

**A CATALYST FOR CHANGE:  
RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING TO STUDENTS'  
EXPERIENCES OF HARASSMENT**

**The Centre for Hate Studies**

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With thanks to the University of Leicester's Executive Board for commissioning this important and sector leading research. With special mention to all of the members of staff across the University for their support in data collection and enhancing knowledge.

This research and report would not have been possible without the input of the hundreds of students, victims and survivors who took part. We would like to thank these individuals for their bravery, honesty and strength in discussing the harassment that they have been subjected to – in many cases, this being the first time that they have entrusted their stories to anyone.

The voices of those sharing their stories must be remembered and acknowledged throughout all stages of this report. We remain proud of our inclusive values as a University and are committed to supporting an environment which embraces 'difference' and which challenges any form of hostile behaviour.

Whilst this study has been undertaken at the University of Leicester, the report highlights issues of hate, harassment and targeted hostility which are evident across the higher education sector and which are mirrored across the world. As such, the issues raised within the report are illustrative of those found across the sector and are not unique to any single institution. Within this context the purpose of this report is not only to raise awareness of problems, but to identify shared challenges and solutions.

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## **1. Context**

Recent years have seen widespread attention devoted to problems of harassment within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Reports such as Tackling Racial Harassment<sup>1</sup> and organic campaigns such as #MeTooOnCampus<sup>2</sup> have demonstrated that students are repeatedly subjected to harassment of many types with little support, recourse or acknowledgement. Moreover, the impacts can be significant, affecting victims' wellbeing, their University attainment and their future aspirations. With increased attention now directed towards this issue, HEIs face heightened scrutiny from future and current students, staff, the media and the wider public in relation to their approach to challenging harassment and the cultural biases which enable hostile attitudes and behaviour to flourish. From a regulatory perspective, the Office for Students (OfS), has an undertaking to ensure that students '[a]re supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education'<sup>3</sup> [3]. In response to continually emerging evidence of the multiple barriers posed to students as a result of harassment within their HEIs, the OfS are updating their compliance framework to ensure that significant financial costs are incurred by University's found to be underperforming.

This report and its research evidence provide sector leading data on the nature, scale and impact of harassment facing university students. In addition, it concludes with recommended areas of focus to address harassment and to support those affected. With support from staff across the University of Leicester, including the EDI team, academic schools and the Students' Union, participants were reached through communications disseminated from academic and professional services teams and via social networks and other membership groups. The participants involved in this project constitute a suitably diverse representation of the student body. In brief it should be noted that 30% (n=153) of participants identified as male, 64% (n=328) identified as female and 3% (n=4) identified as non-binary. At 69% (n=355), most participants were aged between 18-24 and were undergraduates (66%; n=338) although it is important to note that all levels of study contributed. 63% (n=328) of participants were White, 6% (n=30) were Black, 21% (n=106) were Asian and 4% (n=18) had a mixed background. 67% (n=341) identified as heterosexual, 16% (n=80) identified as bisexual and 5% (n=23) identified as gay or lesbian. 13% (n=64) of participants in this project identified as disabled and 29% (n=150) actively practiced a religion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged-executive-summary.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.leicesterunion.com/voice/campaigns/current/metoo/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1406/ofs2018\\_01.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1406/ofs2018_01.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> A full demographic breakdown can be supplied upon request.

The data underpinning this report was gathered through a University-wide survey and 39 follow up interviews. The survey was designed to assess students' views on harassment, irrespective of whether they had encountered harassment or not. Of a total of 565 participants, 227 identified having been subjected to some form of harassment during their time as a University of Leicester student. Interviewees have been anonymised within this report and pseudonyms have been used to protect their confidentiality.

This report draws from students' experiences of harassment to present insights into two key themes: namely, recognising harassment and responding to harassment. The initial sections of this report help us to *recognise harassment* through an analysis of the nature and impact of victimisation. The report subsequently informs *responses to harassment* by exploring experiences of and barriers to making disclosures, reporting and accessing support, and by recommending areas of focus as indicated by students. Each section begins with a summary of the key findings.

## **2. Summary of Key Findings**

### **Gender-based harassment**

- 59% (n=121) of victims surveyed were subjected to gender-based harassment, making it the most commonly identified form of targeted hostility experienced by students.
- Victims referred to overt and covert forms of gender-based harassment committed by staff and by students within academic, social and private spaces.
- Gender-based harassment encompassed incidents of sexual violence, harassment and misogyny.

### **Racially motivated harassment**

- 27% (n=79) of victims referred to having been targeted on the basis of their race.
- Trigger events such as Brexit and Covid-19 acted as catalysts for increased hostility.
- Victims noted overt incidents such as racist name calling and also subtleties such as a lack of BAME representation resulting in feelings of alienation.

### **Religiously motivated harassment**

- Five religious identities were identified as being targeted for harassment: Muslim (53%; n=10), Christian (21%; n=4), Jewish (11%; n=2), Hindu (5%; n=1) and Sikh (5%; n=1).
- Victims experienced cultural disparities between themselves and their peers and lecturers, creating barriers for forming personal relationships and networking.
- Students who wore a physical marker of their religion, such as a headscarf or hijab, were more likely to be subjected to direct harassment.

### **Harassment on the basis of sexual orientation**

- 14% (n=29) of victims observed that they had been targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation.
- Bisexual victims were subjected to harassment most commonly (52%; n=14), followed by gay (19%; n=5) and lesbian (15%; n=4) victims.
- Victims who were female or assumed to be female in same-sex relationships experienced sexualised harassment in addition to general abuse.

### **Disability motivated harassment**

- 7% (n=14) of victims had been targeted on the basis of their learning disability and 4% (n=9) had been targeted on the basis of their physical disability.
- Disabled students were subjected to victimisation in a variety of contexts, and most notably in the sense of being viewed as inferior, seen as easy targets and assumed to be fraudulent.
- Disabled students were disproportionately affected by structural barriers to inclusion.

### **Transphobic harassment**

- Transphobic harassment was encountered by transgender, non-binary and genderfluid participants.
- 50% (n=6) of all transgender participants within this project were subjected to harassment.
- Transphobic harassment centered around attempting to 'other' the victim through discrediting their gender identity.

### **Impacts of harassment**

- Victims highlighted significant emotional impacts as a result of the harassment that they were subjected to.
- 29% (n=58) of victims suffered a negative impact upon their attainment or performance as a result of their victimisation.
- Victims referred to having to adopt various lifestyle changes following their harassment, including concealing an identity trait, hypervigilance and carrying protective equipment.

### **Barriers to reporting**

- Students commonly made reference to:
  - A lack of confidence in the University to handle and respond to a report appropriately.
  - A tendency on the part of the University to minimise or normalise victimisation.
  - A lack of awareness of reporting, disclosure or support options from within the University amongst all levels of the student body.

## **Approaches to encourage reporting**

- Students commonly expressed support for:
  - Longer term strategies which convey a sustained commitment to eradicating a culture of harassment and prejudice.
  - Clearer pathways to accessing reporting or support platforms.
  - Affirmative messaging to reinforce that all incidents are worth acknowledgement.

