

# Spiking: what universities can do

A practice note to support universities' response  
to spiking

# Contents

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Call for action	2
In brief	3
Background	4
What should universities consider in preparation for the 2022–23 intake?	11
How have universities already responded?	17
Additional resources	20

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# Call for action

Spiking is a horrific crime that has a long-lasting impact on victims. While attacks can and do happen to people across society, we are calling directly on universities to be prepared ahead of the 2022–23 academic year and be ready to support the student community.

It's vital that all students feel safe at university and can enjoy their student experience without fear of being harmed. It is important that universities take spiking seriously, and work alongside their local partners and authorities to ensure that we reduce the risk of spiking and raise awareness of the support available, so victims of spiking can come forward for support in confidence.

We hope this practice note – put together with the advice and support of students, campaigners, victims of spiking, the police, academics, and other experts – will help you prepare your responses.

Professor Lisa Roberts  
Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter and  
Chair, Department for Education Spiking Working Group

**Spiking:** Putting drugs and/or alcohol in someone's drink or body without their consent.

## About this practice note

This practice note was written by Professor Nicole Westmarland, Director of the Durham University [Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse](#), with expert guidance and support from the Department for Education [Spiking Working Group](#).

In developing this note, we consulted students from a range of backgrounds, including those with lived experience of spiking.

# In brief

What should universities consider doing to take action on spiking?

## Understand the problem

- Communicate to staff and students that spiking is a serious crime and is broader than is commonly understood. For example, anyone can be a victim of spiking and it is not always connected to sexual assault.

## Have clear reporting and support structures

- Decide where the reporting and support information sits best within your university and publicise this widely.

## Place the problem with perpetrators, not victims

- Do not use communication campaigns that may be viewed as 'victim blaming' or that take a 'zero tolerance' stance on recreational drug use.
- Consider using existing resources that have been well-received (see [Additional resources](#)).

## Work with others

- Spiking is a multi-agency problem and requires a multi-agency solution, so universities should develop relationships with local partners.
- Ensure students and relevant staff are aware of what your local response looks like, covering emergency medical care (which should take priority), forensic testing procedures (agreed with your local police), and aftercare.

**SEE ALSO: WHAT SHOULD UNIVERSITIES CONSIDER IN PREPARATION FOR THE 2022–23 INTAKE?**

# Background

At the start of the 2021–22 academic year, many students started speaking out about their experiences of being spiked or caring for fellow students who had been spiked. While it is difficult to know the true scale of the problem, it was widely acknowledged that reporting was far higher than in previous years.

In addition to the problem of drink spiking (putting drugs or alcohol in someone's drink without their consent), an increase in reports of 'needle spiking' (injecting someone with drugs without their consent) was also reported.

There were 2,065 needle spiking incidents recorded by the police between 1 September 2021 and 31 July 2022.<sup>1</sup> Although students were not the only group affected, reports included spiking happening on university campuses, including students' unions, and at nighttime venues aimed specifically at students, including 'freshers' events.

These incidents are serious crimes of poisoning, can be life-threatening, and have lasting impacts on students who experience it and on their friends who witness it. The threat of it happening restricts the ability for students (predominantly, but not only women) to socialise – freely and without fear – as part of their student experience.

In some universities, students responded by holding a series of 'Girls' Night In' events (later extended to 'Big Night In' to include others who felt at risk). The boycott of nightclubs demanded that spiking be taken seriously, and showed that students would choose to socialise in their private space if the nighttime economy could not be made safe for them.

It is thought that spiking incidents may see a similar increase linked to student venues this academic year.

*'That [the students' union] should be the safe space – now that's been taken away.'*

## Female victim of spiking

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with the National Police Chief's Council (2022)

## What is spiking?

People can spike others by:

- alcohol, including putting alcohol or more alcohol into a drink without a person's consent
- a range of different prescription drugs (such as sleeping tablets)
- illegal drugs (such as cocaine, GHB or ketamine)

Drink spiking is the most common form of spiking, but other items including food and cigarettes can also be spiked. Needle spiking also became a serious concern in the latter months of 2021.

