

# **‘Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community’: An Account of Research in Progress.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides an account of the HEFCE funded 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project, which is based in the Student Wellbeing Centre at the University of Lincoln and is running between May 2017 and May 2018. The foundations for this project are rooted in the Universities UK report, 'Changing the Culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students' (2016). Universities UK published their 'Changing the Culture' report in October 2016 following a comprehensive review of evidence, and the report provides a series of recommendations to universities regarding the prevention of and appropriate response to sexual misconduct on university campuses. Our project, 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community', is based around three key recommendations from Universities UK (2016): ensuring a cross-institutional response to sexual misconduct on campus, developing an online reporting system with the option to report anonymously, and providing evidence-led bystander intervention education to all staff and students.

To date, the project has already designed and launched the online reporting system, and we will soon be releasing the online bystander intervention modules for all staff and students. Further to this, approximately 450 members of staff from across the University will shortly be receiving face to face bystander intervention training. Here, the rationale for each of these responses in relation to the recommendations made by Universities UK is discussed, as is their practical application within a University setting. Finally, the paper discusses the student sexual misconduct survey and focus groups which are being run at the University, and their intended use within the project outputs.

## **Introduction**

The Student Wellbeing Centre at the University of Lincoln was recently successful in gaining funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), to run a one year project looking at sexual misconduct on campus. The project, 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community', is running

between May 2017 and May 2018, and is largely a response to recommendations made by Universities UK in a report published in October 2016. The report, 'Changing the Culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students' (2016), provided in depth advice to universities based on a comprehensive review of evidence. Within it, Universities UK stressed the importance of taking a cross-institutional approach to challenging sexual misconduct on campus, with commitment from senior management being crucial to success. Recommendations made included enabling students to report sexual misconduct online with the option to remain anonymous, and embedding bystander intervention education across the institution. Both of these recommendations have or will shortly be fulfilled at the University of Lincoln, and are discussed below.

This paper will explore in more detail the nature and scale of sexual misconduct on University campuses in the UK, and how this translates into the reasoning behind and practical application of online reporting and bystander intervention education. Finally, there is discussion around ongoing research in the form of a student survey and focus groups, including how this data will influence the outputs of the 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project to help prevent sexual misconduct on campus, and to best support students who experience sexual misconduct whilst at University.

## **Project Background**

Over recent years, there has been growing attention to how university cultures are implicated in, and can be permissive of sexual misconduct. It has been argued that neoliberal values of individuality, competitiveness and consumerism are infiltrating and influencing students' social interactions, with the appearance of charts and competitions challenging students to have had the most sexual partners or to rate the attractiveness of other students, betraying a certain level of entitlement to other student bodies (Phipps and Young, 2015; Phipps and Young, 2015; NUS, 2012). Sexual misconduct on campus is further influenced by the strong links between university student communities and the night-time economy, with documented cases from various institutions across the UK linking sexual misconduct and alcohol

consumption, particularly in the context of 'laddish' behaviour during male sporting socials or initiations (for examples, see Phipps and Young, 2015; Phipps and Young, 2015; NUS, 2010; NUS, 2012; UUK, 2016). A survey by DrinkAware (2015) found that just over half of young women students had experienced sexual harassment during nights out, with half of those stating that it happened on the majority of or every night out. Similar statistics were also found in the NUS Hidden Marks research (NUS 2010; NUS, 2012; Phipps and Smith, 2012). Whilst sexual harassment in social venues differs from other incidents of sexual misconduct in that the perpetrators are less likely to be personally known to the victim (NUS, 2012; Phipps and Smith, 2012), the Hidden Marks research found that these incidents of sexual misconduct had some of the lowest rates of reporting, with students feeling that these incidents were not serious enough to report to their institutions or the Police (NUS, 2010; Phipps and Smiths, 2012; DrinkAware, 2015). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Universities UK have highlighted the importance of universities working with local bars and clubs to collaboratively challenge sexual harassment in these contexts (UUK, 2016). This is something that Lincolnshire as a county is already working towards, with a number of bars and clubs implementing Lincolnshire County Council's 'Ask for Angela' scheme (Lincolnshire County Council, 2016; Safer Communities Lincolnshire 2017), which allows individuals to request help leaving a venue discreetly by asking for 'Angela' at the bar.

Challenging sexual misconduct on university campuses is particularly pertinent due to student demographics. Whilst people of all genders and sexualities can and do experience sexual misconduct, research has shown that, as a group, young women are statistically more at risk. Data published by the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office for National Statistics (2013) showed that young women aged between 16 and 19 have the highest prevalence rate for experiencing sexual offences, and in 2016/17 just over one third of Rape Crisis users were aged 25 and under (Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2017). This translates onto university campuses, with research by the NUS (2010; Phipps and Smith, 2012) finding that 68% of women students had experienced sexual harassment whilst at University, with a further 7% having experienced a serious sexual assault. Despite these high percentages, sexual misconduct on campus remains largely underreported, with 43% of those who experienced a serious sexual assault never disclosing this to anyone (NUS, 2010).

