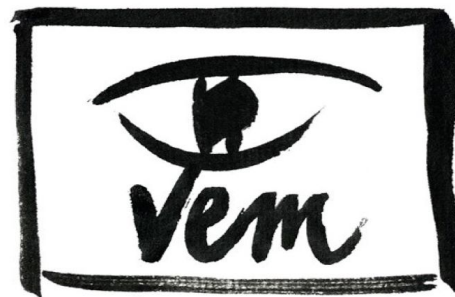


Sexual violence in UK Higher Education

Prevalence, Influencing Factors and Recommendations

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a widespread issue in UK higher education institutions. This article is a review of literature on the prevalence of sexual violence in institutions of higher education in the UK in the last five years. I will argue that sexual violence is indeed prevalent in UK universities, is a gendered phenomenon, and disproportionately affects minorities. I will also argue that not enough is being done by universities or in terms of research. Then I will examine key themes and patterns I have extracted associated with the issue, including influencing factors, before providing a list of comprehensive recommendations for further initiatives. The purpose of this article is to form an up-to-date assessment of the current situation and look at what needs to be done.

Keywords: sexual violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, higher education, universities, UK

1 Introduction

In the last five years, a growing body of research has emerged that shows sexual violence is widespread in the UK university context. This is an issue that threatens the safety and wellbeing of students in the UK and worldwide, and can have a detrimental impact academically, socially, and mentally. Many students and staff end up suspending their studies/career or even altogether quitting their job or dropping out of their degree (Revolt, 2018, AVA & NUS, 2022, NUS, 2018). In recent years, there has been more interest in this issue in the media, thanks to initiatives like Everyone's Invited and MeToo. The use of social media has also been a tool for spreading awareness, mobilising change, and creating a community for victim-survivors. Everyone's Invited listed hundreds of UK higher education institutions associated with sexual violence in 2022 based on the victim-survivors' testimonies submitted. The Office of National Statistics (2022) recently reported that in the UK, students were more likely to experience sexual assault than any other occupational group (ONS, 2022). It is structurally and institutionally embedded, as I will explain in this article. The main purpose of this literature review is to examine the prevalence of sexual violence in higher education institutions and to assess the current climate. I will also discuss contributing factors and prevention measures. This working paper concludes by looking at potential prevention measures, and further research and recommendations. Since 2018, there has been a move away from a medicalised, public health approach to sexual violence to one that focuses more on inclusivity and intersectionality. However, there is a lot more to be done in terms of research on the intersections of sexual violence and gender-based violence, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and racism. This review takes the perspective that despite the increasing number of studies, none of these studies allow for an accurate estimate of actual prevalence across the country to be formulated. Furthermore, universities are not doing enough to help prevent and tackle this issue.

1.1 Methodology

This review is based on an in-depth literature search across many databases, including Google, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, King's Library Search and ResearchGate. Keywords used include 'prevalence' 'sexual violence' 'sexual harassment' 'sexual abuse' 'sexual assault' 'sexual misconduct' in 'higher education' 'tertiary institutions' 'universities' 'academia'. The reason for the range of keywords was the lack of a consistent definition: for example, some behaviours of sexual harassment may also be considered sexual violence. The criteria for assessing the literature were that it must contain information on either the causes, prevalence, or preventions and solutions of sexual violence. This article contains literature

intended to situate sexual violence in a broader context, because as we know, this is a deeply rooted structural issue that spans across multiple disciplines of scholarship, including sociology, psychology, gender studies, politics, and health. It is for this reason that this review features literature from a wide range of disciplines. I will focus on UK specific literature but will also draw from other international literature. The review will also draw from a range of grey literature including surveys, policy documents, quantitative and qualitative studies. It was important to look at this issue as relating to both students and staff, to formulate an in depth understanding of institutional issues. One condition for the review is that the literature must be from the last five years. Whilst other reviews (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020) include literature that predates the last five years, this review focuses specifically on this more recent time frame. This is because of several factors including: the need for a more up to date account of the situation; the substantial shift in prevalence and attitudes with a cultural shift in the last five years due to the #MeToo movement; the increase in importance and usage of social media; and the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Defining Sexual Violence

In reviewing the literature, I came up against repeated problems with inconsistency in the definition of terms related to sexual violence. The causes of this inconsistency may be due to differences in legalistic, medical, and social definitions, as well as different cultural contexts and research interests. This could also be due to the existence of denial and differing perceptions of experiences. The inconsistency of definition is a major issue. Until we concretely conceptualise and define a problem like this, how can we even begin to tackle it? This issue being left as ambiguous fuels the denial of its existence. It leaves gaps for assumptions such as 'that is not serious enough to report' or 'but that wasn't sexual harassment it was just banter'. It contributes to other issues beyond research including low reporting, low awareness, and normalised behaviour.

To address this inconsistency, in this article I will adopt a comprehensive approach to terminology. When referring to 'sexual violence,' I am using this as an all-encompassing term that includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, and various forms of sexual misconduct, all grounded in the context of a culture that perpetuates such behaviours, and the continuum of violence (Kelly 1988 as cited in Boesten 2017). Whilst the scope of behaviours my definition encompasses is broad, this is not to diminish the severity of some more extreme or traumatic experiences and say that all the experiences cause the same amount of distress. However, it is important to note that 'lower level' behaviours scaffold more extreme forms of violence, these incidents can still be incredibly distressing, and many people will often write them off as not being serious, or a 'joke', when they must be acknowledged for what they are: sexual

violence. These offences also often cultivate and pave the way for more extreme behaviours to occur.

Some articles I reviewed also use umbrella terms. For example, Bull, Duggan & Livesey (2022) use sexual and gender-based violence and harassment (SGBVH). Similarly, Bull & Page (2021) use the term sexual misconduct as an umbrella term to describe “sexualised abuses of power by academic, professional, contracted, and temporary staff in their relations with students or staff in higher education that adversely affect students’ or staff’s ability to participate in learning, teaching or professional environments” (Bull & Page, 2021).

The terminology’s lack of uniformity extends beyond the academic realm and extends into institutional contexts, as explained by Roberts, Doyle, & Roberts (2023), who conducted a website analysis of UK universities, revealing varying interpretations of sexual violence. In the Universities UK (UUK) report ‘Changing the Culture: tackling gender-based violence, harassment and hate crime: two years on’, findings from a survey just under a third of institutions suggested developing a common approach to terminology and language, to help deconstruct misunderstandings by students as to what constitutes sexual violence, particularly in the form of ‘everyday’ harassment. (UUK, 2019)

2 UK prevalence: Literature review of the last five years

What we know about the prevalence of sexual violence in the UK is consistent with patterns in studies on workplaces and the country on a wider scale. According to a UN women survey in 2021, 71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. This number increases to 86% among 18-24-year-olds with only 3% not having experienced any of the types of harassment listed (All-Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women, 2021). In terms of sexual assault, the Office for Students (OFS) estimates that 2.3% of adults aged 16 years and over were victim-survivors of sexual assault, this equates to an estimated 1.1 million adults (OFS, 2023). As mentioned in the introduction, there is a particular risk to students compared to any other occupational group (OFS, 2023b). According to the UN, full-time students are said to be disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, with 93% being victim-survivors of some form of sexual violence (APPG for UN Women, 2021). It is important to note, that prior to the following studies, the National Union of Students (NUS) reports were the only existing evidence of the prevalence of sexual violence in the UK (Camp, Sherlock-Smith, & Davies, 2018). This included the ground-breaking ‘Hidden Marks’ survey, which revealed that one in seven survey respondents had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their

time as a student (NUS, 2011). Not much has changed in over 10 years in terms of the high levels of sexual violence within universities.

The recent quantitative studies on prevalence can be divided into four categories. First, there are a series of surveys conducted by third party organisations. Revolt Sexual Assault conducted a survey with The Student Room. A total of 62% of the 4,491 participants, across 153 institutions had experienced sexual violence. 50% had experienced sexual harassment, and 42% had experienced sexual assault (Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018). Another notable external study was conducted by Brook research and Dig In, with the results including a figure of 56% of the 5,649 participants having experienced one of the sexual violence behaviours listed in the survey (Brook, 2019). Furthermore, the AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) #CombatMisconduct project partnered with Universities UK (UUK) and the NUS to administer a survey with 342 responses in 2022. This survey does not specify which or how many institutions this includes. The results from this indicated that 62% of respondents had experienced sexual misconduct at their current or most recent university (AVA & NUS, 2022). These studies are important, because this type of survey may be more useful at convincing a broader audience of the importance of an issue (Bull et al, 2022).

'Empowered Campus' was a collaborative national research project led by an external student market research company and 26 UK Students' Unions. The results revealed almost 1 in 5 students had experienced sexual assault alone, not to count sexual harassment (Empowered Campus, 2020). The second type of prevalence study includes studies conducted by University Unions, which includes studies by Bristol University and Imperial College London. In the Imperial study, the 613 participants represented 2.8% of the student population (See section on key issues within literature on prevalence). The results were that 30.8% and 15.0% of respondents identified as survivors of sexual harassment and sexual violence respectively although the small and probably self-selective sample size makes it difficult to judge what this means in terms of overall prevalence (Imperial Union, 2021). In the Bristol Union study, the 885 survey responses represented around 3% of the student population at the University of Bristol. Almost half of respondents had experienced sexual harassment since starting university, and 29% had experienced sexual assault (Bristol Union, 2021). These studies bring home that there is clearly a problem that needs addressing, even if the sample sizes are small, definitions differ, and the comparative value of studies such as these is thus limited.

