



#CombatMisconduct

Student experiences of sexual
misconduct at UK universities



THE UK FUND FOR
WOMEN AND GIRLS

Acknowledgments

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Executive summary

This research was conducted by AVA (Against Violence and Abuse), a specialist gender based violence charity. Through a nationwide survey, in-depth interviews and a focus group, students and staff shared insight into the nature and impact of sexual harassment, violence and abuse at university, and students' experiences of disclosing, formally reporting and accessing support.

This report uses the term 'sexual misconduct' in line with the [Pinsent Masons Guidance](#), to cover all sex related offences, harassment and anti-social behaviour.

Survey findings:

AVA ran a nationwide survey on sexual misconduct at universities open to both staff and students across the UK. We received 342 responses, including 205 responses from current or recently graduated students.¹ Based on responses from students, we found that:

- » **62% of respondents (87 students) told us they experienced sexual misconduct** at their current or most recent university,
- » **58% of respondents (80 students) reported multiple experiences** of sexual misconduct.
- » **Most commonly, respondents had experienced sexual misconduct from another student (45%, 48 students)**. 7% had experienced sexual misconduct from a university member of staff (7 students), 13% from someone unrelated to the university (14 students) and 17% from a mixture of perpetrators (18 students).
- » **96% of respondents (53 students) experienced misconduct from a male perpetrator.**
- » **82% (23 students) believed that their experience of sexual misconduct was linked to their gender.**
- » **21% (6 students) reported that their experience of sexual misconduct was linked to their sexuality.**
- » **Drug and alcohol use was a common contextual factor - 74% (40 students) said they and/or the perpetrator had been drinking or taking substances** of some form at the time the incident occurred.

Respondents reported that their experiences had a considerable impact on their health and university life.

- » **59% of respondents (58 students) felt unsafe at university** after their experience.
- » **52% (56 students) felt their experience had impacted their mental health, most commonly anxiety, depression, nightmares or flashbacks, and panic attacks. 18% (13 students) reported they had self-harmed.**
- » **37% (35 students) saw a decline in academic performance** after their experience and **20% (19 students) considered dropping out.**

It was uncommon for respondents to have disclosed or formally reported their experiences to university staff.

- » **70% of respondents (61 students) either didn't tell anyone** about their experience of sexual misconduct, or **only told people outside of university.**
- » Common barriers to disclosing to university staff included thinking **nothing would be done** or it was pointless; thinking the issue was **not serious enough** to warrant a disclosure or discussion; **not knowing who to tell**; and feeling they would be **blamed.**

Among the smaller group of respondents who had disclosed to university staff, experiences were very mixed.

- » **67% of respondents (16 students) of those who had disclosed to staff agreed they felt 'believed'**, 42% (10 people) agreed the experience had been 'positive' and 38% (9 people) agreed they felt 'comfortable'
- » However, **63% of respondents (15 students) disagreed that they felt 'safer' as a result of disclosing** and **58% (14 students) disagreed that they understood what would happen next.**

In interviews and focus groups with AVA, student survivors and staff identified a lack of clarity over reporting pathways, timeframes and outcomes, and low trust in the way universities were handling sexual misconduct.

Both students and staff highlight the need for more accessible and transparent information regarding the reporting process, more targeted campaigning and awareness raising, and mandatory training for students and staff regarding sexual misconduct.

Recommendations and resources:

AVA and NUS recommend that universities take a whole-institution approach to tackling sexual misconduct, involving senior leaders, staff and students.

- » Universities should involve students, including survivors of gender based violence, in all their work to tackle sexual misconduct. Universities can track their progress against sector standards on student involvement using the [Combat Misconduct](#) online impact matrix tool, and use [AVA's guidance on involving students and survivors](#).
- » University vice-chancellors, principals and senior leaders can take practical steps to tackle sexual misconduct, harassment and hate using the [Combat Misconduct quick guide and toolkit](#), a peer resource for senior leaders informed by experiences and advice from leading vice-chancellors from across the UK.
- » University staff can access training and resources to support their work on sexual misconduct using the [Combat Misconduct staff resource hub](#), including [AVA guidance on asking and responding to disclosures of gender based violence](#).
- » University students and graduates can access resources, information and support using the [Combat Misconduct student resource hub](#).

The context at UK universities

Rates of sexual misconduct victimisation are high for university students in the UK, although estimates differ.

