



Designing for informal services: a participatory approach to prevent sexual violence within a university

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Abstract

Universities, alongside many other public and private organisations, are beginning to grapple with the issue of preventing sexual violence and providing effective services to survivors within their context. This article describes a unique participatory design-research project conducted to better understand staff and student perspectives of sexual violence within a university and how to better design services. One of the key findings of this research was the general distrust of formal services and reliance on informal services provided by both the organisation's staff (employees) and students (users or customers). This provides unique insights into designing services for challenging social issues within an organisation and raises key questions about how service design can better support informal services and the co-production of services by employees and users.

Keywords: informal services, informal networks, co-production of services, value co-creation, preventing sexual violence, university service design.

Introduction

The prevalence of sexual violence including in university settings

The issue of sexual assault and sexual harassment (broadly referred to as sexual violence) has come into the spotlight as a broad societal issue as survivors began to publicly speak out following the #MeToo movement, which was founded in 2006 (Me too, 2019) and gained momentum as a viral campaign in 2017 (Bennett, 2017). Young people, particularly women between the ages of 18 and 24, are at increased risk of experiencing sexual violence within our community (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). This means that universities that cater for this cohort play an important role in ensuring safe environments and establishing social norms and practices where sexual violence is not accepted.

In 2016, the Australia Human Rights Commission conducted a national survey of students to understand the nature, prevalence and reporting of sexual violence at the request by Universities Australia (Australian Human Rights Centre, 2017). Following a response from more than 30,000 university students across Australia, the resulting Change the Course report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) concluded that sexual violence is far too prevalent in university settings, there is significant underreporting and universities need to do more to prevent and respond to these issues.

The Change the Course report, along with multiple other reports from student unions, activists and academics, contain recommendations for Australian universities to better understand and prevent sexual violence in their contexts. These focus on the development of appropriate services comprising proactive education and communication campaigns to help people understand and prevent sexual violence (known as primary prevention) or response services focussed on university counselling services and reporting mechanisms that support survivors and hold perpetrators to account (known as tertiary prevention). Universities Australia initiated a campaign named Respect.Now.Always to encourage the prevention of sexual violence that Australian universities are also implementing.

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UTS participatory design research and the importance of informal services

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) along with many other universities, established a senior working group as part of its local *Respect.Now.Always* campaign to examine its existing prevention and response services and look at how these could be improved. In late 2017, UTS took an additional step of engaging the UTS Design Innovation Research Centre (DIRC) to conduct research to gain a deeper understanding of first the student and then the staff experiences around sexual violence within their organisational context to better inform the design of services. DIRC are now moving into a phase of more deliberate co-design or co-production of services with these staff and students.

One of the key findings emerging from this comprehensive research project was the general distrust of formal support and reporting services, and an alternative reliance on informal support services. This informal support generally takes the form of conversations with trusted staff and students who are not in recognised support positions, who a student or staff member would seek out to disclose an incident of sexual harassment or assault and to ask advice. This ‘informal support person’ or ‘first responder’ may then assist the student or staff member to engage with formal university services.

Understanding organisational services

Organisations provide services both internally (through leadership, training, rewards and penalties to its staff) and externally (as products and services to its customers or users) (Bowers and Martin, 2007).

Organisations tend to focus their efforts on the design of these services when they are explicit – intentional, visible and with a clear service provider and service recipient. I use the term ‘formal services’ to define these types of services within this paper, drawing on the culture change and service design definitions below. This contrasts ‘informal services’ which are taken to mean unintentional, less visible services where there is no clear provider or recipient.

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Formal and informal networks

Culture-change specialists, particularly those who embrace the complex nature of organisations, describe two levels of structure where services are performed within organisations. This comprises the formal or legitimate network which is designed by those in authority to create predictable, regular patterns of behaviour and collaboration to achieve the organisation's functions (Stacey, 1996; Bryan et al., 2007). Alongside this is a more spontaneous informal structure that arises when people within the organisation exert free will and choose whether to follow formal rules or enact their own way of doing things (Stacey, 1996). Blackhall and Pearl (2019) elaborate that informal networks are comprised of trusted peers with high emotional intelligence (not necessarily senior leaders or experts) and that they have a high degree of influence on the organisation's culture and behaviour. Informal networks may go by names such as peer groups or communities of practice or may not be explicitly recognised at all (Bryan et al., 2007).

