



INSIGHT

learning • sharing • enabling

## Sexual misconduct disclosures

University  
of Liverpool

AMOSSHE Insight project summary

This AMOSSHE Insight project, undertaken by the University of Liverpool and partners, researches students' expectations of university responses to reports and disclosures of sexual misconduct by or against students.



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL





**AMOSSHE Insight** is an annual funding programme to support member-led, research-based project work. **AMOSSHE** is committed to a research agenda led by our members' priorities, to support your professional development and broaden the evidence base for Student Services in the UK. **AMOSSHE** is keen to support our members' project work in order to share innovative research, expertise and good practice across the Student Services sector, and enable continuing development and improvement. This is the purpose and goal of **AMOSSHE Insight**: to develop and share insights for the benefit of all members.

## Student expectations of university responses to sexual misconduct disclosures: a qualitative study in three UK universities

### Project leaders

N Tune (lead author) and K Little (contributing author),  
University of Liverpool

### Completion date

September 2018

### Total AMOSSHE Insight award

£5,000

### Full report

[www.amoshe.org.uk/insight-2016-17-disclosures](http://www.amoshe.org.uk/insight-2016-17-disclosures)

### Overview

This project explored UK students' views on sexual misconduct at university. The project engaged over 500 students from the University of Liverpool, the University of Chester and Edge Hill University in a series of focus groups, interviews, and one survey.

The research questions were as follows:

- What are students' preferred method of reporting sexual misconduct to their universities?
- Why might students not report their experiences of sexual misconduct?
- How do students expect members of staff to support them immediately after they disclose sexual misconduct?
- What type of ongoing support do students expect following their disclosure of sexual misconduct?
- What provisions could the university put in place in order to protect the well-being and rights of the reporting student and the accused individual during an investigation?
- What sanctions do students think are appropriate for different types of sexual misconduct?

### Key findings

#### The decision of whether or not to report sexual misconduct at university

The research uncovered that sexual misconduct is prevalent in UK universities, with females being more likely than males to have such an experience. A number of barriers prevent students from making disclosures to their institutions. They are:

- Ignorance of reporting procedures within universities.
- Embarrassment and 'shame', which they fear they would accrue as a result.
- 'Normalisation' in society of 'low level' acts of sexual misconduct, meaning that disclosures would not be taken seriously. This seemed to be a barrier for female students in particular.
- A misunderstanding that acts of sexual misconduct are not under a university's purview to investigate and punish.
- Previous experiences of reporting resulting in 'inadequate' support (judgemental, 'victim-blaming', and suchlike).

## How participants would like to report sexual misconduct at university

There is no one preferred way that students would like to report sexual misconduct at their university. Rather, how to report misconduct is seen to be a subjective decision based on the individual needs of each student.

The way of reporting least appealing to students was telephone, with only 7% of University of Liverpool students and 5% of University of Chester students stating that they would use this service to report an incident of sexual misconduct. As suggested in the report, this may be connected to the preferences of a 'digital generation' of young people, who use technology to communicate textually. As explained by one participant in one of the interviews undertaken: "No-one talks on the phone anymore".

Students feel most comfortable reporting their sexual misconduct experiences to student support services, the counselling service, and other students.

### Immediate expectations upon reporting sexual misconduct

Face-to-face reporting:

- Staff to support in a way that is professional but not "clinical".
- Signposts to be made to support services.
- A detailed account of the reporting protocol at their university.
- What options are available for the reporting student to take their complaint further (either within the university or externally).

Online reporting:

- A quick response.
- The option to make a face-to-face appointment with a member of staff to disclose their situation more fully.
- The option to receive support solely using the medium through which they have reported their experience.
- A detailed account of the reporting protocol at their university.
- What options are available for the reporting student to take their complaint further (either within the university or externally).

Anonymous reporting:

- An investigation into the allegation (despite not knowing the identity of the reporting student and/or other details about the incident).
- The disclosure to be kept on file until numerous allegations have been made against the same individual. Following this, an investigation into the allegations.

