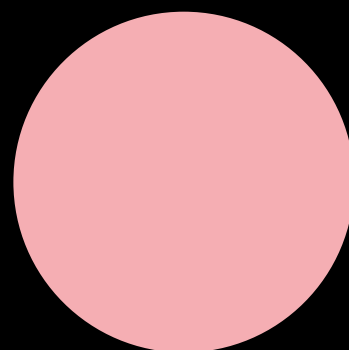
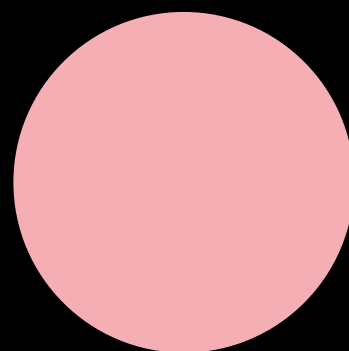


July 2024

Sexual Misconduct Prevalence Poll

Summary of key findings



Research by Savanta for the
Office for Students

Introduction

Research background and objectives

As part of its sexual misconduct prevalence pilot project, the Office for Students (OfS) commissioned Savanta to conduct a sexual misconduct poll. The poll asked current students studying towards a higher education qualification in England to report on their experiences and perceptions of sexual misconduct while at university. The questionnaire itself had been previously developed and cognitively tested by OfS. The objective of this research was to inform the development of a prevalence survey of sexual misconduct in higher education, which was to be piloted later.

Topics covered include:

- Unwanted behaviours of a sexual nature (sexual harassment) and unwanted sexual contact (sexual assault/violence) since becoming a university student;
- persons involved, support sought and reporting of the incidents;
- impact of these experiences on university students and understanding of processes;
- university staff/student relationships.

Research methodology and sample

Savanta conducted a 15-minute online survey through their YouthSight and other internal panels. Of the total number of respondents, 50.1% were sourced from the YouthSight panel and 49.9% were found from other in-house panels. Fieldwork took place from 1st to 23rd August 2023 and a total of 3,017 surveys were completed.

The survey was sent to a sample of current undergraduate and postgraduate students, studying at English higher education providers, excluding students from a selected list of universities due to project context and wider research objectives.

During fieldwork, hard quotas were set on age, gender, study level, study mode and domicile to ensure that students recruited for the survey resembled the populations of interest. The composition of the sample is summarised in the table below. Statistics on the demographics used to construct the sampling frame, survey quotas and weighting scheme were obtained from HESA and UCAS.

The sample was designed to provide a view across a number of different demographics and student characteristics. Therefore, there was close monitoring (soft quotas) of the sample in terms of ethnicity, religion/belief, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, year of study, area of study, education background, free school meals eligibility and provider type, but no quotas were set.

Following fieldwork, the sample was weighted by age, gender, ethnicity and domicile (excluding non-UK residents) to compensate for any under- or oversampling during fieldwork. Study level and study mode were removed from the weighting scheme.

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Given the sensitivity of the subject, the survey offered signposting to relevant organisations at the start and the end. In addition, Savanta limited the use of reminders throughout fieldwork and monitored closely drop off points, suggesting sensible changes to the survey to avoid more students closing the survey window at sensitive points. Data quality checks were applied to the final sample; these included standard checks on speeders, flatliners and incorrect/inconsistent answers to trap questions.

The data in this summary of key findings document has been analysed at a total level. Selected significant subgroup or demographic differences have also been included in the university staff/student relationships section. Any significant differences between subgroups reported are at a 95% confidence level.

