

Enhancing Research Cultures Pilot Project; Professional boundaries and sexual harassment experienced by postgraduate researchers.

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Summary

Staff-student sexual harassment is an urgent area for UK higher education to address, both as an ethical issue but also pending proposed regulation in this area from the Office for Students. Research shows that postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are the group most likely to be targeted for staff sexual harassment. Therefore, this project piloted sessions on awareness of professional boundaries and sexual harassment for PGRs and staff from three departments/Schools at University of York (UoY), as well as training for HR staff on handling sexual harassment complaints.

Sessions held

- **Five PGR workshops** (two hours per session) were held reaching a total of approx. 57 PGRs and received feedback from 36
- **Three staff workshops** (1 ¼ hours per session) were held reaching a total of approx. 40 staff and received feedback from 19
- **One training session for HR and student discipline** was held with approx. 12 participants, with feedback received from six

Feedback on the sessions

- The overwhelming feedback from staff participants was that **the workshop should be mandatory for all staff**. Staff generally appreciated the time and space to reflect on the issues and valued the case study.
- **Confidence in recognising sexual harassment and taking action as a bystander increased** among PGRs, sometimes quite considerably. All respondents except two reported they felt fairly or very confident following the training.

Some key quotes from the feedback are highlighted here:

- **“I definitely felt more empowered after the session** and also felt more empowered to help others who may in a position where they have experienced or are experiencing forms of sexual harassment or a breach of boundaries.” [sic]
- **“I found this session really valuable. The structured discussion worked really well to amplify the message, and the balance of content volume and pace was perfect. The coordinators set a really positive tone that made this difficult topic seem approachable.** Thank you again for this workshop - I'll certainly recommend it to colleagues in future.”
- **“I think I really benefited from the session.** I also really appreciated that training like this is occurring and that people cared enough to show up, it was particularly reassuring to see many male PhD students attending.” [sic]
- **“Very helpful session and very well run. I would make it compulsory for staff to attend.”**

Introduction

Research shows that postgraduate researchers (PGRs), particularly women and people with minoritized sexual and gender identities, are subjected to high rates of staff-to-student sexual violence and harassment misconduct (SVHM) in higher education; 10% of women PGRs are targeted, according to two large scale studies from the US and Australia.¹ The impact on survivors is profound, and can include detriment to their studies, physical health, mental health and wellbeing, finances, PGR experience, and so forth. Consequently, there is both an ethical and legal imperative for HE providers to take action to prevent staff-to-student SVHM, and respond effectively when it does occur.

In addition, the impact on those who are not directly involved but who work with, support or line manage survivors, responding parties, or sometimes both, may also be significant and is often overlooked. Departmental cultures and PGR and staff morale can be negatively affected, even long after one or both parties have left the department. This provides another ethical driver for preventing and responding to SVHM, but also a business case for addressing the issue, as healthy and supportive departmental and university cultures provide a work and study environment where each community member has the best chance of reaching their potential.²

Research conducted by Dr Anna Bull and The 1752 Group highlights that PGRs who have experienced sexual misconduct from staff have called for more training for PGRs and staff in this area³. They have also called for clearer professional boundaries to be in place between staff and PGRs, so that boundary violations and transgressions are easier to recognise both by the victim-survivor/s and any witnesses, bystanders or first responders.

Against this backdrop, the project's goals were to:

1. Pilot awareness-raising sessions for PGRs that will help them to recognise sexual harassment and to know how to raise concerns;
2. To raise awareness of professional boundaries among academic staff so that they are more able to recognise boundary-blurring behaviours as well as boundary violations;
3. To run training for HR staff at UoY so they are more prepared to receive reports of sexual harassment from PGRs relating to academic staff;
4. To make recommendations for next steps for prevention and response to sexual harassment of PGRs at UoY.

Content

PGR sessions cover:

- Context of staff-to-student sexual harassment: prevalence, national policy context

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2017). Change The Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities. Australian Human Rights Commission. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual> ; Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S., Harps, S., Townsend, R., Thomas, G., Lee, H., Kranz, V., Herbison, R., & Madden, K. (2019). Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct (p. 433). Association of American Universities. <https://www.aau.edu/key-issues/campus-climate-and-safety/aau-campus-climate-survey-2019>

² See this [article in the Conversation](#) which highlights the economic cost to organisations of sexual harassment in the workplace - \$22,500 per employee. Also see [Domestic Abuse Policy Guidance for UK Universities](#) 2021 (p.33) for the business case for addressing domestic abuse in HE highlighting, among other things, the cost of domestic abuse to businesses in England and Wales per annum as £14 billion.

