



Universities UK

**CHANGING THE CULTURE**

# **TACKLING ONLINE HARASSMENT AND PROMOTING ONLINE WELFARE**

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## **CASE STUDIES**



## **DIGITAL CIVILITY: A WHOLE-UNIVERSITY APPROACH**

### **UNIVERSITY OF SUFFOLK**

Digital Civility is the University of Suffolk's community-based, multi-method approach to increase digital civility and improve the online safety of students.

The University of Suffolk has a well-established reputation for online safeguarding and managing digital risk in relation to children and young people. The university's research has underpinned a considerable body of academic literature, online safety practice and policy. This is in recognition that since current students have grown up with smart phones, they may have:

- had an online identity since childhood
- experienced bullying
- have received, been asked for or have sent a naked image
- illegal images on their devices as they enter university
- been exposed to online scams, fraud and identity theft
- been vulnerable to blackmail including image-based sexual abuse

The university was aware that, frequently, incidents involved both the reporting and responding student on the same campus, classroom or halls of residence and that not all students were aware of what was acceptable online behaviour or how to report behaviour. This was a concern to the university because reporting students may not have access to support and responding students' behaviours may remain unchallenged.

The university also recognised that more specific work was required to develop digital resilience in relation to disability, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, gender and mental wellbeing. After being awarded round two catalyst funding from the OfS 2017, the university set out to:

- improve online safety for students in relation to online harassment
- enhance understanding of illegal and inappropriate content and conduct online
- increase staff confidence in talking to students about online behaviours
- respond more effectively to disclosures and concerns
- increase awareness of where and how to report unwanted contact online, and what constitutes illegal content

Led by Professor Emma Bond, the University of Suffolk's whole-university approach effectively improved knowledge and awareness of online safety through the following actions:

- partnered with external speakers to create an expert-led, community-based approach that included national stakeholder representation
- embedded a process of continuous review and subsequent updating of the university's online safety and safeguarding policies, pastoral systems and processing, including advice given to students at induction and re-enrolment across the campus
- raised awareness through social media campaigns, leaflets, posters, talks and workshops in collaboration with the students' union, and academic, professional services and marketing staff
- delivered training in handling disclosures of online safety issues including sexual abuse, revenge pornography, digital identity, the legality and reporting of indecent images, coercion and control, harassment and stalking

### **Measuring success and outcomes**

The University of Suffolk employed a mixed-method approach to measuring the success of this project work.

At the start of the project, the university used Microsoft's Digital Civility survey to assess the online behaviours of its student cohort, finding that:

- 51% of students felt that their identity and activities are less secure than a year ago
- 47% suggested that a year from now this would be even less secure
- over 50% of students had experienced phishing, unwanted contact, 'mean' treatment online or trolling, all of which were more likely to have occurred in the past year, as opposed to more than a year ago

Regular meetings and focus groups with staff and students (held separately) highlighted an increase in the reporting of online abuse. This reflected an increased awareness and a better knowledge among students of what constitutes abuse and how and to whom to report it.

Staff reported feeling more able and willing to identify and support students who have experienced online abuse and were more confident in handling disclosures.

As a result of the project, online safety is now more firmly embedded in the University of Suffolk's culture, governance structure, policies and student welfare model.

## Top tips

- Recognise this issue is important and embrace a positive, proactive approach from the outset. This will help to address any perceptions that there may not be a problem in this area at the institution.
- A community-based, whole-university approach is essential, with both internal and external stakeholders and regular, focused activities to explore and discuss specific issues.
- Use a mixture of face-to-face, paper-based and virtual resources to enable an inclusive approach and maximise the opportunities to engage.
- Undertake a self-review of online safeguarding to inform the development of an improvement plan, which can be regularly reviewed as policy and practice improves.

## Higher education online safeguarding self-review tool

Following its work on digital civility, the University of Suffolk developed a higher education online *saeguarding self-review tool*. Based on the authors' collective expertise of 30 years of researching online safeguarding and working as higher education professionals, the tool provides clear definitions for 23 features and levels related to online safeguarding.

Using the tool, universities can undertake a review of the institution's online safeguarding to inform the development of an improvement plan and institutional strategy, which can be regularly reviewed as policy and practice improve.

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## **BEDFORDSHIRE CYBER-AWARENESS PROGRAMME (BCAP) UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE**

The Bedfordshire Cyber-Awareness Programme (BCAP) was designed by the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research (NCCR) to raise awareness and knowledge of how to respond to unacceptable online behaviour, for both students and staff.