## What the law says

Spiking is illegal. It is currently captured under a range of legislation and can result in up to ten years in prison. If followed by an assault, sexual offence, theft or robbery, then this could be even longer.

There is a government review in England and Wales considering whether 'spiking' should become a new, standalone criminal offence. Discussions are also taking place in Scotland.

There is also a new national police investigation underway (Operation Lester) to better understand and respond to the rise in spiking reports. This investigation aims to join up data between forces to improve recording techniques to better understand the nature and extent of the problem to guide better responses.

It is possible for local authorities to place conditions on licensed premises under the [Anti-social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014](#). These include placing additional conditions to a license (eg installing CCTV), carrying out a license review, and even closure powers if improvements are not made.

## The nature and extent of spiking

There is very little high-quality research published on the nature and extent of spiking in the UK. Most of our knowledge comes from sexual violence research. Spiking that is not linked to sexual violence has been underresearched.

Available research suggests:

## **Perpetrators use a range of drugs, not just so-called ‘date rape’ drugs**

The detection of more than one substance is common. In cases of spiking linked to sexual assault, alcohol is the most commonly detected substance.<sup>2</sup>

## **A small number of perpetrators can cause significant harm**

Cases of serial rapists show that a single perpetrator can cause a lot of harm to a high number of people.

High profile cases:

- John Worboys was convicted in 2009 for drugging and then sexually assaulting women passengers in his taxi with sleeping tablets mixed with alcohol. He was convicted of 12 cases, but the number of reports exceeds 100.
- Reynhard Sinaga was convicted in 2020 for using the so-called ‘date rape drug’ GHB to drug and rape 48 men, but the true number of victims could exceed 200.
- GHB was also the drug used by serial killer Stephen Port when he spiked and murdered four men, including Middlesex University student Anthony Walgate, in 2014. The police response in this case was criticised for making homophobic assumptions about drug use and the lifestyles of young gay men.

## **Spiking is a concern**

A nationally representative general population study by YouGov in 2021 found that 6% of men and 11% of women had had a drink spiked.

A non-representative student survey found that 14% of students knew or thought they had had their drink spiked.

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<sup>2</sup> Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) (2006), Operation Matisse - investigating drug facilitated sexual assault; Alderson, L., Flynn, A. and Pilgrim, J. (2017), A global epidemiological perspective on the toxicology of drug facilitated sexual assault: a systematic review, *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine*, 47, 46-54.

Larger-scale surveys of students exist in the US. A survey based on three US universities found that:

- one in 13 students reported being drugged (462 students, 7.8%)
- 83 students reported they had drugged someone<sup>3</sup>

This study also found differences between students depending on gender, with women believing that people drug others for 'sex or sexual assault' and men believing that a main motivation was 'fun'.

## **Spiking is significantly underreported to the police**

Surveys in the UK have found that fewer than one in eight victims make a police report.<sup>4</sup>

## **Some groups are more at risk**

Women are more likely to be spiked than men. However, this risk is likely to be unequal and intersects with other inequalities such as racism and/or homophobia, according to the National Union of Students' Liberation Committee.

## **The impacts of spiking**

*'My mental health's really been impacted – the first time I walked past the clubs on the high street I had an anxiety attack.'*

### **Female victim of spiking**

Personal testimonies from victims and academic research detail the devastating impacts that spiking can cause. Some impacts are short term, while others are medium to long term.

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<sup>3</sup> Swan, S.C. et al. (2017) Just a dare or unaware? Outcomes and motives of drugging ('drink spiking') among students at three college campuses, *Psychology of Violence*, 7 (2), 253-264.

<sup>4</sup> Balmer, K. (2022) The last taboo – spiking at UK universities report 21/22; Stamp out Spiking, FAQs; Students organising for sustainability UK (2021) Student opinion: spiking amongst students and safety in night time venues



Short term impacts reported by victims vary depending on the spiking substance, but common impacts include:

- confusion
- memory loss
- vomiting
- dizziness
- blacking out
- feeling emotional and tearful
- changes in heart rate
- falling unconscious
- loss of bladder control
- paranoia
- vision difficulties

*'It happened within a split second. I've got the CCTV footage, and within ten minutes I'd collapsed. I've never felt as ill in my life.'*

#### **Male victim of spiking**

Long term impacts reported by victims include:

- anxiety
- depression
- social withdrawal
- problems continuing with education and/or employment
- difficulties concentrating
- self-blame
- flashbacks
- the fear that it will happen again

Depending on the substance used in the spiking, victims may experience longer term physical health impacts.

