Students' help-seeking for experiences of interpersonal violence: how can universities respond?

Nicola Roberts, Catherine Donovan, Matthew Durey

Abstract

The prevention of interpersonal violence and abuse for students in Higher Educational Institutions and the development of appropriate institutional responses to support those affected are at the core of the Universities UK's (2016) *Changing the Culture* Report on Violence Against Women, Harassment and Hate Crime. Whilst the provision of robust reporting and monitoring systems on-campus are thought to be essential in helping to ensure the safety of Higher Education students, the findings of research discussed in this article suggest that more fundamental work is needed in order to encourage students to view the University as a source of help in the event that they experience interpersonal violence, particularly when this takes place 'off-campus'. The research, which surveyed students attending Northfacing University in England, found that help-seeking practices

seem to be shaped both by the location in which interpersonal violence occurs and by whom it is perpetrated.

Key Words sexual violence and abuse, verbal abuse and bullying, students' help-seeking, universities' response, co-ordinated approach

Introduction

The Universities UK *Changing the Culture* report (hereafter, UUK, 2016) on violence against women, harassment and hate crime can be seen to represent a watershed moment in discussions about the responsibility of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to improve safety for all students during their time at university, both by preventing victimisation in their student populations and in being appropriately equipped to respond to students seeking help for victimisation. Recommendations include robust systems of reporting and monitoring as well as prevention initiatives such as active bystander programmes to promote wider awareness and responsibility for peer safety among student populations (Fenton et al., 2016). Programmes to provide opportunities to learn about sexual consent as well as the laws relating to sexual violence, hate and harassment (including online and social media use) are also recommended in the report (UUK, 2016).

The report comes after the publication of several surveys commissioned by the *National Union of Students* (NUS) that drew attention to the experiences of female, Black, Asian and ethnic minority, international and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer students, who were found to be disproportionately represented among those who had experienced violence, abuse and discrimination during their time as a student at a HEI (NUS, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2018). The onus in the UUK report is on the Higher Education (HE) sector to take responsibility for raising awareness about sexual violence, hate and harassment in universities, provide prevention activities for students, and develop policy, monitoring and reporting processes for those victimised and provide appropriate supportive responses. In the follow-up report from UUK (2019: 25) which reviewed changes since the original report, one of the conclusions was that 'good progress' has been made across the HE sector in addressing gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Our research shows that students experience such 'everyday violence and abuse' on and off campus including during student activities. The impacts of such victimisation can also be profound, not just for individual mental health and wellbeing but also for being able to successfully engage with teaching and learning activities (NUS, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2018). We, like other university staff (see Donovan et al., 2020), therefore agree with UUK (2016, 2019) that universities should take some responsibility for addressing students' safety and providing support services for victimisation when it occurs.

However, there is little research on students' perceptions of their universities' availability to them if they are victimised and it is this that we consider in this article.

In the study on which this article is based, respondents were invited to provide prevalence data of their experiences of four categories of violence and abuse (see below for details about the survey). At the end of each category, respondents were invited to focus on the most serious example of the violence they had experienced. They were asked to provide a description of the incident and provide information relating to the location and time of the event, the perpetrator and about help-seeking behaviours following their victimisation. The discussion in this article focuses on a comparison of students' most serious experiences of verbal abuse and bullying, and sexual violence and abuse to explore whether students consider their HEI a potential source of support; particularly when victimisation takes place off-campus by someone not thought to be connected to their HEI. The article has five sections including a review of help-seeking behaviours, the methodology of the project, the survey findings and discussion. First, what follows is a brief overview of the literature on students' experiences of violence and abuse on which the current study builds.

Students' experiences of interpersonal violence and abuse

Many students are at a heightened risk of violent victimisation. In the UK, 49%[1] of university students are aged 21 and under (Advanced HE, 2022). The national *Crime Surveys for England and Wales* show that women aged 16-19 (ONS, 2020) and 20-24 (ONS, 2019) were more likely to be a victim of domestic abuse in the previous year than women aged 25 years and over. In relation to sexual offences, women and men aged 16-19 (13% and 3%, respectively) and 20-24 (11% and 3%, respectively) were more likely to be a victim in the previous year than any other age group (ONS, 2021).

In research that focused explicitly on female students' experiences of interpersonal violence, the NUS (2011b) surveyed 2,058 female students in the UK; eighty-six per cent of whom were under the age of 25. They found that almost one in four had experienced unwanted sexual contact, i.e., less serious sexual assault. This happened outside the home, with almost 4 in 5 incidents in institutional or public buildings, such as bars or clubs. Consequently, victims were less likely to know the perpetrator. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents had experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment, including physical (e.g., groping) and verbal harassment (e.g., wolf-whistles, sexual comments/questions), on-campus. These incidents were most likely to happen in university buildings (53%), Students' Union (SU) or SU event (just under a third), lecture theatre or library (16%).

---

[1] Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Seven per cent of respondents had experienced serious sexual assault: 5% had been raped, 2% attempted rape, less than 1% assault by penetration – most (76%) of these had happened in somebody's home. Just under one in five of these incidents happened in public places, e.g., university buildings, bars, nightclubs or outside. In this context, the victim was unlikely to know the perpetrator. Otherwise, most perpetrators were students at the same institution, and they were known to the victim. The impact of students' experiences of sexual assault resulted in a deterioration in their mental health, academic studies, confidence, and relationships. Consequently, Phipps and Smith (2012) argue that sexual harassment and violence against female students by male fellow students is symbolic of the unwelcome presence of female students in HE. Sexual violence is thus concerning and attempts to address it, particularly in UK HEIs where it has received less attention compared to efforts in the US, is important given the role HE can play in enhancing women's equality.

