



***Is the culture changing? Sexual harassment of students and next steps after the 'Changing the Culture' taskforce report***

Tuesday 15 November; 10:00-11:00; Committee Room 18, Westminster, London, SW1A 0AA

The APPG met to discuss sexual harassment and sexual assault on campus, in light of the Universities UK (UUK) report released on Friday 21 October on violence against women, harassment and hate crime on campus. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians, students' union officers, and organisations and academics with interest in the higher education sector and in combating sexual violence.

Jess Lishak, who was the student representative on the Anti-Harassment Taskforce that produced the report, opened the meeting with comments on her experience of being on the taskforce and the role of universities in terms of wider societal problems of sexual violence. She emphasised that while universities are not to blame for these wider issues, they can prolong the problem and must be part of the solution. Jess noted that the taskforce report is the start of a conversation, not the closure of one, and should be used as a springboard for building long-lasting change.

Laura Bates gave a speech quoting examples of instances of sexual violence at universities from the Everyday Sexism Project, the platform for sharing experiences of sexism that she founded. She described sexual harassment at universities as endemic, occurring in multiple spaces on and off campus and combining with other forms of prejudice. She described universities as a crucial battleground, but outlined areas where practice is patchy and students are often not supported.

Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive of Universities UK and chair of the Taskforce, talked through the findings of the report and its recommendations, which she said are designed to respond to the challenging cultures identified by the previous speakers. She emphasised that, while there are pockets of good practice across universities, a whole-institution approach is needed to tackle sexual harassment and assault. Nicola explained that the report is only the beginning, and that there is lots more work to be done on the issue, as well as wider issues of hate crime and harassment for various groups that the taskforce was unable to address.

In comments from the floor, attendees discussed the role of legislation in effectively implementing the taskforce's recommendations:

- Discussion was had as to whether legislation is needed, and if it could significantly change the culture around sexual harassment and assault on campus.
- Attendees questioned what external measures could be put in place, alternative to legislation; concerns about the lack of enforcement or safeguarding mechanisms in the report.
- Laura Bates noted that the existing legislation is not being used, and is not understood by students.
- An attendee raised concern about the legal implications of grouping sexual offences in with other offences in guidance.

A theme in the comments was the importance of good quality sex and relationships education:

- It was noted that many students aren't aware of what constitutes sexual assault or harassment.
- Attendees highlighted the importance of providing good quality sex and relationships education at schools, from a young age, as well as the effectiveness of consent workshops at universities.

Other questions were raised regarding the implementation of the recommendations:

- An attendee raised concerns about the financial capacity of smaller higher education institutions to implement significant regulation changes, and asked what support they could access.
- A point was made about the difficulty of implementing consistent training across institutions.
- Attendees discussed how we can encourage universities to take effective action in cases where student misconduct may constitute a criminal offence.

Discussion was had on what the next steps are in tackling issues of harassment and assault at universities, including addressing problems such as staff-student harassment.

***For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Political Affairs and Advocacy Manager, National Union of Students ([alexander.lee@nus.org.uk](mailto:alexander.lee@nus.org.uk)).***