Table 1 below details the demographic breakdown of the sample:

Category	Options	Sample Size (n)
Total	Total	3,017
Age	18-20	1,086
	21+	1,931
Gender	Female	1,790
	Male	1,169
	Other & prefer not to say	58
Study level	Undergraduate	2,583
	Postgraduate	434
Study mode	Full time	2,651
	Part time	366
Ethnicity	Asian	478
	Black	253
	Mixed	206
	White	2,019
	Other	61
Domicile	East Midlands	207
	London	543
	Northern Ireland	89
	North East	122
	North West	303
	Scotland	226
	East of England	200
	South East	382
	South West	240
	Wales	138
	West Midlands	219
	Yorkshire and Humberside	208
	Outside the UK	140
Area of study	Business and management	482
	Design, and creative and performing arts	315
	Education and teaching	237
	Engineering, technology and computing	440
	Humanities and languages	300

Category	Options	Sample Size (n)
	Law and social sciences	460
	Medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences	446
	Natural and built environment	96
	Natural and mathematical sciences	244
	Nursing, allied health and psychology	60
	Other	303
Religion	Christianity	849
	Islam	361
	Hinduism	91
	Judaism	33
	Sikhism	33
	Buddhism	30
	Any other religion	73
Sexual orientation	None	1,448
	LGBTQ+	607
	Non-LGBTQ+	2,225
Disability	Prefer to self describe/Prefer not to say	185
	Yes	970
	No	1,971
Tariff	Prefer not to say	76
	Postgraduate	12
	High tariff	1,113
	Medium tariff	746
	Low or unknown tariff	772
	Level 4/5: Large	125
	Level 4/5: Small	103
	Specialist: Creative	69
Specialist: Other	77	
Eligibility for free school meals	Yes	894
	No	1,916
	Prefer not to say	42
	Don't know	165

Key Findings

1. Experiences of sexual harassment in the last year

The majority of respondents have experienced some form of sexual harassment, with many reporting these incidents occurred in the last year.

Six in ten (61%) respondents say they have experienced at least one type of sexual harassment since being a university student. Most commonly experienced is someone making suggestive looks or staring at their body (36%), followed by asking, hinting or making unwelcome requests that they have sex (24%), which are both more commonly experienced by women than men (48% vs 20%; 29% vs 17% respectively).

Over four in ten (43%) respondents experienced sexual harassment incidents within the past year. Around a third (32%) report experiencing an incident within the last 12 months that occurred in a university setting or were perpetrated by someone affiliated with the university.

The sexual harassment incidents experienced within the last year tended to occur in a mix of university and non-university settings.

Of those who experienced sexual harassment in the last year, a quarter (24%) say the incident occurred once, half (55%) say 2 to 5 incidents occurred, and a sixth (17%) say there were more than 5 incidents.

Around a third (32%) of those who experienced sexual harassment in the last year say that none of the incidents occurred in a university setting, while two in ten (23%) say the incidents took place exclusively in a university setting and four in ten (42%) say some took place in a university setting and some did not.

Incidents that occurred in university settings most commonly took place in the Students' Union, clubs and societies or events and spaces (28%), followed by other general areas, such as university carparks, walkways, gardens and bathrooms (23%), in student accommodation (23%), in university retail areas (21%) and in the library (19%). The least common university settings where incidents took place included in academic or administrative staff offices (7%), and whilst on work experience (4%).

Incidents that occurred in non-university settings most commonly took place in the town or city (75%), online (32%) or somewhere else (21%).

Most sexual harassment incidents involved someone connected with their university, more commonly a man/men than a woman/women, and most often a student from their university.

Almost six in ten (58%) of those who experienced sexual harassment in the last year say the incident(s) involved someone connected with their university (e.g., a student of staff member). Among these individuals, the person involved was significantly more likely to be a man/men than a woman/women – this is the case for almost all types of sexual harassment tested. For example, three quarters (76%) of those who

experienced a sexually suggestive look or stare at their body in the last 12 months in a university setting or by someone connected to the university say it involved a man/men, compared to 15% who say it involved a woman/women.

Among those who experienced sexual harassment in the last year in a university setting or by someone connected to the university, seven in ten (72%) say it involved a student from their university. Nearly one in ten say it involved an academic staff member (7%) or a non-academic staff member (9%).

