

Re-defining sex education: Addressing the wants and needs of young people in Australia

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Introduction

Relationship and sexuality education (RSE) in Australia varies across states and schools, often lacking consistency. While most students receive RSE, many find it inadequate or irrelevant. This analysis explores gaps in inclusivity, content coverage, and student engagement.

Methods

A total of 3,288 students aged 14–18 participated in the 2024 Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health. Measures included demographic data, receipt of RSE, perceived relevance, and topics covered. Logistic regression analyses identified factors influencing perceived relevance.

Results

Participants attended government (62%), Catholic (18%), and Independent (20%) schools. While 92% had received RSE, yet only 47% found it relevant. LGBTQ+ students reported feeling underrepresented due to heteronormative content. Students described a narrow focus on biology, with limited openness and engagement on topics of interest. Digital consent, pornography, and online relationships were underexplored despite their significance. Logistic regression revealed that topics such as technology, how to have sex, contraception, and diversity were associated with higher perceived relevance, whereas puberty, condom use, respectful relationships, and sexual consent were not. Students who were asked about topics of interest were 1.63 times more likely to find RSE relevant ($p < .001$). More years of RSE were associated with higher perceived relevance ($p < .001$).

Conclusion

Despite the widespread delivery of RSE, gaps in inclusivity, content coverage, and student engagement remain. Addressing these concerns by incorporating topics requested by students and expanding the curriculum to cover diverse sexual orientations, relationship dynamics, and topics that affect young people could enhance its relevance. A more inclusive and comprehensive approach to RSE would better equip young people with the essential knowledge and skills needed for their sexual health and relationships.

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