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## 'We were so close': Education Minister shelves sexual assault taskforce for universities



By [Michael Koziol](#)

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Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan has shelved a planned taskforce that would scrutinise university responses to sexual assault and harassment on campus.

Correspondence seen by Fairfax Media reveals the previous minister, Simon Birmingham, was "so close" to announcing the taskforce before the coup against Malcolm Turnbull and the subsequent cabinet reshuffle.



Education Minister Dan Tehan says he will wait for a review before deciding whether to proceed with the taskforce. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

Activists had pushed for the new body as a way to hold universities accountable following reports of ongoing sexual assault, harassment and humiliating hazing rituals at residential colleges.

Mr Tehan has not dumped the idea entirely but says he will wait for a report from the regulator - the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency - before deciding whether to proceed.

Sharna Bremner, founding director of End Rape on Campus, said she had been "discussing dates" with the government to announce the taskforce before the leadership change in August.

"It's really disappointing that it feels like the federal government has effectively walked away from this issue," she said.

"We're incredibly concerned for the new intake of students who will be stuck in the same position that students have been stuck in for the last 50 years."

Email shown to Fairfax Media show Senator Birmingham had prepared a terms of reference and selected members for the taskforce.



Former education minister Simon Birmingham had prepared the terms of reference for the taskforce. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

In an email titled "Plus ca change..." sent on September 14, Senator Birmingham's then higher education adviser Darren Brown told advocates: "We were so close ... I have briefed the office, including Minister Tehan's [chief of staff], on where things were up to before recent developments and have passed on relevant documentation including the [terms of reference] and proposed composition of the taskforce."

Advocates met with Mr Tehan's advisers a few days later but were left disappointed, and said the minister has not responded to their subsequent inquiries.

Mr Tehan has instead prioritised an inquiry into freedom of speech at universities, tasking former High Court chief justice Robert French to conduct a review of policies to uphold free expression.

The inquiry was largely triggered by an incident at the University of Sydney in September when author Bettina Arndt - a vocal critic of what she calls the "myth" of a rape crisis on campus - clashed with left-wing activists protesting her appearance at a student-run event.

Mr Tehan rang Arndt after the incident and expressed sympathy with her plight. Ms Bremner said it was "incredibly disappointing that the minister would act so quickly on something like freedom of speech on campus but would walk away from students who are being raped on campus."

Mr Tehan did not respond to individual questions but told Fairfax Media: "TEQSA are reviewing higher education provider responses to incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment. I will make a decision about a taskforce once I have received TEQSA's review."

TEQSA is expected to hand the report to Mr Tehan by the end of the year or early next year, but it will be up to the minister whether it is released.

Other government sources suggested advocates had undermined their own cause by failing to agree on issues such as the composition of the taskforce during negotiations with the previous minister.

Senator Birmingham declined to comment.

Universities have pursued their own responses to sexual assault and harassment within their walls, but have also distanced themselves from colleges, which are run semi-independently.

St Paul's College at the University of Sydney, for example, is governed by its own act of parliament. Earlier this year [its new head Don Markwell apologised for past misconduct](#) and declared a "new era" of equality and respect for women. The NSW government also passed new governance measures for the college this month.



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