

From Student Advocacy to Institutionalisation: SGBVH Prevention in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article centres on the research and process involved in implementing Consent.Ed, a workshop series on sexual and gender-based violence and harassment (SGBVH) prevention and education. The workshops are led by students and are designed for the incoming student body. This initiative is an example of students as collaborators and cross-institutional learning.

The article will summarize the prevalence data of SGBVH in UK Higher Education (HE) and provide background context behind student-led research on the relationship between learning spaces and feelings of safety.

The initial research highlighted that those with protected characteristics were far more likely to feel unsafe on campus. We found that all students who indicated that their identity impacts their perception of safety, were women, non-binary people, and or identified as LGBTQIA+.

The resulting recommendations outline specific actions universities can take to combat SGBV and create safer campus spaces. These include but were not limited to; employing specialist paid experts to create learning and resources around SGBV, collaborating and compensating external NGOs and organisation, investing in rigorous research within their institution; and effective monitoring and evaluation of any consent education initiative to ensure future investment and funding from the institution.

Keywords: Campus Safety, Harassment, Student Experience, Consent Education

Summary

This research offers critical reflection and perspective toward the future of consent education and sexual - and gender-based violence and harassment (SGBVH) prevention in UK Higher Education (HE). The transformation of this project from student-led advocacy to institutionalisation was built on research and student activism at the university that we conducted as students at the LSE. One of the recommendations coming out of this research was to implement consent education.

This occurred alongside and in collaboration with student-led campaigns and sabbatical officers, who advocated for this implementation since 2019. Consent. Ed training was first provided to LSE students at the beginning of the 2021/22 academic year. This article contextualizes the need for rigorously implemented consent education and the student-led implementation process of consent training. Working with students brings many benefits, especially within the work of SGBVH prevention where student survivors' needs should be centred. Simultaneously, there is a need for critical reflection on the boundaries and logistics of how this collaboration should be conducted.

Project Background

This research project was initiated by the lack of data on the widespread impact of SGBVH at the LSE. This research transformed into the creation of an innovative sexual violence prevention program. The offered recommendations including the implementation of prevention programming stem from this empirical and practical experience.

Our research is positioned within the literature currently dedicated to safety and well-being on U.K. university campuses, including the ambivalent and chimerical role of H E institutions in SGBVH prevention (Ahmed, 2021, Sundari, Lewis 2018). The most pernicious and pervasive campus safety issue is sexual and gendered misconduct on university campuses. In a 2018 Study, 42% of students in the UK agreed that actions constituting sexual assault and harassment had become normalized at UK universities (Student Room). Crucially, the most common locations on campus, where students experienced sexual assault are: 28% Halls, 24% social events, and 23% university social space. This led us to focus our research on different locations on campus to determine the varying levels of safety felt by students based on location.

LSE is highly ranked for its teaching, however, its reputation is significantly lower in areas such as students' perception of their safety, where the LSE ranks 83 out of 116 UK universities (Times Higher Education 2018). Consequently, we investigated student experience in the pursuit of more preventative approaches to SGBVH on the LSE campus.

Discussion

To gain empirical insight into the impact of SGBVH at the LSE, we surveyed students. Without a university-led, randomly sampled study, our approach elicited initial, non-representative data on the impact of SGBVH. The Qualtrics survey utilised interactive, visual, and qualitative modalities, including a map on which participants could spatially indicate their perception of safety or lack of safety. Following trauma-informed best practices we included open-ended questions. We received 47 survey responses.

The majority of respondents identified as women or non-binary and were graduate students¹. We found that women, gender diverse, and those who identified as LGBTQIA+ felt their identities were a factor in their perception of campus safety. The most commonly named factor to be impacting students' perception of safety was gender. Further, five respondents said that their racial identity impacted their perception of safety. Notably, feelings of unsafety stemmed from a general fear of being women and/or identifying as LGBTQIA+ in a big city and having to navigate public transport alone at night.

