Universities UK

TACKLING ONLINE HARASSMENT AND PROMOTING ONLINE WELFARE

CONTENTS

FOREWARD BY PROFESSOR DEBRA HUMPHRIS

**VICE-CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON;
CHAIR, UNIVERSITIES UK'S STUDENT POLICY NETWORK**

The key principle for dealing with harassment and intolerance in our universities is to understand that all students have the right to work, study and live without fear of intimidation, harassment and threatening or violent behaviour. This right extends to online activities as well.

In 2016, Universities UK (UUK) produced guidance for universities on tackling sexual harassment and hate crime. In collecting evidence for this guidance, many universities highlighted the growing problem of online harassment and the inherent complexity of managing this now that students are online extensively, not only socially, but in accessing their education or simply using technology to carry out a wide range of everyday activities.

Education is the key tool in arming all students with the knowledge of how to stay safe online and how to report offensive content. Universities are ideally placed to support students to engage with the internet safely and to raise awareness of the potential harms from online harassment, including the impact on physical and mental health, academic success and potential career prospects.

To support universities in ensuring that students' experience of technology is positive, creative and productive, UUK has worked with experts and practitioners both inside and outside the sector to develop this guidance.

This guidance offers a set of principles and practical recommendations to support universities to enhance their own policies and practice.

Although the exact extent of online harassment is unknown in higher education, research shows that online bullying and harassment occurs across the lifespan of education and should be challenged and addressed at every point, including during university. We cannot allow these harmful behaviours and content to undermine the significant benefits that the digital revolution can offer.

While some institutions have taken steps, there is still more to do. If we surrender our online spaces to those who spread hate, abuse, fear and vitriolic content, then we all lose out.

UUK welcomes the recent moves from the government that show it is taking steps to tackle online harassment and harm in UK society. The revised hate crime action plan (HM Government, 2018) places a greater emphasis on the need to better understand and respond to online hate crime. The 2019 *Online Harms White Paper* sets out the government's plans for a package of measures to support users in the UK to be safe online, adopting the clear principle that 'what is illegal offline is also illegal online' (HM Government, 2019).

In the wake of this increased sense of accountability for citizens' safety online as well as offline, now is the time for the higher education sector to play its part. The UK's universities now have a significant opportunity to lead the way in changing students' perceptions of how to engage and communicate in a digital environment. This will have an impact well beyond university campuses to the workplace and across society.

Debra Humphris

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015, Universities UK (UUK) embarked on a long-term programme of work to address harassment, hate crime and gender-based violence in the higher education sector. This began with the work of a taskforce, which over the course of a year published its recommendations in *Changing the culture* (UUK, 2016).

The taskforce received evidence that students and universities were increasingly concerned with the manifestation of harassment and hate crime in online spaces. The UK is not alone in this: research shows that online harassment[1] is now a global phenomenon.

In its recommendations, the taskforce invited UUK to develop guidance for the sector to address online harassment among students.

This guidance is based on a range of evidence, including existing practice in the UK secondary and higher education sectors, practice in the international higher education sector, and academic articles, research and reports from external experts, including anti-bullying charities.

UUK also held a roundtable discussion with a range of experts from within and outside the sector to explore what good practice looks like. The outcomes from the roundtable and extensive desk research are presented in a *literature review* published alongside this guidance. The literature review explores what is known about online harassment among university students and sets out the evidence used to inform the principles and recommendations contained in this guidance.

UK society is becoming increasingly concerned about the potential for the internet and communication technologies to cause a variety of harms, including their use as a tool to perpetrate harassment, hate crimes and sexual violence. Universities have a responsibility to play their role in responding to this growing challenge, building on initiatives in the school sector and a *White Paper in England* that sets out the government's internet safety strategy and its plans to improve online safety (HM Government, 2019).

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1. Online harassment can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies by an individual or group to repeatedly cause harm to another person with relatively less power to defend themselves. See Annexe A for further definitions.

The evidence considered shows that, as with other forms of harassment and hate crime, online harassment is often reflective of discriminatory attitudes and beliefs in wider society, including those based on gender, race, faith, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. For example, girls and women report a higher incidence of online harassment and bullying than boys and men; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, and/or non-binary people (LGBTQ+) are also more likely to experience online harassment.

Although most university students' experiences of technology are useful and positive, where online harassment does occur, this can have severe and long-term repercussions for physical, emotional and mental wellbeing and affect academic achievement and future career prospects. Yet, the evidence also shows that for many young people, online harassment is embedded in their digital lives and to some extent is normalised and expected, emerging as part of a wider dynamic of their peer group and intimate relationships. Understanding this is important for universities when developing strategies and interventions to challenge such behaviour.

Strategies, interventions and support, should also reflect the diversity of the student cohort. This can range from young to mature students, undergraduates, postgraduates, distance or IT students, European and international students.

Reference to the learning environment beyond the classroom and university campus is also important such as considering if and how policies and legal protections work if a student is engaged in studying abroad, a joint degree (UK or international), in a apprenticeship or internship in industry or learning in a professional setting.

Although online harassment is not a specific criminal offence in UK law, there are other criminal laws that compel universities to take this issue seriously. These include wider responsibilities under a range of legislation, including the Equality Act 2010, Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and Sexual Offences Act 2003.

There are also distinctive features of online harassment that alter the form it can take and the impacts it can have. These require a more nuanced approach by universities to respond to this issue. Furthermore, the normalising of harmful behaviours online has meant that not all students recognise when online harassment occurs or realise that criminal laws can apply to a range of behaviours linked to online harassment, including stalking, threats and the circulation of sexual images.

Partnership working is a fundamental component of preventing and responding to online harassment effectively. Partners, including the police, community leaders and specialist services, are important in supporting students, training staff and assessing the nature and scale of the problem. They can also play a crucial role in developing effective institutional policies and procedures. By working with local partners,

universities can also spread the benefits of their own activities by embedding positive behaviours in social and sporting activities that take place off campus.

Most importantly, students are vital partners in work to tackle this issue. The evidence clearly demonstrates that regular, meaningful engagement with students is of critical importance in preventing and responding to online harassment and promoting online welfare.

Adopting an institution-wide approach that draws together activities across the university is also important in addressing online harassment. This could include promoting positive student behaviours via awareness-raising campaigns, increasing student and staff understanding of online harassment, and encouraging digital civility and welfare.

Other activities include ensuring that clear policies are in place to address online harassment and making a variety of accessible reporting routes available for students. These should be supported by effective data collection, appropriate governance, robust risk management and regular impact assessments that enable institutions to assess the effectiveness of procedures and improve them where necessary. This is particularly important in a higher education context because online harassment is a relatively new phenomenon, and there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of programmes and initiatives in universities.

Encouragingly, there are examples of good practice in higher education that universities can draw upon to address online harassment and promote online welfare. Universities may find it helpful to consider _the toolkit_ provided by the University of Suffolk alongside this guidance. This provides a policy and practice checklist for responding to online harassment.

The use of catalyst funding by universities in England, made available by the Office for Students (OfS), has been instrumental in stimulating this activity. This highlights the importance of sharing good practice across the sector.

This guidance identifies a set of principles to support institutions in addressing online harassment and promoting online welfare:

1   **Sustain commitment and accountability from senior leaders**

2   **Implement a whole-institution approach**

3   **Engage students in a shared understanding of online harassment and in the development, delivery and evaluation of interventions**

4   **Develop and evaluate prevention strategies**

5   **Develop and evaluate response strategies**

6   **Promote online safety and welfare**

7   **Share knowledge and good practice**

This guidance also identifies practical recommendations for each principle and is designed to support universities in their efforts to address online harassment. These include updating policies, cultivating links with schools, further education colleges, specialist support services, educating students in digital literacy, training staff, creating online reporting provisions, and promoting peer networks.

Although these principles and recommendations are primarily aimed at universities, the guidance emphasises that addressing online harassment is **everyone's responsibility** and requires an holistic approach.

Alongside this guidance universities will also find the following useful:

- the strategic framework in *Changing the culture,* UUK (2016)

- *Guidance on handling student misconduct that could also constitute a criminal offence,* UUK/Pinsent Masons (2016)

- *Equally Safe in Higher Education Toolkit,* University of Strathclyde (2018)

- *Good practice framework: handling student complaints and academic appeals* by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsmen (SPSO). For universities in Scotland the guidance should be considered alongside the *The Scottish Higher Model Complaints Handling Procedure* available from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

PRINCIPLE 1: SENIOR LEADERSHIP

1   If not already doing so, universities transfer sponsorship, ownership and accountability for tackling online harassment to the senior leadership team.

2   To support the oversight of safeguarding issues, universities provide regular progress reports on incidents and outcomes of all forms of harassment, including those occurring online, to university courts and governing bodies.

PRINCIPLE 2: INSTITUTION-WIDE APPROACH

3   Universities incorporate efforts to tackle online harassment as part of wider strategic work to tackle all forms of harassment and hate incidents/crime.

4   The senior leadership team to involve stakeholders from across the institution in developing, maintaining and reviewing all elements of a whole-institution approach. In addition to senior leaders, stakeholders could include students, students' unions, relevant academics and professional staff.

PRINCIPLE 3: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

5   Students are meaningfully and consistently engaged in the development, execution and assessment of interventions to prevent and respond to online harassment.

6   Where possible, universities engage with survivors to shape their work.

7   Universities provide early information to students, including prospective students, on arrangements to tackle all forms of harassment, including online harassment, and the potential consequences of inappropriate behaviour online.

PRINCIPLE 4: PREVENTION

8 Universities consider adopting the term 'online harassment' in relevant policies and make clear to students and staff that what could be referred to as 'cyberbullying' could also constitute harassment or a hate crime.

9 Partnership agreements, such as the student contract or code of conduct, include expected behaviours in the online sphere and acknowledge that disciplinary sanctions will be applied in the same way as for misconduct offline.

10 Universities take steps to ensure that policies and procedures, including codes of conduct policies, IT usage policies and anti-bullying and harassment policies for both students and staff, are joined-up across the institution.

11 Universities regularly review the effectiveness of their existing policies, for example by using the University of Suffolk's higher education online safeguarding self-review tool.

12 Working with survivors, students and students' unions, universities explore how to raise awareness and increase understanding of online harassment, including when behaviours online may be illegal.

13 Universities raise awareness of online harassment with staff and extend a zero-tolerance culture in terms of their activities in the online sphere. Universities also foster staff as role models in championing appropriate online behaviour.

14 Where appropriate, universities engage with local school communities and further education colleges to support a joined-up approach to tackling online harassment and to share effective practice.

