on programmatic interventions, engagement initiatives, internal policies and complaints processes to address gender-based violence on campus, with fluctuating efficacy (Perry, 2024). Examples of gender-based violence prevention and response work have included the creation of institutionally-led prevention training programs such as mandatory compliance modules and the release of annual reports that outline disclosures and reports by some universities year-on-year (Henry et al., 2024; McCall et al., 2023; Perry, 2024); While important work has been undertaken, especially to establish internal sexual harm policies and support services, approaches across the sector have arguably failed to facilitate systemic change.

In Australia, the lack of systemic change has prompted new, consolidated policy developments. As briefly noted above, the recent Universities Accord has set a clear direction of travel, positioning universities as responsible not only for participation and equity, but also for student safety and wellbeing at scale. Both the National Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education, which outlined seven key actions, including the creation of a National Student Ombudsman to provide an independent, trauma-informed complaints mechanism (Department of Education, 2024), and the National Higher Education Code (the Code) to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence set clear standards and accountability mechanisms across the sector. The introduction of the Code marks a shift not only in expectations but in the language through which the issue is understood, defining gender-based violence as “any form of physical or non-physical violence, harassment, abuse or threats, based on gender, that results in, or is likely to result in, harm, coercion, control, fear or deprivation of liberty or autonomy” (Department of Education, 2025).

These standards, to be upheld by a newly instituted Higher Education Gender-based Violence Regulator, are expected to move the sector beyond reactive approaches led by individual institutions toward explicit requirements for leadership to establish whole-of-institution approaches to prevention and response acknowledging “it is only through this approach that changes in organisational culture, practices and service delivery can be achieved to drive institutional change” (Department of Education, 2024, p. 7). In combination, these developments reposition universities as key agents of prevention and not merely entities that respond to gender-based violence. Critically, the introduction of the National Student Ombudsman represents a further departure from the past, marking a move away from institutional self-regulation toward independent scrutiny of how universities handle student complaints. The Ombudsman has the authority to investigate issues relating to student safety and welfare, including gender-based violence, and to identify systemic failures in institutional responses. Early evidence highlights the significance of this shift (NSO, 2026). The Ombudsman’s first investigation found that some universities have used confidentiality requirements in ways that may limit students’ ability to speak about their experiences or seek support, raising concerns about practices that may prioritise institutional risk management over transparency and student wellbeing (NSO, 2026).

These developments represent important progress and potentially offer constructive insights for other higher education systems internationally. However, while expectations shift towards whole-of-organisation prevention and response, the nature of the problem universities are being asked to address is also changing. Gender-based violence in student populations is increasingly shaped by diffuse, networked forms of digitally-mediated misogyny, including the influence of the 'manosphere'. However, these forms of misogyny and hostile views towards women are typically not treated as distinct harms, but rather subsumed within broader and already complex issue categories—such as bullying, gender based violence, online safety, or extremism—where their specific logics and gendered dynamics risk being obscured, diluted, or insufficiently addressed. In other words, misogyny is not treated comparably with other socio-cultural and political issues. This creates a growing mismatch between the expanding responsibilities of institutions and the conceptual and leadership tools currently available to them. This mismatch creates significant scope for harm against both university staff and students, enacted in ways that are both covert and overt, and enabled by the wide availability of content that trains and normalises these behaviours. To make this clearer we now turn to define the manosphere in more detail, elaborating this phenomenon and to explain how current policy frameworks are not yet equipped to address it.

The 'Manosphere', Digital Misogyny and Why it Matters

The "manosphere" refers to a loosely connected network of online communities, influencers, and content ecosystems that promote anti-feminist and misogynistic ideas about gender, relationships, and power (Gerrand et al., 2025). While these ideas are not new, the conditions under which they are now produced and circulated are distinct. The convergence of post-truth and new conspiracist discourses, backlash to the #MeToo movement, and digital technologies that monetise outrage has created a climate in which misogyny is not only revived, but reconfigured (Gerrand et al., 2025). In this context, the manosphere operates as a conduit through which longstanding patriarchal norms are translated into the affective economies and attention systems of digital culture. Importantly, the manosphere is not monolithic, but encompasses a diverse range of groups and positions, such as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Involuntary Celibates (incels), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), as well as "manfluencers" such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, whose ideas circulate across social media platforms with varying degrees of visibility, legitimacy, and extremity (Baker et al., 2024).

