



#CombatMisconduct

Tackling harassment, hate
and sexual misconduct:
**quick guide for
vice-chancellors and
principals**

About this guide

This quick guide sets out practical steps that vice-chancellors and principals can take to tackle harassment, hate and sexual misconduct in universities. It is part of the wider Combat Misconduct toolkit for vice chancellors, produced by AVA (Against Violence and Abuse), and supported by Universities UK and NUS with generous support from the Rosa Justice and Equality Fund.

For further practical support, promising practice examples and reflections from other vice-chancellors, access the full toolkit [here](#).

Nine practical steps

Universities strive to be places where tolerance, dignity and respect are cherished, and senior leaders in higher education do their best to ensure the safety of all members of the university community. These practical steps are based on advice and insights from interviews with nine vice-chancellors and principals and broader recommendations from Universities UK. Although the steps below highlight the important role of senior leaders in delivering change, leaders cannot do this alone. A university's culture is shaped by all of its members, and building cultures of cohesion and respect is everyone's responsibility.

To effectively tackle harassment, hate and sexual misconduct, vice-chancellors and principals will:

1. Publicly acknowledge that sexual harassment, misconduct and all forms of hate exist in universities, as they do throughout society.

- Publicly commit to prioritising this work whilst ensuring that ownership, scrutiny and accountability for progress in this area are held by the Vice-Chancellor and Executive Team.
- Build the business case to explain the benefits of taking steps to address harassment, and the risk and cost of inaction.
- Provide resources to drive organisational change.

2. Set the tone for change, by highlighting the importance and value the university places on the safety and wellbeing of staff and students in missions, value statements, and institutional strategies and policies.

- Set expectations; be proactive and clear in communicating how students and staff can report incidents and seek support.
- Challenge behaviour that does not uphold the organisation's values, and communicate progress to tackle harassment to the broader university community.

3. Adopt a whole university approach, embedding responsibility to eliminate harassment into the university's culture, policies, practice, governance and reporting structures.

- Ensure that the institution has robust policies in place that clearly address harassment, sexual misconduct and hate incidents and offer immediate protection, support and guidance for those affected.
- Embed policies into institutional governance and reporting structures to ensure consistency.

4. Get others on board. Addressing harassment requires all members of the university community to play their part.

- Work with and empower students to speak out and actively participate in creating culture change.
- Encourage staff and students to take part in training to tackle unacceptable behaviours.

5. Seek the support of your governing body.

- Provide governing bodies with information and evidence on the university's commitment to tackling harassment
- Ensure permanent oversight for addressing the agenda and monitoring institutional progress is held by the governing body.

6. Invest in learning and professional development on harassment, sexual misconduct and all forms of hate for yourself and your senior team.

- Engage with those who have lived experience, including those that experience multiple and overlapping forms of harassment.
- Build partnerships with specialist agencies.
- Consider that leaders may bring their own biases to areas such as strategy, implementation and recruitment.

7. Capture and publish data and evidence on the impact of harassment.

- Work closely with students and staff who have experienced harassment, including those with protected characteristics
- Draw on broader evidence on gender-based violence and hate even when data from your institution is difficult to collect.
- Use this evidence to assist with prioritising, decision-making and evidence-based policy and practice, and publish evidence about your institution's reality and progress to inform the wider university community.

8. Practice inclusive leadership and create a safe team environment where all employees can speak up, be heard, and feel welcome.

- Actively recruit and embrace the input of staff whose backgrounds or expertise differ from their own.
- Foster collaboration amongst a diverse staff team, ask questions of all members of the team, facilitate constructive debate, give actionable feedback, and act upon the advice of staff from a diverse range of backgrounds.

9. Recognise the mental health impact of sexual misconduct, harassment and all forms of hate on those who are directly impacted, as well as on academic, professional services and other support staff and student union officers who receive disclosures and work to support victims and improve institutional responses.

- Invest in support and education to build an understanding of trauma among staff and university counselling services.

Key questions to ask

The following key questions are designed to prompt reflection about how your institution can progress in tackling harassment, hate and sexual misconduct. For a full set of prompt questions, see the full Combat Misconduct toolkit.

What personal and professional experiences can you draw on to motivate your own work to tackle harassment?

Does your senior team have similar motivations? Do their individual experiences motivate them in different ways?

The Universities UK Changing the Culture taskforce¹ guidance to address racial harassment and staff to student sexual misconduct² advocates for an institution-wide approach to tackling misconduct and harassment, drawing together activities and teams across all functions of the university.

What progress has been made in adopting an institution-wide approach to tackling harassment and hate?

What practical steps could be taken to improve the levels of diversity throughout staff teams in the institution? Do the recruitment practices prioritise this outcome?

As part of AVA's research, vice-chancellors shared promising practice, risks and challenges across a number of areas of work to tackle harassment, including report and support systems, education, policies and procedures.

What are the risks and costs of not addressing sexual misconduct, harassment and hate?

If a student wanted to report an incident of sexual misconduct at your institution, how would they know where to go? Is this clearly communicated in public and social media channels?

Do members of your board and senior leadership team attend training on misconduct, harassment and hate?

For further information and resources, and to access the full Combat Misconduct toolkit visit [here](https://www.avaproject.org.uk/combatisconduct), or email combatisconduct@avaproject.org.uk.