15 If not already doing so, universities monitor and evaluate the impact of prevention activities and use the data to inform the design of future interventions.
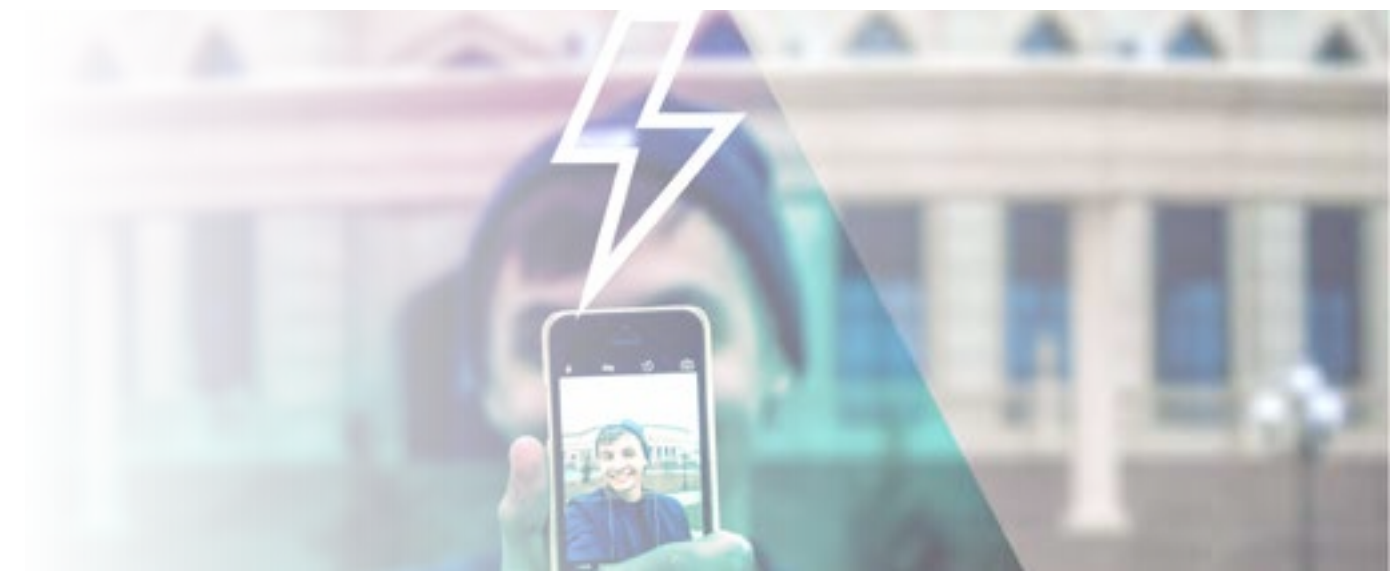
PRINCIPLE 5: RESPONSE

16 If not already doing so, universities ensure that students have access to a range of accessible mechanisms to make a disclosure or report online harassment. Universities may also wish to consider offering an option for a student to make an anonymous report, taking account of any risks this may entail and ensuring compliance with data protection legislation.

17 Institutions collect data on how online harassment is experienced within their student cohort, and wherever possible, ensure equality monitoring is embedded into reporting mechanisms/systems. This data can then be regularly analysed for key trends particularly around protected characteristics (thus supporting intersectional analysis) and used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the institution's response to online harassment.

18 If not already doing so, universities consider establishing and promoting peer-to-peer programmes and networks as a mechanism for supporting students.

19 Where appropriate, staff are trained to respond effectively to online harassment and use is made of academic expertise to inform the design and evaluation of interventions.

20 Universities collaborate with partners and specialist support services in the development of policies, strategies, interventions, provision of specialist support to students and information sharing agreements.

PRINCIPLE 6: ONLINE SAFETY AND WELFARE

21 Universities, working with students and students' unions, promote the importance of online welfare and safety, and the responsible use of technologies. This could include the provision of opportunities for students to develop their digital skills to foster a safer and more inclusive environment online and build on a student's prior understanding and skills obtained during primary, secondary and further education.

22 Universities consider adopting the optional questions on the National Student Survey (NSS) related to student safety as a mechanism to assess progress in improving student perceptions of their safety and wellbeing at university.

PRINCIPLE 7: SHARING GOOD PRACTICE

23 Universities share knowledge and practice both within and across the sector: this could include sharing academic research, student data and good practice initiatives.

1:
INTRODUCTION

THIS GUIDANCE:

- outlines a set of principles to support universities to prevent and respond to online harassment occurring between students

- is aimed at enhancing understanding and outlining some practical steps to tackle this issue

- should be considered alongside an institution's policies and broader programmes of work to address harassment and hate crime

- aligns with, and builds on, the principles set out in *Changing the culture* (UUK, 2016), and *Guidance for higher education institutions: how to handle alleged student misconduct* (UUK, Pinsent Masons, 2016), while recognising the specific complexities of online harassment

- should be considered alongside *guidance on handling complaints* developed by the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for universities in England and Wales including handling complaints in higher education (OIA, 2016) disciplinary procedures (OIA, 2018), and a *briefing note* on complaints involving sexual misconduct and harassment (OIA,2018). For universities in Scotland the guidance should be considered alongside the *The Scottish Higher Model Complaints Handling Procedure* available from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

- acknowledges the significant role gender plays in online harassment throughout the educational lifespan, including at university

- builds on effective practice in schools, but recognises that a more nuanced approach is required by universities, given that most students are aged over 18

- promotes the positive use of technology and welfare

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

In developing our approach, online harassment is treated as a specific form of harassment. This enables a greater understanding of the potential social and emotional harm experienced by those who are affected by online harassment. This form of harassment is, however, part of a bigger picture and cannot be addressed in isolation: it should be considered as part of universities' wider work to tackle harassment and hate crime.

To inform the development of this guidance, UUK sought input from expert practitioners and academics from within and outside the higher education sector. Extensive desk research was also undertaken to better understand the nature, scale, and impact of online harassment among university students. The outcomes of the research have been developed into a *literature review*.

UUK roundtable to address online harassment

The *literature review* was used to inform a roundtable discussion held by UUK in October 2018 during Hate Crime Awareness Week. The discussion was chaired by Bill Rammell, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Bedfordshire. Experts, policymakers, students and professional staff working in universities and anti-bullying charities were invited to explore challenges and determine solutions for addressing online harassment in higher education. Delegates were invited to comment on a draft structure of this guidance and submit case studies and examples of practice to inform the guidance.

Review of existing practice including catalyst-funded projects in England

This guidance draws on lessons learned from existing practice gained from an analysis by UUK of the sector's response to online harassment and case studies from the second round of the OfS catalyst-funded projects to address online harassment and hate crime in England. Further information is available in Section 4 of this guidance, Current practice.

TERMINOLOGY

Online harassment can be defined as:

> 'the use of information and communication technologies by an individual or group to repeatedly cause harm to another person with relatively less power to defend themselves'.

When defining online harassment, some researchers view it as a new form of traditional bullying[2] whereby bullying or harassment is a digital extension of traditional bullying and harassing behaviours (Barkoukis, Brighi, Casas et al, 2015). By contrast, other researchers consider that there are substantial differences between offline and online harassment (Giumete, Kowalski, Lattanner & Schroeder, 2014).

- Online harassment can invade all aspects of a target's home and personal space.

- Those committing the harassment can choose to disguise their identity, which can heighten the target student's insecurity about the quality of their relationships as they will often not know which members of their peer group are involved.

- It can be difficult to control electronically circulated messages.

- If a harmful message 'goes viral' through the actions of bystanders who forward the content to others in their networks, the victim's distress is compounded.

- A simple Google search will show the longevity of material: a 'one-off' attack can have devastating consequences and remain in circulation for a long time.

ONLINE HARASSMENT IS ALSO KNOWN AS:

cyberaggression, cyberbullying, cyber-harassment, cyberhate, cybervictimisation and deviant online behaviour.

The terms 'online harassment', 'online bullying' and 'cyberbullying' are often used interchangeably by researchers and organisations and can have similar definitions.

This guidance acknowledges that there are distinctive features of online harassment, while accepting that to some extent there is an overlap between traditional bullying and bullying online.

2. The common definition originates from Olweus (1993), which defines bullying or victimisation in the following way: 'a student is being victimised or bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one of more other students' (p9)

While 'harassment' is defined in law, 'bullying', and by extension 'cyber-' or 'online' bullying is not. This distinction is important because evidence shows that the term 'cyberbullying' may not always be perceived as a serious issue, or one that could constitute criminal behaviour, particularly among younger people.[3] Evidence from _Ditch the Label_, a leading international anti-bullying charity working with people aged 12–25, found that there is a disconnect between what people perceive to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviours on and offline. In the 2017 survey, 46% of young people surveyed felt that 'real life' only happened offline.

In view of this, the guidance refers to 'online harassment' as opposed to 'cyberbullying', to emphasise that there are laws across the UK that apply to harassment whereby inappropriate behaviour online could constitute a criminal offence.

Where reference is made to the **reporting student** in this guidance, this refers to the student who is making a report of online harassment. Sometimes the word **'victim'** or **'survivor'** may also be used. The **responding student** is the student against whom a complaint is made.

3. The 2013 NUS survey identified a culture of laddishness at UK universities, where disrespectful behaviour was seen as 'banter'.

FORMS OF ONLINE HARASSMENT

As technology develops and social networking sites continue to expand, online harassment will continue to grow and take on different forms; consequently, definitions of online harassment and the behaviour it encompasses will be in a state of flux. Some forms of online harassment are set out below.

CYBERSTALKING:
repeated and deliberate use of the internet and other electronic communication tools to engage in persistent, unwanted communication intending to frighten, intimidate or harass someone, or to spy on someone.

DENIGRATION:
sending or posting harmful, untrue or cruel statements about a person to other people.

DOXXING:
sharing someone else's personal information without their permission.

EXCLUSION:
purposeful isolation of individuals from online communications with others in a network.

IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE:
(also known as 'revenge pornography') online disclosure of sexual or intimate photos or videos, without the consent of the person pictured.

INTERNET PILE-ON:
where large numbers of people are encouraged to target one individual with numerous messages.

MASQUERADING:
pretending to be someone else online.

SEXTING:
the exchange of online sexual images or videos. This is illegal for under-18s. Where sexual photos of adults are shared online between adults (that is, over 18), without permission of the person/people photographed, this is usually classified as 'revenge porn'.

TRICKERY:
engaging in tricks to solicit personal information that is then made public, often to blackmail the individual.

TROLLING:
sending or posting deliberately inflammatory, inappropriate or controversial messages or comments on the internet in order to upset and provoke responses from other internet users.

UPSKIRTING:
filming or photographing under a person's clothes without their consent to capture images of their body or underwear.

VIRTUAL MOBBING:
where a person tries to attract attention to someone else by getting other people to bully a person for example by using hashtags to encourage other people to join in.

For a more detailed exploration of online harassment and its composite behaviours, see Annexe A for a glossary of terms and the literature review.

2:

UNDERSTANDING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Online harassment and bullying are not new phenomena, but as mobile phone and internet use increases so does the use of technology to harass others. For many young people, online harassment is embedded in their digital lives and to some extent normalised and expected, emerging as part of the wider dynamic of their peer group and intimate relationships (Cowie, Myers, 2017).

According to Ofcom, social media has a near-universal reach among 16–24-year-olds in the UK, with 99% claiming to use it at least weekly. The report also shows that 64% of adults claim to use social media at least on a weekly basis (Ofcom, 2016, p.117).

The charity Ditch the Label draws together the largest bullying-related dataset from around 10,000 young people across the UK each year. Its survey in 2017 focused on digital lives, and found that one in two young people reported having experienced online bullying before the age of 25. The charity has also seen a large increase in the number of people who have experienced online harassment, from 17% in 2017 to approximately 30% in 2019.[4]

According to the government's *Online Harms White Paper* (2019), nearly nine in ten UK adults are on online, with two thirds saying they have been concerned about content online and close to half say they have seen hateful content in the past year.

