

Office for
Students



Catalyst for change: Protecting students from hate crime, sexual violence and online harassment in higher education

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Introduction

A significant issue for student wellbeing and safeguarding is the prevalence of hate crime, sexual violence and online harassment on and off campus. A 2018 survey run by the National Union of Students showed a third of Muslim students experienced a hate crime while at university or college.¹ In 2019, in a study of over 6,000 students, 49 per cent of female students said they had been touched inappropriately.² A high-profile case of students being the target of online sexual harassment has received extensive coverage in the media.³

In 2016, Universities UK published a report entitled 'Changing the Culture'.⁴ This report set out a series of recommendations that universities should implement to more effectively tackle violence against women, harassment and hate crime. The report highlighted that providers needed to work in partnership, and in a more systematic way, to begin to deliver sector level culture change.

In order to help providers implement these recommendations, in 2016, HEFCE – the Higher Education Funding Council for England – committed £4.7 million under its Catalyst fund for 119 projects across 71 higher education institutions and 14 further education colleges. This funding has enabled, for example, the hiring of specialist staff, the implementation of bystander intervention training, and the creation of online reporting tools.⁵

¹ Busby, Eleanor, 'Living in fear: One in three Muslim students attacked on campus as Islamophobic hate crime surges', Independent, 16 March 2018 (available at www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/muslim-students-universities-islamophobic-national-union-students-nus-prevent-duty-a8260176.html).

² Brook, 'Our new research on sexual harassment and violence at UK universities', 2019 (available at www.brook.org.uk/press-releases/sexual-violence-and-harassment-remains-rife-in-universities-according-to-ne).

³ Lee, Dulcie and Larissa Kennelly, 'Inside the Warwick University rape chat scandal', BBC, 28 May 2019 (available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48366835).

⁴ Universities UK, 'Changing the culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students', 2016 (available at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/changing-the-culture-final-report.aspx).

⁵ Advance HE, 'Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Thematic analysis report 2', 2019, pp6-8 (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/catalyst-fund-projects-evaluation/).

In 2018, HEFCE was replaced by the Office for Students (OfS), which took over the funding, monitoring and evaluation of these projects. One of the OfS's roles as a regulator is to promote an environment in which all students have a positive experience of higher education. As part of our aim to shine a spotlight on sector-wide issues, we will continue to challenge and support the sector to tackle safeguarding and welfare issues that affect students.

These projects are already having a marked impact in helping students to feel safe on campus and allowing them to report incidences of sexual violence, hate crime and online harassment. They offer practical steps and resources that English universities and colleges can embed to effect the necessary radical change.

Resources for student safety and wellbeing

www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/resources-for-student-safety-and-wellbeing/

Many of the projects funded by the first two rounds of student safeguarding Catalyst funding have produced valuable resources that will be of interest to the wider higher education sector.

These resources include training materials, videos and reporting and support portals.

We hope providers will use these resources when developing their own approaches to addressing sexual misconduct, hate crime and online harassment.

Background

The OfS Catalyst fund allocated £4.7 million in three rounds of funding:

1. 63 one-year projects addressing safeguarding students on campus, mainly focused on addressing sexual violence and misconduct.
2. 45 providers enabling providers to develop ways of tackling hate crime and hate incidents and online harassment on campus.
3. 11 providers received funding to address hate crimes directed at students on the grounds of religion or belief.

Independent evaluator Advance HE has carried out analysis on the first two rounds of projects. These reports are intended 'to support learning, exchange and disseminate effective practice from the projects and help establish 'what works' in safeguarding students'. The most recent is a summative report on the projects from round 1 and round 2.

Example of resources

'Standing Together Against Hate' at the University of Leicester

www.le.ac.uk/hate-studies

The University of Leicester's project was run collaboratively, led by academics at the Centre for Hate Studies and delivered by the Students' Union, Student Support Services, Estates and Campus Services and the Equalities Unit.

The project had three aims: developing a student-led awareness-raising campaign, delivering hate crime training to students and staff, and opening a third-party reporting centre.

As one of the project leads stated: 'we have a collective responsibility to challenge prejudice and hostility in all its forms'. These materials are an example of good practice and should be more widely adopted (and adapted where necessary) by other providers.

Impact

Importantly, the Advance HE reports show that the funding has seen a raising of awareness of the issues and a rise in reported incidences of sexual harassment and hate crime. Wider media and societal pressure to challenge sexual misconduct was noted as an additional impetus for change at universities and colleges.