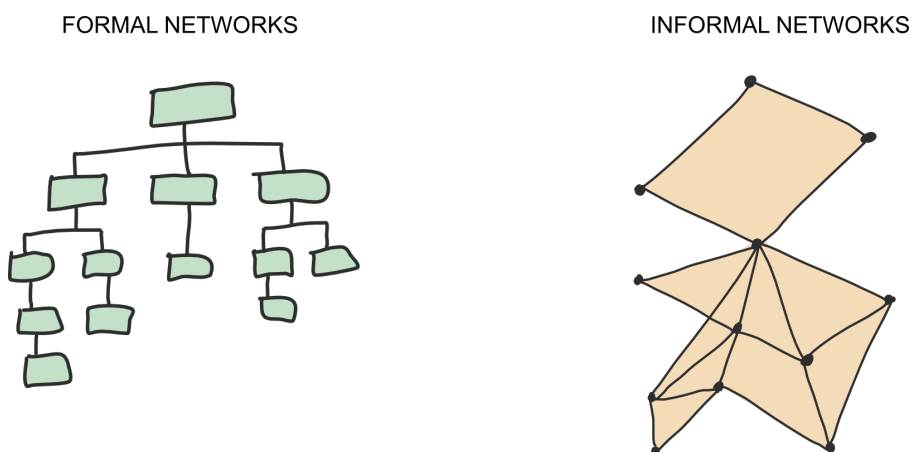


Figure 1: Visualisation of formal networks compared to informal networks within organisations, adapted from Bryan et al 2007

Co-production of service

The emerging field of service design also highlights a powerful shift in perspective when it comes to formal and informal services. The traditional and still-dominant institutional theory frames services as a transactional exchange where a proactive service provider develops and delivers a service to meet the needs of a passive consumer (Kimbell, 2014; Lusch &

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Vargo, 2014). This is equitable to the idea of 'formal services' which are intentional, visible and resourced within an organisation. Service design authors (including Kimbell, 2014; Lusch & Vargo, 2014; and Sangiorgi, 2011) content this limited view by highlighting that people (actors) continually seek out resources and capacities through personal and community connections, public services and private companies to resolve issues and create wellbeing in their own lives. In this model, the value of a service is not defined at its consumption, but is co-produced through the resources and capacities of actors over time. This is equitable to the idea of 'informal services' which could be between any actors, at any time and will not necessarily be visible or controlled by an organisation. Sangiorgi (2011) highlights how this service logic calls into question the roles of service-provider employees and their customers, users and citizens when all actors are co-producing value.

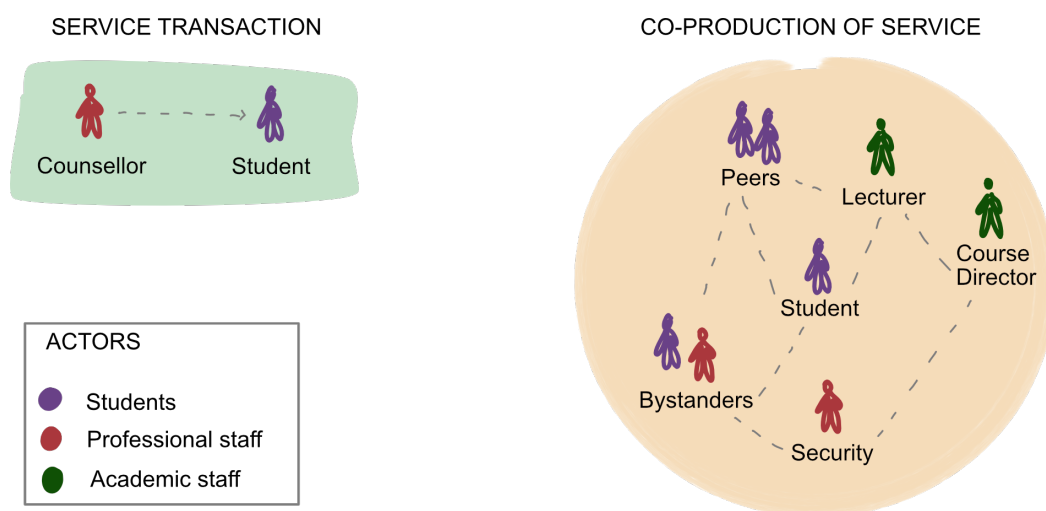


Figure 2: Different perspectives of providing 'emotional support' services following an incident of sexual assault or sexual harassment at a university

Implications of informal co-production of service

Reconceiving the idea of service in organisations and the importance of informal services highlights a number of implications for the actors, organisations, and design of services.