³ Bull, A., & Shannon, E. (2023). *Higher Education After #MeToo: Institutional responses to reports of gender-based violence and harassment*. The 1752 Group/University of York. <https://1752group.com/higher-education-after-metoo/>

- Discussion of an anonymised real-life case study: applying the definition, looking at personal and professional impact of sexual harassment
- How to respond appropriately if a peer or colleague discloses
- Professional boundaries: definition and rationale; data on attitudes in HE
- Second case study discussion to explore bystander intervention options
- Support and advice options within and outside of their HEI

Staff sessions cover:

- Context of staff-to-student sexual harassment: prevalence, national policy context
- Discussion of an anonymised real-life case study: applying the definition, looking at personal and professional impact of sexual harassment
- Group discussion on how professional boundaries may prevent SVHM
- Ethical reflection discussion of examples of professional boundaries in academic staff's working lives
- Support and advice options for signposting students within and outside of their HEI

Collaboration and consultation

Four Departmental/School partners were secured in November 2022; key personnel were Equality, Diversity and Inclusion leads (both academic and professional services (PS) staff), as well as PS staff who worked specifically with PGRs. Also in Nov 2022, sponsorship from York Graduate Research School (YGRS) was secured via the Dean, Prof Kathryn Arnold.

A project steering group was established consisting of colleagues from:

- York Graduate Research School
- Student Conduct and Respect
- Building Research Innovation and Capacity
- HR
- Dept of Education

The steering group provided feedback on content, enabling us to refine the offer, and also highlighted key contacts who would be important for building buy-in across each department.

Further, we discussed with stakeholders and partners the fact that the training may lead to an increase in support seeking and/or reporting, and while the response to student-to-student reports was established and robust, the response to staff-to-student reports is under review. As such, it presented a dilemma in terms of how to cover reporting options in a way which was transparent but didn't discourage participants from reporting when they felt it was appropriate and/or necessary. We settled on an approach that was honest about the response being a work in progress, highlighting the excellent progress made by the Student Conduct and Respect Team, promoting the work of the SVLOs (Sexual Violence Liaison Officers), and providing internal departmental points of contact, such as Dignity Contacts and others who could provide a first response.

We were also grateful to be able to link up with the PGR Experience Committee who offered thoughts and feedback on the planned approach and content.

Once funding was secured, the decision was made to go ahead with three rather than four departments to ensure that the tight timeline (with work completed by July 2023) could be met. Initial planning meetings with the three department/school partners took place in the first and second weeks of April. This gave us a chance to discuss the specific needs of each department/school, as well as content, recruitment, and administrative support.

Planning and delivery

We agreed with each department that they would coordinate sign-ups and room bookings for the staff as well as the PGR workshops; they would have appropriate access to relevant email lists, and would understand the 'geography' of their own departments, e.g. the rooms which would be suitable for group work, the proximity to staff and PGR hubs, and so on. We provided each department/school with an outline of both the staff and PGR workshops to use in their communications.

This approach worked extremely well with one of the three departments, where we received excellent support from both professional services (PS) and academic staff members; being able to work directly with a PS staff member who was responsible for PGRs and therefore knew the cohort well was critical. This department recruited the most PGRs for the workshops; we ran three and all of them were well attended. They advertised the workshops three times, via direct emails to all PGRs and a departmental weekly newsletter. They also noted the value of the training to PGRs' current roles as PGRs and potential bystanders, and their future roles as line managers (whether inside or outside of HE) where equity, equality, diversity and inclusion were becoming more central to every workplace. In their communications promoting the event, they also said the PGRs were "strongly encouraged" to attend and stated the workshops were supported by YGRS and their head of department. This approach is the one we would adopt for any future delivery; it was, professional services staff informed us, helped by a strong, pre-existing EEDI culture within the department.

With the exception of one department, recruitment of PGRs was a challenge, and in one school, we were unable to recruit any PGRs in time to run the workshops; while disappointing, it was nonetheless useful in clarifying our approach going forward. In the third school/dept, both PS and academic staff were very supportive, but informed us that PGR engagement across all extra-curricular activities was low in that school. Staff recruitment was a little easier, but numbers were still relatively low considering the size of the departments. We will cover recruitment further in the section below on lessons learned.