Reporting incidents of sexual misconduct within university communities may be particularly challenging due to the fact that students will often live, study and socialise together (NUS, 2012; Phipps and Young, 2015), with perpetrators of serious sexual misconduct overwhelmingly being male students from the same University, who are previously known to the victim (NUS, 2010; NUS, 2012). Students who experience sexual misconduct may be reluctant to report in case other students discover what has happened, or they may even not want the student perpetrator to be negatively affected by an allegation (NUS, 2010). All of these barriers to reporting must be considered by universities when developing prevention and response mechanisms to sexual misconduct on campus.

### **Developments to Date**

As expressed in the Universities UK (2016) 'Changing the Culture' report, it is important that universities take a two stranded approach to tackling sexual misconduct on campus, covering both prevention and response. Within the 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project we have worked to ensure that both of these requirements are met; however, the project has had more of a focus on the prevention aspect owing to the already well developed response mechanisms within the Student Wellbeing Centre. Rather than needing to develop new responses, more emphasis has been placed on better promotion of current response mechanisms within the student community and local specialist agencies, so that students are aware of the support that can be offered by the Student Wellbeing Centre. This said, there has been an important addition to the response mechanisms in terms of the ways in which students can report sexual misconduct to the Student Wellbeing Centre, with the development of online reporting being a key activity within the project.

Amongst their recommendations, Universities UK advised that online reporting systems be made available to students, with the option to submit reports anonymously (UUK, 2016). Here at the University of Lincoln, it was felt that the creation of an online reporting system would provide a useful addition to the reporting options already in place, namely email, telephone or face to face through drop-in. Within our online reporting system, students are able to make an

anonymous report by withholding their name; however, they are required to provide an email address so that an advisor can make contact and offer support. For those students who wish to remain anonymous, it is advised that they use a personal rather than a student email. The availability of online reporting means that students can submit a report of sexual misconduct 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, immediately gaining access to helplines for the local Rape Crisis Centre and Sexual Assault Referral Centre. The reporting student will also receive an email back from an advisor within one working day, although they are not obliged to reply to this or access support. It was felt that online reporting could offer a less pressured first step in reporting sexual misconduct to the University, as it does not require the reporting student to speak directly with a member of staff as telephone or face to face disclosure would. It is also hoped that by stipulating that all forms of sexual misconduct can be reported, students may be encouraged to report incidents which they see as being 'less serious', and that students who might be concerned that their experience is not 'serious enough' may be reassured by being invited to attend the Student Wellbeing Centre by an advisor.

Returning to prevention, Universities UK also advised that universities explore the implementation of evidence-based bystander intervention modules (2016), which had already been recommended for use in universities in a report published by Public Health England a few months earlier, following a comprehensive review of available literature (Fenton et al, 2016). A bystander is an individual who is witness to an incident, and an active bystander is an individual who then chooses to intervene. Bystander intervention helps to prevent sexual misconduct as active bystanders challenge and change dominant social norms around what is acceptable behaviour (Fenton et al, 2016). It is important that all students and staff are encouraged to become active bystanders, as it cannot be left to students who have experienced sexual misconduct to be solely responsible for challenging this behaviour and these cultures (Phipps and Young, 2015; Powell, 2011 as cited in Fenton et al, 2016). Challenging abusive or discriminatory comments can be particularly challenging for students when they are disguised as 'jokes' or 'banter', with the student calling out this behaviour at risk of being typecast as a 'killjoy' (Phipps and Young, 2015; Phipps and Young, 2015; Fenton et al, 2016; NUS, 2012). To support students to make such challenges, they are given the knowledge and

techniques to become active bystanders, so that they are equipped and confident to identify and safely intervene in abusive or discriminatory behaviour which they may witness on campus or amongst their social groups (Fenton et al, 2016; UUK, 2016). It is hoped that if enough individuals engage as active bystanders on campus, this will induce a shift in what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and therefore prevent incidents of sexual misconduct from occurring. Our bystander intervention modules also ensure that staff and students know how to manage a disclosure of sexual misconduct from a student, and how to refer a student who discloses sexual misconduct to the relevant services within the University or local community. Further to the online modules, there are also plans to provide face to face bystander intervention training to approximately 450 members of staff from across the University, with the space to train up to 600 over 20 sessions.

