



How Universities can Provide the Best Support Services for Victims of Sexual Harassment

Description

Every effort must be made by universities to end instances of sexual harassment and to support victims.

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcomed behavior towards another person that has a sexual undertone.

This can range from unwanted comments and non-consensual touch to sexual abuse and sexual assault.

Unfortunately, sexual harassment is an ongoing issue at universities across the globe.

A report conducted by the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) (AHRC) revealed that one in five (21%) students at Australian universities were sexually harassed either on campus, at a university-related event off campus, or from someone associated with the university via technology.

When it comes to UK universities, [the BBC](#) revealed that there were 1436 recorded allegations of sexual harassment against students from 2018-2019, which is an increase of 476 from 2016-2017.

Not only do these figures show that not enough is being done to prevent instances of sexual harassment, but there is also widespread criticism that many universities don't have adequate support services in place for victims.

The BBC's investigation revealed that of the 124 universities involved in the study, only 33 used specialist investigators to process reports of sexual harassment.

Similarly, the AHRC report detailed how reports of sexual assault took too long to investigate, and that they did not have good communication procedures in place.

Who is most at risk?

Across the board, women report more instances of sexual harassment during their time at university compared with

h men.Â Â

[A study into sexual harassment and assault among university students in Norway](#)Â revealed that 15.2% of womenÂ (compared with 4.4% of men)Â reported unwanted touching, hugging, or kissing since they started their studies.Â Â

LGBT+ students are also at a higher risk.Â [AÂ recent report by Trendence](#)Â revealed that one in two LGBT+ students experienced sexual harassment (56%) and around one in three (36%) experienced Â sexual assault during their time at university.Â Â

[International students are also considered to be a more vulnerable group](#)Â as they areÂ â??more likely to be isolated, lacking a safety net, perhaps new at navigating the culture of dating, and may not feel comfortable in a new language, among many other reasons.â?Â

TheÂ â??Me Tooâ??Â movement has inspired widespread action against sexual misconduct, and universities have a responsibility to align with this cause and to keep their students safe.Â

To find out how your university can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment, download a free copy of our white paper:Â [The State of Inclusivity in International Higher Education](#).Â

PreventionÂ

The first step universities must take in the fight against sexual harassment is to put measures in place toÂ reduceÂ the number ofÂ incidents.Â Â

Educating students on consent is an important step in helping students recognize unacceptable sexual behaviour; both in themselves and others.Â Â

In 2014, EmmaÂ SulikowiczÂ (who uses the pronouns they/them) spent an entire year carrying their mattress around campus to protest the lack of action by Columbia UniversityÂ after she reported her experience of rape by a fellow student.Â

After this incident,Â universitiesÂ acrossÂ theÂ USÂ began to recognize the importance of being proactive in preventing sexual assault, and many developed initiatives to teach their students about consent.Â

Cornell University created theÂ [Intervene program](#)Â which composed of a 20-minute video depicting various distressing scenarios involving students, including sexual harassment.Â Â

This was followed by a 60-minute workshop whereby studentsÂ were encouraged toÂ discuss the video and reflect on howÂ it couldâ??ve beenÂ prevented.Â

Universities mustÂ alsoÂ make sure they are communicating a no tolerance approach to sexual harassment.Â

One of the main intentions behind EmmaÂ Sulikowiczâ??sÂ [â??Mattress Performanceâ?](#)Â was to express her dissatisfaction with Columbia Universityâ??s treatment of the accused,Â as Â they deemed him â??not responsible.â?•Â

Although itâ??s still a challenging space to navigate, it is paramount that serious action is taken in response to any report of sexual harassment

. This may require the involvement of police or others who are qualified to assess the report.

This sends out a clear message to students that the university doesn't accept any unwanted sexual behavior.

Another preventative method that can be taken by universities is to intervene during times where sexual harassment might be more common.

For example, the Trendence report details how students drew a strong correlation between alcohol consumption and sexual harassment.

One female graduate from Stirling talks specifically of the LGBT experience saying: *"We have quite a few issues of sexual assault especially like when people get drunk. The LGBT Society meets on the same day as a lot of the sports societies and when they kind of get [too male], sometimes they have a lot of sexual harassment."*

Having security or support staff available on campus when students are finishing their evening activities can help to prevent instances of sexual harassment.

Vulnerable students who are feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in any way can turn to staff for help with getting home safe or resolving any unwanted situations.

In 2018, [Durham University in the UK was awarded the Alcohol Impact accreditation](#) by The National Union of Students due to its campaign to "promote responsible alcohol consumption, improve students' welfare and wellbeing, and create a more inclusive environment."

One of the many positive outcomes of the campaign was an increase of 15% in students choosing not to walk home alone after a night out, which was part of the wider goal of tackling the issues surrounding alcohol culture at Durham.

It is important to stress that none of these preventative methods should be applied independently but instead should be seen as part of a collection of possible approaches.

The objective of reducing instances of sexual harassment must be confronted in a variety of ways; using education and employing more practical methods for immediate intervention.

Support services

In the unfortunate instances when preventative methods have failed, institutions must ensure they have the right support services available for students who have experienced sexual harassment.

Students should be encouraged to report their experience so that action can be taken against the perpetrator if desired, and to ensure the victim can get the emotional support they require.

In 2016, [Brigham Young University](#) made the decision to no longer investigate victims of sexual assault for possible violations to the Mormon religion.

Given the institution is directed by the Church, actions such as pre-marital sex and alcohol use were punishable even as part of a report of sexual harassment.Â Â

This meant thatÂ manyÂ victims were discouraged from speaking out due to the repercussions they would face.Â Â

The decision to introduce an amnesty clause meant that victims could no longer be disciplined for these violations when reporting sexual harassment, which ultimately encourages them to speak out.Â Â

Many universities, such as theÂ [University of Cambridge](#), have also implemented an online tool to enable students to anonymously report incidents, increasing the likelihood that they will come forward.Â Â

The initial stages after an incident are a crucial part of a victimâ??s experience, and itâ??s important that every step is taken to ensure they feel safe and comforted during this difficult and often confusing time.Â Â

All staff should be trained to deal with the initial stages of a reportÂ when a student first approaches them for help.Â Â

[At the University of Bath](#), staff can also call the Student Service Staff Advice Line or Security for guidance if a student hasÂ approached them to report an incident.Â

However, handling the report in more detail must be left to those who are trained to do so, which for some universities means looking outside of their own faculty forÂ expertise.Â

If the victim would like to report the incident to the police, staff at the university and experts should support them throughoutÂ this process.Â Â

If they decide not to, then alternative contact numbers should be given to the student if theyÂ decideÂ to change their mindÂ at a later date, or if they simply need to discuss their situation with someone further.Â

Regardless ofÂ whetherÂ action is taken against the accused, the effect of sexual harassment on a student, particularly in the more severe cases of sexual abuse or assault, can be devastating.Â Â

As a response, universities should provide the student with long-term mental health facilities; supporting them through their time at university and where possible, in the initial stages of life beyond their studies.Â Â Â

Further details on how to protect the mental health of your students can be found in our blog:Â [Mental Health in Higher Education: What Role Should Universities Play?](#)Â Â

Universities have a responsibility to keep their students safe from all forms of harassment and harm, and initiatives must be put in place to prevent incidents and support victims.Â Â