## Immediate actions to take if a student has been spiked

Staff and students should be aware of the immediate actions that they should take.

### Seek medical help if needed by calling 999, 111 or university healthcare

Use the more specific language of 'drugged' or 'poisoned' rather than 'spiked' if the healthcare practitioner does not understand the term.

*'We went and spoke to security at the university campus and then we went to hospital and then police. At the hospital they took our bloods, but they didn't do anything, they just kept them – they didn't know what they were doing. The doctor couldn't understand what the idea of spiking was; I had to explain it to her for about 20 minutes.'*

#### Female victim of spiking

### Stay with them and provide reassurance and emotional support

When supporting someone who you suspect has been spiked:

- Take care not to ask questions that might make the victim feel they are to blame for what has happened to them.
- They may have been sexually assaulted. Do not suggest they take a shower or do anything that would interfere with evidence preservation.

### With their agreement, support the student to report it to the police at the earliest opportunity

Reporting to the police can help them understand the full nature of the problem and bring perpetrators to justice. However, some students may have concerns about reporting (eg around racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and/or transphobia).

In an emergency (for example, if the perpetrator is still present), call 999. Otherwise, report online, call 101 or use an approved university method, such as a university security service.

All types of spiking incidents can be recorded using existing crime classifications. Reporting the suspicion of being the victim of a spiking crime should be enough for the police to record the crime.

Early reporting will help preserve additional evidence, such as by securing drinks, downloading CCTV, or taking witness details. It is the victim's right to receive a crime number and details of the officer who is investigating the crime. Ask for this information if it is not offered.

## Support them to take a test

Although medical help should be the priority, it is the police, not healthcare providers, who usually conduct testing for spiking incidents.

Police testing is done by taking a non-invasive urine sample. Some drugs leave the body in a very short time (within 12 hours), so it is important to test as soon as possible. Other drugs remain in the body longer, so testing will still be considered up to five days after the incident (increasing to seven for some drugs).

Full test results usually take around three weeks, but can take longer. In some areas, the police may do additional rapid tests. These additional tests can be useful, but have limitations due to the limited range of drugs they can detect. A false negative can give victims a false sense of security and deter them from reporting or seeking medical assistance.

Research is underway to assess the validity and reliability of different rapid test kits. Your local police force can provide further information on testing initiatives in your area.

## Report internally

Use the system in place to report spiking incidents to your university.

**SEE ALSO: WHAT SHOULD UNIVERSITIES CONSIDER IN PREPARATION FOR THE 2022–23 INTAKE?**

# What should universities consider in preparation for the 2022–23 intake?

## 1. Understand the problem

Universities should understand that spiking is broader than is commonly understood and can take many forms.

Communications to staff and students should ensure that a broad understanding of spiking is used, in line with the [What is spiking?](#) section of this practice note.

### Understand different students' experiences

Different students will have different concerns about reporting their experience.

For example, women may feel they will be criticised as 'not taking enough care' if they accept free drinks or do not consistently use drink covers.

Men may be influenced by myths that this sort of crime 'does not happen to men', feel constrained by traditional male gender norms that they should accept harm as 'a bit of a laugh' linked to 'banter', or that the person they are reporting to will not believe them because they are male.

Gender diverse and/or transgender students may be worried that they were targeted as a form of hate crime, or that the person they are reporting to will be judgmental towards them or hold negative beliefs about their social life.

Communications should take this into consideration – using a range of different spiking scenarios and images.

*'I'm not the same person now. I'm very cautious about going into bars and clubs. I've not had a drink of alcohol since. I'm very subdued, very quiet.'*

**Male victim of spiking**

International students may not have heard of the term spiking before and may be particularly concerned.

For all staff and student communications, there must be a balance between giving essential information to help students and not inducing panic that might stop students from participating in social events.