The third category of prevalence study is academic, published in peer reviewed articles. Due to the absence of national and higher education data and sector wide approach, some academics have jumped in to conduct their own studies (Camp, Sherlock-Smith, & Davies, 2018). Even so, there are very few peer-reviewed published studies that measure the extent of sexual violence experienced by university students in the UK (Roberts, Doyle, & Roberts, 2023). However, one important study was completed by Steele, through the Oxford University research initiative 'OUR SPACE'. The results revealed 18% of respondents

reported an incident of sexual violence, and 50% reported an incident of sexual harassment (Steele, Esposti et al., 2021). Another peer reviewed study measuring prevalence of sexual assault was conducted by Camp, Sherlock-Smith and Davies (2018). This study of sexual assault included many behaviours which might be determined by others as sexual harassment- such as catcalling and sexualised comments. The data revealed 50% of women and a third of men had been groped, and 12% of women and 6% of men had experienced a forced sexual act. A high frequency of the sample experienced sexual comments and catcalling (Camp et al., 2018).

The final type of prevalence study is conducted by media outlets and newspapers. One notable survey, conducted by The Tab in 2021, involved the responses of 4,000 students from over 20 different universities. The results painted a concerning picture, with 51% of students reporting experiencing sexual assault during their time at university. Certain universities had a much higher prevalence, with one university showing 70% of respondents reporting an experience of sexual assault (The Tab, 2021).

The above studies all look at student-on-student assault and harassment. Another type of prevalence study concerns staff sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault. As such, McCarry and Jones (2022) argue that conceptualising sexual harassment as a 'student problem' obfuscates the real issue, which is the cultural context of the university. Part of this is academic culture, and surveys of sexual violence in universities should, according to some scholars, include staff experiences where possible (Bull et al., 2022). There was a significant study by NUS and the 1752 group that revealed the extent of staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education. The results indicated that 41% of participants reported at least one experience of sexualised behaviour from staff, while a further 5% were aware of someone they know experiencing sexualised behaviour from staff (NUS, 2018).

In 2021 a University and College Union (UCU) report was published that investigated the staff represented by the union who are impacted by sexual violence. They collected new data, including both quantitative and qualitative data using thematic analysis. The report revealed that sexual violence was commonplace amongst participants, with 39% of respondents either directly experiencing sexual violence, witnessing it, or acting confidant to someone who had experienced it. 73% of the sexual violence reported was by either a colleague, student, or someone in managerial responsibility (UCU, 2021a). In terms of sexual harassment specifically, 26% of staff participants had experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12 months as reported in a study by McCarry and Jones. Furthermore, 76.5% experienced unwanted sexual remarks, 70.6% someone staring at them in a way that made them uncomfortable. 54.9% had someone trying to draw them into a discussion about sexual matters, and 54.9% had been catcalled. 64.7% of these concerned staff or students, with 15.7% of behaviours perpetrated by students and 49% by colleagues (McCarry & Jones, 2022).

Key themes amongst staff sexual violence included abuse of power. This was a frequent theme and linked to the hierarchical nature of higher education. This abuse of power was a theme in both staff-student perpetrated harassment and violence, and staff experiences of sexual violence. In McCarray and Jones' study, 82.6% of staff who experienced sexual harassment on the university campus reported that the perpetrator was more senior than they. Therefore, sexual violence was frequently related to the abuse of power, and the findings showed that power dynamics and working relations, including increased precarity and competition, exacerbated sexual violence in tertiary education (UCU, 2021a). The hierarchies in academia meant sexual violence was more likely to happen to people with insecure employment contracts. Reliance on senior members of staff for references, future employment and joint publications puts certain staff at increased risk. Certain subsets of staff were identified as being more vulnerable to sexual violence, including international staff, minorities, early career staff, and staff on casualised contracts (UCU, 2021a, (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Based on the prevalence studies of staff experiences of sexual violence, the way in which universities function and employment is hierarchised reinforces a culture of sexual violence. There cannot be change amongst the student population unless the institution itself shifts as these phenomena reinforce each other.

Table 1: UK prevalence studies since 2018

Study	Type of study	Sample size	Prevalence	Sample
Revolt, 2018	Online survey	4,491	62% of participants had experienced sexual violence. 50% had experienced sexual harassment, and 42% had experienced sexual assault	Students and recent graduates
Brook, 2019	Online survey	5,649	56% experienced one of the sexual violence behaviours listed in the survey	Students
AVA & NUS, 2022	Report	342	62% of respondents had experienced sexual misconduct at their current or most recent university	Current or recent students
Empowered Campus, 2020	Report	8,106	1 in 5 students had experienced sexual assault	Students
Bristol Union, 2021	Report	885 (3% of the student population at the University of Bristol)	Almost half of respondents had experienced sexual harassment since starting university, and 29% had experienced sexual assault	All students at University of Bristol
Imperial Union, 2021	Report	613	30.8% had experienced sexual harassment and 15.0% sexual violence	All students who were a member of Imperial Union
NUS, 2018	Report	1,839	41% of participants reported at least one experience of sexualised behaviour from staff	Current and former students
UCU, 2021	Report	4,000 UCU members, 100 UCU reps	39% of respondents either directly experiencing sexual violence, had witnessed it, or acted confidant to someone who had experienced it	UCU reps, UCU members, victim-survivors of sexual violence in higher education, professionals whose work covers this area
The Tab, 2021	Online article	4,000	51% of students reporting experiencing sexual assault during university	Students

McCarry & Jones, 2022	Journal article	603	26.0% of staff participants had experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12 months	Data collected from both staff and students (although study focuses on prevalence of staff experiences)
Camp et al, 2018	Journal article	515	50% of women and a third of men had been groped, and 12% of women and 6% of men had experienced a forced sexual act	Students
OURSPACE: Steele et al, 2021	Journal article	1,608	18% of respondents reported an incident of sexual violence, and 50% reported an incident of sexual harassment	All undergraduate and graduate students over 18 enrolled at the University of Oxford, UK
Hales & Gannon, 2022	Journal article	259	11.4% self-reported recent sexual aggression	Male university students

2.1 Situating prevalence in a global context

Sexual violence is an issue which crosses international borders and therefore it is important to observe where the prevalence of sexual violence in higher education institutions in the UK sits in global context. Hales and Gannon (2022) argue that the US has more developed research agendas relevant to university-based sexual violence (Hales & Gannon 2022, Bull et al. 2022). In fact, there are frameworks for measuring prevalence: notably the US campus climate survey. The Campus Climate survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct was a project by the American Association of Universities (AAU) created in order to ascertain comparable data. There was one completed in 2015 and another in 2019, generating comparable results. In 2019, it generated data on a scale that is not comparable to the UK prevalence studies, with survey responses from 181,752 students (AAU, 2019). The results indicated an overall rate of 'non-consensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent' at 13% (AAU, 2019). Another framework used in the US is Administrator Research Campus Climate Consortium (ARC3) survey. One study uses an adapted version of this method. This study involved a survey of 16,754 students across eight college campuses in the US provides an informed account of the climate within American universities. The findings include a prevalence of 19% who experienced faculty or staff perpetrated sexual harassment, and 30% who experienced peer perpetrated sexual harassment (Wood et al., 2021). Although the campus climate surveys for example, may be more sensitive to gender, historically, the US research on sexual violence and prevalence has been critiqued for taking a public health, risk

factor driven approach, that focuses on women's safety, that may not investigate properly the culture which causes it (Jackson & Sundaram 2020). Furthermore, it doesn't illuminate the ways in which masculinities and gender are core to understanding gender-based violence across international borders (Jackson & Sundaram 2020). Since 2018, there is growing body of prevalence studies across Europe (Pantelmann & Wälty 2022, Sivertsen et al. 2019). As well as overarching studies on European experiences, policy and agenda to tackle the issue (ERAC SWG GRI 2020, Ahrens Zascersinska, & Macovei 2022, Bondestam & Lunqvist 2018).

It is also important to this research more broadly to move away from exclusively focusing on Europe, America, and Australia. With increasing student mobility, and large numbers of international students in the UK, it is useful to understand the climate in other countries. Most of the international research is situated around Western Europe and the USA, however, particularly in recent years, there has been more effort to look at the issue more broadly and there has been a rise in studies everywhere. Many studies seem to reveal similarly high rates of sexual violence experience, although it is difficult to compare due to different cultural and methodological definitions of sexual violence. One study of two higher education institutions in Colombia revealed a sexual harassment prevalence rate of 58% amongst the participants, with a prevalence amongst women of 72.3% compared to 33.8% amongst men (Duque Monsalve, Cano Arango, Gaviria Gómez, & Montoya Escobar, 2022). A study in Bangladesh revealed 72% of participants had experienced both non-verbal and verbal forms of sexual harassment. 70.3% of victim-survivors of the sexual harassment had experienced it more than twice (Rezvi, 2021). In one prevalence study of three tertiary institutions in Nigeria, 46.6% of the respondents experienced sexual violence and 35.7% reported experiences of rape (Laima et al., 2021). This is notably high compared to other data. Across the global studies, I observed more use of triggering language, this may be accorded to cultural differences, translation, or increased normalisation of sexual violence. I also observed a lower awareness and recognition of sexual violence behaviours as sexual violence.