1 in 2

young people reported having experienced online bullying before the age of 25

99%

of 16–24-year-olds in the UK use social media at least on a weekly basis

4. Presentation at UUK's conference to tackle online harassment on 17 June 2019 by Holly Everett, Head of Education at Ditch the Label

It is difficult to determine how many students are affected by online harassment in higher education as this remains an under-researched area. However, some researchers have stated that there has been an increase in revenge porn on university campuses (Branch, Hilinski-Rosick, Johnson, Solano, 2017; Luca, 2016).

The main form of online harassment found in incidents of revenge porn is denigration, that is, the sharing of images of a person that causes ridicule, fake rumours and gossip. This is now an offence in all jurisdictions of the UK.

WHOM DOES IT AFFECT?

Online harassment can happen to anyone, with close to half of internet users in the UK saying that they have seen hateful content online in the past year (Ofcom, 2018, p.10). Although the term 'digital native' is used in reference to young people, this can be misleading because not all young people have had the same level of access to technology, or may not have received the same level of knowledge and understanding of how to respond to cyberbullying at school or college. Furthermore, while there is an overlap with young people and the student population, mature students may not have had any training in using the internet.

Experience of harassment continues well into adulthood and the higher education sector is no exception. A recent series of studies covering 231 UK university employees across academic, administrative, research, management and technical roles reported rates of online harassment of 80–88% (for experiencing at least one negative act in the previous six months) and of 14–21% (for experiencing at least one behaviour, at least weekly for six months) (Axtel, Best, Coyne et al, 2017).

ONLINE HARASSMENT IS A GENDERED ISSUE

Online harassment occurs in a gendered context (Cassidy, Faucher, Jackson et al, 2014; Henry, Powell, 2017) and is considered a digital extension of traditional sexual violence (Henry, Powell, 2014, 2017). Women are more likely to experience a variety of harmful behaviours online, such as image-based sexual abuse, exploitation and coercion, sexualised bullying and unwanted sexualisation, and these incidents can often result in more negative outcomes for women (Bryce, Rajeshkumar, 2017; Thompson, 2018).

A recent study of 13–17-year-olds in Denmark, Hungary and the UK found that 30% of female respondents reported having experienced unwanted sexualisation online in the last year, compared with 13% of male respondents (Bryce J, Rajeshkumar, 2017).

Online harassment against women can be exacerbated if one's identity as a woman intersects with protected characteristics such as race, sexual orientation or disability.

Evidence also shows that certain groups are more likely to experience online harassment than others or may experience more severe impacts. These groups include young people, student doctors and nurses, students' union representatives and under-represented students.

Further information and an evidenced exploration of the specific kinds of online harassment women; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered and non-binary people (LGBTQ+) students, disabled students; Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students; and students of particular religious groups may face at university are set out in the accompanying *literature review.*

> I think the sisters experience stuff more than the brothers...
> they're more easily identifiable...with headscarves on...Or even because
> a lot of them are brown. One Indian sister, she was saying to me, 'I got
> bullied because people thought I was Muslim [sic]'. She's a Hindu, but
> she got bullied because she looks like a Pakistani.
>
> 👤 BAME Muslim, male

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Researchers have found several reasons why students may engage in online harassment and other risky and harmful behaviours online.

Young people as 'digital natives'

Young people are often assumed to be 'digital natives' (Cowie, Myers, 2017) because they operate freely in the online world, use technology routinely to carry out a wide range of everyday activities, and are likely to spend a significant proportion of their life online (DfE, 2019, pp. 5–6). However, the ability to recognise and respond appropriately to online harassment and other potential harms online should not be assumed. As stated earlier, young people are increasingly normalising harmful behaviours online that could in fact constitute criminal behaviour (Cowie, Myers, 2017).

Continuation of childhood behaviour

Online harassment that occurs at university could be an escalation of behaviour that has occurred in school (Pörhölä, 2016), or a result of continuing behaviours that have not been challenged previously. Evidence also shows that delivery of education around online safety and digital civility can be inconsistent and patchy, meaning that students may arrive at university with different levels of understanding.

Societal and relational change

When students come to university, their current social groups and the identities formed within them change. Navigating such changes can be difficult for some students, making them more susceptible to online harassment (Hoff, Mitchell, 2009).

Discrimination

Online harassment is symptomatic of the wider issue of discriminatory attitudes and beliefs in society. These are often rooted in sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic or ableist prejudices. Such perspectives and attitudes can influence and shape the behaviours of students (whether young or mature) at different stages of education, and without appropriate opportunities to challenge such prejudices, such opinions can continue to influence students as they navigate their way through their adult life (Cowie, Myers, 2016b).

> I do witness quite a lot [of hate speech] on social media in general, but in particular, I've noticed quite a lot on the university pages, the language used is very aggressive.
>
> 👤 Jewish student

> I know during the Brexit period a lot of people were voicing their opinion, like 'make Britain British again'...but I found stuff like that on the freshers' pages...I was like, 'wow, I didn't know there was that much hostility!' It really goes to your heart, like, 'oh, I don't know whether you guys like us that much.'
>
> 👤 BAME Muslim, female

WHO CARRIES OUT ONLINE HARASSMENT

Research on the profile of those who engage in online harassment is limited. Some researchers suggest that it may be unhelpful to determine a 'profile', since much of the harassment occurring in online spaces comes from anonymous sources, making the legal and moral implications to students less clear.

Notwithstanding this, evidence does show that those committing online harassment are likely to have been harassed previously themselves. Some victims/survivors may also feel more empowered or forced to retaliate online than they would face to face.

With online harassment, bystanders can easily become 'perpetrators', for example by passing on or showing images designed to humiliate others, or by taking part in online polls or discussion groups. Sometimes, student bystanders may not recognise themselves as participating in the bullying; however, the outcome for the student being bullied is the same.

3:
THE CASE FOR ACTION

Changing the Culture (UUK, 2016) highlighted that universities have a significant opportunity to lead the way in preventing and responding to violence against women and harassment and hate crime beyond university campuses. This also applies to tackling these issues as they manifest in online spaces.

Online harassment is not limited to universities but experienced in wider society and in the workplace. Universities, with a community of 2.3 million students and 420,000 staff[5] are ideally placed to play an important role in challenging online harassment wherever it exists and ensuring that the impact of institutional initiatives extends beyond university campuses to affect cultural change in society.

This section sets out the case for action, drawing on the key findings of the *literature review*. The impact on students and the legal and policy contexts across the UK are also covered.

IMPACT OF ONLINE HARASSMENT ON WELLBEING

Online harassment can have a severe negative impact on the education and wellbeing of the person being harassed. This can include their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as affecting the social dimension of the victim's life during and after the incident.

5. Source: Higher education in facts and figures, 2018 (UUK)

Examples of the impact on emotional wellbeing

- The experience can be unpleasant and distressing in the short term and over time can have a significant negative effect on self-esteem and a student's ability to make friends and trust others. This could also lead to social withdrawal from peer-group networks.

- Those targeted are more likely to skip classes or drop out.

- The capacity to study and therefore academic achievement can be affected.

- Students being bullied run a heightened risk of mental health disorders, including depression and social anxiety, with some suffering in silence through fear or shame.

- Research shows that there is an indication that some individuals are bullied across their lifespan and there is no evidence that bullying 'prepares' you for life.

Research also suggests that the impact of online harassment on victims may outweigh that of traditional harassment.[6]

This is due to the:

- potentially limitless audience (Cross, Dooley, Pyalski, 2009)

- increased impact and humiliation

- increased accessibility of the content

- ease with which content can be passed on or seen repeatedly

- longevity of an image, which can be available indefinitely.
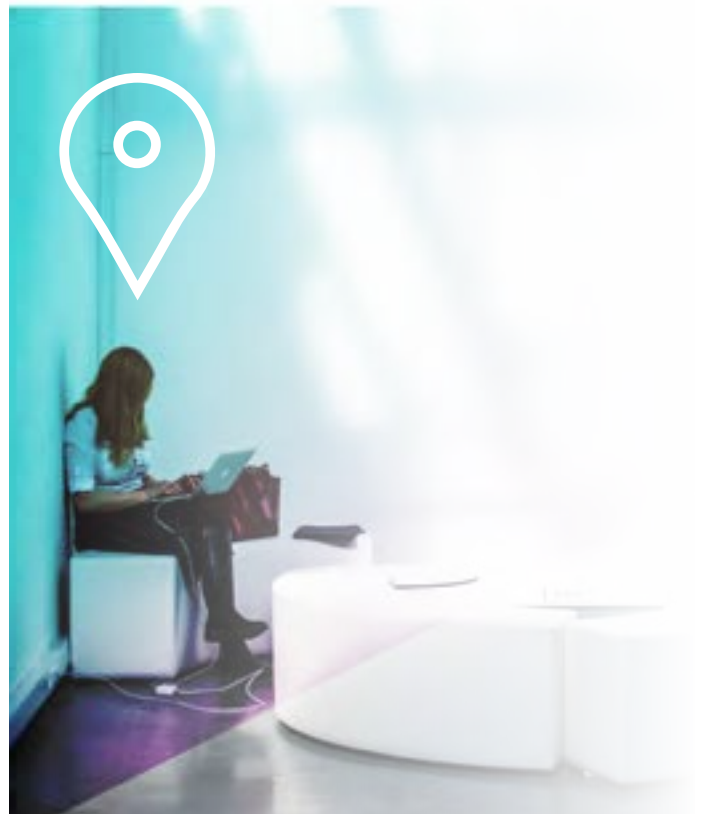
6. Cowie H, Myers CA (2019) Cyberbullying across the lifespan of education: Issues and interventions from school to university. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Heath

It's not nice and makes you feel like you can't do anything or you will make it worse. It also affects your school work too – I did not do as well because you feel down all the time.

👤 Bystander

In year 6, me and most of my class would bully this kid and now I really regret it and want to speak to him and see how he is getting on at secondary school.

👤 Bullying others

Well, people always spread rumours and it gets around quick, even to other schools, creating online bullying from Instagram – this makes me feel very unwanted and not liked. I think to myself, 'Why do I get bullied, why me, what have I done to deserve this?' and then when I self-harmed, I got told I was doing it for attention.

👤 Being bullied

In-depth investigations into the impact of specific forms of online harassment such as cyberstalking provide a detailed insight into the physical, mental and emotional difficulties a person can experience from online harassment (Corcoran, Short, Wheatcroft, Worsley, 2017; Brown, Maple, Short, 2011).

Research which looked into the experiences of LGBT students and the wider experiences of a diverse range of gender and sexual identities confirms the negative effect of online harassment on the mental health of those who are targeted. An NUS survey in 2014 found that one in five lesbian, gay and bisexual students reported at least one form of bullying on campus; many reported that they had to pass as straight to protect themselves from homophobia and transphobia.

RISK OF STUDENTS COMMITTING A CRIMINAL OFFENCE

Some online harassment is clearly deliberate and aggressive. However, this is not always the case. Some researchers suggest that students may be acting without the motivation to commit a criminal offence, and without recognising the severity of their actions or the potential for criminal consequences (Shariff, DeMartini, 2016). This is thought to be the result of students tolerating high levels of risk and abuse, beyond what would normally be considered acceptable, due to the normalisation and acceptance of harassment in the digital realm (Cowie, Myers, 2017).

Where bystanders participate, for example by sending on images designed to humiliate the victim, they can also be classed as perpetrators, yet may not recognise themselves as participating in harassment (Childnet International, continuous).

