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Challenging Behaviour? Approaches to Addressing Sexual Misconduct in Academia

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As part of wider governmental calls to [end violence against women and girls](#) (VAWG), accelerated levels of [awareness and response to sexual misconduct](#) have emerged across UK educational settings. Sexual misconduct ranges from harassment through to violence, and can variously involve pupils, students, faculty members and other staff employed in institutions.

This issue permeates the education sector. The [Women and Equalities Committee inquiry](#) demonstrated the high levels of sexual harassment and violence experienced by school-aged children in England. The report also critiqued the unsatisfactory guidance and support for teachers which resulted in inconsistent responses to sexual misconduct across schools. Similar issues were laid bare on the website '[Everyone's Invited](#)' which was inundated with pupil testimonials of sexual misconduct, resulting in an [Ofsted review](#) detailing inadequate responses to sexual abuse in schools and colleges.

The need to address sexual misconduct at the higher education level was demonstrated in the [NUS Hidden Marks](#) report, which detailed concerning levels of sexual misconduct among students. As the NUS spearheaded activism and calls for policy development, several high-profile sexual misconduct cases involving university students appeared in the British media. Their stories galvanised a greater focus on [exploring the link](#) between campus cultures and rates of sexual harassment.

Sexual Misconduct in HEIs

The Equality Act 2010 outlines provisions governing the legal duty on universities to prevent sexual harassment and violence. However, data released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) illustrated that, between 2018 and 2020, students in England and Wales were [over three times more likely](#) than average to have experienced sexual assault.

Student sexual victimisation has gained traction in the mainstream media. [A BBC investigation](#) found 1,436 allegations of sexual harassment or sexual violence against students recorded in 2018 alone. Few of the responding universities cited having robust systems to prevent or respond to sexual violence, and some victims found it hard to report incidents and were retraumatised by poor systems and support.

As media attention grew, it became clear that the government and universities across the UK were failing to address sexual harassment in HEIs in a robust or appropriate manner. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), an independent student complaints reviewer, confirmed that sexual harassment was an issue of concern, having received a '[small but steady](#)' number of complaints about the handling of sexual harassment cases by universities. A [later OIA report](#) acknowledged the gradual rise in student complaints regarding sexual harassment or misconduct and that some providers were '[developing information and guidance for staff and students](#)'.

The Universities UK Taskforce had national oversight of these institutional developments. In 2016, when the Home Office published its [updated VAWG strategy](#), it referred to the role of the UUK Taskforce in improving the effectiveness of both prevention and response to domestic abuse, sexual violence, and hate crime incidents in higher education.

Across the UK, 63 institutions had [received matched funding](#) of up to £50,000 as part of the £2.45m in Catalyst safeguarding funding released in 2015/16 to facilitate and support institutional change. The resulting [consolidation reports](#) (2018/19) detailed case studies of the approaches, initiatives, and interventions taken by award recipients to tackle misconduct, demonstrating the considerable variability in approach across the sector. More importantly, concerns were raised about the institutional sustainability of such activities without external regulation or financial support.

Beyond Student Sexual Misconduct

Much of the focus thus far has been on student-student sexual misconduct, with far less attention paid to other variations involving wider university personnel. A [NUS/1752 Group](#) report exploring students' experiences of staff-perpetrated sexual misconduct demonstrated that four in ten of all respondents reported at least one experience of sexualised behaviour from staff, while one in eight reported being touched by a staff member in a way that made them uncomfortable.

Similarly, less focus has been paid to staff-on-staff sexual misconduct. Workplace victimisation was recently the focus of a UCU investigation. [The UCU report](#) detailed how one in ten university and college staff had experience of workplace sexual violence in the past five years and over half (52%) did not disclose or report this to their employer. The UCU study also discovered that 70% of those who directly experienced sexual violence described it as an ongoing pattern of behaviour rather than a one-off incident.

These variations are important to acknowledge if a holistic approach to addressing sexual misconduct is to have any impact across educational settings. Similarly, looking at the issue from a disciplinary perspective, learned societies have an important role to play. A recent [British Society of Criminology report](#) uncovered a range of obstacles facing members (criminologists) dealing (or confronted) with sexual misconduct. Respondents who anticipated student disclosures felt underqualified to respond effectively due to the patchy availability of specialist sexual misconduct training available in their institutions. The study also illustrated how some participants had personally experienced sexually inappropriate behaviour and/or sexual misconduct from faculty and/or students while on university premises, yet felt uncertain and hesitant to report incidents (or perpetrators) to their institutions.

Looking forward

In 2021, the Office for Students issued a revised [Statement of Expectations](#) which detailed how harassment and sexual misconduct should be prevented and addressed. When developing policies, procedures, and training for staff confronted with cases of student sexual misconduct, it is important that institutions seek out specialist input. In addition to resources provided by national charities such as Rape Crisis, several organisations (e.g., [The 1752 Group](#) and [Equally Safe in Higher Education](#)) have resources available to HEIs seeking to develop infrastructures targeting sexual misconduct.

Implementing initiatives is a useful starting point, but robust evaluations and assessments of these policies and activities are necessary to know what is / is not working. To assist with this, Dr Anna Bull, Dr Louise Livesey and I recently [published an open-access article](#) outlining our different experiences undertaking such work while reflecting on the institutional challenges we faced / overcame. I hope this will be a useful resource for others seeking to effect similar change in their institutions and thank the FSA for providing the space to share these insights.