In summary, the BCAP consists of a single session combined with additional support materials on how to control online safety and privacy, which is provided on a virtual learning environment (VLE). Part one focuses on providing definitions and explanations of what unacceptable online behaviour is and looks like. This is facilitated by taking learners through a series of scenarios about online behaviour, developed from real-life examples with students and new graduates and asks students to discuss them and determine their acceptability given the learned definitions. The scenarios begin with straightforward examples and then become progressively more challenging.

Part two consists of an explanation of the impacts of the unacceptable behaviours discussed in part one and guidance on what students should do if they experience them, and the best course of action if someone they know experiences them (ie how to be a good bystander). It also tells students about sources of support, both from the institution and other organisations.

The materials are designed to be deliverable initially by trainers to staff and student groups, then cascaded through the university by the trained peer-assisted learning (PAL) leaders, members of support staff etc who will disseminate the information by running their own sessions.

### **Outcomes**

Evaluation of BCAP is currently being estimated by participants' attitude shifts to online behaviours. The opinions of various online behaviours are recorded before the session and the change subsequently tracked at the end of the session.

Preliminary results indicate that 63% of participants changed their opinion on their readiness and willingness to act if they witnessed harmful online interaction.

BCAP has been delivered to support staff within the university and will be offered to each cohort of PAL leaders in the university. The programme will also be delivered in 2019–20 as part of a series of plenary lectures for incoming students, and the VLE site has been set up and will be advertised to new and existing students.

In future, it is suggested that a change in campus culture could be tracked by recording the incidents of harassment reported and the satisfaction students have to the response and support they receive.

### **Top tips**

- BCAP could easily be adopted by and tailored to other universities using an institution's own institutional code of conduct and UUK's guidance.
- When developing similar courses, it is important to tailor the content to the specific needs and characteristics of the student cohort. Involving students is also critical in developing courses so that materials and resources are tailored and relevant to the student group.
- The communication of policy can be better embedded when experienced interactively with realistic context and behavioural examples.
- Although tying a new project to an existing programme may help with participation, it can lead to unforeseen changes to those services, which can have a knock-on effect on the new programme.
- It is likely that the university will learn more about the experience of students by collaborating with students, peer learning networks and university staff, such as those who work in libraries, accommodation and student support services.
- Students looking for help will often go through the channels they already know and trust, so it is important that support staff are trained and aware of the programme.
- Experience shows that if students can be encouraged to talk about online harassment and are aware of the impact it can have, this can contribute towards students feeling more confident to seek help and know that they will be taken seriously.

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## DIGITAL FUTURES

### UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

Digital Futures is a *final-year module* for business students that looks at digital issues in the context of business and management, allowing issues such as online abuse and harassment to be explored from an employability, personal responsibility and human rights perspective.

The module explores the role technology plays in students' working lives and also how this relates to the social world and human rights. It explores contemporary issues such as digital harassment and data abuse, as well as future themes, such as automation and artificial intelligence.

The objectives of the module are to support greater awareness of online abuse and harm in the student body, applied to the subject discipline, and ultimately to equip students with the knowledge and confidence to challenge these issues in the workplace and their social lives.

Guest lectures around the issues of online abuse and harassment have resulted in the student body asking for an opportunity to explore these issues in more detail. Responding to this, Digital Futures was developed and is run by Professor Andy Phippen, who applied considerable research experience to the module content. The module record is included with this case study. The module runs within the business and management curriculum as a 20-credit elective.

Although the module includes input from external speakers such as legal professionals, the other key stakeholder is the student body. Students are expected to take an active part in the module by raising their own concerns and views to shape the curriculum.

The module will be delivered for the first time in the academic year 2019–20. Standard measures of impact will be student feedback and reflective analysis of coursework, to highlight main areas of focus and personal experiences and views.

[SEE THE MODULE](#)

### **Top tips**

- Embed in the curriculum – do not run this as an ‘extra-curricular’ activity.
- Align with subject-specific issues, for example in business and management, this could be covered when referring to matters such as managing digital behaviour in the workplace, and workplace harassment and abuse.
- Negotiate with students on the detail of the curriculum.

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## #NEVEROK

### KEELE UNIVERSITY

#NeverStandBy was a campaign initiated by Keele University Students' Union and Staffordshire University Students' Union during the 2016–17 academic year. As the original campaign drew to a close, Keele Students' Union recommended that work should continue on this project and #NeverOK was adopted as the umbrella term for campaigning work across the university and students' union.

The #NeverOK campaign makes a commitment to students to take a stand against violence and discrimination in all forms and encourages students to question and challenge unacceptable behaviours.

Expanding on this campaign, a research project was undertaken to better understand the impact of hate crime, hate incidents and targeted harassment, including online harassment of marginalised student groups at Keele.

The project was funded through the catalyst fund and carried out as a joint venture between Keele Students' Union, Student Support Services and the Department of Criminology.