## **Enhancing support services**

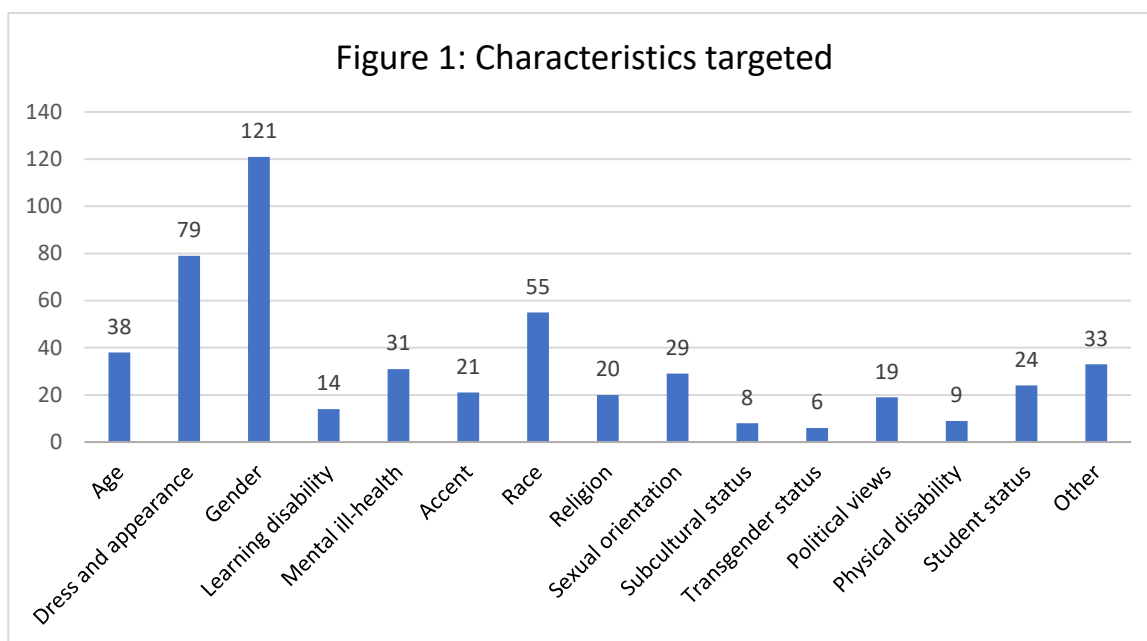
- Students commonly identified a need for:
  - Intersectional representation throughout reporting and support services.
  - Promoting services throughout the year through multiple channels.
  - Staff disclosure training to equip staff with skills for handling student disclosures.



### **3. Nature of harassment**

In the first phase of this research, quantitative survey data uncovered the diverse range of characteristics that formed the basis of students' experiences of harassment.

Over 14 characteristics were identified by students, as detailed below. The most common was gender (n=121), followed by dress and appearance (n=79), race (n=55) and age (n=38). Within the survey and follow up interviews, victims described a range of ways in which this prejudice was enacted, which included microaggressions, offensive jokes, stares and comments, intimidation strategies, destruction of property and physical acts.



The following sections offer insights into the diverse forms of harassment uncovered within this research, with specific focus on gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender status. The following elements are considered: nature, extent, victims, perpetrators and location of harassment.

### **3.1 Gender-based harassment**

Victims referred to overt and covert forms of gender-based harassment committed by staff and by students within academic, social and private spaces.

59% (n=121) of victims surveyed were subjected to gender-based harassment, making it the most commonly identified form of targeted hostility experienced by students.

Gender-based harassment encompassed incidents of sexual violence, harassment and misogyny.

#### **What is the nature and extent of gender-based harassment?**

Of those who had been subjected to harassment, 59% (n=121) of participants disclosed being targeted on the basis of their gender. This was the most common factor which underpinned experiences of harassment, followed by 'dress and appearance' at 38% (n=79) which holds strong links to the types of gender-based harassment disclosed. Within this research, the nature of gender-based harassment encompassed sexual harassment and misogyny – both as an intersection and independently.

When expanding upon gender-based harassment within interviews, sexual harassment was the most dominant experience by students. Almost all female interviewees and every assigned female at birth (AFAB) non-binary interviewee disclosed that they had been subjected to sexual harassment repeatedly whilst at the University of Leicester.

*Oh there's sexual harassment and misogyny everywhere at Uni. It's such a shitty thing to be able to say but I think every girl or trans women has been through some form of sexual harassment in their life, you know, it's like 'look at the arse on her' or being felt up as you walk past ... I can't even give you one incident because it just happens a lot.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Please note that pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants.

The sexual harassment disclosed during interviews came in a multitude of forms including, but not limited to sexualised comments and uncomfortable stares. Escalation to sexual assault and sexual violence including groping, physical advances and rape were also frequently discussed.

*We were walking outside the O2 and he was like 'I'm gonna rape you now'. I was like 'what' and he was like 'yeah, I'm gonna rape you'... it was the fact he was so brazen about it.*

Ali, targeted on the basis of her gender

Despite numerous University and Students' Union-led campaigns on sexual harassment, sexual violence and consent, there were numerous incidents where students conveyed a lack of clarity regarding their victim status. Additionally, there were several instances in which perpetrators appeared to be overtly dismissive of consent, boundaries and the unwanted nature of their advances.

*He offered that he would take me home and because I trusted him I said okay... because I'd had so much to drink I wasn't really conscious and he hadn't had that much so because it happened whilst I was sleeping I couldn't really defend myself. Like I remember waking up a few times ... I wasn't strong or even conscious enough to react.*

Bethany, targeted on the basis of her gender

*It's like [guys] encourage it. Like there's this guy and it's a joke that everyone calls him 'Rapey Dave' because he hangs around with the most drunk girls at pre-drinks and then go home and have sex with them ... Like no one said that's not okay, no one called him out on it, they all go along with it.*

Ali, targeted on the basis of her gender

However, sexual harassment does not exist within a vacuum. Humphreys and Towl<sup>6</sup>, for instance, have observed that sexual harassment often sits within a culture of misogyny and hyper-masculinity

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<sup>6</sup> Humphreys, C. and Towl, G. (2020) *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education: A Good Practice Guide*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited

and feeds off the assumption that women are inferior, worth less or are less powerful. Misogyny can be enacted through sexual harassment or overt forms of gender bias, but female and AFAB students disclosed also experiencing misogyny through microaggressions, dismissal and subordination.

*I've finished top of my year twice now but the males in my group still won't listen to me.*

Sam, targeted on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation and transgender status

### **Who are the victims of gender-based harassment?**

Of those victimised on the basis of their gender, 89% (n=99) identified as female, 5% (n=5) identified as male and another 5% (n=5) identified as non-binary or gender fluid. Most commonly, victims were aged between 18-24 (85%; n=94). Aligning with this, 74% (n=82) were undergraduates, 15% (n=17) were postgraduates and 9% (n=10) were doctoral students. 65% (n=72) of victims were White, 4% (n=4) were Black and 17% (n=19) were Asian. 14% (n=16) identified as disabled and 25% (n=27) were actively religious, most commonly Christian 48% (n=14). 57% (n=63) of victims identified as heterosexual followed by 27% (n=30) identifying as bisexual and 4% (n=4) identifying as lesbian.

### **Who is perpetrating gender-based harassment?**

Victims of gender-based harassment described incidents most frequently perpetrated by male university students, typically assumed to be aged between 18-24. Relationships with the perpetrator greatly varied, with strangers, acquaintances, friends and partners all reported to have engaged in incidents ranging from unwanted sexual comments to rape. However, where there was no former relationship, incidents tended to consist of comments, name calling, sexualized comments and groping – with the latter most frequently in social spaces. Incidents of more extreme sexual harassment and violence were usually perpetrated by someone known to the victim, including people met whilst clubbing, friends, coursemates and partners.

Despite being cited less frequently than equivalent incidents involving student perpetrators, gender-based harassment perpetrated by members of staff at the University was also reported to researchers. Those incidents referred to within this study consisted of general but also pointed sexual remarks to female and AFAB non-binary students. Experiences ranged from overhearing male members of staff discussing female students in sexual and derogatory ways to sexual harassment

perpetrated when alone in offices. Incidents of staff perpetration held highly damaging implications for the likelihood of reporting.

*[My supervisor] stands in the common room joking as loudly as he can about how there's too many female students, that we should know we'd do a better job cleaning the kitchen than doing a PhD. He also says how life would be easier if men could just 'have their way' and have sex with women without worrying about consent.*

Millie, targeted on the basis of her gender

### **Where is gender-based harassment happening?**

64% (n=63) of victims of gender-based harassment disclosed being harassed in the O2 Academy. Interviewees recalled accounts of unwanted sexual advances including grabbing and groping, in addition to multiple accounts of female students' drinks being spiked. Furthermore, some victims detailed how the O2 bouncers had acted in a way that exacerbated the danger of their situation.