The effects of what we now understand as the manosphere have already been felt within universities globally, although this language was not used at the time. As an example of its most extreme manifestation, in 2014 Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured a further 14 as part of a planned attack on the Alpha Phi sorority house near UC Santa Barbara in a rampage motivated by incel ideology (Phelan et al., 2023). Less extreme, but still significant, examples include campus controversies involving manosphere-adjacent figures. In 2018, Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes gave a speech at NYU that prompted protests, while a planned appearance at Penn State in 2022 was cancelled due to threats of violence. While such incidents represent the most visible and confrontational expressions of these dynamics on university campuses, they also point to a broader and less overt diffusion of related ideologies into everyday student cultures.

Recent years have also seen the global rise of populist sentiment and populist-style politics (Rooduijin et al., 2024), which have fostered conditions that align closely with the masculinist

logics underpinning manosphere ideology (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2025). Manosphere spaces often mirror these dynamics, exhibiting anti-establishment attitudes, scepticism toward institutions such as media and the courts, and simplified narratives that attribute complex social and economic challenges to feminists, “elites,” or other perceived out-groups. Like populist movements, they rely on charismatic figures who cultivate direct, affective relationships with followers, using social media to bypass traditional intermediaries and amplify emotionally resonant messages grounded in grievance, crisis, and moral decline. These narratives position men as a virtuous but disadvantaged in-group and feminism or “woke” institutions (including universities) as an oppressor, drawing on broader affective currents, such as aggrieved masculinity, ressentiment, and perceived loss, that transform diffuse frustrations into collective identities and moral claims (Capelos & Demertzis, 2022).

This “new misogyny” (Bates, 2025) functions as both ideology and infrastructure, embedded in platform design, amplified by algorithmic systems, and circulated through networks that reward visibility and emotional intensity. While often disguised through irony, humour, or grievance, this new mode is potent and highly concerning. Miller-Idriss (2025), for example, links these formations to processes of radicalisation and political violence, showing how everyday grievances are reworked into narratives of threat and protection that can mobilise more extreme forms of engagement. Bates (2025) similarly demonstrates how sexist ideologies are increasingly embedded within the architectures of artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and platform design. These dynamics enable the rapid diffusion and normalisation of misogynistic narratives across platforms, audiences, and institutional contexts, making them more difficult to identify and counter.

These dynamics matter because the manosphere operates not at the margins, but within the everyday digital environments through which students form identities, relationships, and expectations about intimacy. As a result, it is already shaping the ‘real world’ social and relational conditions students bring into educational institutions, including universities (Schulz & McDonald, 2025), influencing how gender is understood and enacted, and shaping norms around consent, communication, respect, and power. This is not a distant or emerging issue for higher education, but an immediate and evolving challenge that warrants senior leadership attention. To better understand how these dynamics are already manifesting in educational settings, it is instructive to turn to the existing evidence base, which is currently most developed in research on schools.

Lessons From Research in Schools

The influence of the manosphere and its pernicious impacts do not remain online, but extend into everyday peer group interactions, including in education settings where misogyny is reconfigured through contemporary classroom dynamics (Pfitzner et al., 2026). Qualitative studies across the UK and Europe, Latin America, and Asia point to the ways online misogynistic cultures are entering school environments and shaping gender relations among young people internationally (Cala et al., 2026; Haslop et al., 2024; Lee, 2026). While these dynamics are mediated by local contexts, findings are remarkably consistent across settings. Survey-based evidence is embryonic but also points to the scale of this issue, with teachers across school systems reporting high levels of concern about the influence of online misogyny on student behaviour and wellbeing (Over et al., 2025a; Cala et al., 2026).