Providing human-to-human services involves significant exposure to emotions, specifically in such a sensitive context as sexual violence

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response. Lara Penin (2018) highlights how emotional labour, or psychological effort of service workers, is often invisible and can implicate women more predominantly due to prevailing gender roles and expectations. Without sufficient recognition and support, the burden of emotional labour can significantly impact the actor and have flow on effects to the broader organisation.

When many actors within an organisation co-create a service, this impacts factors that an organisation may perceive are within the control of the formal system, such as organisational reputation and trust. As Zeithaml et al (1985) emphasise, the nature of an interaction between an individual employee (or actor co-creating a service) will still be taken to represent the nature of the broader organisation itself by the actor experiencing the service. This means that organisations need to consider how to design conditions, structures and support to facilitate valuable informal services that build factors like organisational trust.

Designing services within organisations where there is a high level of co-production amongst actors also requires specific and more developed skills for the designer. This includes involving actors in broader participatory or co-design processes so that they can provide input into the design of services that they are implicated by, and a greater focus on the design of relationships and interactions between actors within informal networks (Carla and Manzini, 2009; Sangiorgi, 2011). Sangiorgi (2011) argues that this type of design requires designers to expand their skills and knowledge towards theories of human behaviour and organisational culture to be able to make effective, ethical and empowering interventions.

This paper will now briefly summarise the research conducted as part of UTS' Respect.Now.Always program by the DIRC. It will highlight key results that relate to the participation in formal and informal services that contribute to our understanding of how to design for these types of organisational services.

Research methods

DIRC conducted its research throughout the engagement of the Respect.Now.Always program, which comprised of two main design

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projects. This research combined social research methodology including desktop research and interviews (Gomm, 2004) with participatory design research, including activities at community engagement events and co-design workshops (Spinuzzi, 2005). Participatory design research provided more opportunities to elicit tacit or invisible perspectives from participants and to increase the focus on action from both the researchers and the participants, through utilising results directly improve experience within the UTS community (Spinuzzi, 2005).

1. The Student Voice project

The research objective of this project was to understand the student experience in relation sexual assault and sexual harassment to better inform the design of UTS' services and campaigns.

Research methods included:

- Desktop research to understand the general background of sexual violence prevention within the university
- 13 semi-structured one-hour interviews with students, recruited through online media and including various service prototypes to elicit responses
- Interactive research activities held at UTS Respect.Now.Always community engagement stalls during orientation to introduce new students to the program. These stalls involved staff and student volunteers and several thousand student participants (attractors included free ice-cream and merchandise as part of the 'wanna spoon, ask first' campaign)
- A co-design workshop with staff and students to interrogate research findings.

Overall, nearly 3000 students and 200 staff participated in the Student Voice project – the majority through light-touch participation at the community engagement stalls, and a smaller group through more intensive interviews and workshop activities.

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2. Strategic Framework project

This project focussed more broadly on understanding UTS' community recommendations to generate more sustainable cultural change to prevent sexual violence and to understand the experience of staff as key actors within the service system.

Research methods included:

- Desktop research to better understand the nature of sexual violence and cultural change theories to contribute to its prevention
- 25 semi-structured interviews with staff and student leaders
- Interactive research activities held at community engagement stalls during orientation including volunteers and several thousand participants
- A co-design workshop with staff and students to interrogate research findings and develop opportunities for cultural intervention.

Overall more than 2000 students and 200 staff participated in the Strategic Framework project – the majority through light-touch participation at the community engagement stalls and with some repeat participants from the earlier project.

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Figure 3: Students lining up to attend a community engagement stall at student orientation

Figure 4: A DIRC researcher engaging a student in an interactive research activity

Figure 5: UTS staff and students identifying opportunities for intervention in a co-design workshop

Data analysis

The research data was first analysed by the design team using a physical (post-it note) analysis to identify broad themes which were tested for validity with broader stakeholders in the co-design workshops. The research data was then interrogated more deeply by the research team and one senior academic external to the project, through a full grounded theory analysis. This identified and coded relevant perspectives and statements from the interview data, ultimately coding over 500 illustrative quotes using a database spreadsheet to further develop the findings. These findings were further compared with insights resulting from the

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participatory design research activities to create a comprehensive understanding of both the community experience around sexual violence, and their recommendations for change. The full results of this study are published in [UTS' Respect.Now.Always Strategic Framework report](#).