In the US, there has been more research carried out into the heightened risks of violent victimisation of university students. Fisher et al. (1998) suggested that reporting rates of sexual victimisation of female students in their sample may be higher than those reported in the general population and in a comparable age group, although further research was needed to evidence this. They also found that rape and sexual assault of female students happened both on and off-campus. In other research (Fisher et al., 2000) in a random

sample of 4,446 female students attending a college or university in the US, using a telephone survey, it showed that sexual victimisation is more common off-campus than on-campus. However, the authors argue that given off-campus sexual victimisation may occur in bars and clubs (e.g., organised as a student night) and in student residences, the activity *is* connected to student life. In terms of the prevalence of sexual victimisation, 1.7% of the sample had experienced rape and 1.1% attempted rape. Thus, 1 in 36 college women experienced rape or attempted rape. Of the 123 victims, 28 had been sexually victimised more than once. The research also found that sexual verbal harassment was commonplace: 54% experiencing sexist remarks; 48% experiencing wolf-whistles; and 19% being asked intrusive questions about their sex life (Fisher et al., 2000). In Walsh et al's. (2020) more recent survey with 336 female and male college students in the US, 74% of female students and 23% of male students had experienced sexual assault (defined as unwanted penetrative acts and attempts, and sexual touching). Of these, 214 were repeat victims: 75% of female students and 22% of male students. Thus, in the US, students, particularly female students, are at a heightened risk of experiencing sexual assault.

In the US, there are legal requirements for colleges and universities to protect students against sexual violence and harassment by reporting incidents and providing training, including raising awareness about sexual misconduct, to both staff and students (Campus

Save Act, 2013). In the UK, the legal requirements for colleges and universities to prevent sexual violence and harassment are governed by the *Equality Act 2020*. Institutions are to eliminate harassment and discrimination of women and to encourage positive relationships between men and women. There is also a common law duty for institutions to ensure the general safety and wellbeing of students, and for students aged under 18, institutions must comply with statutory guidance on safeguarding (House of Commons, 2022). One of the ways that UK HEIs are asked to demonstrate the impacts of initiatives to address the recommendations of UUK (2016) is to have robust monitoring and recording systems where students can report instances when they have witnessed the victimisation of others, or when they have been victimised themselves. Moreover, the systematic collation of usage statistics in relation to university support services such as health and wellbeing and counselling services can play an important role in assessing the extent to which students are being effectively supported with experiences of victimisation. Indeed, in her introduction to *Changing the Culture* report (UUK, 2016), Nicola Dandridge, the then Chief Executive of Universities UK, explains that one of the reasons for the report itself was the growing evidence that universities did not always respond well when students reported experiences of violence against women, harassment or hate crime. Whilst the UUK (2019: 44) 'two years on' report found that 78% of HEIs (n=74) responding to their survey said that there was 'clear information for students on how to report', we believe that more fundamental work is required to make students aware

that support from their HEI is available. This is since in our study, students did not necessarily perceive this to be the case.

Help-seeking as an entangled process

Help-seeking has been characterised as a non-linear process involving some key moments: recognition of a problem; decision(s) to do something about it; and selection of a source of help (Liang et al., 2005). The research on help-seeking for sexual violence, domestic violence, hate and harassment is consistent in its findings that, in the main, those victimised do not report their experiences to formal help providers (Kelly, 1988; Donovan and Hester, 2014; ONS, 2016; Donovan et al., 2018). For example, female students in the NUS (2011b: 4) UK survey who were victims of 'less serious sexual assault were least likely to report either to the police or to the institution', 2% did, and only 6% of victims of serious sexual assault told their doctor. If victimisation is reported at all, it is primarily to informal sources of support, for example family and friends. Drawing on US research because UK studies in this area are scant, in Fisher et al.'s. (2000) research, in about two-thirds of the incidents of rape, victims told someone about their experiences, and this was mostly a friend, rather than family or a college official. This is an important finding in the context of university students' experiences of sexual victimisation because they are often distanced from their older existing friendship and familial networks. Consequently, other

research in the US has found that students are likely to reach-out to individuals, such as academics, who they have a rapport with, in their HEI. Of 261 academics in 2 US universities, 110 (42%) received disclosures of student victimisation, with the most disclosed being rape and sexual assault (42%). Many academics who had received a disclosure were not confident in the universities' resources available for crime victims (Richards et al., 2013). In a similar vein, if victims are more likely to tell friends such as fellow students of their experiences, then they too need to be confident in campus resources (Allen et al., 2015) because students believe that the availability of reliable sources would increase reporting (Schaaf et al., 2019). In online surveys with 220 female survivors of sexual assault at a US college campus, 19% (n=42) said 'I didn't know who to report to or that I could report' their experiences of sexual assault (Spencer et al., 2017: 166). Consequently, the study found that 95% of sexual assault victims-survivors did not report their experiences to the university (Spencer et al., 2017).

Other reasons for low- or non-reporting of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, by university students, are various. These include: the failure to recognise the victimisation as a reportable behaviour such as a crime, or as constituting sexual or domestic violence; normalising the behaviours as to be expected; trivialising or minimising the behaviours as not being serious enough to do anything about; feeling ashamed or to blame; not wanting to get the perpetrator into trouble; not wanting to

provoke retaliation from them; fearing the help-provider will not take the experiences seriously; or that help-providers might respond in discriminatory or unsympathetic ways that will cause them further distress; believing nothing can be done and that they can deal with it themselves (Ameral et al., 2020; Donovan and Hester, 2014; Donovan and Roberts, 2023; Fisher et al., 2000; NUS, 2011b; Spencer et al., 2017). Supporting this is data from the NUS (2011b: 24) where students were more likely to cite positive institutional reporting experiences if 'they were believed, taken seriously, reassured and communicated with until the issue has been resolved'. Yet the number of HEIs in the 'two years on' UUK (2019) report that said they involved students who had reported violent victimisation into developing their strategic responses to change the culture of violence and abuse within the university, was low. This is thought important to do because including students in the development of universities' strategic responses should increase the number of students reporting to the institution (UUK, 2019). In Spencer et al.'s. (2017: 173) research, for example, 14% (n= 31) of the female students said that their reasons for not reporting sexual assault was because 'it wasn't related to the university' because it 'did not happen on campus' or 'he [the perpetrator] was not a student', thereby raising questions about the perceived role of universities in the safeguarding of victims-survivors of violent victimisation.