*The O2, that's where I have my worst Uni experiences. I get spiked. I've been spiked in the O2 six times now... I was foaming at the mouth asking the bouncers for help and they told me that I shouldn't have got so drunk and then left me alone... my friends found me unconscious and freezing cold by the side of road, I have no idea how I got there.*

Lizzie, targeted on the basis of her gender

Similar accounts of sexual harassment and extreme sexual violence, including rape and attempted rape, were described as taking place in halls of residence. With 39% (n=39) of victims highlighting halls of residence as a space in which they had been subjected to victimisation, this was the second most common location for gender-based harassment to take place.

However, academic spaces were also raised as a location in which gender-based harassment had occurred, particularly when the perpetrator was a member of staff. 23% (n=23) of victims referred to incidents taking place in their School or Departmental building and 7% (n=7) referred to a workshop or seminar room.

### **3.2 Racially motivated harassment**

27% (n=79) of victims disclosed having been targeted on the basis of their race.

Trigger events such as Brexit and Covid-19 acted as catalysts for increased hostility.

Victims noted overt incidents such as racist name calling and also subtleties such as a lack of BAME representation resulting in feelings of alienation.

#### **What is the nature and extent of racially motivated harassment?**

Of those having been subjected to harassment, 27% (n=79) of survey respondents had been targeted on the basis of their race.

This study revealed that racially motivated harassment was encountered in a variety of ways, ranging from subtle microaggressions through to physical acts of intimidation. Participants referred to being subjected to ignorant comments, indirect and direct verbal harassment, threats and acts of physical violence.

*When you're a black person you're very used to someone saying something or being like, you know, covertly racist, and then just brushing it off, because there's nothing you can do and no one you can talk to about it who understands the situation.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

*Once I walked into Tesco with my friend in city centre, and they were just chatting shit about "oh it's ching chong" and the person's colleague was like "shh, they can hear you"... but then the guy was like "it doesn't matter, they can't understand us anyway.*

Mai, targeted on the basis of her gender and race

Participants noted that whilst it is not a form of overt or direct harassment, a lack of racial diversity amongst their lecturers and fellow coursemates left them feeling “different”, isolated and disconnected from the University, their peers and their lectures.

Trigger events were also highlighted as a specific element that caused spikes in racial harassment, with victims mentioning Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic as particularly damaging.

*“Coronavirus” is like the new “ching chong”.*

Mai, targeted on the basis of her gender and race

### **Who are the victims of racially motivated harassment?**

Of those victimised on the basis of their race, the ethnic breakdown of victims was as follows:

- 16% (n=8) were White British and 2% (n=1) were from another White background.
- 6% (n=3) were Black African and 6% (n=3) were Black British.
- 12% (n=6) were Asian British, 10% (n=5) were Indian, 4% (n=2) were Pakistani, 22% (n=11) were Chinese, 8% (n=4) were White and Asian and 6% (n=3) were from another Asian background.
- 4% (n=2) were from another mixed background, 4% (n=2) were Middle Eastern and 2% (n=1) elected not to specify their ethnicity.

72% (n=37) identified as female, 18% (n=9) identified as male and 2% (n=1) identified as non-binary. Most commonly, victims were aged between 18-24 (69%; n=35), although victims were identified in all age bands up to 55-64. Aligning with this, 61% (n=31) were undergraduates, 29% (n=15) were postgraduates and 8% (n=4) were doctoral students.

45% (n=23) actively practiced a religion, with 39% (n=9) of these students Muslim, and 12% (n=6) identified as disabled.

### **Who is perpetrating racially motivated harassment?**

With examples of racially motivated harassment ranging from ignorant comments to acts of violence, the relationship between victims and perpetrators was also wide ranging. Victims disclosed being subjected to ignorant comments from strangers, course mates, friends and lecturers. Although these

were sometimes hostile in intent, victims felt that these were not always deliberately ill-meaning. However, in examples where the perpetrator of these microaggressions were members of staff, and particularly lecturers, many participants reported feeling disappointed – no matter the intent.

*Sometimes lecturers say something that might come across as a microaggression and perhaps they're not as well informed on diversity. I could point to a couple of examples where lecturers have said things that they shouldn't have said.*

Adam, no disclosed experiences of harassment

Below is a selection of answers submitted in response to this project's online survey and shared via interview by students. These comments exemplify some of the ignorant and apathetic views about race that can prevail within student communities, and resonate with the accounts shared by victims of harassment:

*Let me be very clear. Good to be inclusive. Bad if over-inclusive. You can't harmonise everything and ignore victims so that you can claim to be inclusive. Ok?*

*[I'm] far less likely to discuss anything to do with race at the University, I can't even pretend to care now if someone mentions race I just think 'shut the fuck up'*

*There's basically posters and they say "Why is my curriculum white?" ... I just thought that was just unacceptable. There's a shift to stigmatise White people now ... if you just change to "Why is my curriculum so Black?" it wouldn't be acceptable, would it? I do feel that is harassment of White people. I've spoken to quite a few people about it and they've said yeah that doesn't seem right.*

*It's always "Black Lives Matter" but people seem to forget that everyone had it bad in history. Not just Black people, not just Asian people. Loads of White people were enslaved. It's just like the University has gone a bit far and they're pushing it on people.*

*There's this big push for inclusivity but I think it's going a bit too far now.*



### **Where is racially motivated harassment happening?**

Victims of racially motivated harassment recalled experiences in most public settings including the Students' Union (38%; n=16), outdoor campus (21%; n=9) and the areas surrounding University, particularly Victoria Park and New Walk.

*One time was in front of New Walk museum and a guy, very tall, walked in front of me and spit on the street and say something about COVID-19.*

Mingmei, targeted on the basis of her race

A lack of diversity and representation was noticed most commonly within academic locations (33%; n=14), namely in lectures, workshops and extra-curricular spaces.

*It was hard to feel included [in the society] as the only girl there and one of maybe two brown people there. And it's not on them for who's joining... but that doesn't mean it wasn't difficult to get involved and feel comfortable.*

Zebi, targeted on the basis of her religion and race

### **3.3 Religiously motivated harassment**

Victims experienced cultural disparities between themselves and their peers and lecturers, creating barriers for forming personal relationships and networking.

Students who wore a physical marker of their religion, such as a headscarf or hijab, were more likely to be subjected to direct harassment.

Five religious identities were identified as being targeted for harassment: Muslim (53%; n=10), Christian (21%; n=4), Jewish (11%; n=2), Hindu (5%; n=1) and Sikh (5%; n=1).

#### **What is the nature and extent of religiously motivated harassment?**

Of those subjected to harassment, 10% (n=20) of survey respondents had been targeted on the basis of their religion. Of these 20 victims, 16 had been verbally abused, 15 had been threatened or intimidated in person, 7 had been subjected to deliberate damage to property and 3 had been physically attacked.

Despite encountering physical violence against their person and property, interviewees described their experiences of microaggressions and cultural alienation as the most significant cause of feelings of exclusion from university life. With many university events centering around alcohol consumption and the night time economy such as socialising and networking at pubs and bars, Muslim students in particular observed that they felt uncomfortable engaging in such activities and consequently being 'left behind' in making connections.

Some students who actively practiced their religion explained that, where possible, they would not discuss their religious identity with peers and instead, would keep their religion private due to a fear of being ostracised, judged or subjected to harassment. Such concealment could explain why religion was a characteristic less commonly targeted for explicit harassment and why passive alienation was more frequent for these students. Crucially, however, students who wore a physical marker of their religious identity, such as a headscarf or hijab were more likely to be subjected to direct harassment.

Furthermore, for victims whose religious identity was not immediately obvious but who were also members of a minority ethnic group, racial harassment was commonplace and experienced typically through the form of intersectional harassment towards both their race *and* their religious identity when this was known, or through cultural exclusion.

*Because I don't look religious I suppose, people around me bad mouth religion all the time so now I don't want to say anything and be treated differently or get shit for it. It's easier to keep it to myself... I haven't been to church since I moved to Leicester.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

### **Who are the victims of religiously motivated harassment?**

When exploring who were the victims of religiously motivated harassment and which religious groups were being targeted, five religious identities were disclosed by research participants: Muslim (53%; n=10), Christian (21%; n=4), Jewish (11%; n=2), Hindu (5%; n=1) and Sikh (5%; n=1). Two victims chose not to specify their religious identity.