However, there are forms of online activity that could amount to criminal offences under a range of laws. Ignorance of the consequences and the potential seriousness of online bullying or harassment is not a defence; students are accountable to the law. It is therefore important that students can recognise the severity of their actions, particularly when they go beyond immoral behaviour and move towards illegal behaviour. (Shariff, De Martini, 2016).

This highlights the importance of universities facilitating students to recognise and challenge these normalised behaviours, and raise awareness of the potential consequences of inappropriate behaviour online.

Because of the **embarrassment, humiliation and fear that victims experience** [from revenge porn], it's very hard to quantify how many students are affected by image-based abuse (otherwise known as revenge pornography) as, like domestic abuse, the majority of cases remain unreported. There is increasing evidence which demonstrates the terrible psychological consequences of revenge pornography and the devastating impact it can have on a victim's emotional and mental wellbeing. **Universities must better engage with the issue, raise awareness of how to report and better support students,** as posting intimate images of non-consenting others along with identifying information leads not only to humiliation and embarrassment but could also increase **the potential for further online and offline harassment, which could also be illegal.**

Professor Emma Bond, Director of Research and Head of Graduate School, Professor of Socio-Technical Research, University of Suffolk

Other researchers have suggested that some students may be fully aware that their actions are harmful, and in some cases criminal, but are confident that they will not be called to account, perhaps due to the increased sense of anonymity that the internet provides because such actions are not always reported.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS' CURRENT AND FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

As part of preparing students for employment, including fitness to practise training as part of professional qualifications (such as nursing, teaching, social work), universities should encourage students to consider how their online presence may affect their future career. Research shows that not all students recognise that certain online behaviours or content may be considered inappropriate by employers and could pose a risk to their career prospects.[7] This highlights the importance of talking to students about their privacy settings and raising awareness of the potential consequences on future employment or careers arising from any content that students, or their friends and acquaintances, may post.

It is also worth noting that inappropriate online behaviour could also impact on any employment and other activities while a student is on university placements, internships, entrepreneurships, studying abroad or on a joint international degree.

For more information about the impact of online harassment, see the *literature review.*

7. There have been a number of high-profile incidents where past (sometimes from as long as five years ago) tweets, pictures and posts etc have caused employment to be terminated

LEGAL CONTEXT

A range of legal considerations necessitate universities taking the issue of online harassment seriously.

A university's obligations and duty of care

Online bullying and harassment are never acceptable. Such an abuse of power is categorically at odds with the sector's values and the standards of behaviour expected in the sector.

Although universities do not have the same statutory duty for safeguarding their students as colleges and schools have, they do have a duty of care to ensure that students have a safe environment in which they can live, work and study. This duty of care applies whether a student is physically on campus, in student accommodation, undertaking placements or overseas study, participating in sports or social activities away from campus, or studying online (UUK, 2017).

These obligations arise out of contract law, a duty of care at common law, and legislation that places statutory duties on universities to safeguard the interests of their students in particular circumstances, including the _Equality Act 2010_. This Act makes it unlawful for a university to discriminate, harass or victimise prospective, registered or former students on the grounds of a characteristic protected by the Act. Specifically, the Public Sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act requires higher education institutions to have 'due regard to':

- **eliminate discrimination**, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act

- **advance equality of opportunity** between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

- **foster good relations** between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

Although there is no legislation at present that sets out a distinct and formal statutory duty on universities to safeguard their students (given that many students are adults), the legal framework created by the legislation and the underlying general duty of care created towards staff and students at common law do require universities to be mindful of the risks of breaching this duty.

ADDITIONAL STATUTORY OBLIGATIONS

· Ensure students' human rights (Human Rights Act 1998).

· Ensure students are not placed at risk of foreseeable harm (Health and Safety at Work Act 1974).

· Undertake specific obligations to ensure that students are not radicalised (Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015).

· Ensure that students' data rights are protected (Data Protection Act 2018).

The extent of a university's duties in respect of student wellbeing has not been tested in the courts: whether a duty of care arises, or has been breached, will depend on the facts of a case. However, as the law in this area is continually developing, there is the potential for a precedent to be established in the future.

In England and Wales, the courts have applied a three-stage test to establish whether a legal duty of care exists. The test is as follows:

- on the facts, the harm suffered by the claiming party would have been reasonably foreseeable to the defendant; and
- there was a relationship of proximity between the defendant and the claiming party (often called the assumption of responsibility); and
- on the facts of the case it is fair, just and reasonable for the court to impose a duty of care on the defendant party in favour of the claimant.[8]

If a university fails to meet its duty to its students, there is a significant risk of a successful claim for damages arising out of that provider's negligence.

Central to the question of whether it is fair and reasonable to impose a duty will be the proximity of the relationship between the university in question and its affected student or students, and the foreseeability of any injury. A further consideration will be whether the university discharged its duty to the standard of care expected.

In many cases the proximity of the relationship will depend on the relationship between the university and the student and the nature of the service being provided. Clearly, the extent of any duty will be greater where the service offered is owned or controlled by a student's university.

In most situations, the standard of care expected of a university will be that of an ordinary and competent higher education institution; and those working with students may be judged against the skills of an ordinary skilled individual exercising

8. See the judgement of Lord Bridge in the case of Caparo v Dickman [1990] 2 AC 605

that skill. In practice this will involve a university training staff to be able to act appropriately in situations where they become aware of facts that reasonably suggest that a student or students are in difficulty or at risk of foreseeable harm.

The common law duty of care covers access to, and provision of online services or content, and this is reflected in digital policies (HM Government, 2019).

While the institution–student contract legally binds the university to a duty of care related to the provision of education and support services, institutions also need to be aware that there is a risk in providing further services, such as digital platforms. Failing to ensure that these facilities are monitored may potentially expose students to online contacts or material that might negatively affect their mental health and show a university to be in breach of its duty of care.

Should a student become the subject of abuse, or at risk of abuse, within an online environment provided by their university, the institution needs to be able to demonstrate due diligence, for example through the use of well-defined acceptable usage policies, appropriate monitoring approaches and effective staff training to recognise and support those students who are at risk.

The institution also needs to be aware of the potential impact of online abuse and how it might support students whose wellbeing has been affected by such abuse along with the need to investigate and take action where appropriate.

It is unlikely an institution would be seen to be liable if they provided an online service, for example, campus-wide Wi-Fi, that is used by a student to abuse another where the university was reasonably unaware of that risk. However, an institution may be seen as liable if a student had disclosed issues related to image-based abuse where an abuser shared images of them with peers in a class and the university had not taken steps to ensure the wellbeing of the reporting student. In this scenario, it is likely that the matter would be a breach of the criminal law and the university would be advised to signpost the reporting student to report the matter to the police or pursue an action under the *Protection from Harassment Act 1997.* The university may also have parallel powers under its own internal procedures to consider disciplinary action and precautionary measures pending the outcome of any formal process. In this case, if the reporting student is expected to attend a class where the responding student is present pending an investigation, this may also be an actionable breach of duty on the part of the university if it adversely impacts on the reporting student's safety, wellbeing or mental health.

It should be noted that the extent of the duty placed on a university for a student may be increased where that student is regarded as a vulnerable person. This could be because a student is under 18 and regarded as a minor, or due to a student's mental health or physical disabilities.[9]

9. As an example, The Care Act 2014 defines a vulnerable adult as one who:
· has needs for care and support (whether or not the authority is meeting any of those needs),
· is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, and
· as a result of those needs is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it.

Universities that emphasise in their policies and procedures that their duty of care toward students extends to any activities that take place outside of university owned or controlled spaces, including the 'virtual world', are likely to be in a better position to support reporting and responding students.

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND THE LAW

Although online harassment is not a specific criminal offence in UK law, there are criminal laws in the UK that apply in terms of harassment, defamation, stalking, threatening violence, and menacing and malicious communications.

Across the UK, each nation has adopted a range of offences that can be used to deal with online abuse. Legislative acts, not just those concerning harassment and violence, are often applied to incidents of online harassment, including those relating to the improper use of communications, along with common law offences such as breach of the peace.

A summary of the relevant legislation across the UK is set out below (the list is not exhaustive).

RELEVANT LEGISLATIVE ACROSS THE UK

Obscene Publications Act 1959

Public Order Act 1986

Malicious Communications Act 1988

Computer Misuse Act 1990

Protection from Harassment Act 1997

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Protection from Abuse Act 2001 (Scotland)

Communications Act 2003

Sexual Offences Act 2003

The Law of Defamation

Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009

Equality Act 2010

Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 (upskirting became a criminal offence under this Act)

Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 (covers revenge pornography in England and Wales)

Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm Act 2016 (covers revenge pornography in Scotland)

Justice Act Northern Ireland 2016 (covers revenge pornography)[10]

Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 (makes psychological and domestic abuse and controlling behavior a crime)

Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019

Draft Domestic Abuse Bill (England, 2019)

10. As of May 2019, Northern Ireland remains the only jurisdiction to have no specific provisions in place for upskirting.

POLICY CONTEXT

The UK government adopts the legal principle that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. In 2018, it stated its intention to make the UK the safest place to be online by introducing legislation to cover the full range of online harms (HM Government, 2019).

The government is clear that abusive and threatening behaviour online is unacceptable. *The Digital Charter* (HM Government, 2017, 2018) is a rolling programme of work to agree and implement norms and rules for the online world in the UK. In April 2019, the government published its *Online Harms White Paper* (HM Government, 2019). This sets out the government's internet safety strategy and plans for a package of measures to support users in the UK to stay safe online. The strategy considers the responsibilities of companies to their users, the use of technical solutions to prevent online harms and government's role in supporting users.

The government also intends to develop an online media literacy strategy, which will be devised in consultation with stakeholders, including major digital, broadcast and news media organisations, the education sector, researchers and civil society. This strategy is aimed at developing a coordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education and awareness for children, young people and adults.

The government has also pledged to respond to the emerging challenge of **online hate crime**. This can occur if the abuse is perceived by the reporting student to have been related to their identity.

In a recent survey of young people in the UK, 62% of participants reported they had received nasty private messages via social media, of which 42% were hate-based comments on the grounds of race, sexuality or gender identity.[11]

Online harassment is often rooted in societal prejudices and discrimination that occurs against those with protected characteristics, as such, abuse online can constitute a hate crime if its perceived by the victim to have been related to their identity.

The government's revised hate crime action plan (2018) placed greater emphasis on the need to better understand and respond to the emerging challenge of online hate crime, and committed the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in England to publish a white paper including legislative and other measures to tackle online hate crime and other harms that occur online.

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11. Ditch the Label (2014) The Wireless Report: How Young People Between the Ages of 13–25 Engage with Smartphone Technology and Naked Photos

Approaches across the home nations

In England, the government has made online safety a compulsory part of the computing curriculum in primary and secondary schools (DfE, 2015) and more recently, has made steps to modernise relationships and sex education (RSE)[12] and to place it on a statutory footing,[13] bringing in new topics for discussion such as online harassment, sexting and online grooming among pupils of an increasingly young age.

It should not, however, be assumed that all children will have accessed or engaged with online safety education at primary and secondary level before entering university: provision may vary. This applies not only within the UK, but also to the EU and internationally. Academies and free schools are exempt from following the national curriculum and parents and carers have the right to withdraw their children from sex education, with new rights for children to 'opt in' as they approach age 16 (Long, 2019). Schools are also allowed some flexibility in their approach to teaching the new English RSE curriculum, including for faith schools to teach within the tenets of their faith (ibid).