## **2. Have clear internal reporting and support systems**

Universities should consider where report and support information should be located and how students will best be able to access it.

Universities should publicise their internal reporting and support systems widely to ensure they are understood by all staff and students, and particularly by those in health, wellbeing, and welfare positions.

### **Where should work on spiking sit?**

Universities need to integrate their work on spiking alongside other areas of activity such as tackling bullying, harassment, hate crime, and domestic and sexual violence, while still recording spiking incidents separately. Universities should also connect their work on spiking to broader work on creating positive cultures where violence, harassment, and any forms of discrimination are understood as unacceptable.

Spiking incidents do not fit under the category of sexual violence and misconduct, as they do not always include sexual violence. Referring to spiking as being an example of sexual violence and misconduct may put people off reporting.

### **Enable victims to speak out**

In order to know the nature and scale of the problem, universities need to enable victims to come forward. Universities should clearly state that spiking is never the victim's fault and ask victims to speak out. A student's use of recreational drugs should not stop them from reporting spiking.

Victims are often motivated to report incidents of violence and abuse to the police because they want to stop it happening to other people. Therefore, universities need to reassure victims and witnesses that the information they give will not be used

against them, but will be used to target perpetrators through university disciplinary processes.

### **3. Situate the problem of spiking with perpetrators, not victims**

University policies and communications should not include language or actions that blame the victim in any way. Generic ‘crime prevention’ advice is not appropriate in the context of spiking, where victims may already be feeling a level of self-blame and questions from those around them.

It may be necessary for staff to take part in training that includes the serious impacts of victim blaming, whether intentional or unintentional.

University media and communication teams should work with specialist charities and any academics working within their universities to create or adapt targeted campaigns. Universities should also work with students in developing these campaigns.

#### **Do not ‘victim blame’**

Universities should be aware that campaigns and messaging could be interpreted as ‘victim blaming’, despite that not being their intention. Messages such as ‘don’t leave your drink unattended’ can make victims feel as though it is their fault for not being vigilant enough if they are spiked, because they have not followed ‘the rules’ carefully enough. Perpetrator-focused campaigns or those that provide information to people who think they have been spiked may be more useful.

#### **Be cautious about promoting crime prevention devices**

Although it can be tempting to invest heavily in crime prevention devices to try to prevent spiking from taking place, universities should be cautious about spending money on unproven devices that increase the amount of ‘safety work’ that women in particular are expected to do.<sup>5</sup>

Expert opinion and student views are divided on the usefulness of crime deterrent devices such as drink covers and bottle stops. Some believe them to be

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<sup>5</sup> Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020) Contested gendered space: public sexual harassment and women’s safety work, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 44 (4), 265-275.

straightforward tools to increase safety and confidence to attend busy nighttime economy venues. Others argue they contribute to victim blaming, sexist stereotypes – such as that only women are at risk of spiking, that women should reduce their freedom to ‘keep themselves safe’, and that victims rather than perpetrators can end spiking.

### **Don’t use ‘zero tolerance’ approaches to drug use**

Zero tolerance responses to drug use may deter people from reporting spiking, which can make the difference between a victim coming forward to get tested and receive support or not.

While the police do not condone the taking of illegal drugs, they point out that there are no criminal consequences if someone is found to have incidental traces of illegal drugs in their system.

### **Link work on spiking to work around positive culture changes**

Universities should consider that some perpetrators may be students or staff working in nighttime economy venues, including those that are employed directly by universities. It’s important that universities link work on spiking to ongoing work around positive culture changes. It may be useful to integrate spiking information into any existing bystander intervention training.

Students or staff who have been perpetrators of spiking should be classed as a serious health and safety risk. Once they are investigated, if on the balance of probability they are found to be in breach of university policy, then exclusion would be the anticipated outcome in the case of students, and dismissal in the case of staff.

### **Make physical changes to university venues**

Physical changes may be possible in university venues as a crime deterrent.

For example:

- improving lines of sight
- reducing occupancy numbers
- improving lighting
- upgrading CCTV and/or door entry systems

Highly visible perpetrator-focused poster campaigns can be part of these physical changes (see [Additional resources](#)).