84% (n=16) of these victims identified as female and 16% (n=3) identified as male. Most commonly, victims were aged between 18-24 (74%; n=14), although victims were identified within age bands up to 55-64 (5%; n=1). 80% (n=16) were undergraduates, 10% (n=2) were postgraduates and 10% (n=2) were doctoral students. 21% (n=4) of victims were White, 5% (n=1) were Black, 58% (n=11) were Asian, 5% (n=1) were from another mixed background, 5% (n=1) were Middle Eastern and 5% (n=1) elected not to specify their ethnicity. 22% (n=4) identified as disabled.

### **Who is perpetrating religiously motivated harassment?**

In a similar vein to victims of racially motivated harassment, victims of religiously motivated harassment reported being subjected to unacceptable behaviours from a range of perpetrators. Although not direct harassment, victims frequently recalled hearing ignorant comments from other students, including coursemates and flatmates, which made them feel that they could not disclose or not discuss their religious identity in many spaces. In extension to this, many victims felt that cultural exclusion was facilitated on a structural level by the propensity of student societies and academic schools to design most social events around the consumption of alcohol. Directly hostile or

aggressive encounters frequently stemmed from people with whom they had little or no previous relationship.

**Where is religiously motivated harassment happening?**

In contrast to other victim groups, harassment against students who actively practiced their religion occurred more frequently on campus as opposed to social spaces. Within this context, academic spaces such as lecture theatres and workshop rooms were highlighted as particularly problematic.

*As a Muslim there aren't a lot of social events that I feel are inclusive or that I feel comfortable going to because it's all bar crawl, pub crawl.*

Zebi, targeted on the basis of her religion and race

### **3.4 Harassment on the basis of sexual orientation**

Bisexual victims were subjected to harassment most commonly (52%; n=14), followed by gay (19%; n=5) and lesbian (15%; n=4) victims.

Victims that were female or assumed to be female in homosexual relationships experienced sexualised harassment in addition to general abuse.

14% (n=29) of victims observed that they had been targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation.

#### **What is the nature and extent of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation?**

Of those having experienced harassment, 14% (n=29) of survey participants observed that they had been targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation. Interviewees noted that homophobia and biphobia were experienced as a direct reaction to the assumption of witnessing a same-sex relationship, but also just from the knowledge of one's sexual orientation.

Respondents disclosed that they had witnessed stares and whispers directed towards themselves and/or their partners, as well as receiving threats, damage to property and being victim to physical attacks. Verbal abuse towards sexual orientation was diverse in nature, with comments ranging from dehumanising and degrading hostility through to misogynistic reductive and sexualised slurs.

*I'm bisexual ... They would just pick up on that and make comments about it ... They'd make comments like 'go kill yourself'.*

Jasmine, targeted on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health

*I was ... with my significant other and because we were both females and being intimate with each other there were some guys there who took it upon themselves to make it know that they thought it was attractive what we were doing. You know, they wanted to sexualise it.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

### **Who are the victims of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation?**

When exploring who were the victims of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, five identities were disclosed: heterosexual (11%; n=3), lesbian (15%; n=4), gay (19%; n=5), bisexual (52%; n=14) and pansexual (4%; n=1).

42% (n=13) of these victims identified as female, 30% (n=8) identified as male and 22% (n=6) identified as either non-binary or genderfluid. Most commonly, victims were aged between 18-24 (78%; n=21), although victims were identified within age bands up to 35-44 (4%; n=1). 78% (n=22) were undergraduates, 7% (n=2) were postgraduates and 11% (n=3) were doctoral students. Of those who shared their ethnicity, 85% (n=23) of victims were White, 4% (n=1) were Black, and 11% (n=3) were Asian. 30% (n=8) identified as disabled and 19% (n=5) actively practised a religion.

### **Who is perpetrating harassment on the basis of sexual orientation?**

In examples where knowledge of a victim's sexuality alone acted as the trigger for the hostility there tended to be a pre-existing relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Examples included housemates and coursemates becoming aware that the victim was not heterosexual – regardless of their current relationship status – and harassment ensuing in response to this.

*My flatmates would come back from a night out and shout under my door that I should die.*

Jasmine, targeted on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health

In wider contexts where a victim's exact sexual orientation was not known but they were perceived to be in a same-sex relationship, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator broadened. As such, victims gave examples of being subjected to harassment by people known to them and also by strangers from within the student body and beyond.

Female victims, or those assumed to be in lesbian relationships, recalled not only hostility but also sexualised harassment. In these instances, perpetrators were described as typically being male and unknown to them.

*It's this entitlement that if you see two females doing this, being intimate with each other, it must be for the male gaze.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

### **Where is harassment on the basis of sexual orientation happening?**

Harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, particularly sexualised harassment, frequently occurred in social spaces such as the O2 Academy (36%; n=9) and Students' Union (40%; n=10). Incidents of this nature occurred more commonly in the presence of alcohol and/or when the perpetrator was accompanied by others.

Incidents of harassment that were more hostile, aggressive and personal in nature were also experienced in these spaces, although other prominent locations included School or Department buildings (32%; n=8) and halls of residence (36%; n=9). As such, with incidents occurring in social, teaching and living spaces interviewees described feeling unsafe and unwelcome across all areas of university life. Consequently, some victims disclosed being reluctant to leave their rooms when they knew that their perpetrator(s) would be unavoidably encountered in their home or study spaces.

### **3.5 Disability motivated harassment**

7% (n=14) of victims had been targeted on the basis of their learning disability and 4% (n=9) had been targeted on the basis of their physical disability.

Disabled students were subjected to victimisation within the following contexts: viewed as inferior, seen as easy targets and assumed to be fraudulent.

Disabled students were disproportionately impacted by structural barriers to inclusion, namely inaccessibility.

#### **What is the nature and extent of disability motivated harassment?**

Of those having experienced harassment, 7% (n=14) of survey participants had been targeted on the basis of their learning disability and 4% (n=9) had been targeted on the basis of their physical disability. 15% (n=31) of survey participants disclosed being targeted on the basis of their mental health.

Disabled students were found to experience harassment in a multitude of ways and within various contexts. Broadly speaking, these contexts can be grouped into three main themes of 'justification' for intolerance:

- 1) Disabled students as inferior.

*People have said things like you should die, you should be sterilised, you should be shot if you want children, stuff like that, we don't want your dirty genes in the gene pool.*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

- 2) Disabled students as easy targets.

*I am vulnerable to emotional manipulation because I'm autistic ... and this person was friends with me but she was really emotionally manipulative and would make me feel*



*like everything was my fault. Like she didn't like her job and said it was my fault for motivating her to go for the role. She made me feel like I owed her something in return for her friendship ... she'd tell me she was my mentor and that I'd have to go to her, so if I had a problem with her, who could I go to? I was really trapped.*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

### 3) Disabled students as fraudulent.

*I am met with disbelief because I 'don't look sick'. People immediately disregard me as a 'malingerer' or hypochondriac. I often am met with a snort, and frequently a 'playful' shove ... to test if my disability is real.*

Ruby, targeted on the basis of her appearance, mental health and disability

Beyond these personal, individual-level incidents of harassment, disabled students referred to a series of structural-level barriers which had arguably had the most significant implications for their feelings of acceptance and inclusivity at the University. Disproportionately affected by structural barriers, disabled students explained that a large portion of their learning and wider university engagement was impaired by inaccessibility.

*When something isn't accessible that's not a small thing. That's somebody's entire life, their education, a key to their whole future that you make out of reach.*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

### **Who are the victims of disability motivated harassment?**

'Disability' is a wide-reaching identity, and term is used to cover a wide spectrum of learning disabilities, physical disabilities and forms of mental ill-health. Disabilities present in a multitude of ways including wheelchair or walking stick use, prosthetic limbs, assistance dogs and more. Importantly however, disabilities can also manifest themselves in ways that are not visible at all. Not everyone who has been diagnosed with a disability identifies as disabled or is registered as a disabled

student at the University, with this underrepresentation particularly evident for mental ill-health. Of those targeted on the basis of mental ill-health, 40% (n=12) identified as disabled.