There is also evidence to suggest that some schools may face challenges regarding the more resource-intensive aspects of education and training (Phippen, 2019, p. 23). For example, 43% of schools in England and Northern Ireland participating in a 2018 self-review of online safety practices had undertaken no staff training around online safety (ibid, p.11).

The *2019 Strategic Guidance* from the higher education minister to the OfS highlights the importance of the OfS continuing to work with the sector to address harassment and hate crime. The OfS has provided match funding for 45 universities specifically targeted at addressing hate crime and online harassment. In addition, Advance HE was appointed as an external evaluator to work with project teams in universities to support and enable learning, exchange and dissemination of innovative and good practice and to identify 'what works' in safeguarding students. A summative evaluation report on the outcomes of the evaluation of the round two projects was published in June 2019.[14]

12. Previously named sex and relationships education (SRE)
13. Children and Social Work Act 2017, section 34
14. Office for Students (2018) Evaluation of safeguarding students catalyst fund projects. Summative Evaluation Report

In Scotland, the Scottish Government has developed a national approach to anti-bullying for young people.

The Scottish Government has partnered with several charitable organisations to produce specific guidance for schools on how to address bullying. For example, it has worked with the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) to produce _Addressing inclusion: Effectively challenging racism in schools_ (Scottish Government, 2019) and _Hate Online: A guide to responding to online hate speech and hate crime_ (CRER, 2016) to explicitly tackle types of bullying occurring in online spaces.

Since May 2017, the Scottish Government has also been working with the Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) Campaign[15] and others to address prejudice-based bullying and discrimination in schools through the LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group. It is currently implementing the working group's recommendations into the school curriculum by updating its guidance for teachers, _Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education in Schools, 2014_ (Scottish Government, 2014). All work is expected to be completed by 2021.

15. www.tiecampaign.co.uk

In Wales, the Welsh Government has undertaken a reform of the curriculum, which is due to be completed by 2021. The curriculum is currently being changed in several ways, including in the areas of ICT and sex and relationships education and online safety.

The ICT steering group responsible for developing new curriculum recommendations in this area has advocated for the inclusion of a statutory digital literacy framework from foundation phase through to post-16 education for Welsh students (Welsh Government, 2013). In addition, the Sex and Relationships Education Expert Panel has highlighted the importance of ensuring that lessons relate to activities online as well as offline (Welsh Government, 2017).
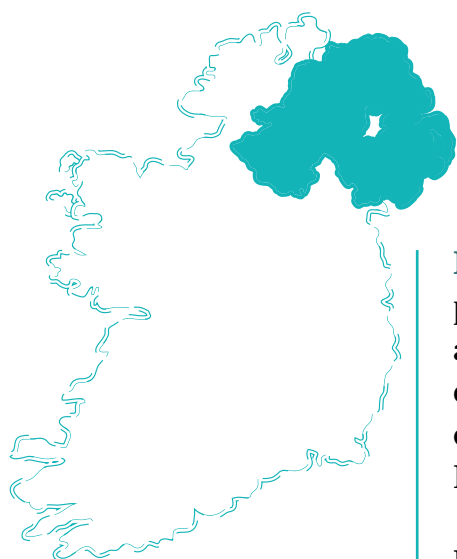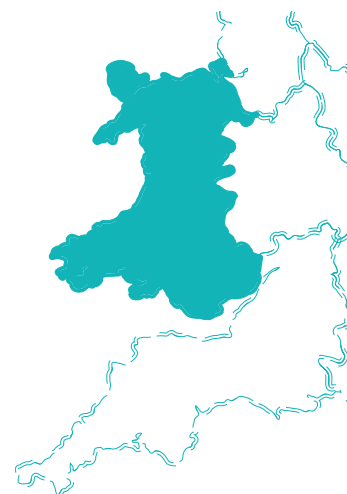
In Northern Ireland, the government has similarly provided guidance to schools to support them to keep pupils and the wider school community safe online and to prioritise online safety within the school's preventative education curriculum and overall safeguarding policy (Department for Education NI, 2016).

Northern Ireland also requires all grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address relationships and sexuality education (RSE) within the curriculum, but the specific curriculum is not legislated. Recently, the Government of Northern Ireland has updated its guidance to better support schools in planning and developing approaches to teaching controversial and sensitive issues at whole-school and classroom levels. This includes explicit guidance to support young people to keep themselves safer in the digital world (Department for Education NI, 2015.

TENSIONS BETWEEN FREEDOM OF SPEECH, SAFETY AND CENSORSHIP

Universities have a particular responsibility to ensure freedom of intellectual enquiry and expression within the law, while simultaneously encouraging tolerance of diverse views and beliefs. These commitments must be balanced alongside the need to foster good relations and safeguard students. This necessitates close working with key groups both on and off campus, of which the students' union is an important partner.

Freedom of expression: A guide for higher education providers and students' unions in England and Wales, published in 2019 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) provides a clear framework for universities and students' unions to work within, and additional clarity on the contentious issue of hate speech. It also sets out a clear benchmark of good practice for how universities can work to uphold free speech alongside requirements to safeguard students.

From UUK's *literature review*, it is also evident that some staff remain concerned about the potential impact of internet security on academic freedom and perceive web filtering as problematic, particularly since the introduction of the 'prevent' duty. However, there is also a view in higher education to suggest that a more appropriate approach would be to shift the focus away from IT safety and re-frame the narrative by focusing on an institution's pastoral duty of care. This would recognise that exceptions can always be made for viewing suspect content online for legitimate academic purposes. Sector experts and students themselves can assist institutions in successfully re-framing the conversation.[16]

Notwithstanding this, UUK has been advised by Jisc that there is a distinction between 'suspect online content' and 'illegal online content'. Jisc encourages universities to use a minimum filtering level of illegal content (such as illegal pornography) and malicious sites (such as those that can cause infections of IT equipment). By doing this, researchers can be adequately protected.

16. JISC email correspondence with Universities UK, 23 July 2017

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CURRENT PRACTICE

Universities are becoming increasingly concerned about online harassment and many are proactively engaged in developing interventions to prevent and respond to online harassment, promote online welfare, and foster respectful and inclusive environments in their institutions. This section references evidence of current activity from UUK's research to assess the sector's progress in implementing the strategic framework set out in *Changing the culture* (UUK, 2016) and draws on examples of innovative projects developed by universities with support from OfS catalyst funding.

OUTCOMES FROM UUK RESEARCH ON SECTOR PROGRESS

Although awareness of online harassment has increased across the higher education sector, evidence of institutional policies and practices in this area is largely undocumented. The effectiveness of interventions also remains limited. However, in 2017, UUK, in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, now OfS) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), initiated a qualitative study to assess the sector's progress in implementing the Changing the culture framework. The outcomes were published in *Changing the culture: one year on* (UUK, 2018).

The study found that the participating universities had adopted different approaches to addressing online harassment. Many did this through general student misconduct approaches, or through other approaches such as acceptable use, dignity and respect policies, or disciplinary codes of practice. A number of universities also recognised that their policies required updating (UUK, 2018, pp. 44–45). The study also found that only one institution had a policy for sexual misconduct that included a specific online strand.[17]

17. See the Online harassment case studies to support the sector in developing and implementing specific social media and online harassment policies as well as integrating standards of online behaviour and tackling online harassment into existing institutional policies.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

Online misconduct themes in preventative campaigns around harassment and hate (many of these campaigns were themselves online)

Clear policies on online misconduct and sanctions, although the title and scope of these policies varied hugely

Online misconduct appeared to be treated in the same way as offline misconduct (equally seriously)

RESPONSIVE ACTIVITIES

Training for staff and students for online safeguarding

Policy developed to safeguard students studying online and by distance learning

Consideration of how international students across multiple jurisdictions could be supported

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Attention was also drawn to the complexities of addressing this form of harassment – for example, one incident could involve multiple responding students. It was also noted that social media formats and the functionality of these developed rapidly, which meant it could be challenging to keep policies in step with these changes.

Some universities reported that when online harassment did occur, it could result in the availability of written evidence such as screenshots of messages, which could make disciplinary proceedings more straightforward. There were, however, exceptions to this. For instance, some social media apps deleted content shortly after sharing. This has implications for guidance for students affected, such as advising to take a screenshot as soon as possible.

Several universities noted that where students were completing professional vocational degrees, the fitness to practise education associated with these courses provided a clear source of information on what constituted online misconduct.

Alongside the qualitative study, in 2018, UUK developed a survey to provide a mechanism for universities to assess their own progress in safeguarding students as well as informing progress across the sector.

The survey found that reporting in person or by phone were the most common mechanisms used by students to report online harassment. Just under half of the participating institutions reported that they had an option for students to make an anonymous report regarding online harassment. This is significant, because research shows that the ability to make an anonymous report is particularly important in the case of online harassment (Chen et al, 2015).

The survey also found that 77% of participating institutions collect, record and store data in relation to online harassment. This is important, because some researchers have argued that the lack of evidence of effective policy and procedures in this area has arisen because some institutions may have adopted the approach that online harassment and bullying are 'pranks' and not to be taken seriously (Cowie, Myers, 2016b).

EVIDENCE FROM CATALYST-FUNDED PROJECTS

Aligned with *Changing the culture*, HEFCE and subsequently OfS provided funding to support universities in England to identify and support good practice in addressing harassment, through three calls for catalyst funding. A small number of the projects in the second round focused on developing innovative approaches to revenge pornography and online stalking or bullying.

To support learning and help establish 'what works' from the projects, OfS appointed independent evaluators from Advance HE. The evaluation of the projects revealed the following insights.

- Typically, online harassment is covered by policies on social media conduct and acceptable use of IT.

- Reporting rates of online harassment among students remain low. This is thought to be the result of low levels of understanding of what constitutes online harassment, and because online harassment has to some extent become normalised.

- Some victims of gender-based and transphobic harassment and online sexual harassment did not think it was 'worth reporting'. This appeared to be related to a lack of visibility of what would happen to address the harassment if a report were made.

In responding to these challenges, project leaders highlighted the following.

- It is important that universities work with students, including those engaged in harassment, to support them in recognising inappropriate behaviour.

- There is a need for enhanced training in digital civility and digital consent among students and ensuring that students know how to manage their digital footprint. For example, one university had used a commercial digital civility survey.[18]

- The importance of clarifying key definitions for students using real-life examples was felt to raise awareness of inappropriate behaviour. Ensuring staff were informed too was also considered important.

- The use of 'report and support' web-based resources was helpful in raising awareness of online harassment among students.

- If it was difficult to engage students in participating in an initiative to raise awareness about online harassment, for example in a survey, more innovative approaches could be useful, such as theatre, film or commissioning students to produce content as part of their coursework. Where appropriate, the outputs such as a video could then be used by the university or adapted and used by other universities.

- Working collaboratively with students' unions was also considered key to encouraging student engagement.

- Developing partnerships and collaborating with local and national organisations to provide pathways to support and additional training were also said to be helpful. Examples of relevant organisations included the Internet Watch Foundation, Marie Collins Foundation, Revenge Porn Helpline and Cifas (fraud prevention).

- Before embarking on any awareness-raising campaigns, it was important for an institution to have policies, practices and infrastructure in place. This would ensure that the institution could respond to a potential increase in demand for services as a result of a campaign.

