

Sexual Health Without Borders: Partnering with Universities to Support International Student Health Equity

Authors:

ANNA DANYUSHEVSKY¹, BELINDA MEGGITT², ELISSA MAGNER², SARAH SMITH², PRIYADI PRIHASWAN², ROCHELLE AVASALU³

¹*Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Services, South Eastern Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia*, ²*UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia*, ³*NSW STI Programs Unit, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia*

Background/Purpose:

International students are a priority population in the Fifth National Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Strategy 2024-2030 due to experiencing higher rates of STIs and unplanned pregnancies. In 2023, UNSW Sydney had over 27,500 international students, representing a large community of young people facing language and cultural barriers, limited health literacy, and stigma. The current NSW STI Strategy confirms universities are a vital setting for accessing sexual health support and education.

Approach:

In 2020, the UNSW Health Promotion Unit (HPU), the Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Service in South Eastern Sydney Local Health District (SESLHD) and the NSW STI Programs Unit partnered to develop *Peers Advocating for Sexual Health (PASH)*, a peer education program training students in STI prevention, testing and treatment pathways. Comprising of domestic and international students, PASH peers conduct outreach education, support the annual “SEXtember” events, and promote the use of the UNSW Health Service.

Outcomes/Impact:

Over five years, PASH has engaged more than 18,000 students and completed over 1500 STI tests, helping to reduce stigma and improve health literacy through in-language conversations about sexual health. Student feedback highlights the effectiveness of peer-led initiatives in creating trusted pathways to normalise STI testing among international students. Insights from the program have informed targeted strategies for overseas-born gay and bisexual men who have sex with men, including the promotion of discreet self-testing options on campus.

Innovation and Significance:

The ongoing partnership between SESLHD and UNSW HPU demonstrates how universities can strengthen sexual health literacy and STI prevention for young people facing barriers to care. Embedding co-designed and remunerated peer education within university settings reduces strain on public health services and expands testing access. Sustained collaboration between health districts and universities is essential to achieving STI reduction targets and advancing equity in youth health and wellbeing.

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