- » A [2018 consultation](#) held by The Student Room and Revolt Sexual Assault found that 62% of all students and recent graduates surveyed had experienced sexual violence.
- » The [Unsafe Spaces report \(2020\)](#) estimates an annual average of 50,000 incidents of sexual abuse and harassment at universities in England and Wales.

Reflecting wider society, research highlights that women at university are considerably more likely to face sexual violence or abuse, while men form a substantial majority of perpetrators. Across these studies, rates of sexual misconduct are found to be higher for LGBTQ+ and disabled students, who are also found to face additional barriers to reporting and support. The [Universities UK Changing the Culture Taskforce](#) on sexual misconduct, harassment and hate crime found evidence that some women students were being targeted for sexual harassment on the basis of their race and faith.

Research on sexual misconduct in education settings suggests that disclosure rates are low. For example, research by the [NUS \(2019\)](#) in further education settings found that only 14% of victims had ever reported it to anyone, of which half (47%) reported it to the police and just one in five told their college/university (22%). The key barriers highlighted across the reports included embarrassment, fear of being disbelieved and concerns that their experience was 'not serious enough' to report.

Interview and focus group findings

Please note that the following sections of the report include descriptions of sexual violence.

The nature of sexual misconduct at university

In interviews, student survivors discussed their own experiences of sexual misconduct and the frequency of sexual misconduct at university more broadly: as 'culture' of sexual misconduct. This 'culture' referred to high rates of peer-to-peer abuse in particular, and all interviewees' experiences of misconduct were of this nature.

"Everyone's friend has had something happen to them, that's ingrained in university culture." —Student

"It is just so common to be in a club and 90% of people wouldn't bat an eyelid and go that's sexual assault." —Student

Tied to the prevalence of sexual misconduct was the suggestion from both students and staff that sexual misconduct is '**normalised**' at university. Interview participants felt that most victims fail to report sexual misconduct due to the normalisation of inappropriate behaviour – students did not identify these common experiences as sexual misconduct, or felt it was too commonplace to warrant a complaint process.

Victim-blaming and minimising attitudes held by both students and staff were seen as normalising disbelief of victims, and created barriers in the way of reporting.

"People go, oh well you're out and you get drunk. Really you may not realise you said yes, that sort of attitude." —Student

"Lots of people joke about rape and sexual assault a lot, joke about girls getting drugged on nights out, those aren't funny things to joke about if you know the reality of those situations." —Student

Though remote learning and COVID-19 lockdown measures have restricted students' access to university settings, participants suggested that the prevalence of **online harassment and misconduct** may have increased as a result of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All participants discussed the **gendered nature of sexual misconduct**. All students interviewed were women, and all had experienced misconduct from a male perpetrator. A number discussed how the prevalence and perpetration of sexual misconduct is deeply tied to a 'lad culture' at university, often the product of both male and class privilege.

"There is [sic] a lot of men on campus who have come from boarding schools or private schools that are single sex schools and you can tell with them that they have a different attitude to women or sexual misconduct." —Student

Sexual misconduct was also discussed in light of other forms of discrimination. Several students reported that their experiences of sexual misconduct were compounded by homophobia and by racism. Participants also identified that sexual misconduct was having a disproportionate impact on minoritised students.

“Most of the victims that I am aware of, at university that have made disclosures to me or spoken to me about their experiences are either Black, Asian or ethnic minority women or queer women, or queer people... I do know of heterosexual men who have been victims, and actually, in all of the cases that I can remember they have been Black or Asian men.” —Student

The impact of sexual misconduct on students

Students discussed the adverse **mental health** impact of sexual misconduct, including a number of participants who had experienced worse mental health linked with the traumatic nature of their experience.

“Even if it’s a sexual assault that happens once, it doesn’t go away afterwards.” —Student

Others focused on the impact of their experiences on their daily life at university, including **social withdrawal** after sexual misconduct. This was discussed in relation to fears and experiences of scrutiny, ‘gossip’ and judgement from peers, compounding the mental health impact of their experience.