## 4. Work with others

No single organisation can respond to spiking on their own. It is essential that the response is a local, multi-agency one.

### Internal partners

Internally, universities should work alongside:

- students' unions
- nightlines (where available)
- student venues
- sexual violence and misconduct teams
- student wellbeing teams
- academics with subject expertise

### External partners

It is essential that a university's local police force is involved in the multi-agency response. There is a single point of contact for spiking in all force areas, and they should take spiking reports seriously.

As well as the police, external partners should include:

- hospital accident and emergency departments
- general practitioners
- nighttime economy businesses, including bars, clubs, takeaway venues and taxis or other nighttime travel
- specialist organisations, such as mental health, sexual violence, and drug and alcohol charities

If there is specialist investment such as a [Business Improvement District \(BID\)](#), or initiatives under the [Safer Streets Fund](#) or the [Safety of Women at Night Fund](#), they should be key partners.

### Share anonymised and aggregated data

Universities should feed anonymised, aggregated data on spiking reports into work with others to help understand the nature and scale of spiking, given it is a substantially underreported problem. Data could also be helpful to the UK Government's report into the nature and scale of spiking, due to be published in spring 2023.



Universities should approach any reporting with transparency. They should identify if there is a problem area and share with partners their plan for addressing it.

### **Agree with the police how and which rapid testing kits should be used**

Universities should agree with their local police forces how rapid testing kits might be most usefully used and ensure they clearly communicate to students what their limitations are.

Expert opinion is divided on the usefulness of rapid testing kits. At present, the only accredited route for drug testing that can be used evidentially is urine testing through the police. Universities should take caution in investing in testing kits that may not be reliable<sup>6</sup> or could give a false sense of security if they give a false negative result.

However, students do request rapid testing kits and they may be a useful tool in some circumstances – for example, to know which venues are being targeted and where additional resources should be allocated.

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<sup>6</sup> Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2007) *Drug facilitated sexual assault*.

# How have universities already responded?

Some parts of the UK higher education sector have already developed good practice responses.

## Effective multi-agency working in Bristol

Bristol Nights' multi-agency approach to tackling drink spiking includes a range of partners, including Bristol City Council, Avon and Somerset Police and Bristol City Centre Business Improvement District (BID), along with the University of Bristol and University of the West of England. The city-wide scheme includes 155 venues across Bristol, as well as the universities and further education colleges.

Bristol Nights has provided venues with drinks testing kits and staff training. The police have introduced presumptive urine testing kits to improve the early evidence gathering needed to increase prosecutions.

Bristol Nights is encouraging people to tell staff at the venue if they think they have been spiked so that testing can take place as soon as possible, ideally within 12 hours. It has produced posters for venues stating that they will believe victims of spiking to encourage more to come forward and to embed a harm-reduction approach to nighttime safety in venues. Bristol Nights has also delivered testing kits and training on how to use them across venues.

Bristol Nights is also working with nighttime venues to collect evidence of crime, including CCTV and other forensic evidence. It has a good range of referral organisations listed, including criminal justice organisations, violence and abuse charities, drug and alcohol services and mental health services – demonstrating the partnership working required to make a difference.

Venue guides, poster packs and social media assets are freely available on the Bristol Nights website.



Social media asset designed by Bristol Nights.  
Download as a pdf from the Bristol Nights website.

## University of Exeter

The University of Exeter sent a message to its university community in October 2021, saying that it understood the distress and alarm that reports about spiking were causing. It encouraged victims to report to the police and to seek support from its wellbeing services. Working with its student's guild, it reminded students that spiking was never the fault of the victim and responsibility was always with the perpetrator.

Responding to requests from the student community, the university made personal alarms and bottle toppers available for students to collect from venues across all its campuses, and also created a fund to support student-led projects relating to safety.

Working through the existing Community Safety Partnership network in Exeter, the university worked alongside the police, Exeter City Council, the NHS and third sector organisations to ensure spiking and safety in the nighttime economy was being addressed holistically. This led to a Home Office funded project focused on safety in the nighttime economy, which developed a charter and pledges for local organisations to sign up to, provided training to nighttime economy staff and reinvigorated the Best Bar None scheme.