The most commonly stated external factors that impacted safety were poorly lit spaces, walking alone, and being on campus at night. This is also reflected in our spatial findings, indicated in the maps right of the Discussion in Figures 1 and 2. When asked about other spaces frequently visited by LSE students and their wider experience of safety as a student, the AU "lad culture," sexual harassment, especially during Fresher's events and at the "Zoo bar" was mentioned.

LSE Campus during the day

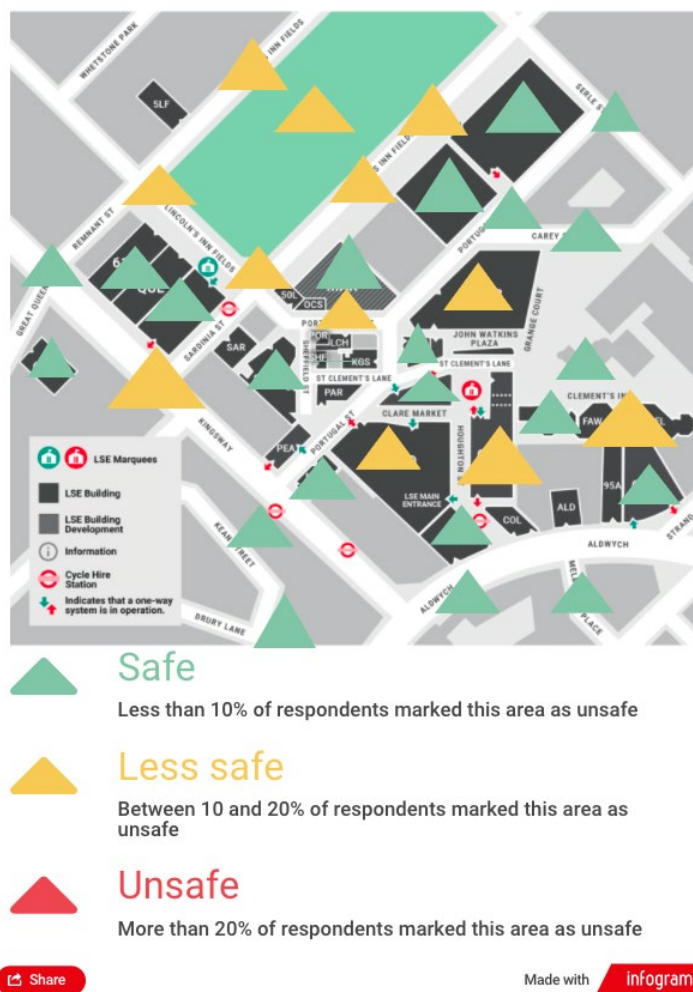


Figure 1.

Animated and better informed by these findings, we presented the data and our resulting recommendations to the LSE Leadership. On an institutional level, we recommended university-led and comprehensive further research into student and staff members' perceptions and experience of safety during their time in the LSE community.

We suggested LSE make their signposting in physical spaces on campus of safe contacts more visible such as a particular banner or sign and more clearly marked trained staff that they can seek support from. For example, expansion of the safe

¹ Our approach was to not include a mandatory question about respondents' demographic data in the survey. Instead we included an optional question, where respondents could answer if any of their personal demographics impacted their perceptions of safety. Therefore, we could not include a definitive number of all respondents' gender.

contacts program including on campus make the locations and contact details of staff members have training or appointment of an ISVA for students to discuss experiences of SGBVH.

There was a significant discrepancy between transparent signposting of policies, support, resources available to those experiencing unsafety (harm in any way), and available spaces of support for students. LSE-specific resources were not easy to find and sexual violence-specific support is largely outsourced to NGOs in London such as Rape Crisis. Further, reporting rates are incredibly low with only 6% reported to the university or police (Student Room) and 29% not reporting, because they didn't know how to make a report. Finally, we recommended mandatory consent workshops tailored to students' roles in the university (Bull et. al., 2022).



Figure 2.

Outcomes and Impact

Following the release of the research above, we became involved with other student campaigners and sabbatical officers in the implementation of consent education at LSE. The collaborative format of the project has presented many learnings not only for the project itself but also for the future of consent education within UK HE.

