Lessons learnt from a Campus Climate Survey at a post-1992 UK University - Nick Addis, Ella Rees and Kieran McCartan

Introduction

University-based sexual aggression has been identified as an international public health issue (Hales and Gannon, 2022); however, this does not represent a new phenomenon. Lamade et al (2018) charted the prevalence of sexual misconduct within campus settings as far back as the 1950s, with university campuses identified as particularly 'fertile' environments in which sexual misconduct can flourish (Lewis et al, 2016). Universities have addressed sexual misconduct through tailored policies and support procedures, also employing 'Campus Climate Surveys' to explore the prevalence and experiences of students impacted by sexual misconduct. This approach to understanding the lived reality of sexual misconduct on and off campus has grown in popularity internationally over the last 10 years.

Methodology and findings

This work details findings from a recent Campus Climate Survey conducted at a post-1992 UK Higher Education Institution. An online survey was created through the Qualtrics platform covering a range of topics, including understanding; details of sexual misconduct witnessed and experienced; and reporting and bystander practices. The survey ran for six weeks between October and December 2022 and was circulated to all undergraduate and postgraduate students via email, as well as social media and promotional posters across key campus locations. In the research there were 307 students who participated[1], with sample demographics as follows:

- 72% identified as female and 24% as male;
- 71% identified as White; 14.1% as Asian or Asian British; 5.8% as Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African; 5.8% as mixed or multiple ethnic groups; and 3.3% as other ethnic groups;
- 79% were aged 18-25.

The research identified five key themes:

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[1] Not all participants completed every question. The number of respondents completing each question is noted at the top of each section, and percentages of respondents given are for those *answering that individual question*.

1. Understanding around Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault (N = 291)

The survey explored students' understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment or sexual assault.

As a point of reference, definitions for sexual harassment and sexual assault are as follows:

> *"Sexual harassment is a prohibited form of sex discrimination which refers to any unwanted sexual conduct such as unwelcome sexual advances, verbal conduct, physical conduct and requests for sexual favours in instances."*

> *"Sexual assault occurs when there is intentional physical contact that is sexual in nature without consent and includes any unwanted sexual touching, rape and other similar acts."*

(www.legislation.gov.uk, 2010)

Students demonstrated greater recognition of more 'overt' behaviours as sexual harassment or sexual assault; for example, recognising being 'wolf whistled'/leered at (93% recognised as sexual harassment), and being forced into a sexual act (97% recognised as sexual assault). Recognition of specific acts as sexual harassment or sexual assault was typically lower for 'non-contact' behaviours; for example, unwanted sexual advances, or publicly showing pictures, photos, or drawings of a sexual nature.

10% of respondents believed there was no difference between sexual harassment and sexual assault, viewing these as 'different terms for the same thing'. As such, the prevalence of attitudes that downplay the seriousness of such acts may contribute to an environment in which these acts are viewed as permitted (Moore and Mennicke, 2020; O'Hare and O'Donohue, 1998).

2. Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault (N = 106)

71% of respondents reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault at university. Specifically, 15% reported being forced into having sex; 26% reported being taken advantage of whilst intoxicated; 41% reported being exposed to sexual comments or jokes; 44% reported being stared at intrusively; and 43% reported being wolf whistled/leered at. Peak times for sexual misconduct (which includes both sexual harassment

and sexual assault) incidents were freshers' week and semester one, accounting for 214 and 239 incidents (respectively).

3. *Locations of incidents of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault (N = 58)*

As shown in Figure 1, there emerged two areas where incidents appeared particularly prevalent:

- Within the night-time economy
- Within and around public transport (and transport hubs)