This work is continuing through the Safer Streets Fund project, which looks to provide bystander training for nighttime economy staff, a safe space in the city centre, the development of an education toolkit for primary and secondary school-aged children and a community initiative fund.

## Nottingham Trent University (NTU)

Nottingham Trent University responded swiftly in October 2021 when Nottingham nighttime venues received high profile national news coverage about the increases in drink spiking and new cases of needle spiking.

The university increased security for events at its students' union by, for example, increasing the number of staff available and the number of routine entry searches. It also immediately introduced Safe Places between 9pm and 9am across its campuses. It has provided bystander intervention training to staff in university venues and in nighttime venues across the city to prevent sexual violence, and is looking to expand on this model by incorporating content on spiking.

## University of South Wales

The [University of South Wales students' union](#) has invested in drink spiking awareness training from not-for-profit organisation [Stamp Out Spiking](#). The initiative includes training on all aspects of spiking, drugs used, and typical symptoms. It has an immediate call to action approach, providing comprehensive risk assessments to ensure that spiking reports are recorded and safeguarding procedures are followed.

Training is available online or face to face and it is independently evaluated. As over 50% of staff have completed the training, the students' union is now an accredited Drink Spike Aware venue.

The training has also been delivered to a multi-agency collective of over 15 people (including nighttime venues, police and councillors) in the Pontypridd Business Improvement District, as well as numerous nighttime venues and security teams across the UK.

The next step on the university's agenda is to provide a standardised approach where each community can work together providing a uniformed concise, accurate, reporting and support mechanism which can be used by all.

## University of St Andrews

In October 2021, [St Andrews' students' association](#) introduced additional safety measures for campus venues at the [University of St Andrews](#), including random bag searches, safety patrols, and the testing of unattended drinks. The students' association also delivered training for bar staff on what to do if they thought someone had been spiked. It made bold public statements about what would happen to spiking perpetrators, saying they will be reported to the police and receive a lifetime ban on attending the bar.

The university added the option to report a drink or needle report to the [Report and Support tool](#). This offered victims the option to report anonymously or to provide their contact details. Students could also access support which highlighted the additional risks associated with needle spiking, such as the possibility of infection from a needle stick wound.

# Additional resources

## **Bristol Nights' Drink Spiking information**

Includes help and advice on what to do if a victim is spiked.

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## **Enough**

The government's campaign to tackle violence against women and girls. The [campaign website](#) signposts support services and reporting routes for victims, offers guidance for bystanders, and offers information for individuals worried about their own behaviour.

[Downloadable campaign resources](#) for partners can be personalised and used by universities and other stakeholders. Although the campaign highlights harms that disproportionately impact women and girls, the support is available for all victims.

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## **Good Night Out**

A campaign to create safer music, culture and nightlife spaces.

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## **The Last Taboo**

A campaign that empowers university students to raise awareness of and start their own campaigns on sexual violence.

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## **Licensing SAVI (Security and Vulnerability Initiative) posters**

Licensing SAVI have developed perpetrator-focused posters in conjunction with the [National Crime Agency](#). These emphasise the consequences an offender may face and can be used as part of a spiking prevention plan.

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## **Middlesex University's Changing the Culture Initiative (CCI)**

An ongoing commitment to tackle discrimination, bullying, harassment, intimidation, violence and any other form of hate.

Middlesex University students have produced [a new campaign film](#) that will be hosted on this site, accompanied by photographic stills from the film and quotes from the filmmakers.

**Nightline Association**

A charity which supports, promotes and develops nightline services. Nightlines are confidential, non-judgmental support services run by and for students.

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**Rape Crisis England and Wales, Rape Crisis Scotland and Rape Crisis Northern Ireland**

Charities working to end sexual violence and abuse. They provide helplines, self-help tools and resources, and can refer to local services.

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**Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs)**

Specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted.

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**Stamp Out Spiking (SOS)**

A not-for-profit organisation which raises awareness about spiking, offers training, resources, and anti-spiking devices. They have developed a [public awareness video](#) that universities can use.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.



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