Several peer reviewed studies on prevalence provide a global perspective. Bridget Steele et al at Oxford University (2021) conducted one of these studies. The overall meta-analysed prevalence rate for rape in higher education globally was at a rate of 17.4% for women and 7.8% for men. Sexual violence in this study is defined as "any attempted or completed sexual act obtained by force, violence, or coercion", although it goes on to highlight that prevalence estimates vary due to the definition and measurement (Steele et al., 2021).

According to Bondestam & Lundqvist, exposure to sexual harassment in higher education globally varied between 11% and 73% for heterosexual women and between 3% and 26% for heterosexual men. In the studies where other forms of exposure are studied in addition to sexual harassment, including direct and indirect discrimination, other forms of offences and harassment, threats of violence, physical and psychological violence, sexual violence, the total exposure is significantly higher, and never below 60% for women. (Bondestam & Lunqvist,

2018). In this review, they conclude that many international studies also show a large variation in prevalence; from 2% to 93% depending on a variety of factors (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). The reason for the variation may not be due to differences in prevalence, and rather due to the surveys themselves. Contributing factors could include sample sizes, and inconsistency of definition, issues found in the UK prevalence literature (See section on key issues within the literature on prevalence for more detail).

This huge variation makes it very hard to assess the prevalence accurately, but regardless, one can conclude from these studies that sexual harassment and violence are indeed international issues, deeply embedded structurally in the education system worldwide. It also seems like in many countries, prevalence research is still in its infancy like in the UK. There are numerous frequent causes of sexual harassment and violence that are common across international contexts, including conservative gender attitudes, sexism, alcohol consumption, and abuses of power (Jackson & Sundaram 2020). There may be more of a fear and threat of disclosure in other parts of the world, and more of a lack of trust in authorities due to corruption in the legal and political system. Whilst in different cultures there are different norms which may impact the severity and frequency of sexual harassment and sexual violence, there is undoubtedly an underlying institutional issue in higher education systems worldwide.

2.2 Key themes

2.2.1 Online sexual violence and harassment

With social media increasingly becoming a core part of day-to-day life, there has unsurprisingly been a rise in online sexual harassment and sexual violence. New forms have been prevalent, such as using social media to sexual harass through messaging, image-based harassment, revenge porn,¹ and online grooming and exploitation. This was clear amongst many of the prevalence studies reviewed. In the Brook study, 12% of men and 26% of women had been sent unwanted explicit messages (Brook, 2019). In another study, a third of the sample had been sent unsolicited explicit material online (Camp et al., 2018).

Interestingly, in one study, participants suggested the prevalence of online harassment and misconduct may have increased due to COVID-19. The pandemic impacted and disrupted

¹ 'Revenge porn' is the sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person, without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress. The offence applies both online and offline, and to images which are shared electronically or in a more traditional way, so it includes the uploading of images on the internet, sharing by text and e-mail, or showing someone a physical or electronic image. (UK Government, 2015)

student consent and misconduct training and that the lack of in person signposting throughout led to lower awareness among students of the nature of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse (AVA & NUS, 2022). There needs to be further investigation into how COVID-19 has permanently affected the nature of sexual violence, as well as further investigation into the nature of online sexual violence. Steele et al included the use of questions about online sexual violence to capture the potentially increasing relationship between social media and sexual harassment during the pandemic (Steele et al, 2021a). There have been studies that examine student experiences of online sexual violence (Jordan et al., 2018) but no prevalence studies conducted.

2.2.2 Repeated occurrences

Sexual harassment and sexual violence exist on a continuum of behaviour (Kelly 1988 as cited in Boesten 2017, APPG for UN Women 2021). The 'less serious' behaviours act as a way of propelling or legitimising more serious behaviour. There were clear patterns of the commonly experienced sexual harassment and violence behaviours perpetrated in the context of higher education. In the literature, this included: rape/forced sex, forced sexual contact, unwanted and inappropriate touching, unwanted remarks, wolf whistling, stalking, sexual coercion, drink spiking, upskirting,² feeling obliged to engage in romantic or sexual advances, such as kissing, going on a date, going back to someone's room. Other behaviours related to online sexual violence, including receiving unwanted sexual messages, and receiving unwanted sexual images. Both academic studies and student union studies revealed that repeated perpetration and experiences of sexual violence were common (Imperial College Union 2021, Bristol Union 2021) According to Hales and Gannon's study on perpetrators, most sexual aggressors (39.4%) committed two sexually aggressive acts in total, and a considerable number (33.3%) reported three or more. In the wider study, 40.0% of sexual aggressors reported three or more sexually aggressive acts (Hales & Gannon, 2022). The literature generally supports the idea that sexual violence is not merely the occasional horrific scandal, but a continuous and normalised pattern, very much built into university life. It was rare that sexual violence was a one-off experience. For example, in the AVA study, 58% of respondents reported multiple experiences of sexual misconduct (AVA & NUS, 2022). Similarly, at Bristol, sexual harassment tends to be more frequent with 18% of the respondents only experiencing it once and 57% experiencing it between two to five times. 41% reported they had experienced between two to five times (Bristol Union, 2021). For staff, this pattern of repeated perpetration was also significant, often an ongoing pattern of

² 'Upskirting' is an intrusive practice which involves someone taking a picture under another person's clothing without their knowledge or consent.

abuse. In fact, 70% of those who directly experienced sexual violence in the past five years experienced it as an ongoing pattern of behaviour (UCU, 2021a).

2.2.3 On-site sexual violence and harassment

Stereotypes of students, for example the drinking, drugs, and experimentation or ‘mucking around’, may get in the way of sexual violence being taken seriously (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). There may be a particular association between these behaviours and student spaces and university campuses, and an idea that the students put themselves at risk in these spaces. Moreover, there is a general sense that sexual violence is out of the hands of universities, that particularly if it does not occur on campus, then it is not their responsibility.

Studies have however revealed the scale of offences that occur on campus. In the ‘Empowered Campus’ study, over half of all students who have experienced sexual assault and/or sexual harassment experienced it on campus (Empowered Campus, 2020). Halls of residence were the topmost reported space by participants, in one study 28% of students who had experienced sexual assault had experienced it in halls (Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018). Another study revealed 38% of sexual assault experiences since coming to university had occurred in halls (Empowered Campus, 2020). In terms of sexual harassment, one study identified that 12.3% had at least one incident take place in university halls (Bristol Union, 2021). This should be a wakeup call to universities, as halls are clearly an environment in which this behaviour is pervasive, yet not prevented. University spaces were also reported as common locations of sexual violence to occur. In one report, 23% of sexual assault incidents happened in university social spaces (Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018). Union bars were also reported as a location (Imperial College Union, 2021). Other common locations included social events, nightclubs, bars, pubs and in the street. (Revolt Sexual Assault 2018, Bristol Union 2021, Imperial College Union, 2021). This emphasises that even if it does not happen at university, certain clubs may be frequented by students so there needs to be more collaborative effort with clubs and universities. The likelihood of sexual assault occurring in a club was recognised by many students (The Tab 2021, Tutchell & Edmonds 2020). In one report, there was an emphasis on the importance of working with the community and city partners to prevent sexual violence (Bristol Union, 2021). Similarly to students, sexual misconduct against staff also had very high levels on campus. In one study, 35.9% of staff participants reported that their experiences of sexual harassment occurred on the university campus (McCarry & Jones, 2022). This indicates a serious demand and necessity for universities to engage with prevention initiatives and research, considering the high proportion of sexual violence incidents happening on campus. The responsibility of the university does not stop beyond the learning environment. It also consolidates the validity of the high prevalence of sexual violence being directly interlinked with higher education. However, we note that studies reflecting on sexual violence ‘on campus’ often refer to

campus-based Universities, as in much of the US literature, while this is not always relevant to the UK.

2.2.4 Perpetration

I will discuss perpetration prevalence, before discussing perpetrator characteristics. There have been two studies which have looked at perpetration prevalence in the UK. The first is a part of Bridget Steele's 'OURSPACE' cross-sectional survey at Oxford University. In Steele's study (2021), perpetration of sexual violence was reported by 1% of respondents and sexual harassment by 12% of respondents. The other study, really the first of its kind, examined psychological risk factors and prevalence of perpetration associated with recent sexual aggression amongst two distinct samples of UK male university students. One was a more focused study of one university, and one was a national study. Shockingly, results revealed 11.4% self-reported recent sexual aggression. Does this mean that these young men are aware of their harmful behaviours? Or does it mean the survey makes them recognise their behaviour as sexual violence and helps them understand? These are important questions to investigate in future research. A similar set of questions surround Jackson and Sundaram's work, within interviews on explanations for lad culture. Two dominant, contrasting narratives emerged concerning sexual violence. One involves the notion that 'boys will be boys' and 'that is just what men do', the other that 'it's not their fault', 'men aren't really like that' and they are inherently incapable of controlling their behaviour (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Both minimise men's responsibility, so it seems like an emphasis on a shift away from victim blaming and towards accountability of perpetrators is needed both in the general university environment and future research. Even after the survey, this prevalence rate may not accurately represent the real extent of perpetration, as the existence of rape myths and denial, and a culture which permits and even encourages this behaviour may prevent people from even knowing or acknowledging their behaviour constitutes sexual harassment and violence. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that this is information that people would willingly report. Perpetration was also predominantly perpetrated by men. This is not to dismiss other perpetrators, but it is undeniably clear that men make up most of the perpetrators. In the NUS and 1752 study, 76% of respondents indicated that the perpetrator was male (NUS, 2018). Similarly, in the AVA study, 96% of respondents experienced sexual misconduct from a male perpetrator (AVA & NUS, 2022).