One provider who received three rounds of funding, for example, saw reports of sexual harassment rise 133 per cent and reports of sexual offences rise 175 per cent on the previous year. They commented that it 'was positive for us to see [increased reporting], because we know that the message is getting out, and people are getting more confident in reporting these issues'.⁶

Enlisting the help of the student body was an important facet of these projects. Over 90 per cent of providers who received funding 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that this student involvement had been successful in improving the delivery and reception of the projects.⁷ The providers who received funding were far more likely to involve students from different backgrounds and identities: only 19 per cent without funding engaged students from a variety of backgrounds compared to 91 per cent of providers that received funding from two or more rounds of Catalyst funding.⁸ Working with students allowed providers to better address specific student concerns.

⁶ Advance HE, 'Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Summative evaluation report', 2019, p44 (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/catalyst-fund-projects-evaluation/).

⁷ Advance HE, 'Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Summative evaluation report', 2019, p45.

⁸ Advance HE, 'Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Summative evaluation report', 2019, p45.

For example, one provider found through a focus group that students were ‘confused’ about aspects of gender identity; this allowed them to tailor their training to better address LGBT+ hate crime and harassment.⁹

The funding has allowed many providers to hire specialist staff and generalist staff who undertook relevant training. 73 per cent of providers who received two or more rounds of funding have hired new staff in comparison to only 19 per cent of providers without funding.¹⁰

Projects which received funding were also more likely to have interacted and worked with external organisations. In total, 86 per cent of providers receiving two or more rounds of Catalyst funding have involved third-party agencies, compared with 58 per cent of those without funding. 77 per cent of providers who received two or more rounds of funding engaged with other providers or local community organisations, compared with 38 per cent of those without funding.¹¹ These partnerships allow universities, colleges and external organisations to share specialist knowledge and work together on effective reporting.

The OfS’s intervention has, therefore, succeeded in stimulating a wide range of activities across multiple English universities and colleges that successfully engaged students and worked alongside external agencies and community groups.

Example of resources

The University of Suffolk’s Higher Education Online Safeguarding Self-Review Tool

www.uos.ac.uk/content/digital-civility

Working with external practitioners and academics, the University of Suffolk developed a tool to help deconstruct the myths surrounding online abuse and offer a blueprint for keeping students safe.

Their tool allows providers to review their online safeguarding practices. It allows universities and colleges to assess the effectiveness of their governance and regulations, curriculum and staff training, student engagement and reporting. The tool ranks these features as either ‘basic’, ‘embedded’, or ‘holistic’. This allows providers to monitor their strengths and weaknesses in student safeguarding.

The OfS encourages higher education providers to use this tool to measure their current level of support and improve their responses to online safeguarding.

⁹ Advance HE, ‘Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Thematic analysis report 1’, 2018, p35 (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/evaluation-of-safeguarding-students-catalyst-fund-projects/).

¹⁰ Advance HE, ‘Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Summative evaluation report’, 2019, p64.

¹¹ Advance HE, ‘Evaluation of safeguarding students Catalyst fund projects: Summative evaluation report’, 2019, p60.

Recommendations

The OfS welcomes Advance HE's recommendations on how to build on the work of these funded projects.

For providers the recommendations are that they:

- Promote better awareness-raising of the issue to students
- Embed good practice in governance
- Involve students in the implementation of safeguarding practices
- Work in tandem with community groups and third-party agencies
- Appoint dedicated staff to continue the work already undertaken
- Ensure data is collected anonymously
- Target marginalised student groups to increase student engagement.

Advance HE has also made a number of recommendations for the OfS. We are undertaking a programme of work, including:

- Developing a community of practice to enable learning, exchange and dissemination of innovative and good practice.
- Launching a series of roundtable events in 2019-20 to examine key issues relating to student welfare and safeguarding.
- Facilitating and promoting the sharing of effective practice and 'what works' to develop evidence-informed policy and practice.
- Securing access to resources and tools produced by the projects.

By learning and working together, the OfS and providers can implement the culture change necessary to address hate crime, sexual violence and online harassment.

Conclusion

These dynamic and transformative projects have already had a major effect on how universities and colleges reduce tolerance for and respond to incidents of hate crimes, sexual harassment and online harassment against students.

These projects cannot be one-offs. Instead, practices to tackle and prevent hate crime, sexual harassment and online harassment need to be fully embedded into the day-to-day running of providers. Above all, from the student body to senior management, there is a real appetite for change that should be capitalised on. These projects show how English universities and colleges can lead the way in challenging sexual violence, hate crime and online harassment in higher education.



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