The project also developed strong relationships with core community stakeholders such as [Tell MAMA](#), [Challenge North Staffs](#), Stoke City Council and Staffordshire Police, and worked alongside the [Keele Policing Academic Collaboration \(KPAC\)](#) to ensure the project considered professional and community experiences as well as methods for sharing best practice.

Thirty-two students across a variety of intersectional identities were interviewed in order to map the student experience of hate crime and online harassment at Keele University.

The data from the research project has been used to direct a number of awareness-raising sessions, such as LGBT History Week and Islamophobia Awareness Week, as well as expanding the #NeverOK active bystander initiative to cover all forms of discrimination.

Keele has also started to provide students with bystander training, and has recruited a cohort of community champions to lead peer-to-peer training.

The interviews conducted for the research project also sought to highlight any inadequacies in reporting to inform the development of a new reporting mechanism. Students definitively called for a reporting tool that was online, transparent and anonymous.

*Knowing that [it's] actually anonymous. That it will not come back to bite you on the arse afterwards.*

LGBT+ student

*The longer it takes to report it, the more you think it over and you think, 'oh, it's not that bad'. So being able to report it instantly online, then with maybe the option for a face-to-face meeting.*

Jewish student

*I think if we have some sort of online reporting system... it's much easier to get your words down in your own time. I think usually when we are facing this stuff, we're like going places – we're not just dawdling around. We have places to be. After that, we will get the time to write the report, write down what happened.*

BAME Muslim, female

In the light of this feedback, Keele Students' Union has established an advice centre as a third-party reporting agent for Challenge North Staffs. Webpages are currently being redeveloped to integrate a bespoke anonymous reporting tool in association with [Stop Hate UK](#).

A number of policy recommendations have been developed to support more effective and meaningful communication with students. These include:

- effective communication plans when dealing with online harassment, including with students' union and university staff, and communications teams
- the appointment of new staff, and/or increased training for existing staff in relation to cyber threats, social media and harassment
- effective moderation of all Keele University and Keele Students' Union social media accounts, which protects students while allowing a forum for open and lively debate
- establishment of an effective mechanism for early detection and intervention, and clear lines of reporting
- a cohesive policy to deal with online incidents, including on warnings, and locking comment threads where necessary

## Measuring success and outcomes

- The #NeverOK project and its constituent parts are all based on legacy and long-term cultural change.
- Considerable effort has been put into ensuring the sustainability of the project once catalyst funding ends, including training new staff and students to equip them to continue and expand the project.
- Undertaking a research project with Keele students has been well received by students, who were grateful to have been consulted at an early stage.

## Top tips

- Use incentives such as freebies and pizza to encourage students to get involved and reward them for their time spent contributing.
- Use student societies to speak with students: reach out to society presidents and ask to attend their meetings and events.
- A good relationship with the student union is invaluable.
- When Keele asked students whether they would like to give feedback on new training materials, students responded that they would rather be involved in developing the materials, so give students the opportunity to have a say and get involved in meaningful ways.

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## SHARED PRACTICE AREA

### ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

The *Shared Practice Area (SPA)* provides an online space for all those working in higher education to come together and share good practice on tackling and responding to harassment, hate crime, sexual violence and discrimination. The SPA encourages members to share and learn from one another, rather than working in isolation or starting from scratch. Universities are requested to give credit to the original creators of the resource.

The idea for the SPA initially came from colleagues at the University of Manchester, who had identified the need for an online facility where colleagues from across the higher education sector could communicate, share and learn from each other without attending a conference, reading a report or awaiting the intermittent publication of case studies.

The University of Manchester supported Anglia Ruskin University's catalyst bid to make the idea a reality, and the project was match-funded by the OfS. Anglia Ruskin University originally made the SPA available for a six-month trial to test the concept.

The SPA now has over 100 members from 75 institutions and a growing selection of resources that can be reviewed, downloaded and adapted for use across the sector.

The SPA contains an institution directory with the relevant points of contact for these areas and a summary of the work under way at each institution, a library to share resources and learn from one another, and a discussion board and events calendar.

Since its launch in July 2018, the SPA has developed into a lively and valuable online sharing space, and has been invaluable in ensuring momentum in this crucial area of work through the sharing of resources and best practice.

The SPA relies on colleagues actively sharing, and therefore the SPA encourages members to add their institution to the directory and start uploading documents when they join. Institutions can also set up an alert to be updated when new resources are uploaded.

Although it is not possible for the OfS to host this site, following an overwhelmingly positive response, Anglia Ruskin University will continue to host the SPA to keep it live in the short term, while seeking a long-term solution to extend its availability.