In its pilot year (2021/2022), 2097 students took part in an online consent course reaching 1517 students. In the following year, the Students' Union followed a more collaborative approach with the university. In 2022/2023 of the new cohort 1553 of students took part in

the online course and 663 students attended in-person sessions. Following student feedback, eight survivor-only sessions were offered through an external specialist service run by survivors for survivors, with 16 students attending in total.

The decline in workshop attendance partly resulted from reduced word-of-mouth advertising, as reported anecdotally by project-involved students. This underscores the stronger involvement and promotion in the pilot year through student campaigners and sabbatical officers.

The involvement of students brings clear benefits, including the communication and promotion of the workshops in a bottom-up approach. Khan notes that "students often serve as 'catalysts' of political and social movements and draw attention to (...) accumulation of social discontent and political tensions" (2017, p.112). This showcases how student activism can often mirror broader societal movements, and with students' proximity to knowledge production, they offer valuable insights into issues like SGBVH prevention.

Reflecting critically on the student as collaborators format, the logistics and boundaries of such an approach need to be set out with care. Utilising students' input needs to be balanced with the labour associated with work involving highly sensitive topics such as SGBVH (Mehta 2019, p. 26). Whilst it is best practice to centre student voices, the placement of responsibility should lie within the institution. The process of institutionalisation presented challenges in defining clear responsibilities and accountability between the university and the Students' Union. For example, a robust distribution of resources is required in order to adequately and sustainably roll out preventative and educational measures. Tangible commitment should be reflected in university budgets and planning as Universities UK notes in their "Changing the Culture: Two Years On" report, a move to a more inter-institutional approach is critical (UUK 2019, p.87).

Conclusion

This research catalysed the efforts of the LSE Student Union in their consent education initiative; Consent.Ed. It highlights the importance of preventative measures when approaching SGBVH. Several key recommendations emerged from our research. They consisted of the following:

Firstly, to employ specialist paid experts to create any learning around SGBVH and consent education. Secondly, forming and maintaining paid collaborative relationships with expert NGOs and organisations will ensure due diligence, safeguarding, and survivor-centric best practices when creating and rolling out education for students.

We recommend defining and distinguishing the responsibility of different sectors of any University. Specifically, delineating and funding the separation of power between the Student Union, often at the heart of Consent Education movements, as seen in the case of the LSE, and the University as an institution.

Any work done by universities must be met with effective and transparent monitoring and evaluation frameworks (Noonan 2009; McCauley, 2019.) This will ensure continuous progress is made with the efficacy of prevention work as well as longevity of any consent or support initiative employed by students and the institution alike.

This work requires a robust financial infrastructure, requiring securing future funding. Structures such as effective monitoring and evaluation will lay the foundation for future funding through an ability to demonstrate the positive impact of consent education. Furthermore, the guarantee of funding on an institutional level will encourage contributions, collaboration, and innovation among students involved in the project. Ensuring more formal and paid pathways and structures for students to collaborate on projects such as Consent. Ed will ensure the continuation of such initiatives. For example, this year two senior facilitators were employed and received a pay increase and Part-Time officers will receive remuneration for their work from 23/24.

Finally, robust, survivor-centred responses to violence and broader prevention of violence are needed beyond HEIs (Bolger 2016; Ellsberg 2015). Many institutions desperately require meaningful reckoning with an institutional response to SGBVH (Adams 2013). This includes secondary and primary school settings, the workplace, and politics (Mason 2022; Everyone's Invited 2022). True, meaningful SGBVH prevention can only be made possible through mobilisation beyond the student body and significant reform of all institutions where SGBVH continues to fester.

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Figures:

Figure 1:

LSE Campus during the day



-  **Safe**
Less than 10% of respondents marked this area as unsafe
-  **Less safe**
Between 10 and 20% of respondents marked this area as unsafe
-  **Unsafe**
More than 20% of respondents marked this area as unsafe

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Figure 2:

LSE Campus at night



-  **Safe**
Less than 10% of respondents marked this area as unsafe
-  **Less safe**
Between 10 and 20% of respondents marked this area as unsafe
-  **Unsafe**
More than 20% of respondents marked this area as unsafe

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