2.2.5 Prevalence amongst certain groups of students

Prevalence rates of sexual violence within higher education institutions vary among different student populations, with contextual factors playing a significant role. Undergraduates are often depicted as more susceptible, potentially influenced by exposure to the university drinking culture, while mature students tend to experience lower rates. Moreover, the

prevalence among undergraduate students may be higher, partly because postgraduate students often spend more time off-campus (Wood et al., 2021). However, in cases of staff sexual misconduct, PhD students were recognised as more vulnerable, possibly due to their close working relationships with faculty members. International students may also be vulnerable due to being in a new country and potentially lacking a support system. It is worth considering the unique experiences of different subsets of students, and the distinctions between postgraduate and undergraduate issues in understanding and addressing sexual violence on campuses.

2.2.6 Increase of focus on marginalised groups

For marginalised groups there is evidence of a higher degree of exposure to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. This includes gender, disability, race, and sexuality. (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Conspicuously, structural, and social inequalities exacerbate sexual violence.

2.2.6.1 Gender

Sexual harassment and violence exist as gendered phenomena. There is a consensus in the literature that this issue disproportionately and significantly affects women. Whilst we must acknowledge the need for inclusive literature which acknowledges that this issue does not just affect women, there is a significant overlap with misogyny and sexual violence. To disregard this is problematic and dismisses the fact that sexual harassment and violence are often part of a continuum of gender-based violence and as part of a wider culture of misogyny. The tension between making studies gender neutral and inclusive for sexual violence victim-survivors, and the adamant need to recognise it as a gender-based violence issue were two slightly oppositional narratives in the literature. Though, as Bull et al highlight, sexual violence should be addressed irrespective of the gender identity of those targeted, however established patterns of gendered perpetration and victimisation are not incidental but structural, driven by white, heteronormative, and homophobic hegemonies (Bull et al., 2022). Without addressing gender inequality, and dismantling the wider institutional conducive context, all attempts to tackle sexual harassment on campus will fail (McCarry & Jones, 2022). It was clear that women, particularly younger women with insecure employment conditions, at lower stages of education, or belonging to an additional minority group are the primary recipients of sexual violence (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Globally, in Bondestam & Lundqvist's systemic review, the idea that sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon is supported by the average exposure rate: for heterosexual women ranging between 11% and 73% compared to 3% and 26% for heterosexual men (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Similarly, in the study by Steele et al, 11.4% of women experienced

coercive sex, 14.5% forced sexual touching, 8.2% attempted rape, and 5.9% rape. Comparatively, for men this was 6.8%, 6.4%, 1.1% and 2.4% respectively.

This is consistent with UK specific studies. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported in its 2022 report that women were most likely to be victim-survivors of sexual assault. In prevalence studies in the UK, sexual harassment and violence are gendered. 82% of respondents in the AVA and NUS study believed that their experience of sexual misconduct was linked to their gender (AVA & NUS, 2022). According to the Revolt, 70% of all female participants reported experiencing sexual violence, compared to 26% of male participants. 57% had experienced sexual harassment and 48% had experienced sexual assault (Revolt, 2018). This is significantly higher than amongst men, 19% and 17%. In the Brook survey (2019), women were more likely to experience every sexual violence behaviour listed. For example, 49% of women had been touched inappropriately compared to 3% of men. There was also a high rate of female response of 66%, that could indicate there is more of an interest or personal affiliation to the subject amongst women. Empowered Campus (2020) revealed that 1 in 4 female students experience sexual harassment and 1 in 5 experience sexual assault.

In terms of the student union data, for Imperial College Union, 84.2% and 87.5% of those respondents who were victim-survivors of sexual harassment and sexual violence respectively were women. In the study by Camp, Sherlock-Smith and Davies, women were significantly more likely to experience four of the items on the sexual assault experiences scale than men. Similar results were found in the survey for 'The Tab', with 59% of female students who responded having been sexually assaulted (The Tab, 2021). It was also a common theme that the consequences disproportionately impacted women. For example, 20% of women reported that they lost confidence in themselves after the sexual violence had occurred, as opposed to 5.9% of men (NUS, 2018).

Staff experiences of sexual violence were frequently linked to gender. This was also consistent with US studies of sexual harassment and violence in academia (Karami et al., 2020). Female staff were far more likely to experience sexual harassment in McCarry and Jones' study. It is suggested that a paradox exists in academia, despite more women gaining entry to academia as both employees and students, the wider institutional structure is hostile towards women and maintains and preserves an environment of both sexual harassment and gender inequality. To support this idea, the study revealed 40.5% of staff participants thought there was gender inequality in their university, 33.7% of staff participants knew of someone in their institution who was treated unequally because of their gender, and 25.3% of staff witnessed someone being treated unequally because of their gender (McCarry & Jones, 2022). This paradox is underlined by the 'band aid' approach of universities, the outward messages to the media, particularly when scandals occur, of equality of opportunity advertised in university prospectuses, and a 'zero tolerance' policy towards sexual harassment and sexual violence. Indeed, these ostensibly affirmative messages adopted by universities, promoting gender equality, and condemning misogyny and sexual violence many inadvertently contribute to

the problem. This is especially concerning because such outward prohibitions are meaningless and performative unless simultaneously consolidated by a bottom-up approach that thoroughly looks at the institutional culture. This performance serves as a tool to downplay the existence of any underlying issues, consequently diminishing a sense of responsibility and need for further efforts.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that amongst the literature although women experienced sexual harassment and violence more frequently and at a much higher rate, it was common for men not to recognise the experience of sexual violence, due to pre-existing ideas that men 'always want sex' for example (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). They were also considerably less likely to report sexual violence. According to one study, 71% of male students who are sexually assaulted deal with it entirely on their own (Empowered Campus, 2020). In sum, gender matters in terms of who is vulnerable to sexual violence and who is more likely to perpetrate, but also in terms of who is more likely to report such violence, making it difficult to paint a complete picture.

2.2.6.2 Disability

Throughout the literature, it was apparent that there is a tendency for people with a disability to be disproportionately affected by sexual violence. Generally, in the UK, disabled people feel less safe in all settings than non-disabled people (ONS, 2022). This is coupled with an underreporting of sexual violence by people with disabilities (Willot et al., 2020). According to the data, it appears that disabled people are also more vulnerable to sexual violence at university. In the Revolt study, it was clear that amongst disabled participants experienced a much higher frequency of sexual violence. 73% had experienced sexual violence, 62% had experienced sexual harassment, and 54% had experienced sexual assault. This is compared to the overall prevalence of non-disabled people of 62%, 50%, and 42% respectively. In the Imperial College Union study, similarly high rates of sexual violence were observed. Out of the whole population of participants, 13.8% of those who suffered sexual violence were disabled. 51.7% of the disabled respondents identified themselves as a victim-survivor of harassment or violence or both. In the 'Empowered Campus' study, students with a self-reported disability were 11.8% more likely to experience sexual harassment. Disabled staff were also more vulnerable to sexual violence. It was clear amongst the literature that there was no specific UK literature on the prevalence and experiences of sexual violence by people with a disability in the last 5 years, and that studies were either over representative or under representative. In the US, these concerns materialise in a study which specifically looks at the relationship between disability and sexual assault, revealing that disabled female students were over 100% more likely to experience sexual assault (Campe, 2021).

2.2.6.3 Race

Within the prevalence research, numerous indications point to race as a significant factor influencing the incidence of sexual violence. In the UCU study focusing on staff's encounters with sexual violence, individuals from racially minoritised backgrounds were found to be more likely to have directly experienced sexual violence in the past five years, with a rate of 11% compared to 9% among white individuals. This discrepancy may be attributed to the higher prevalence of precarious employment contracts among racial and ethnic minority staff, which exposes them to various forms of power abuse (UCU, 2021a) (UCU, 2021b).

Regarding staff misconduct against students, a notable proportion of non-EU international respondents (8.3%) reported experiencing sexualised comments referencing their race, as did students of colour (6.7%) (NUS, 2018). Student union studies also revealed significant prevalence rates, particularly among participants identifying as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME). Amongst this group, 28.2% reported experiencing sexual harassment, and 15.1% reported sexual violence (Imperial Union, 2021). Qualitative research further emphasised the intersection of sexual misconduct and racism, with many students expressing that their experiences of sexual misconduct were compounded by racial discrimination. Students of marginalised ethnicities were also disproportionately affected by sexual misconduct (AVA & NUS, 2022). In the Empowered Campus study, it was found that black and ethnic minority students were twice as likely to experience sexual assault in learning spaces, such as classrooms, lecture halls, or labs, compared to their white peers (Empowered Campus, 2020). Parallel American research corroborates these findings, revealing that individuals of marginalised ethnicities face a significantly higher expected rate of harassment behaviours (Wood et al., 2021). Specifically, being of a marginalised ethnicity is associated with a 90% increase in the expected rate of experiencing additional behaviours by faculty or staff following an initial harassment experience. These findings collectively underscore the intricate relationship between race and the prevalence of sexual violence. It would be helpful to collect better data regarding the experience and prevalence of harassment among BAME students as well as international students.