“I spoke to staff members...and they’ve always said ‘it’s so sad that you are limiting your university experience and not going to uni events and joining clubs’ and I say, ‘it’s entirely for my mental health.’” —Student

“I wouldn’t want to pursue relationships...I felt so scrutinised. You become very conscious and withdrawn from friends in a way.” —Student

Students also highlighted the adverse impact of sexual misconduct on their **university attendance and attainment**. Several participants explored the impact of their experience on their university life in depth. One student took a year out of university due to the adverse mental health impact of the domestic abuse she was subject to. Another dropped out of university after being sexually assaulted, accruing further student debt when she returned to a different university several years later. A third student failed a year of university after being seated directly behind her perpetrator in an exam hall, despite repeated requests to be separated.

Disclosing sexual misconduct to university staff

Barriers

Participants were asked about their experience of disclosing sexual misconduct at university. Considerable barriers to reporting were identified both by students who had reported, and those who had not.

- » **Uncertainty about whether the experience was serious enough or relevant to disclose:** Students highlighted confusion about what constitutes sexual misconduct or a report-worthy offence, and were unsure of the extent of their university's duty of care if an incident happened outside university campus.

“Even though I knew what was happening and was like - this is harassment - I think I felt it wasn't big enough, not something enough to report.” —Student

“Because it happened outside of university, I just thought well, they aren't going to do anything. I was at a predominantly female college, its undergrads going out every night. It ends up like two different worlds.” —Student

- » **Fear of being disbelieved:** Students discussed fear of being disbelieved by staff. Students mentioned hearing negative experiences of reporting from peers, which discouraged them from disclosing.”

“I think that the only barriers were feeling that there is a sense at unis in general that lots of people accuse people of sexual assault and they are not believed.” —Student

- » **Not knowing who to tell:** Students discussed discomfort disclosing to academic staff, and uncertainty about who to tell about their experience.”

“There is no one signposted as the sexual assault staff member...it's never, go to this one person.” —Survivor

- » **Fear of discrimination:** Students with protected characteristics were fearful of facing discrimination as a result of disclosure. One student discussed how her sexuality created a significant barrier to disclosure where she felt she needed to 'come out' to staff in order to report.

Focus group participants noted that staff were finding it more difficult to pick up on safeguarding concerns and ask about student welfare in the **context of remote learning during COVID-19**. Some felt that disruption to student consent and sexual misconduct training and lack of in-person signposting during the pandemic had led to lower awareness among students of the nature of sexual harassment, violence and abuse, creating a further barrier to disclosure.

Where students had not disclosed to staff at university, the majority involved in this research had turned to **family and friends** for support. Two students highlighted that the majority of their female friends had lived experience of sexual misconduct. However, some participants also reported being rejected and disbelieved by friends, leaving them isolated.

“I think it came more natural to seek support in your friendship circle as you could trust that you would be supported and most of my female friends will all have had similar experiences, maybe even with the same person.” —Student

Experiences of disclosure and accessing support

Among participants who disclosed to university staff, the highest proportion had disclosed to student welfare or counselling staff. Other participants disclosed to a personal tutor; one participant had reported to a sexual violence advisor located on her university campus; and one had used an online report and support tool to report anonymously to her university.

Students shared both positive and negative experiences of disclosing to staff. For those who disclosed to multiple members of staff at the same university, responses differed significantly. Students shared that staff **did not appear to have been trained in handling disclosures**. Staff involved in interviews also highlighted a lack of training around handling disclosures in their roles, and instead, both students and staff agreed that students tend to disclose to staff they know and trust as opposed to those with a delegated responsibility

“They did just make me feel like you want nothing to do with me and you don’t want to support me, like you can’t be bothered with this.” —Student

“Students will go to the staff members that they know they would trust, that’s how the disclosure happened with me. This was a student I worked with a lot, we had a rapport, we would talk about her studies, we would talk about these issues, my courses often deal with issues of gender and different identities, LGBTQ identities. So we were just talking after class once and she disclosed to me.” —Staff

Two interview participants discussed negative experiences using counselling services at university to deal with the impact of sexual misconduct. Both highlighted a lack of trauma or sexual abuse awareness in these services and poor counselling techniques. The structure of counselling services meant that students may be waiting extended periods of time and only able to access a limited number of sessions.

