

# Findings from a national study to investigate how British universities are challenging sexual violence and harassment on campus

Professor Khatidja Chantler, Professor Catherine Donovan, Dr Rachel Fenton and Dr Kelly Bracewell

## Introduction

The Universities UK Taskforce published its report on tackling violence against women, hate crime and harassment in UK universities in 2016 (UUK, 2016). The UUK report identified seven key components for change (UUK, 2016: p59):

1. A commitment from senior leadership;
2. Ensuring an institution-wide approach;
3. Prevention of incidents;
4. Enabling an effective response;
5. Managing situations where students have committed an offence;
6. Sharing of good practice; and
7. Assessment of support needed with regards to online harassment.

Many universities in England and Wales received HEFCE funding to tackle the violence against women (VAWG) work stream forward. Our study investigates the future sustainability of such initiatives.

## Aims

Against this backdrop our study focuses on sexual violence and harassment with the following aims:

- To establish what has been achieved since the UUK (2016) report to move the agenda forward in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs);
- To explore the barriers and facilitators to implementing the UUK (2016) recommendations;
- To identify examples of good practice;
- To recommend ways to further the agenda.

We enquired about how university processes are being navigated by university staff and the current state of play at universities to promote the UUK agenda, focusing on sexual violence and harassment (henceforth SV) in universities.

## Who took part?

134 university staff participated in the survey\*.  
25 staff participated in telephone interviews.



Not all respondents answered all survey questions, and the 'n' figure indicates this.

90% of survey respondents were women.

78 survey respondents told us which universities they worked at: 54 universities were named across England, Wales and Scotland: 54% were pre-1992 universities and 42% were post-1992 universities.



30% indicated that personal interest was a reason for their involvement in tackling this agenda

\*The survey invited both qualitative and quantitative responses. This included the use of multiple choice answers and so both number of responses and respondents will be indicated where necessary.

## What Activities Are Being Carried Out?

Respondents were engaged with a range of activities to address the sexual violence and harassment agenda: the development of policies to regulate behaviour; reporting and monitoring systems; specific campaigns and interventions targeted at all students; responses and support for survivors; awareness training and disclosure training for staff; and partnership with external experts.

Specific interventions included preventative work focusing on sexual consent, being an active bystander based on either the PHE/UWE (Fenton et al, 2014) model or another model. Of those providing an active bystander intervention, most had adapted the PHE/UWE model to make it shorter, the next largest group had adopted the PHE/UWE model substantially as published, others had adapted it using other material. A small group had adapted it to be online. A very small proportion had used other (usually non-UK) active bystander models that exist.

## What stage are institutions at?

Out of 78 survey respondents:

- 11 indicated that they were either right at the start of developing the agenda at their institution;
- 28 explained that they were some way along with the agenda but had not yet had a review of their work or identified next steps;
- 10 had a strategy and working group but were yet to launch any interventions.

Others were more unsure: *I don't even think we're at the first stage listed...There has been a 'task and finish' group but I'm not sure what that achieved - probably reviewed some policies.* (Survey Respondent)

Interview participants explained that institutions do not have a specific SV policy (n=13) and some policies were cited as being inappropriate or ineffective (n=17).

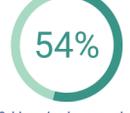
Only 16 survey respondents indicated that there had been one review at their institution.

Key individuals were seen to drive the agenda forward rather than institutional commitment.

*'[we] spent about two years putting together the policy and prevention... took a lot of time to get that written, approved and get input and everything'* (Interview Participant 22, Student Support Staff)

*'We did have guidelines about bullying and harassment...however... we do not currently have a very clear and robust policy about staff-student relationships, about sexual violence in particular.'* (Interview Participant 18, Student Support Staff)

## Research and Evaluation



Said academic research staff were involved

39 out of 72 survey respondents said that academic research staff with experience in the field had been involved with the development of the agenda. However, there was little evidence of academic research or rigorous data gathering to establish the impact or effectiveness of activities. This is unsurprising given the stage at which most participants indicated their institutions are at.

Whilst some academic research staff are involved (n=29) in research to underpin and/or to evaluate the impact of work being done, across the sector there is a mixed picture with student support services (n=33) and other non-academics (n=17) including student volunteers leading on data gathering for feedback.



173 survey responses from 71 respondents about the type of research or evaluation being carried out revealed that:

- The most common form of data gathering comes from an anonymous online reporting tool for those victimised by sexual violence (n=45);
- Relatively few prevalence surveys are being conducted to establish baseline data (n=31);
- Universities are relying on feedback from student respondents about interventions and self-reported learning objectives (n=35);

This may be due to student services leading on interventions and evaluation rather than academic staff.



18 out of 61 survey respondents reported that their institutions are conducting research comparing before/after responses to interventions and only 9 indicated that there is research looking at impacts into the longer term at 3 and 6 months.

## Factors Supporting Development of the Agenda

- Senior Executive buy-in and support to promote engagement of the whole institution; and to address/pre-empt fears about reputational risk;
- Appropriate resources (e.g. funding and dedicated staff, staff time);
- Partnership working between student services, Student's Union and academic staff;
- Partnership working with key stakeholders external to the university;
- Academic staff involvement with research and evaluation;
- Training and support for key staff/ stakeholders in the university.

The role of champions who have promoted the agenda emerged as a key catalyst of change, whether as part of their work remit or not.