2.2.6.4 LGBTQ+ community

Another emerging focal point within the literature pertains to marginalised sexualities and gender identities. This community is found to bear a disproportionate burden of sexual violence, a phenomenon often exacerbated by the normalisation of homophobic humour, contributing to a culture where harassment and violence persist along a continuum (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Furthermore, trans and gender-diverse individuals face a notably heightened risk, with 2021 witnessing a 7% increase in killings within this demographic (TGEU, 2021). Different gender identities amongst staff also experience a high prevalence of sexual violence with trans, non-binary, and other gender identities experiencing sexual violence at a rate of 16%, compared to 12% for women and 5% for men (UCU 2021a).

Sexual orientation also seemed to influence the prevalence, with the rate for non-heterosexual people as 14% compared to heterosexual people at 8% (UCU, 2021a). The 'Empowered Campus' study observed similar results, with lesbian, gay and bisexual students 15.1% more likely to experience sexual harassment (Empowered Campus, 2020). The impact of staff sexual misconduct is likewise disproportionately felt by LGBTQ+ students (NUS, 2018). This is supported by a recent American study that indicated being a sexual minority doubles the risk of both faculty/staff harassment and almost triples the risk of peer sexual harassment (Wood et al., 2021). Notably, there is a deficit of sexual violence prevalence studies regarding non-binary and genderqueer/gender-fluid identities and non-heterosexual relationships, and these grounds are often excluded from prevalence literature (Bull et al., 2022).

2.2.6.5 Overall

While calls for increased research focusing on the prevalence and experiences of sexual violence among marginalised identities are consistently iterated in literature in this field, efforts to address this deficit of research in the UK remain limited. There have been repeated suggestions that there needs to be more research specifically done on prevalence and experience of sexual violence by marginalised identities, but minimal effort to investigate in the UK. There have been more efforts to look directly at these identities internationally, particularly in the US, including sexual and gender minorities (Coulter et al 2020, Tillewein et al., 2023) ethnic and racial minorities (Gomez 2022, Espelage et al 2022, Abdmolaei, 2020) disability (Kirkner et al 2022, Campe et al 2021) and international students (Fethi et al., 2022) but the same cannot be the same in the UK, with limited to no literature in the last five years.

3 Key limitations of the UK literature on prevalence

3.1 Lack of prevalence studies

The first major limitation is the lack of prevalence studies being conducted. This includes both by universities as well as academic articles. There were very few peer reviewed prevalence studies, and relatively few external studies particularly considering the spike in interest in the topic in the last five years. Law enforcement and institutional statistics are considered unreliable by many due to underreporting, so it is paramount that academics and external agencies both produce more research (Steele et al., 2021). In terms of universities, it

was evident that there was a lack of prevalence surveys being conducted to establish baseline data (Chantler et al., 2019). Without this data it is hard to formulate solutions, as Tutchell and Edmonds put it, university policy makers are trying to find a route through a difficult landscape without signposts and without a map (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). Although there may not be a change in prevalence, there has been a change towards recognition of experiences as sexual assault following the #MeToo movement, which is why the need for new data is even more urgent (Jaffe et al., 2021). The importance of prevalence studies should not be underestimated; they can play an important first step in establishing a larger research agenda (Steele et al., 2021). In the beginning of the five years of literature, Anitha and Lewis argued that the higher education sector needs reliable national quantitative and qualitative data, using consistent definitions of the different types of sexual violence (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). There has been no such study conducted.

3.2 Categorisation and Definition

Categorisation and definition of sexual violence, as mentioned in the introduction, is a repeated problem that arises. There are no standardised definitions across the field as to what sexual misconduct/ harassment/ violence/assault actually is. Without a standardised definition, it is impossible for universities to monitor reporting trends (Roberts, Doyle & Roberts, 2023). Different studies investigate sometimes one, or more of these terms, with overlapping meanings. This impacts results and comparability, as studies may vary significantly because of the inconsistencies in how sexual violence is defined and measured (Steele et al., 2021). This was also reflected across the way universities define sexual violence on their websites, 86% of UK university websites had varying definitions of sexual violence (Roberts, Doyle, & Roberts, 2023). In the domain of US prevalence research, although some frameworks have been established, a consensus on terminology, including the term 'campus climate,' remains elusive (Bull et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is an observable trend over time reflecting a desire to establish a common understanding of sexual harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Another issue raised regarding definition was included in Bondestam & Lunqvist's international review (2018) "Research is mainly conducted using national, legal definitions of sexual harassment as the starting point". These legalistic definitions often lack nuance and cultural context.

3.3 Response bias

Whilst the importance of external agencies must be underlined, it is also clear that this method may produce biased responses. This is particularly the case with organisations such as Revolt Sexual Assault. In general, optional surveys result in many issues. We simply cannot be sure

that the students who reply to voluntary surveys are representative of all students (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). The selective nature of participation will undeniably attract people with a personal connection or passion for the issue and this impacts the results, particularly in specialist sexual violence organisations. There is a tendency for people impacted by sexual violence and sexual harassment to respond to all optional prevalence surveys (Steele et al., 2021). More research should be done into the best way of obtaining accurate samples with respondents who are not just specifically interested in the issue. One attempt at this is through offering financial incentivisation for participation, but this also runs the risk of bias in respondents' answers (Bull et al., 2022).

The idea that people affected by sexual violence personally are more likely to participate could be disputed, with many people who had experienced sexual assault being dissuaded from responding to surveys out of the emotional nature of the study or having to accept what happened to them. Many victim-survivors of sexual violence may avoid something like this to avoid potentially reliving trauma or wanting to move on in their lives (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). Another factor which may stop people participating in these surveys is cultural attitudes. There is a reluctance of men to report sexual violence, which stems from a widespread belief that sexual violence does not happen to men. Men may be more likely to dismiss experiences and not report them in a study as sexual violence and may be underrepresented in prevalence surveys (Giroux et al., 2019).

3.4 Sampling and methodology

The scale and a nature of samples is also an issue. Sampling characteristics differ, in terms of the group study of prevalence of sexual aggression in men, or a study in one particular institution. Prevalence may also vary region to region or from institution to institution, based on differences in cultures or beliefs, therefore a singular study on one university does not accurately convey the situation for everyone. Some studies have student participants, some include graduates and some staff, some with a mixture of these groups. This does not wholly outline the problem on a national level. There is also no consistency with the sample sizes. Some studies are based on a sample size of 100, whilst some are over 1,000. Whilst a smaller sample size is useful when conducting qualitative interviews and focus groups, it makes it hard to understand the prevalence.

There are also differences in time frame. For example, some studies were based on recent experience, McCarry and Jones' study was based on experiences in the past 12 months. Others looked at violence that had occurred throughout the duration of participants time at university, and others looked at experiences in general, this could include experience prior to university. There needs to be a specific study looking at university specific experiences, in order that universities do not deflect blame or avoid responsibility or accountability.

There are no standardised methodologies in the UK for conducting prevalence research, so this renders them difficult to compare (Bull et al., 2022). This was experienced by Bull when comparing the methodology of three surveys, elucidating that these differences in adaptation meant it was very difficult to comparatively analyse the data (Bull et al., 2022). In the US, despite there still not being standardisation, they have more of a secure framework in terms of the Campus Climate Survey. We need an equivalent standardised survey in the UK, with it repeated on a regular basis, and adjusted frequently based on changing times, with the shifts in discourse and the shifting nature of sexual violence including the rise in online misogyny. Most surveys are adapted from American models, which is problematic because of the difference in culture, or a combination of different surveys.

3.5 Cultural perspectives of surveys

In the US particularly, there has been a more medicalised, public health approach for measuring prevalence of sexual violence and harassment. Whilst described in the introduction of this article, and other literature as an epidemic, it is important not to look at this issue completely scientifically because of the gravity of the situation. Some literature used more explicit language such as ‘vaginal assault’ or ‘oral assault’ or ‘forced penetrative intercourse’ as well as other outdated, and potentially triggering terminology. This may be due to the methodology of prevalence surveys being constructed off the back of legalistic, medicalised or policy definitions. Whilst not directly talking about prevalence research, Tutchell and Edmonds outline this same issue in terms of university policy.

There needs to be a move away from this type of desensitised approach in order to truly assess prevalence. Despite the message iterated that an overarching survey is needed, alongside this there is a necessity for qualitative data to inform the construction and assessment of results. For example, providing an overarching large-scale survey is important, but using just numbers may diminish its meaning. The need for personal stories and qualitative interviews to underscore the experience and severity of this data is imperative.