Results

Distrust of formal systems

A key paradox emerged in the findings: that although the AHRC recommendations to the issue of sexual violence and initial responses from UTS focussed on the improvement and increased awareness of formal services (counselling and reporting processes), students and staff are wary and distrustful of these services. While some of these views appeared to be based on direct experience (such as long wait times between making a report and receiving a response), other were based on perceived narratives which may include the often-negative treatment of survivors in public media and court cases, e.g.

“We know the penalties for victimisation are stronger than the penalty sometimes for the original complaint.” [Female fixed-term professional senior staff member]

“The culture of silence is not actually a culture of silence, most people, although they do not formally report, do informally report and have discussions with people, most of whom discourage them from taking formal action.” [Female fixed-term academic staff member]

This aligns with literature on organisational trust, where expectations of an organisation's behaviour are based on perceived levels of competence, benevolence, integrity and predictability and this perception may take time to shift through new behaviours which would need to be consistently performed (Dietz and Hartog 2006).

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Reliance on informal systems

Although there was a reluctance to immediately engage with formal systems, there was strong evidence of staff and students seeking support through trusted peers, teachers and colleagues. For example:

“I will get help from some of my friends...Some other sources other than just going through the formal way of launching a complaint ...and all the other protocols that go with it... I think opening up to them would be more comfortable.” [Male international master’s student]

“I need something which says, “When a student discloses a sexual assault to you in the middle of the class this is what you need to do”. Because that happens to me a lot...[Female academic staff member]

It is also clear that informal support is preferable to many people because of the frequency that women experience low-level sexism or sexual harassment and the lack of clarity about what constitutes sexual violence perceived to be ‘serious enough’ to seek formal support.

“...you almost feel like you have to have the worst of the worst case to want to access the services, a lot of people feel that way I think...I think you can have this internalised attitude that like, ‘Okay, I’m fine. It’s not the worst, I’ll get through it, I don’t need to access the services.” [Female PhD student]

As part of the Student Voice research project, we also conveyed some of the stories we heard of support-seeking through trusted staff and students in anonymised journey maps which helped the project stakeholders better understand these experiences. One of the journey maps (shown below) conveys a PhD student seeking advice from an academic staff member and friend before seeking support from UTS’ formal counselling service.

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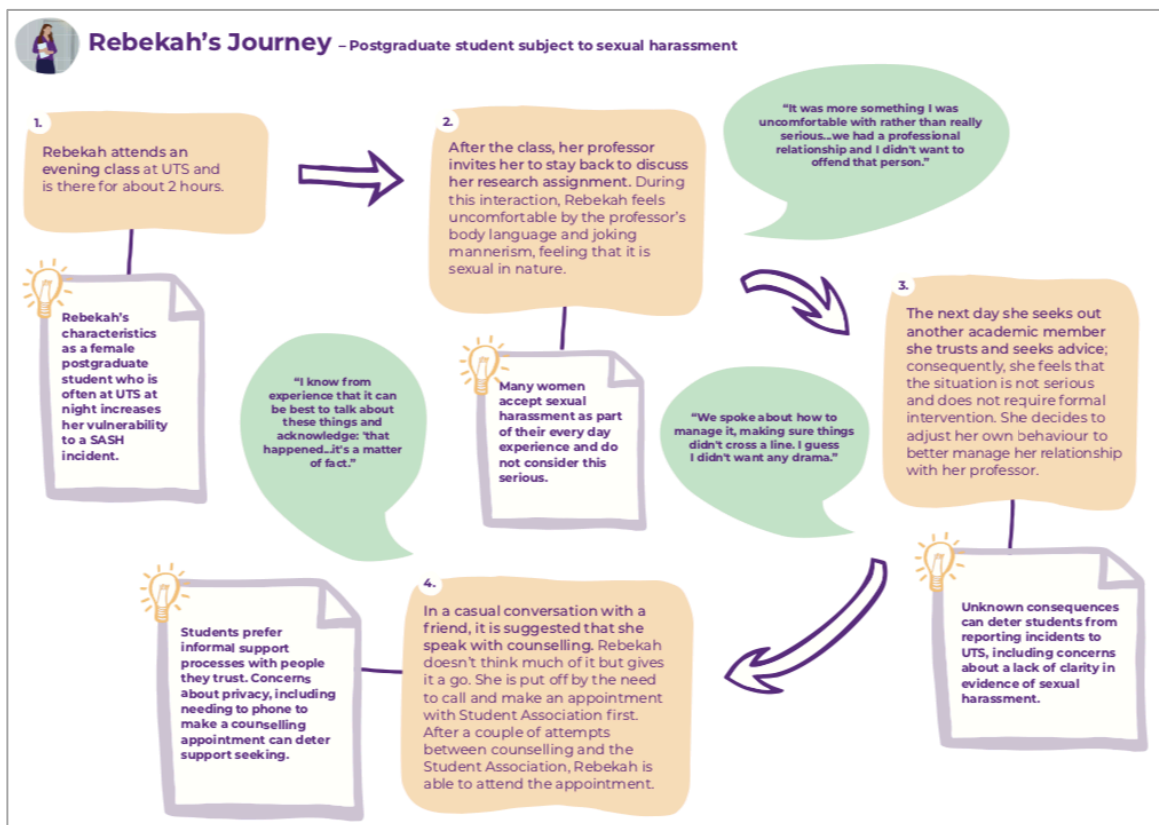