It is important to consider the broader neoliberal context of responsibilisation, self-reliance and individualism (e.g., Rose, 2000) and particularly in relation to personal security (Garland, 1996) to help explain low and non-reporting of gender-based violence by students to their HEI: 'Women have always been held individually responsible for preventing the sexual violence perpetrated against them' (Brooks, 2011: 637). Consequently, Stanko (1997) and others have long argued that women have had to develop self-reliance in the face of institutional denial of their experiences and victim blaming. Although feminist movements *Reclaim the Night, The Everyday Sexism Project*, and more recently, *Me Too,* saw women challenge the focus on them as (potential) victims to modify their behaviours to protect themselves against pervasive sexual violence and to focus on the perpetrators committing the violence, in another paper, reporting on the same study at Northfacing University, Roberts et al. (2019) evidence how women students continue to resist the sexual violence and abuse perpetrated against them on and off a UK university campus by resorting to self-help and drawing-on informal sources of support. They argue that women are therefore agentic in their actions rather than 'ideal' victims. In Nils Christie's (2018: 12) construction of 'the ideal victim', one who is afforded complete victim status, five attributes need to be met: 1. 'the victim is weak'; 2. 'the victim was carrying out a respectable project'; 3. 'she was where she could not possibly be blamed for being'; 4. 'the offender was big and bad'; 5. 'the offender was unknown and in no personal relationship to her'. It is not accidental that the victim is referred to as

'she' since what Christie does not consider in his analysis is the way that a particular construction of heteronormative femininity is assumed to characterise the 'ideal' victim and a particular construction of heteronormative masculinity is assumed to characterise the 'ideal' perpetrator and elements of this construction of masculinity cannot be accommodated in perceptions of a victim (see Donovan and Barnes, 2018). Thus, those who are strong, not carrying out a respectable project, able to protect themselves 'by not being there', are 'as big as the offender' and 'close to the offender' are not worthy of 'ideal' victim status (Christie, 2018: 13). Christie (2018: 12) argued at an individual level, it is the 'participants' definition of the situation' who will define their victim or non-victim status. At a social level, it is the characterisation of the victim as 'ideal' that affords them legitimate and complete victim status. We can therefore make sense of low reporting rates of gender-based violence by students to their HEIs, because students are constructed as non-'ideal' victims. The research, cited above, about why students do not report evidences this, e.g., they believe it was their fault, that they are culpable, they know the perpetrator. This explains why students resort to self-help and self-reliance because such strategies have become embedded in societal and cultural norms about how to respond as a victim of gender-based violence. With this in mind, our aim is to focus on help-seeking behaviours once a decision has been made to seek help and what might prevent students from considering their HEI as a potential help provider. Our methodology evidences this goal.

Methodology

Between April and June 2016, the Project team conducted an online survey of students studying at a HEI we call Northfacing University, a post-1992 university that increasingly relies on student recruitment from its immediate locale. The profile of students at this university mirror that provided by Crozier et al. (2008) in their study of social class and HE study. Northfacing University has been shortlisted for various awards for widening participation in the last decade. As a result of their financial status, the choices about where and what to study made by the student body are ultimately governed by pragmatism to the extent that they might be considered to not have any choice at all (Crozier et al., 2008). The nature of their student experience is also heavily shaped by their financial situation. Many have part-time employment and may continue to live in their family home whilst studying, which often means that their interaction with life on-campus remains limited. Many continue to socialise regularly in social groups not connected with their HEI and are often forced to balance domestic commitments and employment with their studies.

The survey was developed and designed in partnership with a steering group involving representation from the Students' Union, and the University's Business and Legal

services, Facilities and Security, and Student Health and Wellbeing. In addition, a small group of third year social science students were invited to be 'critical friends' and comment on the survey content and layout. At the start of the survey, there was a statement about the aims of the study, participants' rights, and how the results were to be disseminated. Students had to 'tick' that they understood the information and consented to take part in the research before they could complete the survey. Ethical permission was sought and secured from the University's ethics committee. The survey was distributed to all students via the university's e-mail system in April 2016. Three subsequent reminders were sent to encourage participation.

The survey asked a range of questions about perceptions of safety during their time as a student at the university, their perceptions of so called 'lad culture', their experiences of victimisation and perpetration, their experiences of help-seeking, including specific questions about their use of sources of help within the university, and their judgment about the quality of response they had received from those sources of help. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions and experiences of victimisation were explored under four areas of violence and abuse: verbal abuse or bullying; physical violence or abuse; sexual violence or abuse; stalking or online harassment. Following questions asking about the prevalence of each category of violence/abuse, respondents were invited to describe an example of their most serious experience of victimisation

within each category. Students electing to complete these sections were asked more detailed questions concerning where and when the incident happened, who the perpetrator(s) were, whether they sought help and why, from whom they sought help and whether they felt the help received was useful. The wording of the questionnaire was careful to emphasise that the research was concerned with any incidents of violence and/or abuse experienced during their time as a student at the university. However, we surmise that some respondents may have interpreted this to only include incidents related to being a student, e.g., they happened on-campus and/or during student activities even though the question which asked, 'where did this happen' included categories off-campus, such as 'your home', 'somebody else's home', 'other non-university public space'.