Incidents in the night-time economy (for example, in pubs/nightclubs) typically involved high levels of both face-to-face sexual harassment (non-physical) and physical sexual harassment. For incidents in and around public transport/hubs, there were higher levels of face-to-face sexual harassment over physical harassment, yet considerably lower levels of sexual assault (see Figure 1).
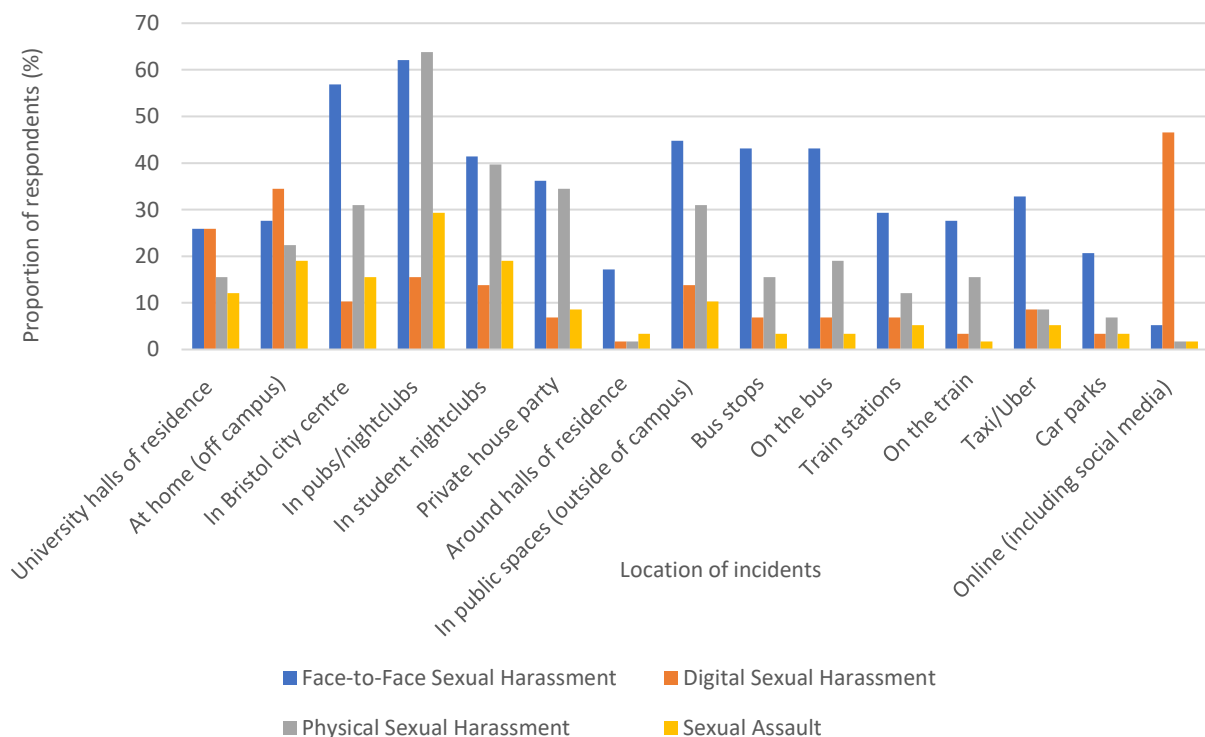
Figure 1. Locations where students have experienced sexual misconduct incidents.

4. *Students' levels of reporting instances of Sexual Misconduct (N = 64)*

Reporting instances of sexual misconduct was not commonplace. Of 64 respondents, only 9% stated they would report every instance of sexual misconduct encountered. 61% of respondents said that they would sometimes report instances, for example, to someone they knew well, or if they deemed these as serious. Alarmingly, 30% of people stated they would never report instances encountered.

5. Bystander Intervention (N = 96)

When asked how they would usually respond when witnessing others being subjected to sexual misconduct, 52% of respondents stated they would try to intervene to help get the victim out of that situation, with 29% reporting that they would call out the person behaving abusively at the time. Two key themes were identified surrounding potential barriers to intervening: *a sense of powerlessness* and *lack of understanding*.

Summary and conclusion

This research highlights the challenges that preventing and responding to sexual assault, harassment and misconduct poses at universities, specifically in respect of students' understanding of the terms, how and why they should report instances, as well as to whom. Sexual assault and harassment are commonplace at universities, as well as within society in general, therefore we need to see a committed approach to preventing and responding to them; although this is happening within the sector, it is piecemeal at times and inconsistent in approach.

Often, the voice of the student is not captured or fed into the process, instead being a top-down approach. To create a community-based approach, which universities ultimately are, we need civic and social engagement in developing shared values and collective norms (McCartan and Meyrick, 2023). As a result of this study, we would suggest that universities:

(1) target intervention around freshers' week and semester one to enhance students' understanding/awareness;
(2) build engagement with bystander training and exploration of university awareness campaigns around non-confrontational intervention methods;
(3) develop a university-wide social media and campus campaign to raise awareness of current services/interventions to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct;
(4) collaborate with local councils and safer cities partnerships, including licensed premises, to enhance safety in public spaces and within the night-time economy; and,

(5) collaborate with public transport providers and transport hubs to reduce the risk of sexual harm and sexual harassment and enhance public safety within these contexts.

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