The diversity of our student body was especially evident within context of victims of disabled motivated harassment. 76% (n=24) of these victims identified as female, 11% (n=4) identified as male, 17% (n=6) identified as non-binary or gender fluid and 6% (n=2) elected not to disclose their gender. Most commonly, victims were aged between 18-24 (82%; n=29), although victims were identified within age bands up to 55-64 (3%; n=1). 89% (n=32) were undergraduates and 11% (n=4) were postgraduates. 66% (n=23) of victims were White, 6% (n=2) were Black, 17% (n=6) were Asian, 3% (n=1) were from another mixed background, 3% (n=1) were Middle Eastern and 6% (n=2) elected not to specify their ethnicity. Victims of disability motivated harassment described themselves as having the following sexual orientations: heterosexual (37%; n=13), bisexual (31%; n=11), gay (6%; n=2), lesbian (9%; n=3), pansexual (6%; n=2), undecided (3%; n=1) and undisclosed (6%; n=2).

### **Who is perpetrating disability motivated harassment?**

Disabled victims explained a variety of contexts in which they experienced harassment and exclusion. It also became evident that perpetrators were both known to the victims as coursemates and friends but also as strangers, particularly in cases of online harassment. Often online and offline harassment was framed around questioning the boundaries of their disability, typically through physical means. Interviewees described examples of being screamed at by coursemates to 'test' the limits of their autism and being pushed and shoved by strangers to examine their pain thresholds.

*I was never asked before I was touched or anything. These are people who instead of believing me that I am disabled, feel the need to 'prove' to me or themselves that because I look fine, I am fine ... But they feel the need to dislocate my joints to believe me.*

Ruby, targeted on the basis of her appearance, mental health and disability

In addition, disabled students are sometimes targets of a unique and subtler form of harassment through what is broadly known as 'mate crime'. This is where disabled students are selected due to their perceived vulnerability and coerced, manipulated and controlled by people believed to be their friends.

*I am vulnerable to emotional manipulation because I'm autistic ... and this person was friends with me but she was really emotionally manipulative and would make me feel like everything was my fault. Like she didn't like her job and said it was my fault for motivating her to go for the role. She made me feel like I owed her something in return for her friendship ... she'd tell me she was my mentor and that I'd have to go to her, so if I had a problem with her, who could I go to? I was really trapped. She took advantage of me a lot. She'd speak over me and speak for me.*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

### **Where is disability motivated harassment happening?**

Halls of residence were most frequently referred to as the location in which disability motivated harassment occurred, with 48% (n=15) of these victims disclosing incidents happening in this space. Within these examples, students discussed being subjected to harassment by flatmates and those visiting others. Furthermore, these victims associated halls of residence with online harassment by strangers, as this place of supposed sanctuary was often where they were when receiving cyber abuse, often resulting in feelings of paranoia and isolation.

Disabled students also discussed general inaccessibility throughout campus. Examples of such inaccessibility included lecture theatres, labs and school buildings not accommodating for wheelchair users; and facilities for blind students not being fit for purpose, such as the guide dog alleviation pen located away from the braille route. Beyond physical examples, disabled students noted a lack of parasport options offered, creating feelings of exclusion from sporting locations and events.

*There's a door to the lift that's so heavy I can't physically open it by myself and the bell is at somebody's head height if they're standing up out of a wheelchair. How am I going to reach that? It's like 'we have a lift', yes. But can anyone actually use it? No.*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

### **3.6 Transphobic harassment**

Transphobic harassment was encountered by transgender, non-binary and genderfluid participants.

50% (n=6) of all Transgender participants within this project were subjected to harassment.

Transphobic harassment centered around attempting to 'other' the victim through discrediting their gender identity.

#### **What is the nature and extent of transphobic harassment?**

Of those having experienced harassment, 3% (n=6) of survey participants (and 50% of all participants who had identified as transgender) had been targeted on the basis of their transgender status or non-binary identity.

The nature of transphobic harassment described in this study centered around 'othering' its victims. Interviewees detailed serial marginalisation through stares, comments and pointed remarks.

*This is what it's gonna be like for the rest of my life. I've kind of accepted it ... it is my normal now, this is the way things are ... it's just stares and stuff.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality identity

Victims described being repeatedly questioned about their dress, appearance and what this meant in terms of their gender identity and transgender status. They also described that these questions were often hostile and disrespectful in nature, with the answers that they offered being disregarded or becoming a source of mockery. Accounts from victims of transphobic harassment revealed that one of the most common means of attacking and invalidating their transgender identity came from being deliberately misgendered or being called by their 'deadname'<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Deadnaming is the use of the birth or other former name (i.e. a name that is "dead") of a transgender or non-binary person without their consent.

Below is a selection of anonymous answers submitted to this project's online survey when respondents were asked for demographic details, such as their gender. These help to illustrate the disregard for transgender identities that was referred to by the victims within this research:

*'Other genders' - this should be an instant expulsion for anyone studying biology/STEM*

*I switch whenever I feel like. Right now, a helicopter.*

*I am of the male sex*

### **Who are the victims of transphobic harassment?**

'Transgender' is an umbrella term for those who are not cis-gendered – whereby the gender they identify with does not align with their birth sex. Sitting within this spectrum are trans men and women, and non-binary and genderfluid individuals.

17% (n=1) of these victims identified as a trans woman, 17% (n=1) identified as trans man and 67% (n=4) identified as non-binary. Of those who disclosed their age band, 50% (n=3) of victims were aged between 18-24 and 33% (n=2) were aged between 25-34. 83% (n=5) were undergraduates and 17% (n=1) were doctoral students. 83% (n=5) of victims were White, 50% (n=3) identified as disabled and none actively practised a religion. The following sexual orientations were specified: bisexual (17%; n=1), lesbian (17%; n=1), pansexual (33%; n=2) and undisclosed (17%; n=1).

### **Who is perpetrating transphobic harassment?**

Although there were incidents in which staff deliberately misgendered students, most examples of transphobic harassment involved student perpetrators. Akin with other groups, victims mentioned frequent ignorant comments, but observed that these were usually expressed through a lack of education and awareness as opposed to being purposefully hostile. However, incidents in which harassment was deliberate and targeted most commonly was perpetrated by students known to the victims. This included flatmates and coursemates. As such, victims frequently encountered their perpetrators and explained that these individuals and groups would usually expend effort to harass the victim regularly, including approaching them in person and via online abuse.

### **Where is transphobic harassment happening?**

Survey data demonstrated that transphobic harassment manifests across University campus and extends into many spaces that were expected to be harassment free, including the LGBTQ+ safe space. In addition, victims also detailed the Students' Union (50%; n=3), departmental buildings (33%; n=2), the library (17%; n=1) and outdoor campus (50%; n=3) in addition to other learning and teaching, social and personal spaces. Importantly, and aligning with victims' accounts of being subjected to targeted and deliberate hostility, online spaces and chat platforms were specifically acknowledged as being an unsafe space for some victims of transphobic harassment.