“The counsellor at uni was really appalling. The level of care was really not suited for what I needed.” —Student

“She [the counsellor] told me it felt like I would just do whatever men wanted for them and that it seemed to her like I would just give up my body for men. I was trying to tell her I thought I’d been raped and she essentially told me I hadn’t or that what had happened was partly my fault.” —Student

“I think that that person, the counsellor, wasn’t necessarily properly kind of trained to deal with [the disclosure]. They didn’t really even know what trauma was... I have heard of people having negative experiences of the counselling service, being gaslit. I’ve heard of people being told by the university psychiatrist that they’ve sort of had certain trauma responses in order to be attention seeking.” —Student

A number of participants discussed their experiences with welfare officers who were either **student union** representatives or individuals with welfare responsibilities in a **student society or group**. All these participants discussed these as positive experiences. In particular, students reported feeling believed, listened to, and given the opportunity and space to discuss their options.

“He [the welfare advisor] was really good, really helpful, took me seriously, believed everything. He took a lot of the communication stuff on him so he didn’t make me have to repeat myself to lots of people, he did the bulk of the organising which was really useful as it’s tiring when you are going through it to keep on repeating yourself.” —Student

One student shared a positive experience of disclosing to an **ISVA (independent sexual violence advisor)** placed at her university. The ISVA provided the student with options and supported her in her decision not to report. Afterwards, the ISVA helped her access sexual health support, and acted as a liaison, including speaking with university security to ensure she would be prioritised if calling for support. This student felt this model should be replicated at all universities.

“I felt really comfortable with the independent advisor...She was great at listening, never pushing for any further details, letting me weigh up my options on whether or not I wanted to report. She said she'd be there throughout the process for however long it would take.” —Student

Formally reporting sexual misconduct at university

Barriers to making a formal report

While some participants had made a formal report to their university, the majority of interviewees focused on the barriers they faced to formal reporting. Focus group participants noted that students may be more hesitant to speak up following periods of isolation during COVID-19 and remote learning.

“I do see a sense of people still being hesitant about speaking up. I can't really put my finger on it, but I think it's the effect of being at home for such a long time.” —Student

Barriers to formal reporting included:

- » **Fear of perpetrator repercussions:** Students were afraid of the perpetrator threatening their safety if a report was made.

“It didn't feel like reporting would make me feel safe, it would have made me feel less safe actually because he would have been made aware of the fact I'd reported and he'll become a flurry of fear and anger about the fact he has been brought into a disciplinary process.” —Student

- » **Lack of clarity around the process and outcomes:** Students discussed a lack of access to clear and concise information about what the process might entail. The investigation process was perceived by some students as interrogative and stressful.

“I was sort of scared of the consequences and I'm intimidated by the whole system. I know it has to be really formal but when you go on the website it's kind of intimidating.” —Student

“It feels like there is no clarity about what the process is and what defined stages are, it feels quite arbitrary and the luck of the draw.” —Student

“The person who reports is the one who ends up kind of getting interrogated.” —Student

- » Students had concerns that reporting would have **negative consequences for their studies**.

“The fear of repercussions of reporting, and thinking that people won’t believe you, or thinking that there will be retaliation or consequences on my studies.” —Student

“I think that we do have a long way to go in terms of encouraging people to report to the right places, and reassuring them that there won’t be any consequences to their studies.” —Student

- » **Fear of not being believed:** Students felt unsure that they would be believed, and fearful of going through a disciplinary process without assurance of a positive outcome. For minoritised students, this was compounded by experiences of judgement and prejudice in wider society.

“I didn’t want to go through that horrible process of being interrogated by the uni to find out they didn’t have my back at the end of it anyway...If it turned out there was no conviction or anything at the end of it, it would have felt like the whole world telling me like it didn’t matter or didn’t happen.” —Student

“I was a Black woman reporting against a white man. When we think about crime, we always think about the other way. There’s absolutely no way anyone in this is going to be compassionate towards me. I’m usually the type of person they criminalise.” —Student

- » **A desire to ‘move forward’:** A number of students wished to ‘move on’ and felt that the reporting process could be detrimental to their recovery.

“It was going to be such a long process. What was more important for me was helping to rebuild and move on with my life, I didn’t want to keep delving into it.” —Student

“It felt like it would be re-traumatising, emotionally exhausting...it just seemed pointless, like you’d be traumatising yourself further.” —Student

“A lot of our students don’t want to report because they’re so career focused, and they want to power through, there’s that sense of fight or flight. Instead of fighting it, it’s just easier to just get on with life, and pretend it never happened.” —Student

- » **Lack of trust in the system:** Students referenced stories of other people not receiving their desired outcome from the reporting process, or the university mishandling their case. This fed into a general lack of trust that a desired outcome or ‘justice’ would be reached.