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[FIND OUT MORE](#)

## HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY UNIVERSITY OF EXETER, LAW SCHOOL

The University of Exeter Law School has developed a [guide](#) for Exeter law students on '[How to use social media responsibly](#)'. The guide is tailored to students practicing and studying law. The guide is student facing and helps students to be aware of the problems that might jeopardise their safety, friendships, studies or future career prospects. It also offers some useful advice on how to use social media responsibly.

[SEE THE GUIDE](#)

## #SPEAKOUT: RESEARCH-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS

### UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

The #Speakout project emerged in response to key findings from the UUK's (2016) Changing the culture report, which identified a need for evidence-based strategies that effectively tackle and mitigate online harassment among students on UK university campuses. The #Speakout project, which ran between December 2017 and April 2019, worked to address these needs at a local level on the University of Liverpool campus by developing and implementing research-informed interventions to tackle and prevent online harassment between students. These interventions encouraged everyone within the university community to play a role in mitigating online harassment and to 'speak out' against it. The project took an institution-wide approach with multiple stakeholders, including student support services, the Liverpool Guild of Students and Sport Liverpool, involved in developing and/or implementing its interventions.

#### **The research**

The project began by conducting research about the perceived extent, nature, and severity of online harassment in student's peer-to-peer interactions and their attitudes to these practices via a campus-wide baseline survey (returned by 795 respondents) and qualitative interviews (with 15 respondents). Key findings included that:

- 21.94% of survey respondents reported that they had personally experienced online harassment and 5% thought that they may have
- online harassment, particularly gendered and sexualised forms, is perceived to be so pervasive in digitised spaces that respondents often see it as the 'norm'
- there is a general lack of awareness about the seriousness of online harassment with some respondents inclined to dismiss it
- there is some unwillingness to intervene or take action to address specific forms of online harassment, including racialised, gendered and sexualised incidents
- respondents did not always know how to report incidents of online harassment to authorities on the university campus or access appropriate support services

#### **Key intervention priorities**

The second phase of the #Speakout project used these findings to identify four key priorities for interventions:

- de-normalise online harassment, including identity-based forms
- publicise the university's commitment to tackling online harassment
- improve visibility and accessibility of reporting services at the university
- foster a respectful and supportive online culture

## The interventions

The third phase of the project developed and implemented four context-specific interventions to address the key priorities, which are as follows:

### *A centralised information hub*

A new centralised information hub was created on the university website, which provides information about online harassment and publicises institutional policies, disciplinary and reporting procedures in ways that aim to improve their visibility and accessibility.

### *#Call it out campaign – fostering a respectful online culture*

‘#Call it out’, a campus-wide communications campaign was co-developed with the Liverpool Guild of Students to address and mitigate harassment on the university campus. This campaign advocated an active bystander approach and encouraged everyone within the university community to ‘call out’ harassment in their peer groups, including digitised forms, in ways that aimed to foster a respectful online campus culture.

### *Encouraging active bystander intervention*

An established Active Bystander Intervention programme on the university campus was updated with training resources using key findings from the #Speakout project. The updated programme aims to equip students with the skills required to safely intervene if they observe online harassment in their peer groups. Since these training resources were first implemented in the academic year 2018–19, they have been delivered to over 2500 students.

### *New online module - Developing a positive online presence*

#Speakout research informed the development of a new student-centred training module, ‘Developing a positive online presence’. This module aims to improve understanding about digital citizenship and support students in building their own digital footprint in safe and considered ways that will enhance their personal and professional development.

### *Positive outcomes*

The impact of these interventions on the student population was evaluated via a follow-up campus-wide survey (returned by 849 respondents), which was conducted after the interventions were implemented. By comparing the results of the baseline and follow-up survey, the research team were able to measure relevant attitudinal and behavioural changes in the student population. Key findings from this follow-up survey indicated that there was a positive shift in respondent’s willingness to report forms of online harassment to the University of Liverpool and/or Liverpool Guild of Students, including identity-based incidents targeting women, LGBT communities and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

**Top tips**

- Online harassment has become deeply normalised in digitised spaces. Therefore, universities should initially prioritise raising student's critical awareness of these practices.
- Online harassment is multi-faceted and complex; tackling and preventing this practice requires a long-term sustained programme of action.
- Conduct research about online harassment on the university campus and use it to prioritise objectives for interventions and, through long-term and continuous evaluation, change priorities and the focus of interventions accordingly.
- Specific forms of online harassment, including racialised, gendered and sexualised incidents, will need to be tackled through specific interventions that address these practices and their particular characteristics.
- Involve the student union and student communities in developing and implementing appropriate interventions to mitigate online harassment
- Establish collaborative partnerships with others within and beyond the Higher Education sector to develop effective interventions that mitigate online harassment, including the local police, government policymakers and community-based advocacy groups.

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