Within this broader international picture, Australian research provides particularly detailed insights into how these dynamics manifest in schools. This work clearly evidences that online misogynistic

cultures enter classrooms through everyday interactions, shaping how boys speak, relate, and position themselves in relation to girls and women. These dynamics are not confined to peer-to-peer interactions, but are also directed toward women teachers, who report experiences of resurgent male supremacy and increasing challenges to their authority and professional legitimacy (Roberts et al., 2026; Schulz et al., 2025; Wescott et al., 2024). While far from all boys support or replicate manosphere logics, a significant minority engage positively with such content (Flood & Keddie, 2026). This is sufficient to shape peer cultures and classroom dynamics beyond those directly engaging with it (Roberts & Wescott, 2025).

Rather than appearing only as overt hostility, these dynamics are often expressed through humour, irony, and forms of "baiting" that blur the boundaries between joking and harm (Roberts et al., 2026), making them harder to identify and respond to due to plausible deniability. In this sense, misogyny operates not simply as individual behaviour, but as part of broader affective and relational dynamics that shape classroom interactions and institutional cultures (Schulz et al., 2025). In this way, the language, identities, and scripts of digital misogyny are embedded within everyday interactions, contributing to the reanimation of normative forms of masculinity (Roberts et al., 2026).

Alongside its impacts on girls and women, emerging research also highlights the ways in which manosphere engagement has shaped boys' identities and wellbeing. As well as promoting adversarial understandings of gender relations and normalising sexist beliefs among young men, manosphere content reinforces restrictive norms of masculinity that are detrimental to boys' mental and emotional wellbeing (Sparks & Papandreou, 2023). In this sense, the manosphere operates not only as a source of harm to others, but as a formative influence on boys themselves, shaping how they understand relationships, power, and their place within changing social contexts (Over et al., 2025b).

These dynamics have also posed a particular challenge for school leadership. Research shows that institutional responses to misogyny are shaped not simply by individual decision-making, but by entrenched organisational norms and gender regimes that continue to legitimate and reproduce forms of hegemonic masculinity. In practice, this has meant that leadership responses frequently fail to reflect broader social shifts, instead remaining embedded in organisational cultures that normalise or overlook gendered harm (Zhao et al., 2025). At the same time, leadership inaction or inadequate responses have been conceptualised as forms of institutional gaslighting, where teachers' experiences of harassment are minimised, denied, or reframed in ways that undermine their credibility and reinforce existing power relations (Wescott & Roberts, 2025). These responses are not incidental, but patterned: they emerge from unequal "epistemic terrains" (Bailey, 2020) in which women's accounts of harm are systematically delegitimised, and where maintaining order, reputation, or existing hierarchies take precedence over addressing structural issues (Wescott & Roberts, 2025).

This body of school-based research can provide key insights to inform university approaches, as it highlights that leadership is not peripheral to the problem, but central to how it is constituted, recognised, and addressed. Where leadership lacks the conceptual tools or institutional mandate to engage with gender, power, and digital culture, responses are likely to remain superficial, partial, reactive, or ineffective. This helps explain why whole-of-school approaches, while widely advocated, are difficult to sustain in practice. What is first required in this kind of approach is the recognition of the existence of gendered violence and misogyny, and acknowledgment of this as

a distinct harm. This recognition would encourage universities to adopt a mandate to proactively engage in prevention measures, which can be localised across the diversity of institutional systems, structures, and experiences within the higher education ecosystem. It relies, too, on the courage to weather possible backlash to acting on gender-based violence, which, within the broader political conditions outlined above, is increasingly weaponised to 'expose' educational institutions' alleged 'wayward' agendas.