Findings

Students' demographics

The survey received 1034 useable responses which was approximately 10% of the student body (9,798) at that time and included representation from all university faculties. Eighty-two per cent of students were studying undergraduate programmes, 95% were registered as full-time students and 74% were UK/home students. Seventy per cent were aged between 17-24 years with a mean age of 25 (median 22, mode 21) and 66.9% were female,

32.6% were male, and 0.5% identified as 'other' gender identity. These percentages were different compared to the percentages of students registered at the university (59% female and 41% male). Sixty-four per cent of students identified as white British (the university does not use this category and therefore no comparison can be made of this). Ninety per cent of students identified as heterosexual/straight which is lower than the university's statistics of 96% of students identifying as heterosexual, though these statistics are problematic given those who elect not to respond. Twenty-one per cent of the survey respondents identified with at least one disability, and of these, 19% (n=39) reported multiple disabilities, both figures higher than the university's statistics which show 8% of the student population with one disability and 0.5% with more than one disability.

It is important to preface the following findings by stating that most students surveyed perceive that the University is a safe place: 74% of respondents gave the university 8 out of 10 or higher for perceptions of safety and of these, 30% gave the University 10 out of 10 (for a discussion of gender and perceptions of safety, see Roberts et al., 2022).

Reports of Verbal Abuse and Bullying, and Sexual Violence and Abuse

In the section of the survey that asked closed questions about whether students had experienced verbal abuse and bullying, half of the 8 questions asked were about general verbal abuse (e.g., someone making hurtful or abusive comments towards you) and half of the questions asked were about sexual verbal abuse (e.g., someone making sexual comments that made you feel uncomfortable). Of the students that answered these questions, 37% (n=254) and 44% (n=300) said they had experienced general verbal abuse and sexual verbal abuse, respectively, during their time at university. Women students were more likely to experience sexual verbal abuse than men (Roberts et al., 2022) and students reporting non-heterosexual/straight sexualities were more likely to experience sexual verbal abuse than heterosexual students (Donovan and Roberts, 2023). Eight closed questions were asked about sexual physical abuse.[2] Of the students that answered these questions, 30% (n=96) had experienced sexual physical abuse. Women were more likely to experience groping, pinching and smacking of their bottom 'when they did not agree to it' and 'sexual contact including kissing, touching or molesting them, including through their clothes, when they had not consented', compared to men (Roberts et al., 2022: 293).

---

[2] This includes exposing sexual organs without consent.

In the sections of the survey that asked students about their most serious incident of verbal abuse or bullying, the most common form of this was sexual verbal abuse, e.g., harassment and stalking, followed by other forms of abuse, e.g., racist, disabilist, homophobic and body-shaming. Examples of the abuse given include: 'A group of boys asking me what I was like in the bedroom, which one of them I'd rather sleep with, how far I was willing to go e.t.c'; 'a guy calling me a "paki" as I walked past (I am not from Pakistan, however I am brown)'; 'Derogatory remarks about my disability'; 'Being called 'dyke' & other abusive language for asking someone to stop touching me'; 'Only someone commenting that I was fat'.

In the sections of the survey that asked students about their most serious incident of sexual violence or abuse, students wrote about experiencing this primarily in the pubs and clubs as some of the following examples illustrate: 'Someone exposed their genitalia to me on a night out without my consent'; 'Well just walking around clubs, guys feel like they can grab your butt if they want. [...]'; 'Student felt me up in the bar I was at'; 'I was at a party event for Halloween and a man cornered me on the dancefloor and groped my vagina over my clothing without my consent, he was a stranger'. The abuse was mostly sexual physical abuse.

When reporting whether she had experienced general verbal abuse and sexual verbal abuse, this student said 'never' because:

Some of these may have happened outside of the university environment but not my time spent within university buildings or areas around.

Similarly, another female student did not report experiencing sexual physical abuse to the survey but stated:

I have experienced sexual violence but it was outside the university [...], given this I don't feel comfortable answering I have experienced any of these behaviours because I have, just not here. However it was at University during my first degree.

Consequently, the survey undercounts students' experiences of abuse when they happen off-campus, even though the survey included areas off-campus as responses for students to choose to indicate where the incidents happened. Moreover, we believe that the location of where the abuse happens determines the students' source of help-seeking, as the following shows.

Help-seeking behaviours for verbal abuse/bullying and sexual violence/abuse: a comparative analysis

First, we compare information concerning the location of incidents and help-seeking practices in relation to incidents of 'verbal abuse and bullying' (VAB) and 'sexual violence and abuse' (SVA) given in response to the questions concerning the most serious incidents of violence and abuse. These categories have been chosen to provide a contrast between experiences typically understood to have low level impacts and risks for harm (viz. VAB) with those experiences typically understood to have high level impacts and risks for harm (viz. SVA). Table 1 provides data on where the most serious incident of VAB occurred. Most incidents reported took place in university premises/occasions: 44 (24% of students reporting) were in university teaching buildings; 46 (25%) were elsewhere on-campus; 44 (24%) were in a pub, bar, club or similar location on a 'student night' off university premises. Whether off or on-campus, most reports of serious incidents of VAB occurred in public spaces. It is important to note that some students reported more than one location of their most serious incident of VAB, indicating that abuse is not fixed in its location: it traverses space. Given the nature of the VAB, as 'everyday violence and abuse', it is understandable why a range of contexts has been noted as the location/s. This is also likely to indicate that students are victimised more than once. In a similar vein, abuse was not fixed in time because some students reported their most serious incident as occurring during both weekdays and weekends. One-hundred and fifty-four students reported that incidents happened during a weekday and 49 students reported that incidents happened over the weekend.