“I haven’t actually met anyone who has had any outcome and therefore any repercussions and therefore it contributes to that environment where people are victims but they don’t get any support or reporting system and it becomes a vicious cycle. It feels like they are getting away with it.” —Student

Experiences of making a formal report and the investigation process

Participants were clear that student experiences of reporting and investigations could have a profound effect on mental health as well as their future life experiences. The process had the potential to be both supportive and validating, or highly stressful and traumatic.

“It is very pivotal, the way they are treated, and the way that they are, those reports are handled at university, because I think that can have quite a big impact on their future life.” —Student

“The most traumatic thing wasn’t even just the event which took place in itself. It was everything around it.” —Student

Staff and students raised serious issues with university investigation and disciplinary processes:

- » **Lack of training for staff involved:** Staff reported a lack of training for those involved in disciplinary processes. Two members of staff sat on disciplinary boards and were worried by this apparent lack of training. Both discussed how this led to ‘victim-blaming’ attitudes going unchallenged or being held by staff members themselves.

“Leading the panel was my colleague who was a guy who had two daughters who had started university. [He] remarked to me, ‘What on earth was she doing letting him sleep in her room? My daughters wouldn’t do that.’” —Staff

- » **Advantages for socio-economically privileged students:** Staff explored their discomfort with the involvement of paid legal professionals in the disciplinary process. Staff shared examples of how this created a dynamic at their universities whereby socio-economically privileged students accused of misconduct were more likely to avoid disciplinary action for their behaviours.

“The other student had a solicitor. I didn’t have that, I had to do everything myself.” —Student

- » **Challenges with universities signposting to the police,** particularly for Black and minoritised students. Participants noted that not all survivors feel safe and comfortable reporting sexual violence to the police, and that this advice may be actively harmful.

“When I was also seeing the student support services, I was told, don’t go through an internal procedure, go to the police...being told to go to a police as a young woman of color. I was like - do you guys want to traumatise me?” —Student

Outcomes of formal reporting

Participants had mixed experiences of formal reporting. Those who had made a formal report had done so via several different routes, including through sexual misconduct policies and procedures, bullying and harassment policies and procedures, and via an anonymous report and support online tool.

Students discussed that often formal reports did not proceed due to lack of evidence, which was likely to be a difficult and distressing outcome for reporting students. Where reports did proceed through a full investigation and disciplinary process, the outcomes preferred by the reporting student did not always match those prioritised by the university, even when investigations found that wrongdoing had occurred.

One student described that though her report had a ‘positive’ outcome - the student that assaulted her was excluded - her safety was not prioritised throughout the process.

“The main issue at hand was I don’t have a safe space to study and work and that could have been addressed. And the university refused to address that.” —Student

“I think the outcome was as close to fair as I could get at this point, there was an element of closure. But the only thing I’d be happy with is not having to go through something like this, and that no one else has to...I don’t want this to be seen as a clap on the back for the uni. Oh, we’ve done so well.” —Student

University responses to sexual misconduct

Participants were also asked to share their perspectives on the broader efforts of their university to combat sexual misconduct. Key insights shared across the interviews included:

- » Students and staff felt **not enough was being done** to tackle sexual misconduct, and that the issue was not being prioritised by senior leadership. Slow pace of change and lack of sufficient funding were identified as key barriers to change.
- » Despite this, both staff and students agreed things had been **‘getting better’** in recent years. Improvements to responses were discussed in light of the #MeToo movement, and previous sexual misconduct ‘scandals’ at UK universities, and how these moments of crisis have created a necessary call to action.

“I respect an institution which takes ownership over it. And is trying to address it.” —Student

- » A number of students regarded current initiatives as being more focused on **reputation management** as opposed to support for student survivors. A number of students described the university-led campaigns and awareness raising activities on their campuses as ‘performative’, or targetted heavily at potential victims rather than potential perpetrators.

“There are awareness campaigns, my uni has them supported by all the sports clubs at the unis, wristbands and t-shirts talking about them getting consent. The twisted truth of that is my abuser had those wristbands on the bedposts of the bed he raped me in. So either the message isn’t ringing true, or there is a disconnect between people’s actions and what they think they are doing.” —Student

- » Students discussed the limited **education and training around sexual misconduct** available to them through university. This was discussed in light of a lack of mandatory sex education for university students and the fact that initiatives tend to only target first year students without refresher courses.