The evidence base in higher education is embryonic, but there are clear indications that these dynamics are not confined to school settings. Emerging research on online abuse and digital sexual violence in university contexts illuminates that these cultures extend into higher education environments, operating across both student interactions and institutional systems (Lee, 2026). At the same time, early commentary has begun to conceptualise what might be understood as a misogyny 'pipeline' from school to university (Schulz & McDonald, 2026), which questions what happens when these dynamics move from school to university. This suggests that higher education is not a fresh starting point, but a continuation, and in some cases consolidation, of earlier formations of gendered identity and behaviour (see discussion of preliminary research findings by Schulz & McDonald, 2025, 2026). This makes sense: universities are increasingly inheriting cohorts of students (particularly young adult men) whose identities, attitudes, and relational norms have already been shaped by prolonged engagement with digitally-mediated misogyny. Moreover, university settings also naturally create a space that promotes critical thinking and exposure to new ideas that could either strengthen, embolden or challenge existing schemas. Research examining online misogyny and masculinity-focused digital content shows that engagement is not limited to teenage boys, but typically extends into young adulthood, with men in the 16–25 age range (i.e. overlapping directly with typical undergraduate age cohorts) identified as a key audience for and active participants in these spaces (Over et al., 2025a; Keddie & Flood, 2025). Broader attitudinal research has also found that contemporary young men across the globe are more likely than other generations to hold problematic or regressive views about gender and relationships, including scepticism toward gender equality and greater acceptance of sexist norms (King's College London, 2025). While these attitudes cannot be attributed solely to the manosphere, they point to a wider cultural context in which such ideas are gaining traction among young adult men of typical university age.

While universities are increasingly expected to address gender-based violence, we would suggest there has been relatively little attention to how emerging forms of 'new' digital misogyny are already embedded within the student populations they serve, reshaping the conditions under which this work must occur. The challenge for universities, then, is to respond to the diffuse ways that manosphere-related harms manifest in higher education settings, in the absence of the more therapeutic, restorative, and family-inclusive approaches that often underpin responses in primary and secondary school contexts. This is of further consequence because universities provide qualifications to emerging practitioners – future teachers, doctors, psychologists, social workers, etc – whose views and attitudes may pose risks to those they will encounter in their field (see for example Iacobucci (2024) on growing concerns about the return of medical misogyny).

Higher Education's Manosphere Challenge

Despite increasing policy attention and ongoing institutional commitment, there are reasons to suggest that universities, as currently configured, are unlikely to fully meet the challenge posed

by gender-based violence in the context of digitally-mediated misogyny. This is not a question of whether universities are acting, but of whether existing approaches are aligned with the nature of the problem they are now facing.

In Australia, much of the sector's response to gender-based violence has been shaped by reactive and compliance-oriented models, focused on policies, reporting mechanisms, one-off educative interventions (e.g., mandatory training modules), and elective student support services (Henry et al., 2024; McCall et al., 2023). Evidence suggests this mirrors broader international patterns of prevention and response in universities, where institutions develop policy frameworks and provide general training and support services for victim-survivors (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Perry, 2024). These are important initiatives, particularly in strengthening disclosure and response. However, they tend to focus on individual, interpersonal harms and institutional processes, rather than culture, identity, and everyday interactions, where many of these dynamics are formed and reproduced. There is the additional complexity of higher education institutions' use of anonymous student evaluation tools to assess educator performance, where many scalable designs discriminate against gender, race, age and accent, and may prohibit educators from wanting to confront problematic behaviour (Fan et al., 2019). As above, insights from school-based research suggest that this mismatch is significant. Where misogyny is understood primarily as a behavioural issue, responses tend to focus on discipline, awareness, or individual correction. Yet, the influence of the manosphere points to something more diffuse and embedded: a set of norms, narratives, and identities that are socially produced, collectively reinforced, and often only partially visible to institutional actors. In such contexts, existing (predominantly procedural) approaches alone are unlikely to be sufficient.

There is also a challenge, observable across national contexts, in how gender-based violence prevention and response is distributed and led across institutions (Antolak-Saper, 2026). Australia's National Code, for example, explicitly requires a "whole-of-organisation approach", and positions accountable leadership and governance at the centre of institutional responses to gender-based violence, with action expected to be led from the highest levels and embedded across the organisation. However, what this looks like in practice remains in development.