To promote safer training spaces, we provided a letter and case study/ies in advance of the sessions to all staff and PGR participants. Recognising this was a sensitive topic, we wanted to ensure participants were prepared and knew what to expect, clarifying we would not be dealing with explicit details, but would be using a case study about the impact of sexual harassment. Additional guidance was provided about staying safe during and after the workshops, and a list of resources for survivors and their supporters was provided after the workshop.

Delivery of the sessions went well; as is often the case with a sensitive subject, there was usually a sense of trepidation at the start of the sessions, especially with PGRs. However, using the real-world case studies and small group discussion helped them to focus and we quickly generated some excellent discussion. In one of the sessions, the facilitators took two disclosures from PGR participants, with a couple of PGRs taking some time out during the session; this was not unexpected but raised the question as to whether there should be two facilitators as a minimum, as discussed below.

Delivery of the staff sessions was similarly positive. The workshop materials focused on facilitating a discussion, rather than trying to 'teach' contested notions of right and wrong in the area of professional boundaries. Staff were very open and receptive in much the same way PGRs were. Where staff were less familiar with the subject or presented more controversial opinions, other staff present were keen to offer an alternative perspective, and this was always done in a professional and non-confrontational way. Consequently, the more challenging questions were often resolved by

the group themselves, which was the goal. The sessions started local conversations needed to set shared expectations relating to professional boundaries and cultural norms at a departmental/school level.

Finally, a half-day session was offered to HR and student discipline and conduct staff involved in handling sexual harassment reports. There was excellent take-up, attendance, and participation, as the feedback outlined below demonstrates.

Overview of participant feedback

- We ran 5 PGR workshops reaching a total of approx. 57 PGRs and received feedback from 36.
- We ran 3 staff workshops reaching a total of approx. 40 staff and received feedback from 19.
- One training session for HR and Student Conduct and Respect was held with approx. 12 participants, with feedback received from six.

HR/Student Conduct training session feedback

- All attendees who gave feedback reported increased confidence in handling staff-student sexual misconduct reports after the training compared to before
- The main area where attendees wanted further training was in risk assessments (n=4).
- Two respondents also wanted further training in interim/precautionary measures in this area
- The most helpful aspects of the session, according to feedback, were:
 - “The information sharing and collective learning”
 - “Working through the case studies”
 - “Discussing power dynamics, understanding impacts rather than intention the definition of harassment, discussion on risk assessment and information sharing. Appreciated the opportunity to undertake the training with colleagues involved in PGR support”
 - “Respecting professionalism and learning new information”
 - “Understanding best practice in this area - there are lots of improvements that could be made to our processes”
 - “Really informative and well structured session. I felt a non-judgmental space was held for us to discuss how our current practice does or doesn't fit with the case studies examined. Very thought provoking stuff!”
 - “Really enjoyed the session - very engaging and informative”.
- Suggestions for future changes were:
 - “Perhaps asking us to bring examples of a couple of our cases (anonymised of course) so we can discuss what went well/what could be improved in the future.”

The trainer’s comments and recommendations included:

- The support of a contact in HR was invaluable in setting up this session.
- Running the training jointly with HR staff and the Student Conduct and Respect team was very useful, as good practice could be shared.
- As noted in the participant feedback, the session identified areas for improvements in policy and practice in this area. Further follow-up work is therefore needed to ensure that these are acted on.
- Further training needs were identified, particularly around carrying out risk assessments, and ensuring that recent guidance in this area is being implemented.

PGR workshop feedback

Feedback from attendees was gathered via Qualtrics questionnaires. Key findings included:

- Confidence in recognising sexual harassment and taking action as a bystander increased, sometimes quite considerably. All survey respondents except two reported they felt fairly or very confident with this following the training.
- Out of 36 respondents, all bar three said the content was at the right level – not too difficult or too easy
- All bar three agreed the course was about the right length.
 - During informal discussions with the facilitators after the workshop, some PGRs said they wished it was longer to allow for more in-depth discussions, though this presents challenges in terms of recruitment; we will revisit this below in lessons learned.

Changes to be made to the content

A small number of respondents commented on the content, notably that they would have preferred more detail on LGBTQ+ survivors, male victims, power dynamics, and reporting routes. These topics are in fact currently covered in the workshop but clearly respondents wanted more time spent on them.