- Where a project was academically driven, at the end of the project it was important to consider how to embed the outcomes into institutional policies, processes, systems and governance.

The evaluation by Advance HE also revealed that there was a lack of knowledge and guidance in relation to current practice and regulation around online safety within higher education. In response to this, the University of Suffolk has developed an online safeguarding self-review tool for universities that is freely available for any institution to use.[19]

18. This is an index which measures a person's lifetime exposure to online risks. For more information see: https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/digital-skills/digital-civility?activetab=dci_reports:primaryr6

19. https://www.uos.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Higher-Education-Online-Safeguarding-Self-Review-Tool%202019.pdf

5:
PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the evidence considered, UUK has developed a series of principles to underpin institutional strategies to prevent and respond to online harassment and to promote online welfare. These principles build upon the *Changing the culture* strategic framework (UUK, 2016) and include additional principles derived from the desk research to support institutional practice, and lessons learned from existing practice, including UUK's assessment of progress and the catalyst-funded projects in England.

These principles and recommendations can also help universities to fulfil their obligations under the public sector equality duty, in particular, to show due regard to the elimination of unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation of people based on their protected characteristics and other relevant legislation.

Each principle is accompanied with recommendations for suggested actions. These have been drawn from research studies, effective practice in schools, current projects in the higher education sector and good practice examples from outside the education sector. The recommendations are primarily aimed at universities but addressing this issue is **everyone's responsibility.**

When developing strategies, policies, interventions or support it is important to ensure that these reflect the diversity of the student cohort such as young and mature students; undergraduates/postgraduates; European and international students; distance or IT students.

Consideration is also needed for the start and end point of the university's relationship with the student, eg an enquirer/applicant through to alumni, given the increasing potential for these groups to engage in online connections and discussions on university owned platforms.

It is also important to be minded to the different learning environments outside the classroom/campus, such as when students engage in study abroad, joint degrees (UK or international), placements, apprenticeships, internships in industry or learning in a professional setting.

PRINCIPLE 1:
SUSTAINED COMMITMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY BY SENIOR LEADERSHIP

The Changing the culture taskforce recommended that all university leaders should afford priority status to tackling violence against women, harassment and hate crime (including online acts) and dedicate appropriate resources to this work. The ownership of policy and interventions by senior leaders is important in helping to influence cultural change across an institution and in challenging behavioural norms.

University governing bodies have a responsibility to receive assurance that adequate provision has been made for the general welfare of students. In support of this, UUK's taskforce also recommended that individual universities provide their governing bodies with regular progress reports on all forms of harassment, including online incidents. This could include reporting on prevalence, including trend analysis, types of incident, preventative and responsive measures, and outcomes.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1 If not already doing so, universities transfer sponsorship, ownership and accountability for tackling online harassment to the senior leadership team.

2 To support the oversight of safeguarding issues, universities provide regular progress reports on incidents and outcomes of all forms of harassment, including those occurring online to university courts and governing bodies.

PRINCIPLE 2: A WHOLE-INSTITUTION APPROACH

Universities are encouraged to include tackling online harassment as a component of their wider strategic work to tackle harassment, hate incidents/crime and gender-based violence across their institution.

UUK's taskforce highlighted the importance of adopting a university-wide approach, that is, a cohesive strategy that is genuinely cross institutional. This approach should involve all parts of the university, students' unions and external agencies.

Evidence from existing practice shows that having executive-level responsibility and accountability for decision-making can be effective in facilitating a whole-institution approach. This will also help ensure consistency in responses to students and is likely to be more effective in both reducing incidents and effecting cultural change.

A whole-institution approach will also support the embedding of activities to tackle harassment within an institution's governance systems, structures, policies, practices and processes. This has the benefit of supporting the sustainability of initiatives and maintaining their place on the institutional agenda.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

3   Universities incorporate efforts to tackle online harassment as part of wider strategic work to tackle all forms of harassment and hate incidents/crime.

4   The senior leadership team to involve stakeholders from across the institution in developing, maintaining and reviewing all elements of a whole-institution approach. In addition to senior leaders, stakeholders could include students, students' unions, relevant academics and professional staff.

PRINCIPLE 3: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Although evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to prevent and respond to online harassment within the higher education sector is limited, there is evidence that working with students to develop interventions is likely to improve the effectiveness of any results and deliver a greater positive impact (Chen et al, 2015). Engaging students as equal stakeholders in the development of policies and strategies, and the design and implementation of training, along with evaluating the impact, can also help raise awareness and understanding of online harassment and facilitate buy-in across the whole student body.

Ninety percent of institutions in the second round of catalyst-funded projects in England reported that enlisting the student body had improved the delivery and reception of projects. Working with students also meant that institutions were better positioned to address specific student concerns (OfS, 2019).

In developing interventions, universities may also find it beneficial to seek advice from survivors on what may constitute a successful outcome. In doing this, taking account of intersectionality will also be important; that is, interconnected categorisations such as race or gender as they apply to a given individual or group which can create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage.

Universities may also wish to consider providing information on what constitutes online harassment to prospective students as well as registered students. It may be reassuring for prospective students to hear of arrangements in place to ensure their wellbeing and safety before arriving at university. Institutions engaged with catalyst-funded projects reported that initiatives to raise awareness of harassment were often more effective if disseminated at the earliest possible contact with students. This included the use of pre-arrival materials for prospective students (Baird, 2019).

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

5   Students are meaningfully and consistently involved in the development, execution and assessment of interventions to prevent and respond to online harassment.

6   Where possible, universities engage with survivors to shape their work.

7   Universities provide early information to students, including prospective students, on arrangements to tackle all forms of harassment, including online harassment, and the potential consequences of inappropriate behaviour online.

PRINCIPLE 4: PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

As with other forms of harassment, there is no single solution to preventing online harassment. It needs to be regarded as an evolving and ongoing issue. This is particularly important with online harassment due to continuous technological advancements.

UUK has identified a series of actions that the sector may wish to consider which together offer an effective approach to the prevention of online harassment and to supporting the embedding of a zero-tolerance culture across all institutional activities.

The local and community context (in terms of the nature and types of incident) also needs to be considered to effectively and appropriately tailor approaches to prevention.

Update or develop policies and practices and embed them across the university

Universities will have a range of policies in place to address harassment and hate incidents/crimes – the terminology for these will vary across institutions. Policy, informed by multi-stakeholder input (including students and external stakeholders) should define specific, online elements of bullying and harassment and specify how the university will respond to online bullying and harassment concerns. It is recommended that the definition of harassment should be in line with that used in the Equality Act 2010.[20] Policies should also explain how digital technology plays a role in online harassment.

In terms of terminology, UUK recommends the use of 'online harassment' as opposed to 'cyberbullying' to highlight that an incident that could be considered as 'banter' by some students could in fact constitute harassment or a hate crime.

Regulations for students or codes of conduct should state the university's commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of students and highlight the behaviours, both off- and online, that are expected of students as part of the university community. Regulations and codes should make clear the consequences and sanctions for failing to adhere to these standards.

All policies should be clear, accessible and communicated to students. To encourage more students to come forward, universities may also wish to be explicit in stating that internal investigations rely on a balance of probability level of evidence, rather than beyond reasonable doubt, as is the case for criminal levels of justice.

20. For further information see the glossary (Annexe A).

All policies should be regularly reviewed and updated, ideally by input from a range of stakeholders, and adapted to reflect any emerging trends and disciplinary data. Consideration should also be given to how, and if, policies work when a student engages in study abroad, joint degrees (UK or international), placements, apprenticeships or internships in industry.

Given the wide range of policies relating to students and staff (such as policies on bullying and harassment, equality and diversity, codes of conduct, acceptable use, and IT usage), it is important to ensure that these are joined-up across the institution.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

8 Universities consider adopting the term 'online harassment' in relevant policies and make clear to students and staff that what could be referred to as 'cyberbullying' could also constitute harassment or a hate crime.

9 Partnership agreements, such as the student contract or code of conduct, include expected behaviours in the online sphere and acknowledge that disciplinary sanctions will be applied in the same way as misconduct incidents that take place offline.

10 Universities take steps to ensure that policies and procedures, including codes of conduct policies, IT usage and anti-bullying and harassment policies for both students and staff, are joined up across the institution.

11 Universities regularly review the effectiveness of their existing policies, for example by using the University of Suffolk's higher education online safeguarding self-review tool.

University of Leicester has a suite of online modules to deliver hate crime training to staff and students. These modules are free and include real-life case studies and good practice recommendations designed to shape improved levels of knowledge and understanding: Engaging with diversity; Preventing hate and extremism; Supporting victims of hate crime; Tackling religiously motivated hate; Hate crime in higher education; and Hate crime on public transport. The modules can be accessed at www.centreforhatestudies.com

University of Suffolk has developed the higher education online safeguarding self-review tool, a checklist on policies and practices.

The **University of Exeter Law School** has developed a guide for Exeter law students on 'How to Use Social Media Responsibly.

SEE THE FULL CASE STUDIES

Raise awareness of online harassment and its impact

Universities, working with students and students' unions, should consider how to raise awareness and increase understanding of online harassment among all students. Engaging in discussions with students on online harassment, including when actions could potentially be criminal and the impact this can have on both the reporting and the responding student, are critical elements in preventing and addressing harmful behaviours.

University staff can also experience online harassment. Having a zero-tolerance culture that extends to staff and their activities online as well as offline is also important.

University can be a key transitional period between adolescence and adulthood. The influence that the behaviour of university staff can have on the behaviour of students is an important factor to consider when tackling online harassment among students. Encouraging staff to model expected behaviours, speak about online harassment and to offer solutions that support the emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of students will help to increase students' confidence to report incidents. Furthermore, having a joined-up approach across staff and students will help facilitate a change in culture across the university.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

12 Working with survivors, students, and students' unions, universities explore how to raise awareness and increase understanding of online harassment, including when online behaviours may be illegal.

13 Universities raise awareness of online harassment with staff and extend a zero-tolerance culture in terms of their activities in the online sphere. Universities could also foster staff as role models in championing appropriate online behaviour.

Part of **Middlesex University's 'Changing the Culture Initiative'** has involved exploring ways to embed this agenda as part of existing curriculum frameworks while utilising student project work to disseminate to a wider student audience through campaigns and awareness-raising activity. Student work is collated in various campaign books, such as this one for online harassment.

Initial findings from the **University of Bedfordshire's cyber awareness programme** indicate that although there is tolerance of negative behaviours, it is possible to prompt changes in attitudes so that perceptions and responses to online harassment change.

SEE THE FULL CASE STUDIES

Cultivate links with schools and further education colleges

Given that research shows that online harassment occurs across the lifespan of education and that behaviours at university can begin in schools (Pörhölä, 2016), having a joined-up response across all stages of education is likely to be important to achieve real cultural change in higher education.

The continuing developments to promote online safety and digital literacy in schools across the UK imply that it is timely for universities to cultivate links with those in the primary, secondary and further education sectors. This could also facilitate the sharing of expertise and good practice around interventions at all levels of education.

This is reinforced by the feedback from the catalyst-funded project teams, who found that for real cultural change to happen, conversations and interventions around harassment should begin before students enter higher education.

Further research is needed to understand what would work in universities' interactions with schools and further education colleges to support earlier discussions taking place with young people.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

14 Where appropriate, universities engage with local school communities and further education colleges to support a joined-up approach in tackling online harassment and to share effective practice.