Table 1. Locations of verbal abuse/bullying

Location of Verbal Abuse/Bullying		Number of reports by 187 students[3]	% of students reporting
University Premises/Occasions	Teaching Buildings	44	24
	Library	21	11
	Hall of Residence	20	10
	University Gym	1	0.5
	University Sport Fixture, Meeting (including social and off-university premises)	6	3
	Students' Union	5	2
	Pub, bar, club or similar location ('student night' off-university premises)	44	24
	Elsewhere on-campus	46	25
	Other university society	1	0.5
	TOTAL	**188**	
Off-University Premises	Your home	12	6
	Somebody else's home	2	1
	Pub, bar, club or similar location (regular night)	26	14
	Other public space (e.g., bus station, park, coffee shop)	27	15
	TOTAL	**67**	

In Table 2 the reports from 45 students of where their most serious incident of SVA happened are shown. Like VAB, SVA is not fixed in time or space and students are likely

---

[3] Some students reported more than one location.

to be victimised more than once. Similarly, findings show that more students said that their most serious incident of SVA happened during a weekday (n=35) than those students (n=18) who said their most serious incident happened over the weekend. Interestingly, though, compared to VAB, few students reported most serious incidents of SVA happening on-campus. The SVA is still connected to student life because 27 (60%) students reported it happening in a pub, bar, club or similar location on a 'student night' (i.e., occasion). Likewise, 15 students (33%) reported their most serious incident of SVA happening in a pub, bar, club or similar location on a 'regular night'. Thus, most serious incidents of SVA, which, as stipulated above, are sexual physical abuse, happen in the night-time economy of the pubs and clubs (see also Roberts et al., 2019).

Table 2. Locations of sexual violence/abuse

Location of Sexual Violence/Abuse		Number of reports by 45 students	% of students reporting
University Premises/Occasions	Teaching Buildings	3	7
	Library	2	4
	Hall of Residence	3	7
	Students' Union	2	4
	Pub, bar, club or similar location ('student night' off-university premises)	27	60
	Elsewhere on-campus	5	11
	Other university society	1	2
	TOTAL	**43**	
Off-University Premises	Your Home	2	4
	Somebody else's home	3	7
	Pub, bar, club or similar location (regular night)	15	33
	Other public space (e.g., bus station, park, coffee shop)	3	7
	TOTAL	**23**	

When students were asked about the perpetrator of their most serious experience of victimisation, responses also revealed important differences between the two categories of behaviours. Perpetrators are also not fixed in their type: some students chose more than one type of perpetrator committing the abuse thereby indicating that students are victimised more than once.[4] For the most serious incident of VAB, Table 3 shows that

---

[4] It might also be the case that the categories of perpetrators are not mutually exclusive. E.g., a fellow student might be a friend and/or an ex-partner.

this kind of violence/abuse is as likely to come from strangers as it is from members of the university community, including from fellow students.

Table 3. Perpetrators of verbal abuse/bullying

Perpetrators of Verbal Abuse/Bullying		Number of reports by 188 students	% of students reporting
Member of University Community	University staff	8	4
	Fellow student	83	44
	TOTAL	**91**	
Acquaintances	Someone recognised but not known	25	13
	Acquaintance	6	3
	Neighbour	5	2
	TOTAL	**36**	
Someone known	Friend	15	8
	Ex-partner/former intimate relationship	6	3
	Flatmates	1	0.5
	TOTAL	**22**	
Someone unknown	Stranger	84	45
Others	Unspecified	2	1

However, Table 4 (see below) shows that students are more than twice (26 reports) as likely to report strangers than a fellow student (11 reports) as the perpetrator of SVA.

Table 4. Perpetrators of sexual violence/abuse

Perpetrators of Sexual Violence/Abuse		Number of reports by 46 students	% of students reporting
Member of University Community	Fellow student	11	24
Acquaintances	Someone recognised but not known	8	17
	Acquaintance	6	13
	TOTAL	**14**	
Someone Known	Friend	3	7
	Ex-partner/former intimate relationship	5	11
	TOTAL	**8**	
Someone unknown	Stranger	26	57

It is when we consider the help-seeking practices of these respondents that the implications for HEIs become clearer. Of those students answering the question about whether they had reported their most serious incident of VAB, 68% (n=128) said that they had not reported their experience, 32% (n=60) said they had. The largest group of students (42%) reporting their most serious incident of VAB to the survey said it had occurred in their first year of undergraduate study. Set against a backdrop of non-reporting, Table 5 shows the range of help-providers reported to. In line with other research, informal sources of support are the most popular reported to with fellow students (43 reports) the most common, followed by friends and family (40 reports in total). Of all the formal sources of support sought, the University was the most frequently

reported to (46 reports in total), with academic staff (24 reports) being the most reported to. Formal off-campus agencies such as the police or counsellors received 15 reports.