3.6 Lack of representative samples

Another evident issue with the current prevalence data is the lack of accurate prevalence measuring, without representative student samples (Roberts et al., 2023). Many surveys were not accurate representations of the wider student environment. For example, some studies were over representative of marginalised identities (Empowered Campus, 2020) whereas others sufficiently lacked diversity, with mostly women, white and heterosexual respondents (Camp et al. 2018, Bristol Union 2021). This is a particular issue with focusing on individual institutions because for example in the study at Oxford University by Steele et al, the Oxford

population is not representative of the wider population, 20% are black and minority students and 87.8% of students live in 'more advantaged areas' (Steele et al, 2021). The UCU report emphasises the fact that its data collection and analysis does not produce a sample representative of the national wider population, but only represents those that responded to its survey.

3.7 Low response rates

In the Bristol study, the survey sample only represented 3% of the student population, with the Imperial study representing an even lower percentage at 2.8% (Imperial Union 2021, Bristol Union 2021) The current peer review prevalence studies that have been carried out in the UK also suffer from low response rates. (Roberts, Doyle & Roberts, 2023). There are similar difficulties with US campus climate studies (Bovill & White 2020, Wood et al. 2021) with non-response and non-completion of surveys occurring at higher rate for census sampled, broader climate surveys (Giroux et al., 2019). Nonresponse and missing data were also an issue in UK prevalence studies, with not all respondents responding to every question in the UCU survey (UCU, 2021a).

3.8 COVID-19 pandemic

Some recent studies were conducted during or with interruption from the COVID-19 pandemic (Steele et al. 2021, Empowered Campus 2020). this is due to the increasing relationship between social media and sexual harassment due to the fact that prevalence rates may be impacted by the living arrangements and social activities of participants in surveys (Steele et al, 2021a).

The current literature around prevalence helps us gauge the culture and get a sense of the situation, however it doesn't give us an accurate scale of the problem. One must consider whether most prevalence data is accurate at all. This is specified explicitly by the NUS, who describe their study as a descriptive study not a prevalence one (NUS, 2018). Similarly, UCU states that their work does not fully represent and analyse prevalence of sexual violence in tertiary education (UCU 2021a). One overarching survey is needed to assess the true nature of the problem (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). It is undeniable from qualitative and quantitative studies, regardless of the accuracy of numbers, that sexual harassment and sexual violence are most definitely commonplace, but one multi-institutional, ultimate study would help to really solidify and validate the severity of the problem to the public, government, students, and universities. These studies in the last five years have helped to inform the field massively, however, there are patterns of knowledge gaps, underrepresented and overrepresented groups, small samples, self-selective bias, and lack of consistent frameworks

and definitions. Until one overarching study is conducted, and a more consistent, repeatable methodology is produced, prevalence studies will fail to give an accurate reflection of the overall issue. This requires collaboration between universities. Alongside an overarching national study, more specific research needs to be done into the prevalence and nature of sexual violence for people from marginalised groups.

4 Structural factors influencing the prevalence of sexual violence

4.1 Cultural setting for sexual violence

In the literature, an overarching theme was that sexual violence does not manifest out of nowhere, it is a product of a broader culture that not only permits, but actively facilitates its occurrence. This is true of society as a whole, but also true of higher education institutions specifically. Conceptualising sexual harassment as a student problem is to disregard the deeper issue, which is the cultural context and conducive environment of the university (McCarry & Jones, 2022). Much of the literature suggests that UK universities are a breeding ground for sexual aggression due to institutional dynamics, drinking, campus culture and age of students. Whilst it is important to focus on the prevalence, risk factors and responses to sexual violence, a focus on these factors alone “may render less visible the gendered, sexist, and misogynist masculine cultures that are associated with sexual harassment and violence” (Jackson & Sundaram, 2018). It is therefore important to delve into the culture in order to effectively address the problem.

4.2 Changes in the cultural discourse

At the same time, despite the pervasiveness of misogynistic views which may uphold a culture of sexual violence, there has also been an increase in positive discourse around sexual violence and pushback from a feminist discourse. We are currently witnessing a considerable change in views about the acceptability of sexual assault across various spheres including the media and politics (Camp et al., 2018). This is happening alongside the use of social media as a tool for spreading awareness, providing space for victim-survivor communities, and encouraging discourse around consent. Many women started to speak out about their experiences using the #MeToo hashtag. There has been an increase in online initiatives, websites, and social media accounts, such as Everyone’s Invited, The Everyday Sexism Project, and similar initiatives have been started within universities. However, despite this broader cultural shift,

and the outward support of universities, there could be a much stronger push towards a cultural shift and eradicate sexual violence beliefs and behaviours. The cultural setting was echoed in many of the qualitative studies in this area of the literature.

4.3 Existing culture

Whilst used as a way of deflecting blame, it is clear that the seeds for sexual violence are sown long before university. There is a ubiquitous gap in education. Numbers suggest only 50% of university students had been educated in consent and under a third in harassment (Brook, 2019). The improvement of education on sexual violence in schools could become a whole paper, but it is worth mentioning that even if the RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) in schools improves, this does not account for the older years in schools or recent university students. It is therefore a combination of both the university's responsibility in ensuring consent is taught, and automatically assuming that many students will have knowledge gaps, as well as the refining of sex education in schools.

A list of common themes was extracted from the literature relating to cultural setting of universities.

1. A lack of understanding of consent: Only 51% of students are observed to have an understanding of what does and does not constitute consent (Revolt, 2018). Other data reveals only 52% know that it is not possible to give consent when you are drunk (Brook, 2019). A worrying number of students (26%) reported they believe consent can be given under the influence (Bristol Union, 2021).
2. Unawareness of what constitutes sexual violence/harassment: Despite 56% claiming to have experienced unwanted behaviours, only 15% recognised these experiences as sexual harassment or violence (Brook, 2019).
3. Widespread lack of awareness: it is indicated by some literature that there is a lot of ignorance and lack of awareness around sexual violence as an issue (Bovill & White, 2022).
4. Normalisation of sexual violence/harassment: Normalisation and minimisation discourse has emerged in research with students (Bovill & White, 2022). 42% believe that SA and SH behaviours are normalised at university (Revolt, 2018). Unwanted touching and sexual attention were so ubiquitous that students saw it as normal- it was not something they reported (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). It seems that behaviour has to be extreme to be properly investigated (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020).
5. Trivialisation and minimisation: attributing sexual violence to inherent traits in individual men based on age and gender. These narratives, characterised by "boys will be boys" thinking, diminish men's responsibility for their actions, while alcohol is seen as a factor that reduces accountability (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020).

6. 'Bad apples' minimise general behaviour: Extreme examples portray sexual violence as a rare phenomenon, and there is an idea this is an issue caused by individuals rather than systemic (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020).
7. Rape myths are common: (Hales & Gannon, 2022).
8. Victim blaming: Some students (5%) even believe that consent can be implied based on clothing or behaviour. Victim blaming is perpetuated within university culture, with alcohol often used as an excuse. Some participants blame victim-survivors or normalise sexual assault experiences (Camp et al., 2018).
9. 'Lad culture': Lad culture in universities, characterised by hegemonic masculinity, excessive alcohol consumption, misogyny, and more, has been linked to sexual harassment and violence. (Phipps, 2018). Jackson & Sundaram's (2020) qualitative study highlight physical, verbal, and sexualised actions that shame, demean, and humiliate women students. Lad culture fosters an environment conducive to sexual violence. The perpetration of sexual misconduct was discussed by many students as 'lad culture' at university, often the product of both male and class privilege (AVA & NUS, 2022).
10. Structural and Institutional dynamics: Including hierarchical organisations, precarious working conditions, and the favouring of toxic academic masculinities, sustain the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).
11. Universities not concerned enough: 24/68 respondents in a study of universities indicated their institutions refused to believe sexual violence was a problem at their institution or did not see it as a priority agenda for their institution (Chantler et al., 2019). Universities have a 'tick box' approach in which victim-survivors can fall through the gaps (Empowered Campus, 2020).
12. Reputational concerns: Universities often prioritise their reputation, leading to underreporting and a culture of silencing complaints (Tutchell & Edmonds 2020, Chantler et al. 2019) 30.9% of respondents to one study said that their institution had suggested that their experience might affect the reputation of the institution (NUS, 2018).
13. Gender inequality: There is a paradox that exists in which despite women entering academia as employees and students, 'the institutional, experiential and organisational cultural conditions create, and maintain, a climate in which gender inequality is preserved and maintained.' This therefore produces and sustains sexual harassment, because it is ultimately reliant on gendered and power inequalities (McCarry & Jones, 2022). Misogyny and hostility towards feminism is rife (Lewis & Marine, 2018).
14. Complicit masculinity: Complicit masculinity and men scaffold sexual violence and the maintenance of sexual violence tolerant culture. Lad culture cannot be reduced to performances of hypermasculinity (Jordan et al., 2022).

15. Drinking culture: Alcohol used as a method of both minimising responsibility of perpetrators and a method of blaming the victim-survivor (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020).

A detached sense of responsibility is seen from universities due to the idea that higher education leaves students completely independent. In UK universities, there is a culture that places a huge amount of responsibility on students to stay safe on a night out and not 'encourage' certain behaviour, whilst simultaneously minimising responsibility of perpetrators who are 'just having a laugh' and participating in the university lifestyle of drinking, partying and sex. Universities lack a proactive approach that targets and attacks perpetration and instead dismisses behaviour, therefore deflecting the responsibility onto students to 'stay safe'.

