

Action on campus rape shelved in cabinet reshuffle

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A Taskforce to tackle sexual violence on university campuses appears to have been abandoned by Education Minister Dan Tehan despite being ready for announcement prior to the leadership spill, it was revealed today.

A coalition of leading advocates on campus sexual violence say they were working closely with the former Education Minister's office on the Taskforce - that draft terms of reference had been developed, a prospective Chair had been approached, and announcement dates were in discussion for September.

However, in the months since the cabinet reshuffle that followed the Liberal Party spill, it has become clear that the new Education Minister has backed away from plans for the urgently needed Taskforce.

The revelations come less than three months out from the start of the new academic year.

"Fifteen months after the Australian Human Rights Commission identified the horrifying rate of sexual violence being perpetrated at our universities, Minister Tehan appears to have abandoned the desperately needed safety measure that was about to be announced under his predecessor." said Renee Carr, Executive Director of community campaigning group Fair Agenda.

'Minister Tehan reportedly claims to be waiting on a report from the regulator, the Tertiary Education and Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), a report TEQSA stated in May 2018 would be publicly released in July. The consistent revelations about student safety issues on campus make it abundantly clear oversight is urgently needed. This is just a belated excuse for inaction.'

"Sexual violence is the most significant safety issue on university campuses right now - it's well past time for the government to step up and hold universities and residences that are jeopardising student safety and wellbeing to account.

"It's outrageous that urgently needed action on student safety has been jeopardised because of political power plays in Canberra." she stated.

Fair Agenda, End Rape on Campus Australia, the National Union of Students and The Hunting Ground Australia Project launched a joint call for the

government to establish an independent, expert-led taskforce on campus sexual violence in February this year.

They had been working closely with former Education Minister Birmingham's office on such a Taskforce until the Ministerial reshuffle in August.

"It's critical that an independent expert-led body be established to provide oversight and accountability on this issue," said Sharna Bremner, Director of End Rape on Campus Australia.

"Far too often we have seen universities taking months and months to get back to young women with urgent safety concerns, we've seen survivors unable to access affordable, trauma-informed counselling services, and we've seen college cultures where demeaning and violent behaviour is normalised."

"It's disgraceful that we're in a situation where nobody is effectively holding universities accountable for compromising student wellbeing. Even the national higher education regulator doesn't have the powers to effectively deal with this issue." she added.

"Minister Tehan's lack of action means that we're heading towards a new academic year, when hundreds of thousands of new students will arrive on campus, whilst there are still ongoing issues with many universities and residences failing to do enough to prevent and improve responses to rape on campus." said Kate Crossin, Women's Officer at the National Union of Students.

"We're heading into another academic year with no federal government intervention to address the biggest safety risk on our campuses." she added.

"Former Minister Birmingham demonstrated the kind of thoughtful engagement and commitment to action we expect and deserve from an Education Minister on this issue. For Minister Tehan to fail to deliver this urgently needed accountability and safety mechanism, despite having months to do so is appalling - and a total failure in his responsibility as Minister to act for student safety." Ms Carr added.

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