Table 5. Sources of support for students reporting verbal abuse/bullying

Sources of Support		Number of reports by 77 students	% of students reporting
On-Campus	Fellow student	43	56
	Lecturer/tutor	24	31
	Campus Security/Police	11	14
	Welfare/Counselling services	5	6
	Accommodation Manager	2	3
	Student Union	4	5
	TOTAL	**89**	
Off-Campus	Friends	23	30
	Family	17	22
	Neighbour	2	3
	Organisations (Faith leader, GP, Domestic violence service/refuge, support worker, counsellor/therapist, sports official, bouncer)	11	14
	Police	4	5
	TOTAL	**57**	

Looking at SVA, of those students answering the question about whether they had reported their most serious incident of SVA, 17 students, a slightly greater per cent (39%, compared to 32% reporting VAB) said that they had reported their experiences, which might reflect the serious nature of the incident. Sixty-one percent (n=27) of students said

they did not report the incident. Moreover, 50% and 23% of students (73% in total) said that their most serious incident of SVA had occurred during their first and second year of undergraduate study, respectively. This reflects the findings of the NUS (2011b) survey of female students (87%) who reported that their experiences of sexual violence had mainly taken place in their first or second year of study. Table 6 also shows a difference in reporting patterns compared with that of students reporting a most serious incident of VAB. Students are less likely to report to university sources. Only 3 reports (13% compared to 59% of students reporting VAB) were made to formal university sources and 8 reports (35% of students reporting compared to 56% of reporting VAB) made to the informal source of fellow students. No student said they had reported their most serious incident of SVA to a member of academic staff. The percentage of students reporting SVA to informal sources of friends and family (48%) are comparable to students reporting VAB to these sources (52%). Importantly, a higher percentage of students report a serious incident of SVA to an off-campus organisation (44%) compared to those reporting a serious incident of VAB to an off-campus organisation (19%). Other (US) research has similarly found that students do not report sexual assault if it is thought not related to the university because the perpetrator was not a student and it happened off-campus (Spencer et al. 2017).

Table 6. Sources of support for those reporting sexual violence/abuse

Sources of Support		Number of reports by 23 students	% of students reporting
On-Campus	Fellow student	8	35
	Campus Security/Police	1	4
	Welfare/Counselling services	2	9
	TOTAL	**11**	
Off-Campus	Friends	8	35
	Family	3	13
	Organisations (GP, counsellor/therapist, support worker, bouncer/manager, accident & emergency)	8	35
	Police	2	9
	TOTAL	**21**	

It is important to not assume that people who report their victimisation receive a helpful response (Donovan and Hester, 2014). The research aimed to assess the extent to which students draw on the services the university provides *and* how helpful they perceived the responses of university support services to be. Towards the end of the survey, all respondents were asked whether, because of any of the victimisation they had reported in the survey, they had drawn on any of the services provided by the university; and to indicate what they thought of the service they had received. Table 7 shows their responses.

Table 7. Use and perceived quality of university services

Sources of Support	Very Poor/Poor (%)	Adequate (%)	Good/Very Good (%)	Did not know service available (%)	Number of students answering question
Chaplaincy	5 (2)	11 (6)	21 (11)	159 (81)	196
Health and Wellbeing	15 (8)	17 (9)	53 (27)	108 (56)	193
Disability	13 (7)	14 (8)	58 (31)	100 (54)	185
Counselling	15 (8)	21 (11)	56 (28)	103 (53)	195
Security	11 (6)	25 (13)	80 (41)	76 (40)	192
Students' Union	26 (14)	41 (21)	70 (37)	54 (28)	191
Academic Staff	23 (11)	26 (12)	132 (60)	38 (17)	219

Just over four-fifths of students did not know that the university provided a chaplaincy; over half of students were not aware that the university provided health and wellbeing, disability, and counselling services; two-fifths did not know that there was a Campus Security; over a quarter of students did not know about the SU; and just less than one-fifth did not know that academic staff were available as a support service. When students had used any of these services most thought the service was good or very good.

Conclusion

This paper compares responses of students reporting experiences of VAB with those reporting experiences of SVA. These were compared to explore experiences of

victimisation and help-seeking for behaviours perceived to be at the lower end of the continuum of seriousness and harm, VAB, with those perceived to be at the higher end of the continuum of seriousness and harm, SVA. Those reporting experiences of SVA were more likely to report behaviours experienced off-campus by perpetrators not identified as belonging to the university community than those reporting VAB. Any help-seeking for SVA was thus mainly focused off-campus. Moreover, a large proportion of students reported not being aware of the provision offered by the University.

If SVA is experienced off-campus by perpetrators not recognised as being part of the university, it is likely not to occur to those who are victimised that their university can be a source of help. This will be reinforced in those students for whom the university occupies a marginal role in their lives because they live at home and for those whose university life is narrowly focussed on attendance at lectures or seminars. Northfacing university fits the profile of those post-1992 universities outlined by Crozier et al. (2008) where many students are not campus facing, live at a distance and commute to university, and where student participation in extra-curricular and SU activities, including the elections of SU officers, is low. It is, therefore, not difficult to understand why students experiencing violence including SVA might not consider their university as a source of support: they neither perceive the university as a help-providing environment more

generally but particularly when incidents of violence and/or abuse take place off-campus by perpetrators not connected with their university.

Student populations are at an increased risk of violent victimisation, including 'everyday violence and abuse', and the impacts can be profound and include students' academic engagement and attainment and as such, universities have an important role to play in taking responsibility for enhancing students' safety (UUK, 2016, 2019). The findings therefore raise important implications for HEIs. UUK (2016, 2019) recommend universities change the culture to end violence against women, harassment and hate by embedding the five pillars of their strategic framework: central role of senior leadership team; holistic institution-wide approach; effective preventative and responsive strategies; and sharing good practice: what Lewis and Anitha (2018: 235) refer to as a 'jigsaw of strategies'. However, their successful implementation is dependent on the development of effective strategies of communication to promote awareness among the student body about the measures their university has adopted, their relevance for students regardless of where they are victimised or by whom, and the help and support available. Recent research suggests that whilst universities have made progress as UUK (2016, 2019) indicate, there is much to do in raising awareness both of what sexual violence and abuse is and the procedures to report it (Donovan et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2023). Moreover, in its attempts to regulate universities to address sexual violence, the Office for Students'