Only 1 in 5 victims of sexual harassment sought support from their university.

A fifth (20%) of students who experienced sexual harassment in the last year say they sought support from their university for help; 77% say they did not.

In cases where help was sought from their university, the university welfare or wellbeing support services were the most commonly used support (46%), followed by a student leader (30%), someone in the faculty or school (26%), someone from their residence (21%), campus security (21%) or someone else associated with the university (8%).

A similar proportion of students sought support from outside of their university as inside their university.

A quarter (26%) of those who have experienced sexual harassment in the last year say they sought support from somewhere outside their university to help them deal with their experience(s); 72% say they did not.

Among those who sought help from outside their university, a friend (61%), family member (41%) or partner (28%) were the most commonly sought support. Help was much less commonly sought from a formal support service, such as a mental health professional (16%), a local sexual assault or rape crisis service (13%), the police (9%), a telephone or online counselling service (8%) or a healthcare professional (6%).

Two thirds of those who sought support from their university rate the support they received as 'good'.

Among those who sought help from a support service at their university, 29% rate the experience as very good, 35% as good, 16% as neither good nor poor, 12% as poor and 6% as very poor. A minority (3%) say they sought support but did not receive any.

Half (50%) of those that did not seek help from their university say it was because *they* did not think the incident was serious enough, whilst two in ten (20%) say they did not think *others* would take it seriously enough and one in ten (10%) were worried they wouldn't be believed. Four in ten (42%) say they did not think they needed help and a third (36%) handled it themselves. One in six thought it would be too hard to prove (18%) or didn't think that the support or assistance on offer would be helpful (17%).

Three quarters of students that have experienced sexual harassment in a university setting did not report it to their university.

Among those that have experienced sexual harassment in a university setting or by someone connected to the university, almost a quarter (23%) say they have formally reported the incident to their university, with three quarters (75%) saying they did not report it.

Most of the students who reported the incident to their university say the experience of the process was good and clearly explained.

Among those who reported the incident to their university, 24% rate the experience of the reporting process as very good, 35% as good, 18% as neither good nor poor, 14% as poor and 8% as very poor. Seven in ten (69%) of these individuals say the reporting process was clearly explained to them at the point of making a complaint, with three in ten (28%) saying it was not clearly explained.

A sixth (17%) of those who experienced sexual harassment in the last year say the incident was reported to the police – either by themselves (8%) or by someone else (9%). Four in five (81%) did not report it to the police.

2. Experiences of unwanted sexual contact (sexual assault /violence) in the last year

Over a third of respondents have experienced unwanted sexual contact (sexual assault or sexual violence), with a fifth of these incidents occurring in the last year.

Over a third (36%) of respondents report experiencing some form of unwanted sexual contact since becoming a student and about a fifth (21%) of respondents state the incident(s) happened within the past year. 15% of respondents report experiencing an incident within the last 12 months in a university setting or perpetrated by someone affiliated with the university.

A quarter (24%) of respondents say that, since being a student, someone touched them in a sexual manner, kissed, pinched or rubbed up against them, or removed some of their clothes when they did not want them to but did not attempt sexual penetration.

Around one in twenty respondents say that they have experienced unwanted sexual penetration (6%) or oral sex (5%) or that someone unsuccessfully tried to sexually penetrate them (7%) or make them have oral sex (5%) when they did not want to.

Three in ten victims say the incident(s) took place exclusively in university settings.

While 44% of incidents of unwanted sexual contacts that occurred in the last year did not take place in a university setting, 28% were exclusively in a university setting and 26% took place in mix of university and non-university settings.

Two in ten respondents who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the last year in a university setting say it took place in a university retail area (20%), in general areas, such as university carparks, walkways, gardens and bathrooms (19%), in student accommodation (19%), or in lecture theatres, computer labs or seminar rooms (19%). It was least likely to take place on work experience or placement (4%) or in online spaces (4%).