In order to improve prevalence data, there must be an institutional cultural shift towards a culture that values the importance of prevalence data and even encourages students to participate. University currently, for many, is not only a place where this could occur, it allows it to occur and can even indirectly encourage it through its passive response. The acceptance, tolerance and normalisation of sexual violence allows and encourages it to happen.

5 Reporting: low reporting rate, common barriers to reporting and how this affects prevalence studies

5.1 Worrying low reporting rate

The issue of low reporting is a concerning yet common. It makes gauging the extent of the problem more difficult, as there is an overlap between the barriers to reporting to institutions and the police and the self-reporting on surveys. It also means that statistics are not necessarily accurate because the number of unreported offences is so significant. Throughout all studies, reporting was extremely low. The Revolt survey revealed that just 6% of those who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment reported it to the university, and only 6% reported it to police. In the Brook survey, the highest level of reporting was the act of forced sexual intercourse, and this was only 1 in four cases, with other offences such as being touched inappropriately being reported at a rate of just 5%. With a similarly low rate of reporting, according to the Tab's survey, only 7% of students reported their experience of sexual assault to their university. In the AVA study, it was very uncommon for respondents to disclose their experiences, particularly to staff. 70% of respondents either did not tell anyone

about their experience of sexual misconduct, or only told people outside of university (AVA & NUS, 2022). In the Bristol Union study, only 11% reported sexual assault and only 5% reported sexual harassment. Interestingly, the study indicated the likelihood to report as well as those who had reported. Of people who had not experienced sexual violence, 31% said they were likely to report it to the university, 23% were neutral to this statement and 47% were unlikely to report (Bristol Union, 2021). With reporting sexual assault, 64% of the respondents felt that they would be likely to report it, 19% were unlikely and 17% were neutral. There is clearly a feeling of before sexual violence has even occurred, there is a reluctance to report and some level of distrust in university services. Despite the fact the number of people theoretically willing to report sexual violence, it is a lot higher than the actual reporting rate. This disparity is similar in the 'Empowered Campus' survey, in which 43% said they would go to university support services, yet just 3.4% of female victim-survivors of sexual assault engaged with university support services. In the other student union study at Imperial, 18.7% of victim-survivors sought help from these or any other support services at Imperial for sexual misconduct. In terms of staff sexual misconduct, at Imperial it appeared that 51.2% of victim-survivors of violence did not seek support from anyone. In the main study of staff misconduct against students, fewer than one in ten respondents (9.6%) who experienced staff sexual misconduct reported this to their institution (NUS, 2018). The low reporting rate has significant consequences on prevalence data.

Universities who rely on reporting statistics to understand the scale of the problem on their campuses are likely seeing only the tip of the iceberg (The Tab, 2021). This is particularly concerning since the most common form of data gathering in UK universities attempting to combat the issue comes from an anonymous online reporting tool for those who have experienced sexual violence (Chantler et al., 2019). There seem to be large discrepancies between the numbers of students and staff subjected to sexual misconduct, those who report it, and those who find action is taken by the institution after reporting (Bull et al., 2022). Therefore, in order to achieve more accurate prevalence data, there must be widespread efforts to increase and modernise reporting systems, overcome reporting barriers and increase reporting satisfaction. Low reporting also gives a misleading impression, because in external surveys it seems unbelievable how high the prevalence is in comparison to the reported cases. The low reporting weakens the validity of the existence of a thriving culture of sexual violence and gives universities another reason to sweep it under the carpet.

5.2 Barriers to reporting

The observation of a conspicuously low reporting rate within academic institutions underscores the pressing need to identify the impediments to reporting incidents of sexual violence. Notably, the Revolt study exposed a disconcerting statistic wherein 56% of participants refrained from reporting due to the perception that the incident was "not serious

enough." The pervasive notion that reporting was not perceived as a need indicated a distressing normalisation of sexual violence. Other common reporting deterrents in the literature include: thinking that nothing would be done or it was pointless (AVA & NUS 2022, Imperial Union 2021, Bristol Union 2021) not knowing who to tell or where to report, (Bristol Union 2021, NUS 2018, AVA & NUS 2022) (Revolt 2018, Imperial Union 2021, The Tab, 2021) shame, (Revolt 2018, Imperial Union 2021) fear of not being believed, (Revolt 2018, UCU 2021a, Imperial Union 2021) feeling they would be blamed, (AVA & NUS, 2022) fear of losing control (Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020).

These barriers are not just based on fear and social taboos. It seems for those who do report, the experience confirms people's apprehension. The repeated lack of satisfaction in university reporting processes was a consistently iterated theme in studies which asked those victim-survivors who did report their experience. According to Revolt, only 2% of those who experienced sexual violence felt able to report it to their university and were also satisfied with the reporting process (Revolt, 2018). In the AVA & NUS study, 63% of respondents disagreed that they felt 'safer' as a result of disclosing and 58% disagreed that they understood what would happen next (AVA & NUS, 2022). In the NUS study of staff misconduct, 90% of respondents who had reported sexual violence, stated at least one way in which their institution failed them. In fact, half of respondents thought that their institution had denied their experience (NUS, 2018). Drawn out processes, inadequate responses to reporting, and unclear outcomes after reporting were other issues frequently mentioned in the literature (UCU 2021a, Imperial Union 2021, The Tab, 2021, AVA & NUS, 2022, NUS, 2018).

It is not only cultural perspectives on sexual violence in wider society that produce the common reporting barriers, but the university processes themselves. They are clearly failing students in the reporting process. To summarise this dissatisfaction, in one study 32% of respondents reported that they had no confidence that the university would follow formal procedure to address complaints of sexual assault and harassment fairly (Bristol Union 2021). It is clear that there is a lack of trust in institutions, the reporting process itself, and a lack of confidence among victim-survivors as to whether sexual violence was serious enough to warrant a reporting. There is also fear due to a culture that may dismiss reporting or make a painful situation a lot worse.

6 Interventions aimed at reducing the issues

Alongside the prevalence literature, a growing body of academic work working on implementations and initiatives to combat sexual harassment and violence has emerged. That

includes activism (Lewis & Marine, 2018) policy (Donaldson et al., 2018) reporting, supporting and the complaints process (Roberts et al., 2023) (Bull, Calvert-Lee, & Page, 2021) training and education, (Jordan et al., 2018) and bystander initiatives. (Roberts et al. 2023, Bovill & White 2022, Fenton & Mott 2018, Hutchinson 2018, Jordan et al. 2018) As well as academic articles, this includes grey literature: (ONS 2019, Lewis, 2022) including the follow up report by UUK (2019) of its 'Changing the Culture' report (UUK, 2016) and the Office for Students (OFS 2022) There was also a report conducted by Chantler on findings from a survey to investigate how British universities are challenging sexual violence and harassment on campus. 39 out of 72 survey respondents said that academic research staff with experience in the field had been involved with the development of the agenda. However, there was little evidence of academic research or rigorous data gathering to establish the impact or effectiveness of activities, despite claims that many participants had indicated they were in the process of developing an agenda (Chantler et al., 2019). There were consistent themes across the literature recommendations, but there was lack of or mixed empirical support for each intervention was observed (Perry, 2023). So, despite the increase in literature, there seems to be a lack of investigation into the efficacy of these techniques, particularly regarding the long-term impact. Although as previously mentioned there are other prevention methods found in the literature, I have focused in more detail on three that appear more frequently in the literature.

6.1 Education and awareness

Education programmes were commonly cited as prevention techniques. This reflected the perspective that universities have a direct educational responsibility to tackle sexual assault (Camp et al., 2018). Some key elements that were mentioned to be included in these education initiatives included sex and consent education (Imperial Union 2021, Bristol Union 2021). This should include information on consent and alcohol, (Bristol Union, 2021), and consent in established relationships or with a partner (Bristol Union, 2021). In one study by think tank the Higher Education Policy Institute, 58% of the 1,004 people questioned said students should have to pass a test to show they fully understand sexual consent before starting university. 51% thought relationships and sex education should be compulsory during the welcome period. (Sky News, 2021) Furthermore, talks and workshops, (Camp et al., 2018) the impact of sexual misconduct, (AVA & NUS, 2022) debunking rape myths, (Bristol Union 2021, AVA & NUS 2022, Hales & Gannon 2022) defining consent, (AVA & NUS, 2022) the range of everyday and rarer harms that also constitute sexual violence, (UCU, 2021a) signposting resources (AVA & NUS, 2022) targeting negative derogatory beliefs (Hales & Gannon, 2022) sexism and encouraging more positive beliefs such encouraging positivity towards women (Bristol Union 2021, Hales & Gannon 2022) modules in empathy to prevent perpetration (Hales & Gannon, 2022) were also common themes. Raising

awareness through campaigns (Imperial Union 2021, UCU, 2021a, NUS 2018, AVA & NUS 2022, Bristol Union 2021) were a common important theme, with a whole university approach (Hales & Gannon, 2022) as a lot of the time the responsibility gets placed upon student unions and activists (AVA & NUS, 2022). It must be noted though that student activism has been very powerful at enacting change to do with sexual and gender-based violence and should not be overlooked (Lewis & Marine, 2018).