In order to make the project, and hopefully by extension the prevention of and response to sexual misconduct, cross-institutional, the project has involved collaborating with a number of partners both from within the University and from the local community. In their report, Universities UK suggested that prevention efforts can be more effective when a collaborative approach between the University, Students' Union and external organisations is taken, as this helps to reach more students, provide specialist services and enforce a more consistent message across campus (UUK, 2016). In terms of project management there is both a Project Steering Group and Project Advisory Board. The Project Steering Group consists of internal members of staff from the Student Wellbeing Centre and Human Resources, who oversee the direction of and activities within the project. The Project Advisory Board consists of the same individuals, plus two representatives from the Students' Union, two academic members of staff who research in the subject of gender-based violence and two external partners from Lincolnshire Police and Lincolnshire County Council, who serve to review and make recommendations on work carried out as part of the project. Whilst the Student Wellbeing Centre already has strong links with local partner organisations, including the Police, County Council, Lincolnshire Rape Crisis and Spring Lodge (Sexual Assault Referral Centre), these links have been further strengthened through the project. As well as having partners sitting on the Project Advisory Board, specialist local organisations have also spent time on campus promoting their services to students as part of the cross-county #NoMore

sexual violence and abuse in Lincolnshire campaign (Lincolnshire County Council, 2017), which is led by Lincolnshire County Council and which will be repeated in the new year. Furthermore, in order to provide students who have experienced sexual misconduct with coordinated and specialist support on campus, referral pathways have been set up with local specialist organisations, who also provide 1:1 counselling out of the Student Wellbeing Centre.

### **Project Work in Progress**

To help inform the activities within and assess the impact of the 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project, focus groups and a survey with students across the University of Lincoln have recently commenced.

### **Survey: Methodology and Ethics**

The student survey is investigating witnessed, disclosed and experienced incidents of sexual misconduct on campus, and is being offered to all students enrolled at the University. Generalisability of the survey data to the wider student population at the University will be largely affected by how many students eventually complete the survey, and will be further affected by the fact that the sample is self-selecting. At the time of writing, the survey is part way through the allocated time in which it is open for students to complete, and so the final number of completions is unknown. The findings can certainly not be assumed to be generalisable to other Universities (Bryman, 2012).

Survey design was influenced by the Hidden Marks survey (NUS, 2010) and the World Health Organisation's 'Researching Violence against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists' (2005). When designing the survey questions, careful consideration was given to the language used to describe different forms of sexual misconduct. For example, rather than saying 'sexual assault' we used 'someone groping, touching or kissing you in a sexual way without your consent', and rather than 'rape' we used 'sexual intercourse without your consent'. We decided to describe acts rather than use official terminology because it was felt that not all students would know what is encapsulated under different legal terms. Furthermore, research has shown that those who experience sexual assault or rape

may not always identify or define what happened using this terminology (NUS, 2010). This can be for a number of reasons, be it not recognising the incident as sexual assault or rape or not wanting to identify as someone who has been sexually assaulted or raped. It was felt that by describing the different forms of sexual misconduct, students who had experienced them might be more likely to identify their own experiences.

Conducting a survey will allow us to access a larger number of responses than would have been possible through interviews (Bryman, 2012), and also allows us to collect quantitative data on the number of students experiencing different forms of sexual misconduct, the locations it occurs in and the profile of the perpetrators. Being able to calculate prevalence rates means that an 'overview' of sexual misconduct on campus can be built and analysed for trends or patterns, which will complement the qualitative data which is helping us to understand students' individual experiences (Bryman, 2012, May, 2011). The data can also be compared to similar data from national surveys such as the 'Hidden Marks' report (2010).

The survey was conducted according to guidelines set out in the University's ethical principles (University of Lincoln, 2013). The survey asks students about both witnessed and experienced incidents of sexual misconduct, so a number of mechanisms were built into the survey to reduce any distress caused to participants through taking part. The survey was broken up into three 'sections', with an information screen before each section clearly explaining what the following questions would entail. Each of these information screens gave students a list of University or community-based support helplines, and also gave students the option to submit their answers up to that point and end the survey. The helplines were also provided at the start and the end of the survey, meaning that students had a total of five opportunities to access support throughout the survey. Students were also left to access the survey in their own time, which meant that they were able to complete it at a time and place with which they felt comfortable, and were better able to maintain their anonymity (Miner and Jayaratne, 2014; May, 2011; Bryman, 2012). All responses to the survey are anonymous as identifying personal information is not being collected, and students are not observed completing it. The only information which is being collected is course and year of study, to ensure that a range of Schools are represented and to allow for patterns around particular year groups or

courses to be looked for. Ensuring anonymity was a conscious decision, as it was felt that students would be more likely to answer honestly if they were not identifiable (Miner and Jayaratne, 2014; May, 2011; Bryman, 2012). However, protecting the participants' anonymity has meant stipulating that no action can be taken by the Student Wellbeing Centre over any incidents disclosed during the survey, and that respondents would have to contact the Student Wellbeing Centre in person in order to receive support or make a formal complaint against another student or a member of staff.