Unwanted sexual contact incidents that occurred in non-university settings most commonly took place in the town or city (66%), online (15%) or somewhere else (29%).

Most involved someone connected with their university, more commonly a male than a female.

Over half (54%) of those who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the last year say the incident involved someone connected with their university. Among these cases, it is significantly more likely to be a man/men who was involved in the incident than a woman/women – this was the case for half of the forms of sexual assault tested. For example, of those who experienced someone touching, kissing, pinching or rubbing them in a sexual manner, or removing their clothes when they did not want them to, 64% say that a man/men was involved, compared to half of this proportion (32%) who say that a woman/women was involved.

Survivors of unwanted sexual contact are most likely to say the incident involved a student from their university (42%). One in ten say it involved a hook-up or date (11%), a non-academic staff member (10%), a friend not from their university (9%) or an academic staff member (8%).

A quarter of unwanted sexual contact survivors sought out support from their university. Over half of these individuals think that the support they received was good.

More than a quarter (27%) of students who have experienced unwanted sexual contact in the last year say that they sought support from their university. Support was most commonly sought from university welfare or wellbeing services (39%), followed by a student leader (30%), someone in their faculty (25%), someone from their residence (23%) or campus security (18%).

Among those that sought support from their university, 24% say the experience was very good, 30% say it was good, 18% say it was neither good nor poor, 14% say it was poor and 10% say it was very poor. A minority (2%) say they sought support but did not receive any.

Those who did not seek support from their university tend to think the incident was not severe enough or felt ashamed.

Among the 71% who say they did not seek support from their university, a third say this was because they did not think they needed help (33%), that the incident was not serious enough (32%) or that they felt embarrassed or ashamed (32%). One in ten say

they didn't think that the support or assistance on offer would be helpful (10%) or confidential (11%).

Three in ten survivors (28%) sought help from outside their university, mainly seeking support from friends (48%), family (39%) or a partner (21%). Formal sources of support were less commonly sought, for example, mental health professionals (16%), local sexual assault or rape crisis services (16%), the police (12%), or a telephone or online counselling service (12%). Of note is that people are more likely to seek these forms of support if they have experienced sexual assault compared to sexual harassment.

Of the third of survivors of unwanted sexual contact who reported the incident to their university, six in ten think the reporting process was good.

A third (34%) of those who have experienced unwanted sexual contact in the last year in a university setting or involving someone connected to the university say that they formally reported or made a formal complaint about the incident to their university. Of these individuals, 33% say the reporting process was very good, 26% say it was good, 21% say it was neither good nor poor, 9% think it was poor and 10% very poor.

Among those who made a formal complaint, 67% say that their university's formal reporting process was clearly explained to them. A quarter (27%), on the other hand, say that it was not clearly explained.

A quarter (26%) of those who experienced it in the last year say it was reported to the police, either by themselves (12%) or by someone else (14%). The majority, however, did not report it to the police (72%).

Three quarters of survivors of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact experienced an impact on their lives in some way.

Among those who experienced sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact in the last year, a third say they stopped going out as much (33%) and/or stopped trusting people or experienced difficulty in other relationships (33%). Two in ten (21%) say they experienced poor mental health or emotional problems and 13% say they skipped lectures, seminars or meetings. A quarter (25%) of survivors say that they did not experience any impact or the question is not applicable to them.

Many are not confident on how to access support or how to make a formal complaint regarding sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact.

Only half (54%) of respondents feel confident about where to seek support in their university about an experience of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact and 38% say they do not feel confident.

Similarly, while half (49%) of respondents feel confident about how to make a formal complaint to their university about an experience of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact, 43% do not feel confident.

3. Student and university staff relationships

Most students feel comfortable about university staff socialising with students, but other activities tested are less palatable, particularly among female students.

Six in ten (59%) respondents say they feel comfortable for a member of university staff to socialise with students in their own time, although more than a third (36%) feel uncomfortable with this. While this is the most acceptable behaviour tested in the eyes of students, male students are significantly more likely to feel comfortable with this than female students (70% vs 50% respectively), as are postgraduate students (64% vs 58% of undergraduate students).