Our point here is that even where the regulatory direction is clear, translating it into effective institutional action requires significant changes to systems, processes, and organisational culture. Not only are universities at different stages of institutional maturity in terms of operationalising these expectations, but regulatory guidance has not yet appeared to factor in how institutions are often so structurally different (e.g., in terms of number of campuses, student/staff numbers, geographic location, budget, leadership hierarchy, and learning models). Again, in our own context, recent findings from Australia's National Student Ombudsman (2025) highlight the challenges of this transition, with their evidence suggesting some university reporting processes, particularly the use of confidentiality requirements, have had the effect of silencing students, limiting their ability to seek support, and discouraging reporting. These practices point to a broader issue: where institutional responses are overly procedural or risk-focused, they may inadvertently reproduce the very harms they seek to address.

In this context, responsibility may continue to be operationalised through specialist portfolios (such as student services, human resources, equity and inclusion, or gender-based violence prevention and/or response units) without a corresponding shift in leadership knowledge and capability across executive teams. While such portfolios play a critical role, this approach can limit

the extent to which broader questions of gender, power, and digital culture are engaged consistently at the level of institutional strategy and decision-making. However, the shift toward prevention, alongside the changing nature of the problem, requires forms of coordination, interpretation, and sustained engagement that extend beyond existing governance and compliance frameworks. Without this shift, there is a risk that institutional responses remain fragmented, reactive, or procedural, despite strong intentions and significant effort.

Enhancing Stewardship Capacity: Executive Subject-Matter Expertise as an Imperative

Given the shifting challenges posed by the manosphere, and the evolving regulatory environment, universities are now being explicitly required to strengthen prevention approaches. In practice, prevention and response efforts in higher education have tended to coalesce around a familiar set of interventions (policies, education and training, complaints processes, and victim-survivor support) with policy frameworks often positioned as the primary mechanism of prevention (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Perry, 2024). Institutional factors such as leadership, governance, and organisational capacity, by contrast, remain comparatively underexamined, despite both academic and practice/advocacy-oriented work that has consistently emphasised the centrality of leadership engagement and organisational ownership in effective prevention efforts (see e.g. Hewson-Munro & McCook, 2023 who make this point particularly with respect to men leaders).

As our preceding discussion suggests, the challenge is not only structural but conceptual. It requires all levels of higher education leadership and management, including and especially executives, to interpret, coordinate, and sustain responses to a problem that is diffuse, evolving, and embedded across multiple institutions of education. This more closely resembles what has been described as an adaptive challenge (Heifetz et al., 2009), i.e., one that cannot be addressed through technical solutions alone, but that requires shifts in understanding, values, and organisational culture. This aligns with longstanding observations in higher education leadership research that complex institutional change—particularly around culture and equity—cannot be achieved through compliance mechanisms alone, but requires sustained, distributed, and interpretive leadership (Kezar, 2018; Bolden et al., 2012). However, we underscore that it also demands forms of leadership that operate at a system or institution-wide level, rather than through individual actors alone. Here we find alignment with critiques within the leadership literature that highlight persistent challenges in how leadership is conceptualised and measured, including an overreliance on individual leader behaviours and a lack of conceptual clarity in defining leadership itself (e.g. Crawford & Kelder, 2019; Crawford et al., 2020).

Sexism and misogyny in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and in wider society, is not at all new. However, while universities have made important progress in addressing gender-based violence, the current moment is characterised by a resurgence and transformation of these dynamics, shaped by digital cultures, backlash to gender equality, and the reconfiguration of longstanding gender norms. Existing approaches therefore require adaptation and renewal. We describe this as a need for *stewardship capacity*: the ability of senior leaders to hold and guide complex, institution-wide reform over time, particularly on contested issues of gender, power, and social change.