*In the whole course group chat they anonymised their names and spammed messages about how there's only two genders and anyone that says otherwise is mentally ill.*

Sam, targeted on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation and transgender status

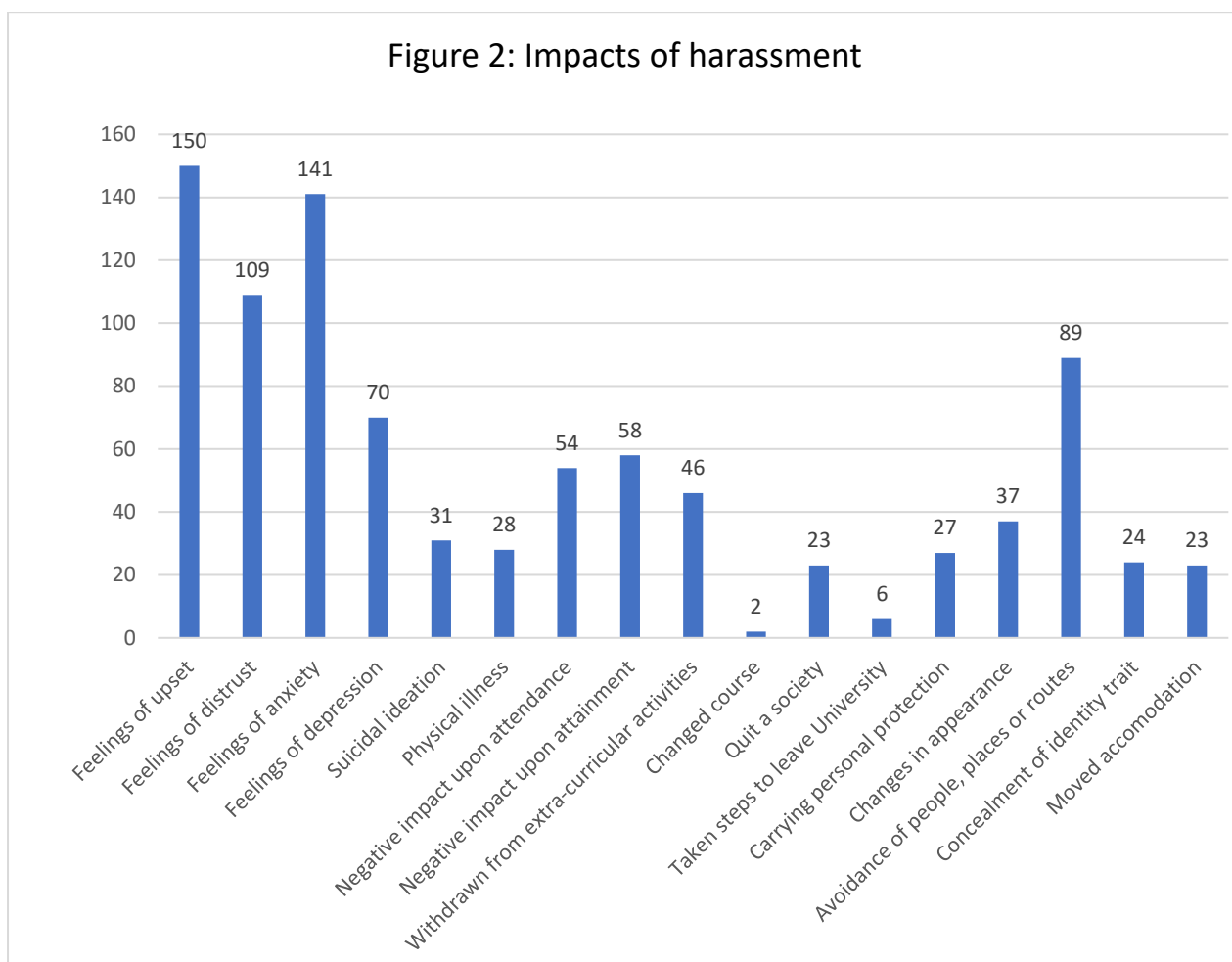
#### 4. Impacts of Harassment

Victims highlighted significant emotional impact as a result of the harassment that they were subjected to.

29% (n=58) of victims suffered a negative impact upon their attainment or performance as a result of their victimisation.

Victims noted adopting lifestyle changes following their harassment, including concealing an identity trait, hypervigilance and carrying protective equipment.

In addition to sharing the nature of their experiences of harassment, victims also discussed the impacts of such encounters. These impacts were diverse, far reaching and exemplified the damage that harassment can cause. The table below depicts some of the most commonly cited impacts that victims identified as a result of their harassment:



Clustered into the substantive themes of emotional impacts, educational impacts and lifestyle impacts, the findings below outline the nature and effect of these harms.

### **What are the emotional impacts of harassment?**

A variety of emotional impacts were discussed by victims, with 74% (n=150) of those who had been subjected to harassment noting feelings of upset. The impacts upon mental health were evident from victims' responses: 70% (n=141) became anxious, 35% (n=70) felt depressed, 15% (n=31) were suicidal and 14% (n=28) had become physically ill as a direct result of being victimised.

*One of my friends had to talk me down from some quite bad self-harm.*

Charlie, targeted on the basis of their transgender status and mental health

54% (n=109) of these victims stated feeling distrustful and many discussed in turn facing difficulty in connecting with their peers and with lectures. Despite the University 'bubble' having many positive implications, the association of 'everyone knowing everyone' caused victims to withdraw socially, with this isolation having a further impact on mental health.

*I became very cautious who I was becoming friends with. It took me a long time to become friends with people. It wasn't that I wanted to catch them out, but I was very careful that there was any prejudice towards anyone else that could've then opened up a prejudice to me. It became a tiring task to make friends.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

*I was walking back by myself and it had a weird psychological effect where I just want to avoid people as much as possible, I don't want to see people. When I walk past people I become very self-conscious.*

Mai, targeted on the basis of their race and gender

*It definitely impacted [upon my trust]. I thought to myself if he was capable of doing such a thing then anyone could, so that made me very much more careful. From then onward I've never let anybody in my house ... You just never know that person as it*



*turns out, even if you think it's a friend and you trust them you can never really know what can happen.*

Bethany, targeted on the basis of her gender

Noted within the context of many forms of harassment, but particularly relevant for female and AFAB non-binary sexual harassment victims, was a sense of collective acceptance in which sexual harassment was seen as 'an inevitability'. Holding strong implications for reporting rates and support service uptake, within this project alone there was a high proportion of research participants who disclosed encounters of sexual harassment within interviews but who had not done so within the survey – explaining that sexual harassment was 'a given'. This suggests that the worryingly high volume of gender-based harassment revealed within this study is in itself an underestimate.

*I don't worry about [being groped] because I just expect it. The shame of it is all my female friends would expect it, it's not a big deal, we're numb to it... that's just what it's like, it's fine, I'm lucky I haven't been roofied so it's fine.*

Ali, targeted on the basis of her gender

### **What are the educational impacts of harassment?**

At 29% (n=58) almost a third of victims suffered a negative impact upon their attainment or performance as a result of harassment.

*In the second year I got marked down [for group work] ... It impacts on your learning when the other students won't engage with you.*

John, targeted on the basis of his age and class

*It affected my grades ... it's like they'll give you an extra two weeks [extension] but that wouldn't make a difference if you've missed a bunch of lectures.*

Jasmine, targeted on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health

At 27% (n=54), over a quarter of those who had experienced harassment cited a negative impact upon their attendance as a result of their victimisation. Specifically, 24% (n=47) of these respondents described a process of withdrawing from social activities, hobbies or extra-curricular activities in an attempt to feel safer. Additionally, 18% (n=36) of these respondents had also stopped attending lectures, seminars, workshops and/or meetings at University.

*I went out with my housemate and three boys that are on my course and ... I was spiked. I was being passed around like a piece of meat between these three boys that were meant to be, supposedly my friends... someone found me on the floor in a bush outside the O2... I was just freezing cold, out of it, didn't know what was happening... and from that point I didn't go to any lectures or seminars that I knew those boys would be in because I just felt too uncomfortable to be near them.*

Lizzie, targeted on the basis of her gender

*My attendance dropped from 80% to 20% if that. I just couldn't get out of bed for three, four weeks.*

Jasmine, targeted on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health

At the extreme end of this spectrum, 24% (n=49) of these respondents claimed that their experiences made them want to leave the University, with 3% (n=6) having taken steps to leave. An additional 12% (n=24) referred to wanting to leave their course, with 1% (n=2) having already actioned this.

*Numerous times I've thought you know what, I should've gone to DMU. I've even thought about changing during my course, I've looked into it actually.*

John, targeted on the basis of his age and class

*I wish that maybe I had of gone to Southampton or some place like that where I would've been more welcome.*

Anna, targeted on the basis of her gender and race

Despite University initiatives and communications declaring a tough stance taken upon sexual harassment in particular, students' experiences are far from reflective of this. Consequently, it appears that as the culture of sexual harassment deepens, so too do students' feelings of alienation from the University and their studies.

*There's lots of posters... that say 'no means no' and 'we say no to harassment' which I just find quite ironic because I just think oh do you now, well I can confirm you don't.*

Lizzie, targeted on the basis of her gender

Further heightening students' feelings of disenfranchisement from and distrust towards the University are incidents of sexual harassment that are perpetrated by authority figures from within the institution. Although this is expanded upon further within the '*Gender-based harassment*' section earlier in this report, it is important to acknowledge how prolific, deep-rooted and widespread sexual harassment can be within university settings.

