All Party Parliamentary Group on Students

Stopping sexual harassment and assault, on and off campus
Wednesday 13 April; 13:00-14:00; Committee Room 21, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

Introduction
The prevalence of the sexual harassment and assault of students has received increasing media, political and sector attention. Against a backdrop of reports on the pervasive 'lad culture' within universities and colleges across the UK, there have been growing concerns for student safety and how students, institutions and authorities can tackle this.

Identifying the problem

> *Key statistics:[1]*
> * 1 in 7 women students have experienced a serious physical or sexual assault
> * 68% have been a victim of verbal or physical harassment on campus
> * 17% have been the victim of some kind of sexual harassment within their first week
> * 59% of witnessed incidents of harassment have happened at social events or in night clubs
> * 62% of students are not aware of how to report sexual harassment or assault at their university

For a number of years, shocking research has revealed the degree of harassment and assault of women students. This can affect students both on and off campuses, whether it is groping on nights out, misogynistic abuse on social media, sexist 'banter' in halls and lecture theatres, or serious sexual assault and rape.

On campus, research suggests a concerning normalisation of sexist language and 'lad culture' that can target women students, making them uncomfortable and damaging their learning experiences. Over 2 in 5 women students told a survey that they had been subject to catcalling, wolf-whistling or other overtly sexual noises in their university and college buildings; **16% reported these incidents had actually happened in a learning environment like a lecture theatre or library**; and, 20% have been asked inappropriate questions about their sex lives whilst in academic environments.

Off campus, incidents of harassment and assault are particularly experienced on nights out: for example, 59% of people who have witnessed an incident report that it happened at a social event or in a night club. Indeed, interviews conducted for NUS' 2013 report identified women students that actively change or limit their social activity to evade 'laddish' behaviour on nights out.[2] Interviewees reported crossing the road to avoid groups of men who had been drinking and arranging nights to avoid bars or clubs where certain societies or 'club nights' were.

However, experiences of harassment and assault outside of the campus environment are not exclusively reserved for nights out. Many women students are victims of these incidents simply travelling to and from home. These experiences can range from being shouted at from passing cars to being touched whilst using public transport, and even being followed home: 12% of women students have been victims of stalking or obsessive behaviour.[3] **Notably, the vast majority (76%) of serious sexual assaults take place in home of the victim, their friend or their (ex-)partner.**

Responses within institutions
Guidance for universities about responding to incidents of harassment and assault is still provided by the 1994 Zellick report, which is often used by universities to inform their policies on handling circumstances where a student's alleged misconduct would also constitute a criminal offence.

This guidance primarily instructs institutions to avoid inappropriate involvement with legal proceedings: for example, it requires institutions to await the result of a trial before undertaking disciplinary procedures against a student; disciplinary procedures must take the result of a trial into account; and it advises institutions to not report to the police without the consent of the victim.

However, the nature of sexual violence against students – where the alleged perpetrators and victims often live and work in close proximity and where survivors are unlikely to report to police – means that

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[1] Drawn from NUS, *Hidden Marks* (2011) and *Lad Culture and Sexism Survey* (2014).
[2] *That's what she said*, page 47 (2013)
[3] *Hidden Marks*, page 15 (2011)

universities are often on the front line in terms of reporting and support. With increasing awareness about sexual harassment and assault affecting students, universities have played an important role in ensuring they have proper and transparent processes for handling complaints, managing social media on campus and creating a visible culture of zero tolerance of harassment and violence.

Nevertheless, worrying indicators show that significant levels of harassment and assault go unreported, while women students continue to raise real concerns over how seriously incidents are treated by institutions and authorities. Concerns over how effective disciplinary procedures will be in responding to incidents can deter victims from coming forward whilst students also report that the relative absence of victims' support needs within the Zellick guidelines can lead to support for survivors being difficult to access or under-resourced.

Universities UK has recently committed to a review of the Zellick guidelines.[4]

Political responses
Tackling sexual harassment and violence against women has been made a priority for the UK government. In November 2010, the Home Office published its cross-government strategy *Call to end violence against women and girls*, which focused on the prevention of violence, provision of support, working in partnership, and education. An associated action plan has been updated every year since.[5]

Whilst the latest strategy did not specifically identify action in higher or further education, tackling sexual violence against students has received increasing attention. In November 2015, the Universities Minister Jo Johnson invited Universities UK to convene a sexual violence taskforce to "build on existing efforts to bring about cultural change and provide new guidance for the sector".[6] The taskforce – composed of university, civil service and student representatives – will report in September 2016 with recommendations for tackling harassment, assault and hate crime in universities.

Even more recently, the Scottish Government announced in March 2016 that the University of Strathclyde would be undertaking a £300,000 project to create a 'toolkit' for Scottish universities as part of its own strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls.[7]

Student responses
As more has become known about 'lad culture', students and students' unions have found new ways to work with their institutions and local communities to stamp out harassment. As examples:

King's College London Students' Union (KCLSU) runs the *It Stops Here!* campaign, in collaboration with King's College London. The university and the students' union have worked together to challenge harmful attitudes across the whole community. They have designed a website that more easily enables students to report an incident and they have created a Harassment Adviser Network to clearly identify who victims can turn to.

Oxford University Students' Union (OUSU) leads the *It happens here* campaign which, as the name suggests, raises awareness of sexual abuse and violence happening at Oxford. The vast majority of OUSU's undergraduate and postgraduate Common Rooms now hold compulsory 'Consent workshops' for students to discuss what consent is, common myths about rape and healthy practices of consent.

Durham University, in collaboration with its students' union (DSU), has set up its own Sexual Violence Taskforce to look at how the university's reporting procedures might be improved and is encouraged contributions from survivors' groups. It has also implemented 'bystander training' to give witnesses of sexual harassment and assault the confidence to challenge harmful behaviours.

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).

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[4] http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/TaskforcecallsforreviewofZellickguidelines.aspx#.VwOGb-IrLIU
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/call-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls;
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls-2016-to-2020
[6] http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/Newtaskforcesetuptolookatviolence,harassmentandhatecrimeaffectinguniversitystudents.aspx#.Vv6W-uIrLIU
[7] http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Making-university-campuses-safer-237d.aspx