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of prevention activities

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of prevention interventions are vital steps in reducing incidents of online harassment in the long run. It is also an important way for institutions to understand whether interventions are working effectively for different groups of students (eg women, ethnic minority women, and non-binary people) and whether there is any underreporting by certain groups which seems unusual. In this way institutions can also assess how they are showing due regard to the public sector equality duty, and where necessary, can adapt an approach to ensure that the institution meets the needs of the whole student population.

The university should explore how best to measure the impact of prevention activities. As with the development of interventions, enlisting the help of the student body to develop impact measures is likely to improve the success and reception of the measures.

Data from evaluations can be used to support learning in terms of 'what works' and to inform the design of future interventions.

Making the findings visible to students and staff will also be important in helping to create a positive and respectful culture, and an environment where students understand that online harassment will not be tolerated.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

15 If not already doing so, universities monitor and evaluate the impact of prevention activities and use the data to inform the design of future interventions.

PRINCIPLE 5: RESPONSE MECHANISMS AND STRATEGIES

Although prevention is critical, having an effective response to online harassment is also necessary. This may include the need to carry out an investigation and to take action.

As with prevention, the local and community context will be relevant in terms of determining the approaches to be taken.

It is also important that institutions recognise that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' response which can be applied to every case. There are a variety of factors which may differ from case to case including whether the case is recent or historic or whether the incident may also constitute a criminal offence. In terms of the latter, universities are encouraged to refer to the UUK/Pinsent Mason's *Guidance on how to handle alleged student misconduct which may also constitute a criminal offence*. This guidance makes recommendations about the process that can be followed and the factors to consider such as:

• the provision of information, support and advice for both reporting and responding students; this applies irrespective of whether an internal disciplinary process or criminal process is used

• referral to the police

• precautionary action

• internal disciplinary procedures and conducting investigations

Universities in England and Wales will also wish to consider guidance from the OIA: this includes *The Good Practice Framework* and a briefing note, *Complaints involving sexual misconduct and harassment* (OIA, 2018). For universities in Scotland the guidance should be considered alongside *The Scottish Higher Model Complaints Handling Procedure* available from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

The rest of this section sets out a range of activities that together enable a systematic, institutional and joined-up response to online harassment.

Clearly signposted, visible and accessible mechanisms to report online harassment, including anonymous routes

Reporting mechanisms

Having a visible and robust reporting mechanism was highlighted by UUK's taskforce as a vital component in delivering an effective response. Given the sensitivity and emotions involved in the disclosure of any form of harassment, having a range of reporting options from which a student can choose may facilitate more students in coming forward to report.

In the first round of OfS catalyst projects, 17 of the projects focused on improving or developing new reporting mechanisms for students. These were mainly web-based and/or through apps. Many of the reporting mechanisms were also aligned with improved support for students reporting harassment, with facilities to direct students to relevant internal and external support and resources.

Options to report anonymously

UUK's survey indicated that a number of institutions also offered an option for students to report harassment anonymously. From a student's perspective, this can be incredibly helpful: studies show that some students prefer to make an anonymous report, for example if they wish to reduce the risk of retaliation or do not want to divulge something about their own online activities (Chen et al, 2015).

Anonymous reporting can also provide an indication of the types of incident that have occurred. This information may be useful for an institution in determining whether further training is required to address a specific issue or to develop a specific campaign. This information can also support an institution in monitoring the impact of current campaigns and initiatives and provide an option to communicate the support that is available without a student having to go through a formal reporting process.

However, any option to report anonymously should be accompanied with **clear information on the extent to which an institution can investigate and can act on such reports**. Providing clarity on what action the university can take in relation to different types of reports will also help to manage student expectations. Depending on the information that the student provides (by choice or by limiting the anonymous reporting system), it may not be possible to take any action, or only limited action, in response to a report since without independent witnesses and evidence, there is likely to be insufficient evidence to proceed.

Managing risks

From an institution's perspective, it is **important to have clearly defined processes in place for managing risks when anonymous reports are permitted.** While the amount of information available may be limited, institutions should ensure that anonymous reports are reviewed in a structured way to ensure that any personal or individual, community or university risks are identified, and appropriate action is taken.

It is also important to ensure that any personal data collected on students or staff is held in accordance with data protection regulations. An anonymous reporting system that prevents students providing the identities of the people involved in any harassment will ensure compliance with legal requirements but will prevent a direct action being taken regarding the anonymous report.

A culture where students feel encouraged to report

As well as implementing carefully designed reporting procedures, consideration also needs to be given to increasing the confidence of the reporting student and bystanders to use the system and make a report.

Evidence from the evaluation of the safeguarding catalyst-funded projects indicates that students with protected characteristics are often less confident in reporting incidents. BAME students reported significantly lower levels of confidence than White students (Baird, 2019, p.55).

Initiatives to drive cultural change should help to raise awareness of unacceptable behaviour and create an environment in which students feel safe and empowered to report an incident. Effective reporting procedures will underpin this and support both the reporting and responding students and give students confidence in their institution's ability to respond.

The provision of clear information to students on the steps the university will take in different situations including carrying out an investigation and, if appropriate, invoking disciplinary proceedings, may also improve students' confidence levels to report. Ensuring staff are trained, knowledgeable and understand the issues is also likely to improve reporting rates.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

16 If not already doing so, universities ensure that students have access to a range of accessible mechanisms to make a disclosure or report online harassment. Universities may also wish to consider offering an option for a student to make an anonymous report, taking account of any risks this may entail and ensuring compliance with data protection legislation.

Recording and storing data

Having effective reporting systems in place will also improve the institution's ability to record data efficiently, which will support enhanced monitoring and evaluation of policies and processes.

UUK's Taskforce highlighted the importance **of establishing a systematic, institution-wide approach to recording and collecting data**. This includes recording and documenting all actions and decisions that are taken by the university from the day when the report of the incident is received and until the incident is concluded such as through an internal disciplinary process if required or any criminal proceedings.

The taskforce also drew attention to the benefits of having a centralised point where data is stored. This can enable senior leaders to determine the scale of a problem, track trends, monitor progress and prioritise specific incidents or approaches. It is for universities to determine how they record this sensitive data but recording processes should be robust and consistent across an institution and take account of students with protected characteristics.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

17 Institutions collect data on how online harassment is experienced within their student cohort, and wherever possible, ensure equality monitoring is embedded into reporting mechanisms/systems. This data can then be regularly analysed for key trends particularly around protected characteristics (thus supporting intersectional analysis) and used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the institution's response to online harassment.

Peer-to-peer support networks

Research shows that students are often likely to look to their peers for help before exploring other means of support, and a growing number of universities are establishing peer support or similar programmes in recognition of the essential role that students play in supporting one another on a day-to-day basis while at university. Peer-to-peer learning and mentoring were also identified by those involved in the catalyst-funded projects as one of the most influential ways of engaging students.

Good peer support programmes provide appropriate opportunities to equip students with skills such as active listening, conflict resolution and problem-solving, as well as imbuing an understanding of the support mechanisms available to students and how to access them. Such tools enable students to feel more confident in supporting their peers and ensures those they are supporting have an empathetic and useful interaction. Peer support is a useful means for disseminating empathy and information about the variety of support services available across the student body.

Research demonstrates that the most effective systems seem to be those that are embedded in a whole-school policy (Salmivalli, 2014). Likewise, peer support systems at university level would benefit greatly from being part of a university-wide policy to reduce and prevent bullying and harassment (Cowie, Myers, 2016b).

OUR RECOMMENDATION

18 If not already doing so, universities consider establishing and promoting peer-to-peer programmes and networks as a mechanism for supporting students.

Staff training

The UUK Taskforce emphasised the importance of staff training. The type of training will depend on factors specific to an institution, such as student demographics and size. In some cases, training may involve support from external specialist or partner organisations and/or the police.

Learning from the catalyst-funded projects highlights the importance of ensuring that training for staff is not limited to one group but available to all staff that have contact with students. This will ensure that they are equipped to direct students to relevant support services.

Given the complexities of online harassment, universities may wish to consider specific training for staff in handling disclosures of online safety issues including sexual abuse, revenge pornography, digital identity, the legality and reporting of indecent images, coercive control, harassment and stalking.

Ensuring that staff involved in investigations and disciplinary panels understand online harassment will also mean they will be better placed to identify and respond to incidents of online harassment.

Universities may also wish to consider engaging academic staff (such as criminologists, sociologists and psychologists) to provide subject-specific expertise and knowledge. Examples of the involvement of academic staff in projects can be seen in the second thematic report for the Catalyst-funded projects (Baird, 2019).

OUR RECOMMENDATION

19 Where appropriate, staff are trained to respond effectively to online harassment and use is made of academic expertise to inform the design and evaluation of interventions.

Partnership working and collaboration with outside agencies

The results of UUK's survey and the evaluation of the catalyst-funded projects highlight the benefits of universities working with specialist support services, third sector and national organisations, and the police. This includes access to specialist knowledge for the design and delivery of an intervention, help regarding the language to use, providing expert training for staff and students, and access to helplines such as the Revenge Porn Helpline.

Building links with the wider community can also help institutions to establish formal referral pathways when students need access to professional support, or access to mediation and restorative justice initiatives. Joint work can also promote information-sharing agreements.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

20 Universities collaborate with partners and specialist support services in the development of policies, strategies and interventions, the provision of specialist support to students, and information sharing agreements.

PRINCIPLE 6: PROMOTE ONLINE SAFETY AND WELFARE

Universities as digital gatekeepers

Many people in the UK now use technology routinely to carry out everyday activities. Increasingly, universities also rely on the use of technology. Virtual learning environments (VLEs), digital workspaces and informal online groups are often used by universities to deliver and manage courses, as well as providing a mechanism for communicating with students.

In view of this, universities are digital gatekeepers with responsibility to ensure that students know how to respond and participate in conversations about digital citizenship in a professional space. This could include agreed protocols for using generic channels (such as closed student chat groups or WhatsApp chat groups), the inclusion of e-professionalism in course delivery, and embedding protocols into academic programmes and electronic data interchange (EDI) activities. This will help keep students safe, as well as equipping them to present themselves professionally online when they enter employment.

Universities have a wide range of resources at their disposal to support online safety and digital literacy. Many are highlighted on the UK Safer Internet Centre website and in the list of resources accompanying this guidance.

Universities may also wish to consider adopting the optional questions on the National Student Survey (NSS) that relate to student safety as a way of assessing progress in terms of a student's perception of their safety and wellbeing at university.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

21 Universities, working with students and students' unions, promote the importance of online welfare and safety, and the responsible use of technologies. This could include the provision of opportunities for students to develop their digital skills to foster a safer and more inclusive environment online and build on a student's prior understanding and skills obtained during primary, secondary and further education.

22 Universities consider adopting the optional questions on the NSS related to student safety, as a mechanism to assess progress in improving student perceptions of their safety and wellbeing at university.

The **University of Suffolk** adopted of a whole-university approach to improve online safety for students. This included the use of a commercial 'digital civility' survey to assess the online behaviours of the cohort. This survey provides a useful baseline for reviewing the impact of interventions to improve online safety.