“We have an online little video that you can watch about what consent is and that sort of thing which is supposed to be part of the induction package at the start of university but I’m the only person I know who has watched it.” —Student

- » Staff and students both discussed a lack of **training for staff around sexual misconduct**. In particular, all three interviewed staff members highlighted that the available sexual misconduct training at their university was limited and took the form of an online e-learning.

“The training is very minimal. I would say if you went on our training university booking website you wouldn’t find anything related to that now.” —Staff

- » Students and staff members shared how the **onus of challenging and preventing sexual misconduct often falls on student activists** with very little support. Students union officers, student groups and societies often lack the training, resources and support to manage the impact of hearing disclosures regularly, and are unlikely to have capacity to provide support to all students who need it.

“Who’s going to safeguard us?...We need to make it clear we are not a replacement for counselling or for an actual trained worker coming in.” —Student

“[The university] made the statement about racism last year, and they signposted to the BME students committee...the students who are doing this work for free, have hardly any funding, and are grappling with their own traumatic experiences here, it’s completely unfair.” —Student

Improving university responses to sexual misconduct

Participants shared their ideas and suggestions for tackling sexual misconduct at university, creating a culture of respect and ensuring staff and students are adequately supported.

Outcomes of formal reporting:

- » **Mandatory consent and sex education for all students**, available in accessible formats, and at regular intervals. Contraception and STI testing initiatives should integrate messaging about consent as standard. Education should include:
 - Definitions of sexual assault and misconduct, domestic abuse and the gendered nature of this violence
 - The impact of sexual misconduct and trauma
 - Debunking rape myths (in particular, around drinking and consent)
 - Intersecting systems of power that shape the violence faced by survivors
 - Spotting the signs of misconduct and assisting others (bystander awareness)
 - Consent
 - How and where to seek help as a student survivor

“I think most of the assaults that go on are people who don’t have an understanding of consent and therefore end up raping their partner. Those are the people I don’t think that we are reaching, the people who are just uninformed. I don’t think they know that they are uninformed.” —Student

“The issues on campus in terms of sexual assault need to be addressed in the framework of gender, sexuality and race and everything...I don’t feel like people are talking about it like that.” —Student

- » **Improved university wide campaigns and awareness raising.** This must be spearheaded by senior leadership, with a focus on holding perpetrators to account and using positions of power to make structural changes to university policy and practice. Commitments by vice-chancellors and senior leaders set a precedent for the rest of the institution, but must be resourced appropriately.

“If men knew that they were going to be called out for touching people inappropriately, they would stop doing it, but that will only come from education and making it not a normal thing.” —Student

Improving reporting:

- » **Clear and accessible information on the process of reporting sexual misconduct** available on the university website and explained during induction processes. This should include definitions; a clear explanation of what the process might look like; timeframes; potential outcomes; and signposting to support services both internal and external to the university.

“When I was reporting it I was really nervous, because all incidents are so individual, whether mine would actually count and I wouldn’t want to be told that actually yours doesn’t count as rape or assault. I think having stuff like that would be really helpful.” —Student

“I think maybe if universities had a clear strategy: if this happens you can report it like this and this action will happen and that consequence is likely to happen. Then if someone feels the need to assault someone, they will know actually this will happen, so I might not. It’s just public accountability.” —Student

- » Students also raised the importance of offering **COVID-secure options to disclose and report face-to-face**, even when students are remote learning.
- » **Simplified reporting processes including embedded emotional support options.** Students and staff suggested reporting procedures should include a single point of contact for student survivors, a ban on lawyers involved in the disciplinary process, a shorter period of investigation and consistent timelines and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity where possible.

“They need to stop placing conditions on students to not talk about their experience while an investigation is taking place - when investigations are endlessly delayed, students are effectively gagged.” —Staff

“When you report, you have to tell your story to multiple different people and it can be really traumatising and upsetting. So, it’s something we suggested... [there should be] one contact person that people would go to about sexual violence and they’d be the only person you’d have to tell your story to if you wanted that to be the case and never have to tell them again.” —Student

- » **More substantial outcomes for perpetrators.** Students felt that the disciplinary measures currently in place were not acting as a deterrent. Students wanted to see clear and significant disciplinary measures made explicit to all university students and staff, and the publication of outcomes of fully anonymised cases and transparency around previous investigations.