*[My lecturer] would pause the lecture recording and say 'Oh I'd get in trouble for saying this' and then make some sexist joke weekly ... I stopped going after a while.*

Millie, targeted on the basis of her gender

Students being subjected to harassment, prejudice and exclusion at individual and structural levels was found to have had profound overall impacts, greatly damaging engagement, networking and aspirations.

*As a Muslim there's not a lot of social events I feel are inclusive or that I feel comfortable going to because it's all bar crawl, pub crawl... And those are the kinds of bond building events that can build bonds between not only students but students and staff as well ... You don't notice at first but as the years progress you get further away from staff.*

Zebi, targeted on the basis of her religion and race

## What are the lifestyle impacts of harassment?

In response to being subjected to harassment targeted towards a personal characteristic, many victims referred to concealing identity traits going forward. For example, 6% (n=11) now hide their religion, 5% (n=8) hide their nationality, 8% (n=16) hide their sexual orientation, 8% (n=12) hide their disability and 5% (n=9) hide their accent. As a result, such a disassociation from innate and unchangeable characteristics has negative implications for their sense of wellbeing and their ability to connect with friends, families and support services.

*It's harder for me to be open, because of the stares, because of the looks, like yeah once again I don't know people's intentions and I'm trying to protect the both of us... Because being constantly aware, it's exhausting.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

Further active lifestyle changes adopted by research participants included increased vigilance, with 14% (n=27) of victims disclosing carrying a personal alarm. Worryingly, one respondent explained that they now carry a knife for protection. Beyond this, instead of depending on the University for help or support in relation to sexual harassment, students have created their own mitigation and safety strategies.

*It's more that it's sensible [to carry a rape alarm]. You just expect [extreme sexual harassment]. You stay in a group, preferably in a group of girls. And if you find a girl that's really drunk you look after before someone can get to her. You know what happens when someone gets too drunk.*

Ali, targeted on the basis of her gender

*I had to push a desk chair and my dresser up against my door every night to go to sleep and I had a tennis racquet beside my bed because that's how anxious I was.*

Olivia, targeted on the basis of her gender

Furthermore, due to the emboldened and potentially dangerous nature of the harassment, some students disclosed that in managing the risk of the situation, they felt they were not able to prevent it whilst it happened and it was safer to not publically object.

*I think that now I've gotten older and I feel stronger saying 'don't touch me'. But I only do that in situations where I know I can handle it, there's other times where you can't just because it'll get so much worse.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

Other significant lifestyle changes have included the earlier mentioned isolation and increased wariness of leaving the house, with 45% (n=89) avoiding certain places or routes, 26% (n=51) not going outside at night and 12% (n=23) moving homes. Many students, particularly international and female students, noted that they completely avoided leaving their homes where possible. Furthermore, numerous international students explained that they had permanently left the UK with no intention to return. This included Chinese and other Asian students concerned about UK's response to the pandemic and the subsequent hostility that they received and Canadian students left disillusioned by the sexual harassment culture within higher education and the UK.

*I won't leave the house unless I'm with my best mate who's a guy*

Lizzie, targeted on the basis of her gender

*Nowadays I cannot go outside, or I choose to go outside as less as possible. Before I've been through this I would take a little walk around the park but now if I walk I must invite my friends or my classmates to walk with me.*

Mingmei, targeted on the basis of her race

*I've chosen not to return to the UK .... I'm taking a break*

Anna, targeted on the basis of her gender and race

## **5. Responding to harassment: recommended areas of focus**

The preceding sections highlighted a range of unacceptable behaviours and their impacts on students. However, only 28% (n=55) of victims had formally reported being subjected to harassment and 23% (n=44) had accessed support in relation to their experiences. In response to these findings, this study generated feedback from students as to what they felt that they needed to access reporting or support platforms at the University of Leicester.

The key barriers raised by students are outlined below alongside recommended areas of focus to elevate service uptake of reporting and support pathways in the future.

### **What is preventing reporting?**

A lack of confidence in the University to handle and respond to a report appropriately.

A tendency on the part of the University to minimise or normalise victimisation.

A lack of awareness of reporting, disclosure or support options from within the University amongst all levels of the student body.

The primary reason for students not formally disclosing was a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of formal institutional processes. 59% (n=94) of victims stated that they did not think reporting would help, and 51% (n=82) did not feel that their case would be taken seriously. Within this context, students revealed a lack of faith in the University's ability to handle any reports and disclosures appropriately and in its power or capability to progress their case in a meaningful way.

*The University does nothing to deal with harassment. Realistically how much formal stuff has worked, how many people have been kicked out even if they get to the end of the process? If the University wanted to do something about it, they could, but they just stick up some posters about it and then expect it to go away.*

Jasmine, targeted on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health

With increasing numbers of sexual harassment cases in universities coming to public attention over recent years, students' confidence in reporting pathways will have been shaped to varying degrees by their witnessing of the handling – and potential mishandling – of these incidents. Consequently, students have become increasingly hesitant to report any incidents of harassment, particularly if these are 'smaller' or without indisputable evidence.

*I was thinking 'it's my word that these things are happening to me' and I'm so used to seeing ... issues with sexual harassment and Universities not seeing things as evidence. I'm so aware that if anything is going to happen there needs to be solid evidence ... that I've been threatened or been hurt or that these things have really been said, like a text message. And because it was mostly verbal, I didn't have that evidence I felt I needed.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

*I did go and talk to my course tutor about it. She was really good about it actually, she was like 'do you want to press charges?' but because I didn't press charges I was told there was nothing the Uni could do to help me ... because 'it's your word against his'.*

Olivia, targeted on the basis of her gender

Beyond a lack in confidence, 27% (n=43) of victims cited not knowing how to report as a reason for not disclosing to an official body. Students did not recall being directly told about any disclosure, reporting or support provisions at the University. Several research participants cited seeing posters on campus, but could not remember any specific details.

*I think a lot of my friends would be like me and just tune out from these non-coursework related matters. I don't really pay attention to what is said unless it's directly relevant to coursework or something that might impact my study.*

Anton, targeted on the basis of his nationality

Where students recalled being told about services, this had happened within introductory sessions at the start of their course. Particularly amongst male students and new starters, many students mentioned that they had not been expecting to encounter issues and therefore had not taken note of relevant information.

*I've not thought about what I would do because I hope to god it never happens.*

David, targeted on the basis of his age

When students attempted to access disclosure, reporting and support services, interviewees unanimously cited confusion and a lack of understanding due to various, seemingly overlapping options listed online. Particularly when students already felt easily dissuaded from discussing their victimisation, this lack of clarity in accessing support posed a significant barrier to them preceding.

*When you have so many services – report and support, the advice centre, student support – where should you go and who's for what? I work in the SU and I still don't understand. Someone could say 'where do I go for support?' and I wouldn't know."*

Lou, targeted on the basis of their disability and gender

A further significant barrier to making a report or disclosure, and one which is equally relevant to similar incidents experienced outside of higher education, was a tendency among many victims to minimise or normalise the harassment that they had been subjected to. Often this fed into a narrative of not seeing themselves as 'real' victims or their experiences as worthy of being reported. An overview of some of the most common barriers to reporting can be seen below.

- Not wanting to 'demonise' the perpetrator.

*I don't want to ruin this young man's future because he's been an idiot.*

Ali, targeted on the basis of her gender



- Unwillingness to report verbal harassment, 'lower level' incidents or microaggressions.

*Unless it's something that someone can physically see, like I said with physical abuse or something, it won't seem as serious because you can't physically see it.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

- International students and their perceived access to services.

*I just feel like a perpetual outsider, foreigner, because it feels like no matter how long I've been here for, it often feels like it's not my place to say anything at all. Like is it my place to say anything when it's not my country?*

Mai, targeted on the basis of their race and gender

- Normalisation of harassment.