(OfS, 2023) recent consultation proposed pre-registration conditions for universities to meet, such as stipulating how cases are reported and students supported. In addition to the strategies that address this agenda of 'what to do' should also be strategies that address the agenda of 'how to do it', because victims often do not formally report their experiences of violence and abuse, given the reasons outlined earlier. Reporting experiences of sexual violence is key to calling it out and changing the culture (Fanghanel, 2017, 2019). Women students are not passive victims, they actively resist the sexual violence and abuse committed against them by resorting to self-help and drawing on informal sources of support, including universities (Roberts et al., 2019). This construction of victim-survivors as agentic in their actions must be recognised by universities and drawn-upon so that all victims whether constructed as ideal or not (Christie, 2018) need to be able to make choices about their help-seeking behaviours that include the option of reporting to their university for both academic and pastoral support. The findings from this study suggest that there needs to be some preparatory work done by universities to help students with this. Including students who had reported violent victimisation in developing universities' strategic responses is one way to do this (UUK, 2019). Fundamentally though, it is important to identify the specific nature of the university and its students to work out how best to communicate with them about what the university has to offer. Communication must go further than leaflets, posters, tweets, emails, or other social media vehicles that advertise the reporting systems and help-

providing services the universities offer. It must also include culture-shifting messages and activities (e.g., bystander initiatives – these promote reporting as active bystander intervention) that counter the ways in which the neoliberal turn to individualisation and consumerism (Phipps and Young, 2012, 2015) and responsibilisation (Garland, 1996) have manifested in HE. These still need to be promoted. Universities should promote themselves as places where student wellbeing is recognised as a core value and where help and support is always available should a student be harmed: explicating what 'harm' means in its broadest sense; and conveying the message that the university is concerned about their student's health and wellbeing and their academic attainment, both of which can be negatively impacted by sexual violence. Importantly, our findings point to the dangers of assuming the efficacy of a universal strategy for addressing violence against women, hate and harassment. Instead, universities should consider the profile of their own student body (see for example the work of Crozier et al., 2008, Clayton et al., 2009 and Reay et al., 2009, 2010), including where they live, their engagement with campus life, especially in non-curriculum related activities, their knowledge about and engagement with university student services and their SU.

A co-ordinated, institutional approach with the senior leadership team (including the executive) taking-up a central role, is required to ensure that consistent messages are given to students that the university is interested in their health and wellbeing and

understands that students' ability to continue their study can be adversely affected by experiences of violence and abuse wherever it takes place and whoever the perpetrator(s) are. Robust disciplinary procedures for students and staff are crucial (UUK, 2016) however, the perpetrators of the violence experienced by students might not be members of the university. Universities with sizeable numbers of 'commuter students' and those that live at 'home' will need to develop their partnership working beyond the university and possibly beyond the city boundaries in which the university sits to create positive working relationships with the statutory and voluntary organisations in the areas in which their students live. These are big asks for universities at a time when they are being asked to do more about student health and wellbeing with very stretched resources. It may well be that universities will need to renew efforts to convince government of the need for new resources to enable universities to meet these needs. With more people going to university and universities becoming bigger organisational concerns, it would seem the challenge of creating a sense of belonging, ofand of concern will become greater but without addressing this the intended aims of the UUK (2016) report will remain aspirational.

References

Advance HE (2022) *Equality + Higher Education: Students Statistical Report 2022.* Advance HE Knowledge Hub. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-reports-2022 (accessed 30 January 2023).

Allen C, Ridgeway R and Swan S (2015) College students' beliefs regarding help seeking for male and female sexual assault survivors: Even less support for male survivors. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 24(1): 102-115.

Ameral V, Palm Reed K and Hines D (2020) An analysis of help-seeking patterns among college student victims of sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 35(23-24): 5311–5335.

Brooks O (2011) Young women's adoption and rejection of safety advice when socializing in bars, pubs and clubs. *British Journal of Criminology* 51: 635-51.

Campus Save Act (2013) *The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act of 2013.* Available at: http://campussaveact.org/ (accessed 1 March 2022).

Christie N (2018) The ideal victim. In Duggan M (ed) *Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Criminology.* Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 11-23.

Clayton J, Crozier G and Reay D (2009) Home and away: Risk, familiarity and the multiple geographies of the higher education experience. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 19(3): 157-174.

Crozier G, Reay D, Clayton J, Colliander L and Grinstead J (2008) Different strokes for different folks: Diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education* 23(2): 167-177.

Donovan C and Barnes R (2018) Being 'ideal' or falling short? The legitimacy of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender victims of domestic violence and hate crime. In Duggan M (ed) *Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Criminology.* Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 83-101.

Donovan C and Hester M (2014) *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It?* Bristol: Policy Press.

Donovan C and Roberts N (2023) Violence and abuse, universities and LGBTQ+ Students. In Humphreys CJ and Towl GJ (eds) *Stopping Gender-based Violence in Higher Education: Policy, Practice, and Partnerships.* London: Routledge, pp. 66-87.

Donovan C, Bracewell K, Chantler K and Fenton R (2020) *Findings from a National Study to Investigate How British Universities are Challenging Sexual Violence and Harassment on Campus.* Available at: https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/research-into-violence-and-abuse-centre-for/Universities-Responses-to-Sexual-Violence_May-2023.pdf (accessed 20 June 2023).

Donovan C, Clayton J and Macdonald S (2018) New directions in hate reporting research: Agency, heterogeneity and relationality. *Sociological Research Online* 24(2): 185-202.

Fanghanel A (2017) How to break a rape culture: gendered fear of crime and the myth of the stranger-rapist. In Lee M and Mythen G (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook on the Fear of Crime.* London: Routledge, pp. 417–428.

