

Ending sexual abuse in universities

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In November 2020, a new report - *Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities* – shed a light on the amount of sexual abuse and harassment cases within universities. The study found that there were approximately 50,000 incidents of sexual abuse or harassment in England and Wales each year, and that more needed to be done by universities to tackle this behaviour and deal with allegations appropriately. Concerns were raised that people felt unable to report these crimes to their universities, because the processes in place were inadequate. Indeed some of the perpetrators were also academic staff, as well as students.

This research came through after the Law Commission announced in September that it was currently looking at the extension of Hate Categories to include gender, meaning that public forms of harassment against women and girls may be included under that category. The Law Commission acknowledged the fact that sexual harassment and abuse of women in both public and private space is a cultural problem that has for too long been ignored.

Despite most universities already having an Equality and Diversity policy, these findings from the Unsafe Spaces Report indicate that policies used alone are ineffective tools in cracking down on sexual abuse and harassment. It's clear that higher educational institutions must actively do more to ensure that abuse and harassment are not going under the radar. For example, the role of peer groups engaging in "lad culture" within sporting clubs in universities and/or sexual harassment of students by university staff.

So how can universities tackle this culture of widespread sexual abuse and harassment within their institutions? My belief is that a key aspect of effecting cultural change is the use of educational resources to raise awareness about the scale and nature of the problem and its impact.

Through educational drives initiating discussion and debate about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour we can foster a culture of challenge and change which means that more victims will come forward, such behaviour will be questioned and those perpetuating it will be dealt with.

For example, a new cartoon style educational tool to tackle the harassment of women and girls was recently launched by Nottingham Trent University and the University of Nottingham. The graphic style web-based comic strip called 'Changing Minds' - which is free to download - aims to deliver a strong and accessible message about the real impact of harassment on the lives of women and girls in Nottingham and beyond.

The comic is valuable for providing a way of initiating discussion, debate or even role-play. It makes the issues around sexual harassment and abuse accessible within everyday examples helping those taking part to identify with the characters in the story and to spot examples of harassment and abuse either as victims or perpetrators.

The comic was the result of research I undertook with Professor Louise Mullany from the University of Nottingham that spoke with women and men in Nottingham about sexual harassment and abuse. Our research highlighted that men are often unaware of the scale and impact of this upon women and girls – demonstrating that it is crucial to involve them in initiatives for change. For universities this comic can be included as part of student enrolment and fresher activities to promote notions of respect for students and staff whilst outlining acceptable and unacceptable conduct.

Other educational initiatives could include running online campaigns / seminars / events around what constitutes sexual harassment, how victims can report it and what the process will be, as well as communicating information on further support the university can provide.

Institutions of education have a key role to play in changing cultural attitudes through pedagogical tools as well as setting standards for behaviour for staff and students that provide a safe space for all.