Some key quotes from the feedback are highlighted here:

- **“I definitely felt more empowered after the session** and also felt more empowered to help others who may in a position where they have experienced or are experiencing forms of sexual harassment or a breach of boundaries.” [sic]
- “I found this session really valuable. The structured discussion worked really well to amplify the message, and the balance of content volume and pace was perfect. **The coordinators set a really positive tone that made this difficult topic seem approachable.** Thank you again for this workshop - I'll certainly recommend it to colleagues in future.”
- **“I think I really benefitted from the session.** I also really appreciated that training like this is occurring and that people cared enough to show up, it was particularly reassuring to see many male PhD students attending.” [sic]
- “It was a good session and **cleared a good amount of doubts that I had** earlier regarding the topics that were discussed during this event.”
- **“maybe more talk about LGBT intersectionality with sexual harassment.** I feel like the stats were quoted at the start and surprised a lot of people but then it wasn't explored. Also I feel a situation that comes up a lot in the casual atmosphere of academia is people making 'jokes' that are actually harassment, it'd be good to cover a situation like this I think.” [sic]
- “Thinking about the “grey areas” and establishing that Andrea’s example would be regarded as sexual harassment. It was quite validating after being aware of similar situations occurring and **now I feel more confident in calling out this behaviour.**”

An unexpected outcome from the PGR sessions is that one participant was moved to enquire about options for them to get involved in training and campaigning against SVHM in HE at York. We made onward referrals, but it inspired us to think about the value of peer delivery in relation to scaling up and next steps.

The facilitators were aware of informal discussions taking place about making this type of training mandatory for all PGRs and the academic staff who work with them; there was a general sense from attendees that those who would benefit the most from these sessions would not attend if it wasn't compulsory. This will be explored further below in next steps.

Staff workshop feedback

- Attendees' reported increased confidence in recognising sexual harassment and professional boundaries after the sessions, although many more staff than PGRs described themselves as fairly or very confident on the subject matter prior to attending the workshop.
- Out of 19 people who gave feedback, all bar three felt the content level was about right. There was a bigger split in terms of the length of the session, with about a third saying it was too short and two thirds saying it was about right.
- Staff generally appreciated the time and space to reflect on the issues, and valued the case studies. Again, feedback from several respondents said they would have preferred a longer session, perhaps with more department specific context to support them thinking about their own next steps.
- We had requests for case studies which flip the gender dynamics e.g. male victim and female perpetrator;
 - This is not an appropriate change to make to the content, as female perpetrators are rare. While male victims are less rare, they are almost always targeted by male perpetrators.
 - We will amend the training to acknowledge this in an explanation of why we use female victim/male perpetrator case studies.

The overwhelming feedback from staff participants was that the workshop should be mandatory for all staff:

- "Very helpful session and very well run. I would make it compulsory for staff to attend."
- "To departments: these conversations should be central (and mandated) to all members of staff."
- "Compulsory for everyone!"
- "It was a good session that I wish more people had attended. I hate to say mandatory, but strongly encouraging certain roles to be involved with this (especially those who don't think they need it), might really benefit the department and university culture."

Lessons learned

We highlighted above some of the amendments we will make to the content in light of the feedback. Below, we focus on lessons learnt for recruitment and delivery.

Recruitment

- **Recruitment of PGRs was a particular challenge**, despite the enthusiasm of the departments/Schools involved.
- Good practice from one department helped to mitigate this issue; it involved a three-pronged drip-feed recruitment strategy;
 - It was explicitly stated that the workshop is supported by both the Head of Department and the YGRS, attendance is 'strongly encouraged', and the multiple

professional scenarios where the content will be relevant both now and in the future are outlined.