Fanghanel A (2019) *Disrupting Rape Culture: Public Space, Sexuality and Revolt,* Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Fenton R A, Mott H, McCartan K and Rumney N (2016) *A Review of Evidence for Bystander Intervention to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence in Universities.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment _data/file/515634/Evidence_review_bystander_intervention_to_prevent_sexual_and_do mestic_violence_in_universities_11April2016.pdf (accessed 10 March 2022).

Fisher B, Cullen F and Turner M (2000) *The Sexual Victimisation of College Women.* Available at: https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf (accessed 1 March 2022).

Fisher B, Sloan J, Cullen F and Lu C (1998) Crime in the ivory tower: The level and sources of student victimisation. *Criminology* 36(3): 671-710.

Garland D (1996) The limits of the sovereign state: Strategies of crime control in contemporary society. *British Journal of Criminology* 36(4): 445-471.

House of Commons (2022) *Sexual Harassment and Violence in Further and Higher education.* Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9438/CBP-9438.pdf (accessed 1 March 2022).

Kelly L (1988) *Surviving Sexual Violence.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lewis R and Anitha S (2018) Conclusion: Setting the agenda for challenging gender based violence in universities. In Anitha S and Lewis R (eds) *Gender Based Violence in University Communities: Policy, Prevent and Educational Initiatives.* Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 229-240.

Liang B, Goodman L, Tummala-Narra P and Weintraub S (2005) A theoretical framework for understanding help-seeking processes among survivors of intimate partner violence. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 36: 71-84.

NUS (National Union of Students) (2011a) *Race for Equality. A Report on the Experiences of Black Students in Further and Higher Education.* Available at:

https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/race-for-equality-a-report-on-the-experiences-of-black-students-in-further-and-higher-education-2011 (accessed 22 March 2022).

NUS (2011b) *Hidden Marks: A Study of Women Students' Experiences of Harassment, Stalking, Violence and Sexual Assault.* Available at: https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/hidden-marks-2011 (accessed 22 March 2022).

NUS (2014) *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow. LGBT Students' Experience in Higher Education.* Available at: https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/education-beyond-the-straight-and-narrow-2014 (accessed 21 March 2022).

NUS (2018) *Power in the Academy: Staff Sexual Misconduct in UK Higher Education.* Available at: https://1752group.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/4f9f6-nus_staff-student_misconduct_report.pdf (accessed 22 March 2022).

ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2016) *Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending Mar 2016.* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmar2016 (accessed 10 March 2022).

ONS (2019) *Domestic Abuse Victim Characteristics, England and Wales: Year Ending March 2019.* Available at:

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/dome
sticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019#age (accessed 1
March 2022).

ONS (2020) *Domestic Abuse Victim Characteristics, England and Wales: Year Ending
March 2020.* Available at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/dome
sticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#age (accessed 1
March 2022).

ONS (2021) *Sexual Offences Victim Characteristics, England and Wales: Year Ending
March 2020.* Available at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexual
offencesvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/march2020#age (accessed 1 March
2022).

OfS (Office for Students) (2023) *OfS Launches Consultation on Tackling Harassment
and Sexual Misconduct.* Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-
and-events/press-and-media/ofs-launches-consultation-on-tackling-harassment-and-
sexual-misconduct/ (accessed 17 May 2023).

Phipps A and Smith G (2012) Violence against women students in the UK: Time to take
action. *Gender and Education* 24(4): 357–373.

Phipps A and Young I (2015) Neoliberalisation and 'lad cultures' in higher education. *Sociology* 49(2): 305-322.

Reay D, Crozier G and Clayton J (2009) 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology* 43(6): 1103-1121.

Reay D, Crozier G and Clayton J (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Education Research Journal* 36(1): 107-124.

Richards T, Branch K and Hayes R (2013) An exploratory examination of student to professor disclosures of crime victimization. *Violence Against Women* 19(11): 1408–1422.

Roberts N, Donovan C and Durey M (2019) Agency, resistance and the non-'ideal' victim: How women deal with sexual violence. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 3(3): 323-338.

Roberts N, Donovan C and Durey M (2022) Gendered landscapes of safety: How women construct and navigate the urban landscape to avoid sexual violence. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 2(22): 287-303.

Roberts N, Doyle L and Roberts M (2023) Changing the culture of sexual violence at UK universities: a website analysis of definitions, report/support and prevent mechanisms. *Higher Education Policy* https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41307-023-00317-0

Rose N (2000) Government and Control. *British Journal of Criminology* 40: 321-329.

Schaaf S, Lamade R, Burgess A, Koss M, Lopez E and Prentky R (2019) Student views on campus sexual assault. *Journal of American College Health* 67(7): 698-705.

Spencer C, Mallory A, Toews M, Stith S and Wood L (2017) Why sexual assault survivors do not report to universities: A feminist analysis. *Family Relations* 66: 166–179.

Stanko E (1997) Safety talk: Conceptualizing women's risk assessment as a 'technology of the soul'. *Theoretical Criminology* 1(4): 479-499.

UUK (Universities UK) (2016) *Changing the Culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce Examining Violence Against Women, Harassment and Hate Crime Affecting University Students.* Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/changing-the-culture.pdf (accessed 2 March 2022).

UUK (2019) *Changing the Culture: Tackling Gender-Based Violence, Harassment and Hate Crime: Two Years On.* Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/uuk-changing-the-culture-two-years-on.pdf (accessed 21 March 2022).

Walsh K, Choo T, Wall M, Hirsch J, Ford J, Santelli J, Gilbert L, Thompson MP, Reardon L and Mellins CA (2020) Repeat sexual victimization during college: Prevalence and psychosocial correlates. *Psychology of Violence* 10(6): 676-686.