SEE THE FULL CASE STUDY

PRINCIPLE 7:
EVALUATE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND GOOD PRACTICE

Research into the nature and impact of online harassment, as well as investigations into the means to prevent and respond to such behaviour, are a relatively new research field. This reinforces the value of an institution's engagement in its own research to better understand how online harassment is occurring in the institution.

The sector's understanding of this issue and how best to tackle it should be informed by sharing practice on 'what works'. At an institutional level, regular engagement with new evidence and the continuous assessment and evaluation of initiatives will be particularly important, given that social media, and technology more generally, are developing and changing at an extraordinary rate.

The *Online Harms White Paper* (HM Government, 2019) refers to the need to improve the evidence-base of online harms and to support research into developing technological solutions. The regulator (for overseeing the new regulatory framework to improve citizens' safety online) will also work with companies to ensure academics have access to company data to undertake research, and academics will also be brought in to provide further direction to the government.

Establishing a knowledge community within an institution can also be beneficial for those involved in researching, preventing and/or responding to online harassment: this could include academics from relevant fields of study, student support services, and the students' union. A knowledge community could be further enhanced by involving those from the local community and specialist support services.

UUK welcomes the agreement by the OfS to develop a community of practice to enable learning, and the exchange and dissemination of good practice across all forms of harassment (OfS, 2018). This will complement the online Shared Practice Area developed by Anglia Ruskin University, where universities can upload and share resources and other information and allow for the development of increased uniformity of good practice across the sector.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

23 Universities share knowledge and practice both within and across the sector: this could include sharing academic research, student data and good practice initiatives.

6:

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Technology and the online world are taken for granted by many people today. With the reliance on online environments in universities, the higher education community is also now largely online. With this comes a responsibility to ensure that students are equipped with the skills they need so that their experience of technology is positive, for everyone in their community.

This guidance – the first national resource for universities – has set out principles and recommendations to support the sector in preventing and responding to online harassment and to promote online welfare. Having change driven by senior leaders, empowering students and staff with a shared understanding of online harassment, and mobilising students to be part of the solution are all key in addressing this agenda.

It is also clear that the issue is not isolated to higher education but occurs throughout the educational lifespan of a student. This requires action at each stage of the education process and a recognition that responding to online harassment must be everyone's responsibility. This includes challenging emerging behavioural norms where forms of online harassment have become accepted.

UUK's literature review clearly shows that evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in higher education remains limited. It is important for universities and students' unions to share practice across the sector and draw on learning from other sectors such as schools and further education colleges. The Shared Practice Area already established by Anglia Ruskin University provides a platform for this.

By addressing this agenda, UK universities have a significant opportunity to lead the way in changing students' perceptions of how to engage and communicate over the internet. With a community of 2.3 million students and 420,000 staff this can have a far-reaching and positive impact on society.[21]

21. Source: Higher education in facts and figures, 2018 (UUK)

ANNEXE A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Cyberstalking

Repeated and deliberate use of the internet and other electronic communication tools to engage in persistent, unwanted communication intended to frighten, intimidate or harass someone. Cyberstalking may occur solely in the digital realm or may form part of a wider campaign targeting individuals on and offline (Brown, Gibson, Short (2017). Threats are not required for the criminal offence of stalking to be prosecuted.[22]

Cyberstalking behaviours include:

- locating personal information about a victim

- surveillance of the victim

- identity theft, such as subscribing the victim to services or purchasing goods and services in their name

- damaging the reputation of the victim

- electronic sabotage such as spamming and sending viruses

- tricking other internet users into harassing or threatening a victim[23]

Denigration
Also known as: *put-downs*

Sending or posting harmful, untrue or cruel statements about a person to other people.

Domestic violence

Many behaviours that are manifested as part of an abusive relationship may in themselves be criminal law offences, including sexual offences. Domestic violence is defined by the government as 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:

- psychological

- physical

- sexual

- financial

- emotional [24]

The Scottish Government defines domestic abuse as one of a number of forms of gender-based violence, incorporating the five identified types above, and is regarded as a cause and consequence of women's inequality. [25]

Women experience domestic violence disproportionately.

22. https://paladinservice.co.uk/
23. https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/stalking-and-harassment
24. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse
25. http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00454152.pdf

Doxxing

Revealing personal or identifying documents (or docs=dox) or details online about someone without their consent. This can include personal information such as a person's home address, real name, children's names, phone numbers and email address. A violation of a person's privacy, the aim of doxxing is to distress, panic and otherwise cause alarm.[26]

Exclusion

Actions that specifically and intentionally exclude a person from an online group, such as exclusion from a virtual messaging group.

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence refers to violence directed against someone because of their gender and expectations of their role in a society or culture. Women and non-binary people experience gender-based violence disproportionately but men can also experience it.

Harassment

The criminal law sets out offences regarding harassment under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (amended by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012). These offences require that a course of conduct, which means at least two occasions (including speech and online harassment) amounting to harassment or stalking, have taken place. Harassment is prohibited, although not defined, but includes causing the other person alarm or distress.

Harassment under the Equality Act 2010

Under the Equality Act 2010, harassment is unwanted behaviour which makes a person feel offended, intimidated or humiliated. There are three distinct types of harassment under the Equality Act:

1. harassment related to one or more 'relevant protected characteristic' (age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity).

2. sexual harassment

3. less favourable treatment because of a submission to or a rejection of sexual harassment or harassment related to sex or gender re-assignment[27]

27. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/11/what-is-online-violence-and-abuse-against-women/
28 For further information see Equality Act 2010 Technical guidance on further and higher education

Hate crime

Where we refer to 'hate crime' in the guidance and accompanying resources, we use the definition set out by the Home Office: 'Any crime that is motivated by hostility on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity can be classed as a hate crime.' (HM Government, 2016)

Hate incidents are incidents that appear to the victim or anyone else to be based on prejudice towards them because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity. Examples of hate incidents are verbal abuse, bullying, intimidation, harassment, abusive phone calls, online abuse, graffiti and threats of violence. Where there is overlap with the criminal law, a **hate incident may also be a criminal offence and if so, is referred to as a hate crime**. Hate crime is not a specific criminal offence in itself; rather it denotes a criminal offence such as assault, harassment, sexual offences, criminal damage and hate mail, which is perceived to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity.

There are three categories of hate crime in legislation:

- incitement to hatred offences on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation

- specific racially and religiously motivated criminal offences (such as common assault)

- provisions for enhanced sentencing where a crime is motivated by race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity

Violence against women is not currently included under UK law. Although specific police forces may treat it as such, this is not consistent across the UK.

A person who commits a hate crime need not actually be motivated by hatred for their victim, but rather it is their expression of prejudice or bias against the victim's (presumed) group membership that more properly characterises such crimes (Hall, 2013).

Hate speech

Hate speech lies in a complex nexus with freedom of expression, individual, group and minority rights, as well as concepts of dignity, liberty and equality, hence its definition is often contested (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, Martinez, 2015). In the UK, hate speech is defined **as expressions of hatred toward someone on account of said person's (perceived) race, nationality, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability.**[28, 29, 30] Hate speech includes any communication that is threatening or abusive, and is intended to harass, alarm, or distress someone.[31]

28. https://www.cps.gov.uk/hate-crime
29. Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006
30. Public Order Act 1986
31 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

Image-based sexual abuse

Also known as: *revenge pornography, non-consensual pornography, cyber rape, involuntary pornography, intimate image abuse*

The disclosure of private sexual photographs and films without the consent of an individual who appears in the photograph or film, and with the intent to cause distress to said individual.[32] A person may be blackmailed or extorted following a disclosure of private sexual content.

Intersectionality

A theory and a tool that acknowledges that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989).

Lad culture

A group mentality embedded in campus activities such as sport, heavy alcohol consumption and 'banter' that is often sexist, misogynistic and homophobic. At its most extreme, it involves rape-supportive attitudes, sexual harassment and violence (Phipps, Young, 2013).

Masquerading

Also known as: *catfishing*

Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad or places that person in potential danger.

Online harassment

Also known as: *cyberaggression, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, cyberhate, cybervictimisation, deviant online behaviour*

The use of information and communication technologies by an individual or group to repeatedly cause harm to another person with relatively less power to defend themselves.

Rape culture

A complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. Rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm, and both men and women assume that sexual violence is inevitable. However, much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change (Buchwald, Fletcher, Roth, 1993). Rape culture rests upon the assertion of heterosexual male sexuality but is not limited to heterosexual dominance over women: it is also used to control and regulate sexualities that diverge from the hetero-male 'norm' (Shariff, DeMartini, 2016).

32. Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, section 33

Revenge pornography

See image-based sexual abuse

Sexting

Nude or semi-nude sexual or sexually suggestive images or videos sent and received through mobile phones and social media apps (Poltash, 2013). Sexting is an acceptable online activity when it takes place between consenting adults within adequate privacy settings, but problems arise when images sent are subsequently distributed online without the consent of the creator (Shariff, DeMartini, 2016). Such actions can constitute a criminal offense under new 'revenge pornography' legislation. Sexting is a gendered phenomenon as there are greater levels of risk for women who participate in such actions (Bailey, Hanna, 2011).

Sexual harassment

Under section 26(2) of the Equality Act 2010, harassment is defined as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature which has the purpose or effect of violating the recipient's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It is a prohibited conduct under the Equality Act 2010, for which redress lies in the civil courts.

There is no specific criminal offence of sexual harassment in English law. However, behaviour referred to as 'sexual harassment' can be criminal under various pieces of legislation, depending on the nature and severity of the incident. The types of behaviours or conduct that make up sexual harassment are varied and may include: verbal harassment such as whistling, catcalling, sexual comments, sexual innuendo, telling sexual jokes and stories, spreading rumour about a person's sex life; non-verbal harassment such as looking someone up and down, displaying pictures of a sexual nature, sending emails containing sexual content, making sexual gestures, and asking for sexual favours. Sexual harassment will overlap with the criminal law on sexual offences once any touching of the other person is involved, for example physical unwanted sexual advances, kissing, touching, hugging, stroking, patting of someone's clothes, body, hair etc, and rubbing up against someone, where the touching is sexual.

Some forms of sexual harassment may overlap with other criminal offences such as harassment and stalking, and revenge pornography.

'Slut-shaming'

A means to control women's sexual agency by regulating the extent to which women and girls can express their sexual agency before enduring scorn from society (Poole, 2013). Policing female sexuality creates a double standard between men and women which ultimately marks female sexuality as deviant (Attwood, 2007).

Stalking

The criminal law sets out offences regarding stalking under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (amended by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012). The Act gives examples of stalking behaviour, such as following, watching, spying, monitoring use of electronic communications, interfering with another's property, and publishing material relating to a person or purporting to originate from a person. The Act further provides the offences of putting a person in fear of violence or causing serious alarm or distress that has a substantial adverse effect on their usual day-to-day activities.

Trickery

Also known as: outing, phishing, hacking, scamming

Sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images, or engaging in tricks to solicit embarrassing information that is then made public. A person may be blackmailed or extorted following a disclosure of such information.

Trolling

Also known as: *flaming, virtual mobbing, pile-ons*

Posting or sending inflammatory, inappropriate, rude and/or violent messages or comments directed at a person or persons on the internet in order to cause upset. Can be perpetrated by one individual but often with the intent that the initial message will provoke responses from other internet users. Women are disproportionately targeted (Cole, 2015) and content often draws upon sexually degrading language, exerting online forms of sexual harassment (Megarry, 2014).

ANNEXE B: **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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