### **Focus Groups: Methodology and Ethics**

Alongside the survey, a number of focus groups are being held with students who sit on sports team or society committees, looking at their understanding of and knowledge about consent and sexual misconduct, cultures on campus, and their reaction to the project and its outputs. It was felt that focus groups would be useful as they can help to display group dynamics and understandings (May, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Munday, 2014), which would give us an insight into how students understand and contextualize campus cultures and issues like consent within their peer groups. Again, the focus groups were conducted according to the guidelines in the University's ethical principles (University of Lincoln, 2013). Students were provided with comprehensive information prior to the focus group, which included explaining the 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project and the topics that would be discussed during the focus group. Secure data storage was explained, as well as how the data will be analysed and who it would be shared with. Students were also informed that they could end their participation in the focus group at any time, and were given information on how they can withdraw their contribution after the focus group had concluded.

As sexual misconduct is a sensitive topic, safeguards were put in place around the focus groups to support participants who may be affected by the subject matter. Participants only discussed incidents of sexual misconduct that they had witnessed on campus, and were at no point asked to discuss any personal experiences of sexual misconduct. Furthermore, each participant was provided with a list of helplines prior to the focus group, and a mental health or wellbeing advisor was

specifically allocated to be available for an hour before and after each focus group in case any participants felt that they needed support. Participants were also able to access a wellbeing or mental health advisor at any point after this by contacting the Student Wellbeing Centre or attending a drop-in.

Access has been gained to these students through the Students' Union, who are responsible for the sports teams and societies on campus. However, invitation to and arrangement of the focus groups was conducted directly with the sport and society committees, so that the Students' Union would not know who had gone on to take part. This was done in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (Silverman, 2013). To further protect the participants' anonymity, they will be referred to as a 'sports team member' or 'society member' in the report, to disguise their real name or activity affiliation. As only students from the committees of sports and societies are being included this is an example of quota sampling, although which committees from the various sports and societies took part was their decision and they were therefore self-selecting. Although participants to date have been from a diverse range of activities, self-selection does mean that some groups who may have had more problematic cultures themselves may have chosen not to participate.

## **Going Forward**

It is hoped that the findings from the focus groups will provide some insight into the extent to which students understand concepts such as consent, and whether they are able to recognise different forms of sexual misconduct as sexual misconduct. If knowledge is poor, then the project outputs can be designed to address the lack of knowledge within the student body. In respect of the survey, it is hoped that this will reveal whether there are any trends regarding sexual misconduct on campus, for example around specific locations or behaviours. The Hidden Marks survey (2010) found a significant underreporting of sexual misconduct on university campuses, and there is no reason to believe that there is not also underreporting at the University of Lincoln. It is hoped that the anonymity afforded by the survey will mean that we are able to build a better picture of the rates of sexual misconduct on campus. We may also be able to learn why those students who have experienced sexual misconduct

and chosen not to report it made this decision, and whether there is anything that the Student Wellbeing Centre can do to encourage reporting or make this process easier. For example, if students are feeling that certain incidents are not serious enough to report, as found in the Hidden Marks (2010) research, the Student Wellbeing Centre can take steps to ensure that students know those incidents are serious enough to report and will be taken seriously. Similarly, if students are concerned about others finding out what has happened, work can be targeted to reassure students that the University will treat all reports as confidential, and that no other agencies will be informed without that student's consent.

Once all of the data has been collected and analysed, the results will be used to influence project outputs in terms of understanding where we need to target our prevention efforts and what information and support students need. Results will also be disseminated to relevant departments and individuals within the University and the Sexual Violence Delivery Group for Lincolnshire, to continue to inform a cross-institutional and cross-county collaborative response.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, through the 'Building Respect and Changing Cultures in the University Community' project the University has largely met the recommendations made by Universities UK (2016). Online reporting of sexual misconduct with the option to remain anonymous is available to all students, and bystander intervention education will very shortly be available to staff and students across the institution. The collaborative approach towards the project, including a range of parties both from within the University and Students' Union and specialist organisations from the local community, also meets Universities UK's (2016) recommendations for good practice by ensuring that a consistent message is maintained across campus, and that those students who experience sexual misconduct know how and where to seek support. Now that these initiatives are in place, the focus will be on promoting them within the student community and encouraging staff and students to engage with the bystander intervention modules. It is also important that relationships across the University and with local organisations are maintained long term, so that culture changes and best

practice around supporting students who experience sexual misconduct can be reviewed and continuously improved upon.

Whilst the student sexual misconduct survey and focus groups are still being run, they are already providing some useful and interesting data which will help to influence future project outputs. By collecting data about incidents of sexual misconduct on campus and why students choose not to report particular incidents to the University, we hope to be better able to understand how we can increase confidence in reporting, and support students to create a safe and respectful culture on campus.

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