“I think when it comes to reporting it, if there were case studies of successful outcomes that would also be a deterrent. At the moment I feel like perpetrators sort of know that they are going to get away with it.” —Student

Improving support:

- » **Improved mandatory training around sexual misconduct and handling disclosures for all university staff.** Training should be culturally competent and include clear guidance to enable staff to handle disclosures in a trauma responsive way, as well as support for staff to manage secondary trauma and burnout.

“I want a trauma informed workforce. I’d love to see more understanding that when you are going through a traumatic experience recovering from trauma, you may not be able to attend all tutorials, or you may have to alter how you do exams.” —Student

- » **Mandatory and funded training in trauma and sexual assault for all university employed counselling staff**, including education on the intersecting systems of power that shape the violence faced by survivors and the experiences of sexual misconduct of minoritised groups of students.
- » **Students' unions should be resourced to provide specific support for survivors**, shaped in consultation with student survivors on an annual basis. This must go beyond signposting pages on the website and mandatory consent sessions.
- » **Stronger partnerships between universities and specialist sexual assault and gender based violence**, ideally involving co-location of an ISVA or sexual violence specialist available to students on campus to support them with reporting, accessing support and liaising with university staff.

“I’d love for them to work more closely with Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid, other orgs that work with queer survivors or male survivors...so you can actually bridge that gap.” —Student

- » **Constructive engagement with students and other activist groups** who take a trauma-focused approach to gender based violence, to help develop a framework and strategy to address abuses of power at the root. This process should be shaped by students who are survivors, postgraduate students, international students and students from minoritised communities.
- » **Improved and consistent signposting** and information on support after sexual misconduct available for students on university websites and in university buildings.

“Have a dedicated page of where you can go for immediate help, signposting to the Havens, Rape Crisis lines, domestic violence hotlines - all that kind of thing. Remind people they can go to the police and A&E.” —Student

- » Support **after investigations have concluded**, particularly where the outcome has not been what the survivor hoped.

“People have said that they’re going through the process and then have like, no outcome because of the lack of evidence can be gathered and then kind of feel a bit abandoned by the university.” —Student

Appendix 1: research methodology

This research report brings together a number of research activities held between July 2020 and December 2021. This includes:

- » **342** responses to a nationwide survey on sexual misconduct at UK universities, including **205** responses from current or recent university students.
- » **7** interviews with students with experience of sexual misconduct at university
- » **3** interviews with staff involved in work around sexual misconduct at university
- » A focus group with students involved in work around sexual misconduct at university, focussing on changes to experiences and responses to sexual misconduct due to COVID-19

All interviews and focus groups were held online, and participants were given the option to engage with or without video and take breaks at any time. Ethical considerations were made including gathering informed consent, and providing options for participants to view questions (or themes) in advance, and to opt out of questions.

About AVA

AVA is a feminist organisation committed to creating a world without gender based violence and abuse. Our mission is to work with survivors to end gender based violence by championing evidence-based change. We are a national charity, independent and particularly recognised for our specialist expertise in multiple disadvantage and children and young people's work. Our core work includes training, policy, research, and consultancy. AVA's work focusses on whole-organisational models for tackling domestic and sexual abuse including our highly regarded whole school approach, which we draw upon in our work with universities.

About combat misconduct

AVA worked in partnership with Universities UK and NUS on our Combat Misconduct project to improve responses to sexual violence, harassment and misconduct across the higher education sector. The project ran from 2019 to 2021 and was made possible by support from Rosa's Justice and Equality Fund. For more information about Combat Misconduct, visit www.avaproject.org.uk/combatmisconduct.

About NUS UK

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of 600 students' unions across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Through our members we represent, campaign on behalf of and support the interests of more than seven million students.

Working with more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education students' unions across the UK, our main purpose is to defend, promote and extend the rights of students to make a real difference to their educational experience. Our goal is a country where everyone can access and thrive in education regardless of their background, and a society where students are valued as active citizens.

As education policy is devolved in the UK, we deliver our democratic and student voice activities through NUS UK and our nation-based teams in NUS Scotland, NUS Wales and NUS-USI. Through our teams in NUS Services and NUS Charity we help member students' unions develop and build effective students' unions for all learners. Working with commercial partners, such as Endsleigh and OneVoice, we ensure students' money is reinvested back in the student movement. Our charity partner SOS UK delivers our award-winning sustainability campaigns, including Green Impact, Student Switch Off and Divert-Invest.

www.nus.org.uk