At the other end of the spectrum, students are least likely to be comfortable with university staff flirting or having sexualised conversations with students (83% uncomfortable; 15% comfortable), going on dates or hook-ups with students (81% uncomfortable; 15% comfortable), or having ongoing romantic or sexual relationships with students (81% uncomfortable; 16% comfortable). Female students are significantly more likely than male students to feel uncomfortable with these three behaviours (flirting: 90% vs 72%; dates/hook-ups: 90% vs 70%; ongoing relationships: 89% vs 70%, respectively).

There are some behaviours which sit in a grey area and are more likely to split opinion among students regarding their acceptability. For example, 55% feel uncomfortable with university staff asking for phone numbers to contact students, whilst 39% feel comfortable with this. As seen previously, female students are significantly more likely to feel uncomfortable with this than male students (62% vs 46%), along with undergraduates compared to postgraduates (56% vs 49%).

One in ten students have had an intimate relationship with a member of university staff in the last year.

Among the 10% of students who have had a relationship with a member of university staff in the last year, half (51%) say the staff member is/was involved with their education and/or assessment, such as a lecturer, tutor or supervisor, and half (52%) say the staff member has/had a pastoral or non-academic professional responsibility for them, such as a student welfare worker, sports coach or security personnel.

Among those who have had a relationship with a member of university staff in the last year, a third (35%) say they felt pressure to begin, continue or take the relationship further than they wanted because they were worried that refusing would negatively impact them, their studies or career in some way, even if the member of staff did not say or imply that would happen. Three in ten say the staff member stated or implied that refusing might negatively affect them, their studies or career in some way, such as getting worse grades (31%) or that doing so would mean they would be treated more favourably, such as getting better grades (31%). Only one in six (16%) say that none of the aforementioned forms of coercion applied to their incident(s).

One in six students have had a staff member attempt to pressure them into an intimate relationship in the last year.

Other than the intimate relationships with staff members already discussed, one in six (15%) students say a university staff member has attempted to pressure them, either in person or online, into an intimate relationship (sexual, romantic, emotional, financial). This is either by stating or implying that doing so would mean they would be treated more favourably (8%) or that refusing them might negatively affect them or their studies or career (7%).

Nearly half of those who have experienced pressure to engage in an intimate relationship say the staff member is/was involved with their education and/or assessment (46%), or has/had some pastoral or non-academic professional responsibility for them (46%).

One in six students know of an intimate staff-student relationship.

Among the 13% of students who say they know of students who have been or are currently involved in an intimate relationship with a university staff member in the last year, half (51%) say the staff member is/was involved with their education and/or assessment, and four in ten (39%) say they have/had some pastoral or non-academic professional responsibility for them.

Among those that know of an intimate staff-student relationship in the last year, almost seven in ten (68%) agree that it appears/appeared to be consensual, with 10% disagreeing. Over half (54%) agree that the student is/was worried that ending the intimate relationship might negatively affect their studies or their career. Almost half agree the student felt pressured into the relationship because they would gain favourable treatment (45%) or that by refusing it might negatively affect their studies or career (44%). Interestingly, male students are significantly more likely than female students to agree that the student felt pressured either by positive coercion (55% vs 33%) or negative coercion (54% vs 32%).

One in ten are aware of an intimate staff-student relationship that ended.

Among the 10% of respondents who are aware of an intimate staff-student relationship that ended or where the student rejected the advances of a staff member in the last year, a third (33%) believe the student experienced adverse or derogatory behaviour from the staff member. This includes shaming or rumour spreading. A quarter (26%) believe the student lost access to essential resources or activities, such as work placements, and almost a quarter say the student changed their module or course to avoid choosing a particular module/course (23%) or changed university (23%). A further 9% say that the student changed their career.