*The thing is, I think the thing is for me, being a black individual – this is gonna sound terrible – but verbal abuse is just something you're used to.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, gender identity and sexuality

### **What can we do to encourage reporting?**

Longer term strategies which convey a sustained commitment to eradicating a culture of harassment and prejudice.

Affirmative messaging to reinforce that all incidents are worth acknowledgement.

Clearer pathways to accessing reporting or support platforms.

Transcending short term initiatives, namely as poster campaigns, many students called for a meaningful commitment from the University to acknowledge and address changing the culture of

harassment and prejudice. In recognising how deep-rooted the issue of harassment is, victims frequently mentioned that observing tokenistic campaigns had the opposite effect of overturning a negative culture – instead, this often reinforced the feeling that harassment would continue unchallenged.

*When I'm too scared to even leave my house most of time and the odd occasion I make it onto campus I see all these "no means no" posters ... it just makes me sad and feel more alone as I think if you know it's a problem, why don't you do something for people like me who this keeps happening to? Those posters are decoration, they don't help.*

Lizzie, targeted on the basis of her gender

Students involved in this research explained that they felt reassured that the University's Executive Board had commissioned this project to better understand their experiences and offered them the opportunity to co-produce solutions. They stated that it demonstrated a potential for meaningful change in a way that the short term "buzz word" campaigns that they had seen previously had not. Described by a final year Undergraduate as "the first chance I've had to share what I've been feeling for so long and I feel like I've finally been heard", numerous respondents shared that having the opportunity to use their voices to inform necessary change was a positive step forward. Building upon such feedback, continued engagement with authentic voices, having open channels for feedback and having expert and victim/survivor led initiatives could help to re-engage populations and to create a culture shift in a way that short term poster campaigns have not.

In addressing victims' confusion towards reporting and support provisions, clear channels with distinct remits would benefit students' understanding of where to access relevant services and what they should expect from them. Ensuring that the staff who seem to be students' first port of call are also aware of the signposting procedures would be a further positive step in generating an increase in reporting.

*Do I go somewhere different for sexual harassment and other harassment? And what if I just want to talk to someone without making a formal report? The thought of even trying to detangle all the options and what I'm meant to do and where I'm meant to go is exhausting ... It's easier to deal with it myself.*

Sam, targeted on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation and transgender status

Finally, many victims within this project explained that it took many months or years before they had acknowledged their own victim status and realised that they were entitled to support and a place to talk about their experiences. These victims observed that they hadn't thought to actively look into reporting or support provisions as they did not recognise that this was a service that they were eligible for. As such, to increase reporting, it is important for services throughout the University to adopt affirmative messaging to reinforce that all incidents of harassment are worthy of acknowledgement.

*If I had known about Report & Support in first year, that would've been the saving grace I needed. Just someone to explain it all to who would've said 'yeah, it's real, people are saying these things to you and it's a big deal, it's not something that you should diminish'.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

### **How can we enhance our support services?**

Staff disclosure training to equip staff with skills for handling student disclosures.

Intersectional representation throughout reporting and support services.

Promoting services throughout the year through multiple channels.

Students noted that when they were told of reporting and support provisions at the University, this information had tended to be relayed at the start of their degree with no follow up messaging. As such, should they need to make a disclosure, report or want to access support provisions at a later

date in their university career, they no longer knew where to access this information. When reflecting upon this, victims and bystanders stated that the promotion of such services throughout the academic year through multiple channels including social media, email and BlackBoard would better enable them to make use of the support provisions available at the University.

*Someone might have mentioned it in Freshers but I really can't remember now. That was so long ago and Freshers is so busy anyway. You're just trying to remember where the local supermarket is at that stage.*

Matt, no disclosed experiences of harassment

When reflecting further upon what would encourage use of support services, victims from minority and liberation groups in particular discussed the importance of representation – and intersectional representation specifically. These participants dissected the value added and reassurance that would be derived from having the opportunity to speak with someone who may be able to emphasise with their concerns on a personal level.

*I've heard when it comes to the counselling service ... if you're LGBT, you get referred to this one specific counsellor and I've heard, like even if your issue is not LGBT, you'll still be pushed to this one specific person and from what I understand the person is white. And it's like a white cis man. And that may not be everyone's comfortable place. The person may be LGBT but like there needs to be just a bit more diversity.*

*People have so many different identities, we're multifaceted people. I think we need to talk more about being black and gay or a woman and Muslim, you know putting these intersects together, because most of the time we talk about this one identity that we have when people have multiple. So when we talk about more support or having a home at University we need spaces where people can come together with their multiple identities.*

Nat, targeted on the basis of their race, transgender identity and sexuality

Underpinning victims' enhanced access to reporting and support provisions is the need for staff disclosure training. Many participants discussed the assumption that all staff would be fully trained in all areas relating to student wellbeing, including responding to disclosures and safeguarding. Therefore, where victims were left unsatisfied or without onward information, they referred to feeling let down by the University because they expected more in terms of help and support. However, with disclosure training for all student facing staff, responses to students during times of crisis will likely improve, as will subsequent use of formal reporting and support provisions. In addition, when reflecting upon staff wellbeing, enabling them to feel equipped to handle sensitive situations with confidence is also beneficial.

*I thought talking to my supervisor would help but it made him so awkward that I wished I'd never said anything. Things got so much worse after that but there was no way I was going to tell him and make everything so uncomfortable again.*

Jessica, targeted on the basis of her gender, disability, mental health and class

## **6. Closing remarks**

We would like to reiterate our gratitude to all who took part in this study and to the Executive Board for commissioning this report. Although this report has outlined significant challenges, it is important to acknowledge that the University has taken a significant first step in addressing such challenges by identifying the nature, extent and impacts of harassment, as informed by the student body.

Although this study has been undertaken at the University of Leicester, the challenges identified are by no means confined to one institution. These are sector wide issues which require holistic responses from university communities to overcome systematic issues of prejudice and harassment. It is hoped that the themes highlighted within this report can act as a catalyst for change by facilitating improved levels of recognition, understanding, empathy and responsiveness across all areas of higher education.

At the University of Leicester, and as Citizens of Change, we remain committed to generating a shared response to harassment from across the student and staff body in order to make a meaningful and lasting difference. Our current and future students deserve nothing less.

*Minority communities have so much to offer and how things are at the moment, the decision to go to any University feels like a risk, rather than an achievement. It really does feel like a decision of “do I have the strength to enter an institution that was never meant for me?” ... It isn't fair that I have to use my presence to wear down other's assumptions. You can't just hope that over time people will get used to each other and biases will disappear, we need those in charge to change the culture to really get rid of those biases and ensure that this is a safe space for all students to be in.*

Sam, targeted on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation and transgender status

*Of course it's hard to talk about and it's hard to hear about, but I'm really proud and reassured that my University have tried to learn about what's happening and what they can do. Now you can see the problems, that means you can do something.*

Jade, targeted on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views

## **7. Appendix**

The table below details the factors that interviewees selected as the basis of the harassment that they were subjected to. As indicated at the start of this report, please note that pseudonyms have been used throughout and in the below table to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of interviewees.

Charlie	Transgender identity and mental health
Matt	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Nat	Sexual orientation, transgender identity, dress and appearance
Rachel	Class
John	Age and class
Carole	Age, disability
Lizzie	Gender
Jade	Gender, accent, political views and nationality
Ali	Age, dress and appearance and gender
Kamila	Race and religion
Marie	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Bethany	Gender
Henry	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Jasmine	Sexual orientation and mental health
Olivia	Gender
Lucy	Age, gender
Lou	Disability and gender
Anna	Gender and race
David	Age
Adam	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Natalie	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Mingmei	Race and gender
Gabrielle	Gender and race
Sean	No disclosed experiences of harassment
Anton	Nationality
Lexie	Gender and dress and appearance
Mai	Race and gender
Jessica	Gender, disability, mental health and class
Zebi	Race and religion
Sam	Gender, sexual orientation and transgender status
Rebecca	Dress and appearance, age, gender
Benjamin	No disclosed experiences of harassment
India	Dress and appearance, sexual orientation and gender
Yasmin	Gender
Millie	Gender
Awais	Race
Hannah	Race and gender
Ruby	Dress and appearance, mental health and disability
Lauren	Gender