- In future, for departmental/school role out, we would adopt this approach.
- Based on the pilot, we would also make the following changes:
 - Require a PS contact to lead on setting up the sessions and recruiting attendees; this was missing in the School where we were unable to recruit enough PGRs to run a session, which meant poor recruitment was not identified in time to take action;
 - Provide a more detailed approach to recruitment communications for promoting the event, including content (future and current relevance, 'strongly encouraged to attend' etc.), method and schedule, e.g. multiple communications via a drip-feed approach - weekly newsletter, coffee mornings or other PG gatherings, as well as direct emails;
 - Monitor signups and implement further communications in advance of the sessions if sign-ups are slow
 - Start with two sessions for participants to choose from and add sessions if they prove popular. In one school we started with 4 sessions which meant low numbers were spread even more thinly across multiple dates/times
- If piloting a mandatory approach is possible in the future, we could pilot allowing larger groups, as long as there is a space which would allow for groupwork.
 - For this pilot, numbers were capped at 25; larger groups could help to address capacity issues of running multiple smaller events
 - There are also disadvantages to larger groups (for example, some learners do not like larger groups) and the session would probably need to be an extra 15-30 minutes long to allow for discussion by a larger group. Nevertheless, this is something that could be trialled at a departmental level, even if it were mandatory only for first year PGRs in the first instance.
- Beyond the Department/School level, another option in terms of reaching PGRs would be to offer sessions for general sign-up across the whole postgraduate community.
 - This could have a snowball effect, as some PGRs said in their feedback they would promote the workshop with colleagues who did not attend.
 - There were also **multiple requests from PGRs to include post-doctoral researchers** who, they felt, would be more likely to attend the PGR sessions than the staff sessions. Post-docs represent another opportunity for opening up the conversation about boundaries and culture in academic communities.
- **Staff recruitment**
 - While **attendance was good at all three staff workshops**, many more staff didn't attend compared with the number who did.
 - The departmental/school culture is crucial in addressing cultural norms and boundaries, and while the University may set out its cross-institutional values, these are largely operationalised at department/school level.
 - In addition, setting expectations as to professional boundaries and cultural norms cannot be done at an individual level, but instead requires co-creation with members of the relevant community.
 - Consequently, while online training might help to reach more individuals, **exclusively online training is likely to be ineffective in producing cultural change.** We will discuss this further below under next steps.
- A further lesson learned in relation to staff recruitment is to ensure explicit Head of Department support for promoting sessions to staff as either 'strongly encouraged' or

'mandatory' e.g. attendance is expected unless there are exceptional circumstances. The sessions are relatively short and therefore not overly burdensome in terms of time, and could be scheduled during quieter times of the year, such as June (as was the case for this pilot) or January/February (during the assessment period but before marking demands begin).

- **Mandatory attendance**

- Both staff and PGR feedback suggested the sessions should be mandatory
- This had been considered early in the planning stages. One school/department explored the option of running multiple sessions and making it compulsory for all PGRs
 - However this would have required extra resource from this School which was unavailable
 - There were challenges in getting PGRs to volunteer to attend sessions, but some of these would remain if sessions were compulsory, and there would be different challenges with a compulsory approach.

Delivery: lessons learned

- **Workshops should be led by two facilitators wherever possible**

The majority of the PGR sessions and all of the staff sessions were co-delivered by two facilitators. There were multiple benefits to this, such as a more relaxed dynamic, additional specialist knowledge and experience, and so forth. But the key benefit was that it enabled us to respond to disclosures when they emerged. The subject is sensitive and may be difficult for participants; this is not uncommon, and even those victim-survivors who feel they have processed their trauma can be surprised by an unexpected impact. Facilitators took two disclosures from victim-survivors and a third participant sought advice as they had been supporting a survivor. As such, to safeguard the wellbeing of participants, a key lesson was to provide two workshop facilitators wherever possible. This raises issues around capacity, which we will consider further under next steps and scaling up.

- **Longer sessions could be beneficial**

A second lesson learned is that while it was hard to recruit PGRs, once in the room, many of them wanted a longer session. It's important to note that not all of them did, and the vast majority stated in their feedback they were happy with the length. But some PGRs and some staff wanted the opportunity to engage in more discussion. One option might be to run the sessions with their current timings, but allow participants the option of an extra 30 minutes for further discussion if they prefer to stay. This happened informally, as both staff and PGRs chose to stay behind and talk to the facilitators in approx. 50% of the sessions.

Next steps

The pilot has confirmed there is both a need and a willingness, even enthusiasm, to make time and space to address the issues of SVHM and professional boundaries. Multiple participants asked whether sessions would be running again in the future for other colleagues/peers who were unable to attend this time, and others asked if they could have a recording or attend online. The pilot has demonstrated the demand.

The project will move forward in developing and piloting an evaluation tool for the workshops. We will be seeking partners both within and outside of the UoY.

Summary

The project sought to address research culture by highlighting SVHM as a problem for every HEI across the world, and offering bystandership (PGRs) and professional boundaries (PGRs and staff) as

tools to support enhanced and healthy cultures, and disrupt the conditions which enable, obscure or implicitly condone abuses of power. The workshops were well received and there was a strong push from participants for further roll-out or even mandatory roll-out.