Figure 6: Student Voice project journey map

Individual agency in informal services

UTS responded to the AHRC report with a number of enhanced policies and controls, including mandatory reporting when staff receive disclosures of sexual violence. DIRC's research findings also indicated instances where staff utilised individual agency within an informal network to provide value they deemed most appropriate to the situation, even though this may have been differed from organisational policy (or formal service guidelines). E.g.

"I probably was meant to tell my boss, was meant to go up the line, but I just needed an intervention here straight away and I don't care really about the policy. I needed to intervene and I think we need to have permission to do that if it's necessary." [Female academic staff member]

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This implies the need to understand the motivations, attitudes and capacities of people providing informal services and design with these in mind, as only designing through control mechanisms will not necessarily achieve the intended outcomes.

Personal consequences to people providing invisible services

Many of the people (particularly student-facing staff) who we spoke to reported instances of providing informal support to students or other staff members, and although they were generally willing to offer this, they identified personal consequences including increased time and effort in addition to core job responsibilities.

“I make myself available I say until 10 p.m. at night if you need me. Weekends as well, if you need me, I will answer my phone. I may be asleep after that but if you need me you can ring me. I just think if I’m presenting and supporting [subject matter that may raise emotional responses] I have to be available.” [Female academic staff member]

Providing these kinds of services becomes invisible emotional labour (Penin, 2018) that often fall to women, and those who meet the characteristics of being trusted peers with high emotional intelligence that form our informal networks (Blackhall and Pearl, 2019). If this level of co-production of services by staff and students is not recognised and rewarded by those managing the formal systems, this additional labour may impact individual wellbeing performance, progression and the ability for the organisation to maintain a productive and vibrant community (Penin, 2018).

Designing and training for co-production of services

Staff frequently identified the need for more support to be able to deal with potential disclosures of sexual violence, particularly if informal support seeking increases through messaging in the Respect.Now.Always program.

“I am not aware of any support particularly for staff. I mean, we have information sheets and online training and things, but I think that they do not do all the work to support staff”. [Female, academic, permanent staff member]

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Accepting that staff and students perform an important support service also means accepting and designing for risks around this service, including that these people need to have the skills and competency to adequately respond, as well as being able to care for their own wellbeing. In addition, as highlighted by Sangiorgi (2011), if stakeholders become co-producers of services, they should also be part of the design of these services.

Conclusion

This case study provides a tangible example of the challenges of designing services to address complex social issues within organisations. It highlights the importance of informal services and the challenges that arise when services are co-produced by diverse actors who may face emotional burden and need increased recognition and support. It highlights the need for designers to carefully consider how service is performed within an organisation, and to include actors who provide less visible services in the design processes. It also highlights the need for designers to increase their knowledge and skills in the areas of relationships and culture change in order to effectively influence they spontaneous yet influential aspects of service.

In current phases of the Respect.Now.Always program, DIRC are working with actors to co-design and implement change, including specifically working with the identified informal support networks. Future research may include questions such as how to improve the trust of formal systems which are still necessary but are negatively influenced by broader distrust around the treatment of sexual violence survivors and how to create more effective interfaces between formal and informal support services to ensure that survivors get the support they need.

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