In deploying this term, we draw on what Macfarlane et al. (2024) identify as three perspectives within the higher education leadership literature: a traditionalist perspective emphasising the distinctive culture and norms of academic life; a reformist perspective concerned with the

alignment of leadership with broader social and political values; and a pragmatist perspective focused on the skills and practices required to achieve organisational change. While these perspectives are not necessarily intended to be integrated or aligned, each offers a distinct lens on the challenges addressed in this paper: the need to understand and work within institutional cultures; to respond to issues of gender, equity, and social justice; and to develop the practical capacities required to enact effective change. Stewardship, as we use it, reflects the need to work across these dimensions in guiding institutional responses to complex and contested issues. It goes beyond compliance or program delivery and involves shaping how problems are understood within the institution, aligning activity across domains, and sustaining strategic focus in the face of ambiguity, resistance, and/or competing priorities. In university contexts, this includes shaping institutional priorities, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms across teaching, research, and student experience domains, rather than relying solely on delegated portfolios or compliance functions. This reflects a shift from viewing leadership as the actions of individuals to understanding it as an institution-wide capacity to interpret and respond to complex social problems.

This task is further complicated by the distributed and fragmented nature of leadership within higher education, where responsibility is dispersed across organisational units and professional domains (Bolden et al., 2012; Kezar, 2018; Macfarlane et al., 2024). Developing stewardship capacity therefore requires a step change in knowledge and capability across executive and senior leadership teams. Evidence from school-based research, alongside emerging higher education studies, suggests that leadership responses are often constrained by limited conceptual understanding of gender, masculinity, and digitally-mediated cultures. In particular, then, executive and other senior leaders would need a more developed understanding of how gender, masculinity, and digitally mediated cultures (such as the manosphere) are shaping student identities and interactions, and how these dynamics intersect with gender-based violence. Without this, there is a risk that institutional responses continue to treat symptoms rather than underlying conditions.

Stewardship capacity also requires leadership to engage beyond specialist portfolios. While expertise in student services, equity, and gender-based violence prevention and response remain essential, the issues described here cut across teaching and learning, research, student experience, staff experience, workplace safety, governance, and organisational development and culture. As such, they require coordinated attention at the most senior level of institutional strategy, rather than being addressed solely through delegated units or discrete initiatives (Hewson-Munro & McCook, 2023). This includes the capacity to lead through contestation, recognising that issues of gender and power are often politically and culturally charged, and to sustain attention on long-term reform in the face of resistance or competing priorities. Stewardship also involves recognising that this work is ongoing rather than finite. The dynamics described here are not static, and institutional responses will need to adapt over time, especially as evidence specific to the higher education context emerges. This places a premium on humility, reflexivity, learning, and sustained engagement, rather than one-off interventions or short-term programs. In this context, the question for universities is not whether they have policies or programs in place, but whether their executive leadership is equipped to steward the kind of long-term, institution-wide change that current conditions demand.

Conclusion

Although mainly stemming from reflections of the Australian higher education policy context, our analysis is instructive for higher education systems globally. We argue that universities are entering a new phase in their response to gender-based violence, shaped not only by changing regulatory expectations, but by shifting student cultures influenced by digitally-mediated misogyny. Evidence from other education settings, such as primary and secondary schools, demonstrates how these dynamics are already embedded in educational environments, affecting students and staff, and exposing the limits of individualised and procedural responses. While the higher education evidence base remains emergent, there are clear indications that universities are inheriting cohorts of students whose attitudes and identities have been shaped by these influences prior to arrival, and are likely to continue to be shaped by these dynamics during their time at university (anecdotally, we suggest this is already clearly the case). At the same time, even where policy developments signal a move toward whole-of-institution approaches led through accountable governance (as is occurring in Australia), the capacity required to enact this shift, particularly at the level of senior leadership, in our view remains underdeveloped.

The challenge facing universities is how to act effectively in a rapidly changing environment. The regulatory settings in many national contexts are firmly in place, and the expectations are clear. However, meeting these expectations will depend less on the existence of policies or programs, and more on whether leadership is equipped to interpret and respond to the evolving dynamics shaping student cultures and institutional life. This requires a shift from compliance to stewardship; from implementing initiatives to guiding sustained, institution-wide change, and built on executive-level subject-matter expertise in gender, masculinity, and digitally mediated cultures, rather than reliance on generalist leadership capability alone. Without this shift, there is a risk that universities will continue to respond to yesterday's problem, rather than the one already being inherited.

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