### Ongoing support

Students indicated the ongoing support that they would require following a disclosure:

- The main intervention asked for by students was counselling and support group sessions. Many across the research asked that such sessions be facilitated by a professional trained in sexual misconduct support, and that they not be limited to a particular number.
- Spatial separation of student and perpetrator was also given as a desired intervention following an experience of sexual misconduct.
- Reintegration into university life is also seen as important for students who have experienced sexual misconduct. Respondents asked that universities encourage students to become active in the social aspects of university life.
- Tighter security measures on campuses and in halls of residences in order to prevent reoffending.
- The option of extensions on work / the option to have their experience considered as extenuating circumstances.

### Precautionary measures during an investigation

During a university's investigation into an allegation of sexual misconduct, students recommended:

- That both the reporting and accused parties should be supported during the investigation. Staff investigating the allegation must take steps to make sure they approach the investigation without bias.
- Anonymity for both parties until the allegation has been proven true.
- No contact between parties during an investigation.



## Sanctions

Students expect universities to undertake the following sanctions and actions when an allegation is found to be true:

- Students endorse sanctions for all types of sexual misconduct at university.
- Students feel it is always appropriate to provide the offender with education on sexual misconduct.
- Offenders should receive psychological support in order to reform their desire to enact deviant behaviour.
- “More serious” cases of sexual misconduct are viewed as punishable by terminating studies / employment and by referring the case to the police.
- A “warning” should follow “less serious” acts of sexual misconduct for both staff and student perpetrators.

## University culture

Students believe that universities must take steps to break the “culture of silence” surrounding sexual misconduct on campuses.

## Key recommendations

The project team make the following recommendations for higher education providers, based on their research:

- Universities should create clear and accessible reporting routes for students to disclose and/or report sexual misconduct, ensuring that both face-to-face and email routes are publicised.
- Universities should ensure that they communicate information about sexual misconduct reporting routes to students, both during induction and throughout the year. This should be backed up by information and campaigns about what constitutes sexual misconduct and what behaviour is unacceptable.
- Universities should facilitate students to make anonymous disclosures, for example through an online form, but must also be very clear about how they will respond to anonymous disclosures or allegations against a named individual. This must be communicated to students seeking to use the anonymous disclosure facility.
- Universities should ensure a prompt response to disclosures made online or by email, offering face-to-face support and clearly setting out students’ options for reporting and/or seeking support.

- Universities should ensure that staff across the university are given sufficient information to be able to signpost students to appropriate support and reporting routes, particularly staff undertaking the role of personal tutor / academic adviser.
- Universities should ensure that staff receiving disclosures are trained specifically in how to respond to survivors of sexual violence and are able to demonstrate an effective and empathetic response.
- Universities should offer students disclosing sexual misconduct ongoing specialist mental health support, ensuring that it is delivered by a professional trained specifically in supporting survivors of sexual violence.
- Universities should have policies and procedures in place to impose appropriate precautionary measures whilst an investigation is ongoing, particularly to ensure the separation of the reporting and reported student or member of staff. These measures must be proportionate and fair to both parties.
- Universities should ensure that they offer support to both the reporting and the reported students while an investigation is ongoing.
- Universities should actively support students’ re-integration into university life following an experience of sexual misconduct, or following the imposition of any precautionary measures and/or sanctions (for example, by offering peer support systems, encouraging the student to join societies or play sport, providing ongoing pastoral support and advice).
- Universities should consider introducing educative and reflective sanctions for all sexual misconduct offences, alongside more punitive sanctions for cases deemed to be “more serious” in nature.

In addition, the project team recommends that the sector should commission further research into:

- The intersectional experiences of BAME, LGBTQ and disabled students regarding sexual misconduct disclosures.
- The prevalence of student-student, staff-student and staff-staff sexual misconduct across the sector and the consistency of universities’ responses.
- Students’ perceptions of what constitutes “serious” and “less serious” incidences of sexual misconduct and the reasons for this.