The importance of a whole institution approach encompassing external partners, staff and the Students Union was stressed in interviews and survey responses:

*'Linking with local services and charities to help promote the support available for sexual violence victims such as: The local SARC Rape Crisis, Refuges, ISVA services, SAFE network for Young People, Victims First, Victims Support, the local GUM clinic. Linking with the local police and promoting their campaigns, creating referral networks internally and externally to support from within and outside the university. Working closely with the SU to promote the agenda. Educating staff on the prevalence of the SV issue and how to respond to disclosures. Setting up a support service for students who are affected by SV, ensuring they continue to feel empowered to study here, despite previous circumstances. Promoting the idea that we do everything we can to believe and support victims. Raising awareness within the SMT and gaining their acknowledgement of the need to do more in this area to support students and to prevent (minimise) incidents of SV.'* (Survey Respondent)

## Challenges Encountered in Promoting the Agenda

Out of 68 survey respondents only 17 indicated that they had met no challenges at their institutions.

Two key challenges were identified throughout the survey and interviews: institutional resistance and lack of resources.

### Lack of Resources

37 out of 68 survey respondents indicated that their institution was verbally supportive but had not committed any or sufficient resources (money, staff time etc) to realise it.

*'We did have a team, but due to the restructure... a lot of staff did not have the time to commit... there is a fear that we are not going to be able to handle the sexual violence reports with that team'* (Interview Participant 1, Student Support Staff)

### Institutional Resistance

Out of 68 survey respondents:

- 33 said their institution either worried about the reputational risks of pursuing the agenda or feared that by pursuing it students might be disproportionately worried;
- 24 indicated that their institutions had either ignored the agenda, refused to believe it was a problem at their institution or did not see it as a priority agenda for their institution;
- 16 said they had experienced problems getting senior enough buy-in to promote the agenda;
- 7 said they had experienced barriers from ethics committees in conducting research for the agenda.

*'There is also a lack of joined up thinking at senior levels, with some DVC and other senior staff very supportive, but others appear to be more concerned with institutional reputation and potential distress to students.'* (Survey Respondent)

### Sustainability Beyond HEFCE Catalyst Funding

41 (out of 60) survey respondents said their institution had received HEFCE funding.

- 6 respondents said that the end of HEFCE Catalyst Funding would not pose a problem for sustaining the agenda at their institution.
- 12 reported that there would be a problem with sustainability without HEFCE funding.
- 23 said there might be a problem and this depended on decisions being made to mainstream the funding and/or other resources initially provided by HEFCE Catalyst funding.



*'it may be a challenge to keep the project sustainable without the role being in place any more. However, having the person in post at the start of the project meant that certain areas are now established, and this is helpful in now moving the project forward'* (Survey Respondent)

## Accountability and Mandatory Legal Duty to Prevent an Respond Effectively



Said yes - the OfS should be accountable to the Government for implementing the UUK SV agenda (n=60)



Said yes - universities should be accountable for implementation of the UUK SV agenda (n=64)

*'...if it was mandatory, that's when it falls from almost a campaign into something that legally has to be done. I think saying something has to be done, it must be done; if you say that to a senior member of staff, they know it is required, it is not something that is just an add-on. So, yes, I think making it mandatory is a good idea.'* (Interview Participant 17, Student Support Staff)

A Kite Mark was the most popular device for embedding accountability (n=45 out of 99 responses), followed by a measure/indicator in the league tables (n=27 out of 99 responses)



58 out of 68 survey respondents said either yes or maybe they would like to see a mandatory legal duty on universities to prevent and respond effectively to SV

Responsibility for UUK SV Agenda being in the role profile of senior executives of a University was most often reported as a way of demonstrating implementation of the UUK SV agenda.

*'There is still a hesitation by a number of senior staff to meaningfully respond to SV as its 'difficult' or 'uncomfortable'. However, this could be worked around if there was a mandatory legal duty, in such a way as to enforce a duty of care to our students'* (Survey Respondent)

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The interest in the survey and willingness to be interviewed demonstrates a great deal of positive commitment to addressing SV at universities. There are a number of examples of good practice, but overall there are significant barriers in moving the SV agenda forward. These are:

- Institutional fears of reputational risk that prevent universities from embedding this agenda into their core activities, including research activities.
- A lack of senior management buy-in
- A lack of adequate and sustainable resourcing (including beyond HEFCE Catalyst funding).

Recommendations to address these barriers:

- Accountability of universities and the OfS are favoured, and may be a way to overcome institutional barriers, improve standardisation, strong leadership and governance;
- Legal duties may help to ensure more uniform progress across the key areas explored;
- Mandatory legal duties on universities to prevent and respond effectively to SV;
- Robust evaluations need to be carried out to ascertain the effectiveness of interventions and to develop evidence-based interventions.

Examples of best practice were found where universities acknowledged the extent of the problem and the gendered nature of SV and adopted a whole institution approach. This included specific policies and strategies to address and respond to SV in multiple ways and attention beyond student-to-student SV.

An institutional audit tool based on our findings is provided as a method of promoting the development of best practice.

### References:

Fenton, R.A., Mott, H.L., McCartan, K. and Rumney, P.N.S. (2014) *The Intervention Initiative*. Available at: <https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/research/interventioninitiative/>

Universities UK Taskforce (2016) *Changing the Culture*. Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining VAW, harassment and hate crime affecting university students.

UUK.