Some suggestions included advertising campaigns, including social media and posters. (Camp et al., 2018). Despite the effort of some dedicated individuals, there needs to be more of an effort put into campaigns by universities. In the UCU report, 62% of respondents of the members' survey were not aware of any campaigns at their institution (UCU, 2021a).

Mentions of forming partnerships with and bringing in external services organisations brought in for initiatives was also mentioned, including specialist sexual assault organisations for both support and education (AVA & NUS 2022, NUS 2018, Empowered Campus 2020). There was a lot of mention of this type of education and awareness being compulsory and repeated, rather than just a one off in freshers week, whilst some literature mentioned the importance of this for first year students it was emphasised that these efforts should be mandatory and ongoing (Bristol Union 2021, AVA & NUS 2022, Camp et al. 2018, Imperial Union 2021) with potential refresher courses (AVA & NUS, 2022). Some literature emphasised that these campaigns should be spearheaded by senior leadership (AVA & NUS, 2022) or disseminated by a central university service, such as the equality and diversity office (UCU, 2021a).

It is worth noting the potential problems with these education initiatives. In the UK, several universities have developed sexual violence reduction programs but like the research in this field, these programmes lack standardisation and may derive from research with American students (Hales & Gannon, 2022). Similar to the limitation of response bias, it is unlikely those who hold beliefs such as victim blaming, or a lack of regard for the issue as a whole, would attend such programmes. This idea is supported by Hales and Gannon, who argue that it is likely that perpetrators are unlikely to engage with workshops or harm prevention programmes. Camp, Sherlock-Smith and Davies also highlight this notion, and argue that one major obstacle in formulating prevention strategies will be how to engage those students who do not see sexual assault prevention as a relevant issue (Camp et al., 2018). It is therefore ineffective unless mandatory. Currently, there is only mixed empirical evidence that supports the effectiveness of these education initiatives (Perry 2023, Camp et al. 2018, Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020, Hales & Gannon 2022). It is clear that there needs to be more evaluation of these programmes, because post workshop feedback is not sufficient to judge a programme's efficacy (Camp et al., 2018).

6.2 Training

Training has observed positive short-term effects of training on sexual harassment and violence on participants' attitudes (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Staff training being

improved and/or made mandatory including counsellors and personal tutors was considered important, particularly with the culture of victim blaming and harmful advice from staff following disclosures being ever present (AVA & NUS 2022, NUS 2018, UCU 2021a). Moreover, student training, training for nightclub and bar staff (Imperial Union, 2021) causal and temporal staff (Imperial Union, 2021) training for security, and bringing in external services to train were also frequent themes. Training content must be intersectional and inclusive (Wood et al. 2021, UCU 2021a, Camp et al. 2018) and include feminist understandings of sexual violence. (UCU, 2021a) information about consent (Imperial Union, 2021) and sexism (Bristol Union, 2021). One specific type of training is bystander intervention training (UCU, 2021a, Wood et al. 2021, Hales & Gannon 2022, Camp et al. 2018). Bondestam and Lundqvist argue that there must be a shift from occasional training sessions to bystander intervention programmes (Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020). Bystander programmes can have an impact on ignorance, but research is still in its infancy as to what makes these programs effective (Bovill & White, 2020). There doesn't seem to be any evidence-based results suggesting more long-term effects on prevalence (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020) and no strong empirical support (Perry, 2023).

6.3 Policy

It came up as a theme in the literature that policy both externally and internally is important to prevent sexual violence in higher education. There have been several efforts by government and unions to tackle the issue, including the 2021 Government report, as well as the UUK taskforce report in 2016, with 62 higher education institutions of which there was a follow up to check what was being done in 2019. The Office for Students (OfS) published its "statement of expectations" in terms of sexual violence in higher education in the workplace. There was a report prepared by the SWG GRI sub-group in 2020 on sexual harassment and violence in academia in European member states. This report interestingly highlighted the UK as one of the only 3 in 29 countries that did not respond when asked about how they are addressing this issue. In terms of institutional policy, myriad literature highlighted this as a necessary step in tackling sexual violence. This policy should also be focused on staff student relationships, (NUS, 2018, UCU, 2021a) as well as inter-staff relationships (UCU, 2021a). Some literature highlighted the need for policies to change (NUS, 2018). There was also a need raised for policies to be clearer (Bristol Union, 2021) outlining clear reporting and complaints processes (UCU), and clearly set out serious repercussions, penalties, and consequences for perpetrators. (Bristol Union 2021, Imperial Union 2021). Empowered Campus argues that policy should move away from disciplinary processes and strive towards a trauma informed, victim-survivor centred approach (2020). Another approach mentioned in a US article noted the importance of intersectional policy, and less separation from sexual harassment and violence and racism (Wood et al., 2021). The importance of using leadership

and infrastructure to spearhead policy was also important (AVA & NUS 2022, NUS 2018). These policies should also exist on a national and European level as well as institutional (SWG GRI, 2020). However, the reiterations of policy as a way of encouraging change have also been criticised, highlighting that there is almost no evidence-based research on policies strengthening the impact of policy changing the current situation or reporting, policy awareness or decreasing prevalence rates (Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020, Perry 2023).

7 Recommendations

Following from this review, we can make several recommendations.

For academic research:

- A comprehensive, authoritative survey must be conducted of all UK universities, until this happens it will be hard to assess the true prevalence and nature of sexual violence and harassment in universities.
- There must be more qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in general, as there is a lack of literature and prevalence data in the last five years, despite the evident change in views and increase in discourse around sexual violence and harassment.
- A collaboration between experts from across UK universities to formulate methodological consistency in the research, and work towards a standardised prevalence survey framework.
- Include the possibility of disaggregating prevalence data according to marginalised student and staff groups, including the BAME community, the LGBTQ+ community, and disabled community.
- An investigation into the prevalence and nature of online sexual violence and harassment.
- Investigate the links between sexual violence and social media platforms such as TikTok.
- A study of preventative interventions and methods of tackling the issue to understand which is effective.
- Monitoring and evaluation of initiatives and surveys to test efficacy, both in the short term and long term.
- A need to better understand why and how men become perpetrators.

- To further investigate the resistance to progressive agenda, e.g. men's rights activists (Anitha & Lewis 2018) or incel culture.³

For universities:

- More funding to be committed to research: many institutions are verbally supportive but have not committed any or sufficient resources to make it happen (Chantler et al., 2019). It would not overstretch universities and could even improve their reputations.
- A substantial shift in university's attitudes.
- Collaboration with schools and colleges, this issue does not begin at university. Bovill & White (2022) recommend working with schools to tackle the lack of awareness.
- Mandatory and consistent consent education.
- New preventative measures must be tried, as the same ones are repeatedly used with little to no empirical support.
- A move away from concern for reputation and a more widespread proactive effort to tackle the issues.
- Collaboration between universities, although individual institutions conducting surveys might be beneficial to raising sexual violence as an issue within that particular institution, it is not representative of all universities.
- Engage university leadership in spearheading a radical shift and attitudes towards addressing sexual violence.
- It will not be sufficient for there to be a slow and painful growth towards change, there needs to be a radical shift in attitudes that should be spearheaded by university leadership.
- The intersectionality of sexual violence must be recognised, otherwise the issue cannot be overcome.
- Implement visible messaging to raise awareness and promote support services.
- A collaborative effort with external specialist organisations.
- Recognition of the gendered nature of sexual violence (Anitha & Lewis, 2018).

³ "Incels subscribe to a transnational ideology characterised by white male supremacy, oppression of women and the glorification and encouragement of male violence. Seeing themselves as perpetual victims oppressed by a 'feminist gynocracy', they believe that sex is their inherent birthright as men, and that rape and murder are appropriate punishments for a society they perceive as withholding sex from them" (Bates, 2021).

8 Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of recent literature spanning the last five years reveals that sexual harassment and violence is commonplace in UK higher education. This violence disproportionately impacts women and is intrinsically connected to misogyny. Sexual violence impacts both staff and students, and disproportionately impacts intersections of these groups, particularly marginalised ones, such as racial and ethnic minorities, and sexual and gender minorities. It also links to other types of violence such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and gender-based violence more broadly. Current prevalence research has issues with sampling, methodological consistency, accuracy, and response bias. This is in addition to a sufficient lack of research in general. There is also widespread online sexual harassment and violence, with new forms of sexual violence becoming more pervasive. Furthermore, the cultural dynamics inherent to universities serve as a breeding ground for the perpetration of sexual violence. This includes norms that may inadvertently tolerate or even condone certain behaviours. The persistently low rates of reporting and the barriers that victim-survivors face when reporting are indicative of a deep-set lack of trust and confidence in institutional mechanisms. Prevention methods have been theorised but have not found much empirical support to truly know the efficacy. There needs to be a substantial shift in the attitude of universities, and a push in research to create localised studies in every institution, as well as one authoritative study. Given the persistently limited and fragmented research landscape, coupled with a continuous adherence to conventional strategies by universities, the persistence of sexual violence within higher education will remain inevitable. It is not enough to look at prevalence through a public health or risk factor driven approach, there must be an overarching conscious effort at assessing the real nature and scale of the problem and an equally significant effort to try and prevent the occurrence of sexual violence in higher education institutions.

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