

Review of best practice in ‘first response’ training internationally

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to examine the current (September 2016) provision of first response training at universities in Europe and beyond, with a view to assessing best practice. The review discusses the general features of programmes already in place and highlights some limitations of these. It considers additional sources of inspiration for the development of first response training arising from student campaigns, artistic interventions, and survivor testimony. A list of freely accessible training resources is included towards the end of the document.

Existing training models

In recent years, European universities have become more attuned to issues of sexual violence. A number now provide information about what to do in the wake of an assault, often using guidance borrowed from front line services. It has also become increasingly common for universities to signpost information about regional or national support services, such as help lines for victims of sexual and domestic violence. There are also larger awareness raising campaigns focused on alerting students to issues around sexual violence, and giving information about support services. University counselling services sometimes now include specialist support for victims of sexual violence. A small number of universities have implemented some form of guidance or training for staff and/or students on issues of sexual harassment and violence. While many of these programmes focus on primary prevention, they often encompass some consideration of issues of disclosure and first response. Current provision, however, is uneven.

Some universities include guidance on ‘first response’ via their webpages, signposting information about local support services, but do not provide any kind of active skills development or educational programmes. While a small number of universities (all in the UK) state that they include training on sexual violence as part of their mandatory staff induction procedures, it is difficult to assess how robust this is. ‘First response’ training and guidelines developed by the University of Sussex have now been adapted

for use at other institutions, including SOAS, University of London. There are also other types of training programmes in place which do not centrally focus on ‘first response’, often linked to or as a result of campaigns led by students and following a series of high-profile reports and investigations appearing in the UK media.¹

Some of the most comprehensive training programmes include the ‘Intervention Initiative’ at the University of the West of England, which is aimed at students and based on bystander approaches, and the ‘We Get It’ campaign at the University of Manchester, which seeks to reinforce existing university policy on sexual harassment by raising awareness, encouraging staff and students to pledge support, and providing reporting mechanisms and support services. The University of Oxford has now trained a number of dedicated Harassment Advisors, while the University of Manchester has made commitments to appoint two Sexual Harassment Advisors in the near future. In 2015, Durham University launched a ‘Sexual Violence Task Force’, which has produced a rapid evidence assessment on issues of sexual violence and prevention on campus (Bows, Burrell, and Westmarland, 2015). The Durham Task Force has also trained staff in handling disclosures and is in the process of appointing a Student Support and Training Officer in the area of Sexual Violence and Misconduct.

As yet, there is little evidence of such comprehensive training programmes being delivered in universities in other European countries. There are, however, examples from further afield. In the US and following the 1991 Clery Act, all universities that receive federal funding are required to monitor the occurrence of sexual violence (as well as other crimes) on and around campuses. The Act was expanded in 2013, and now all such universities are required to have some form of awareness, prevention, and response programmes in place on issues of sexual violence.² The American Association of University Professors has also produced a report on campus sexual assault, which includes detailed guidance on suggested policies and procedures.³ In the past year, a number of Canadian universities have launched special task forces on the issue of sexual violence and have developed recommendations: some of the most detailed of these come from Queen’s University.⁴ One of the key documents informing the development of guidelines and training programmes at Canadian universities is a report produced by the Ontario government’s action plan on sexual violence, the goal of which is “to create a resource to support introductory training on sexual violence, including

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jul/26/student-rape-sexual-violence-universities-guidelines-nus>

² <http://knowyourix.org/understanding-the-campus-save-act/>

³ <https://www.aaup.org/report/campus-sexual-assault-suggested-policies-and-procedures>

⁴ <http://www.queensu.ca/studentaffairs/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.vpsawww/files/files/SAPRWG%20final%20report%20for%20posting.pdf>

supportive responses to victims/survivors who disclose experiences of sexual violence” (Baker, Campbell and Straatman, 2012).⁵

Key features

Where universities have implemented programmes that encompass first response training, the general remit of these is to:

- Provide information about sexual violence, including the different forms it can take, legal definitions, incidence and prevalence, and rates of reporting and prosecution. In the UK, the most relevant and frequently cited source of information on this is the National Union of Students (NUS) ‘Hidden Marks’ report (2010), which found that a large number of women students had experienced some form of sexual harassment, and more than one in ten had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault while at university. The figures are mirrored in data from other countries in Europe, as discussed by the ‘Gender Based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime’ report (2012).
- Address common misconceptions surrounding sexual violence. These include the notion that sexual violence most frequently occurs between strangers (the ‘dark alley’ scenario), that only women are victimised and that only men perpetrate sexual violence, that sexual assault can be provoked or invited, and that victims of sexual violence respond in predictable ways.
- Explain reasons for as well as barriers to disclosure. Reasons for students to disclose can include a desire to access medical treatment or counselling services, to receive support in locating specialist services off-campus, to get help when filing a report with the police, to empower themselves, and to seek justice. Disclosures can be intentional (when a student purposefully seeks support from a particular individual), situational (when an episode of violence has been witnessed by or otherwise come to the attention of another party), or incidental (such as when a student is accounting for absence or seeking an extension for assessed work). The barriers to disclosure are manifold, encompassing fear of being blamed for the assault, shame or embarrassment about being sexually victimised, belief that support is not available or that available support is

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http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/sites/vawlearningnetwork.ca/files/LN_Overcoming_Barriers_FINAL.pdf

<http://usvreact.eu/>

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inadequate, fear of being forced to go to the police, concerns about the implications of disclosing sexual violence, fears about retaliation or recrimination, or a desire to protect the assailant. It is also important to note that students and staff may disclose experiences – for example, in the context of a classroom discussion or a meeting – which they themselves do not recognize as sexual violence.

- Provide advice about how best to support those who disclose. Most programmes place emphasis on the need to listen carefully, to affirm and believe the victim, to provide appropriate emotional as well as practical support, and to act only with the victim's consent. This includes providing information about support services both on and off campus, as well as information about the procedures involved in reporting to the police. In case of the latter, details about how to retain important forensic evidence are provided alongside guidance on making notes to record key details of the event (time, place, and so on). Many guidelines include specific advice on what to say and what not to say, while others utilise general frameworks borrowed from front line services, such as SEEK: Safety, Empathy, Empowerment, Knowledge. Using the SEEK framework, responders are encouraged to create a safe space for disclosures; to listen empathetically and without judgment; to highlight the survivor's strength and courage and to use empowering language wherever possible; and to be knowledgeable about sexual assault and available care pathways.⁶
- Provide guidance about how to support students who have experienced sexual violence over the longer-term. This includes helping students to access the information and support they need when dealing with issues such as accommodation and assessment.

Formats and activities

Training programmes on sexual violence currently utilise a variety of formats and activities. These include:

- Presentations and discussions: providing information to participants via presentations and exploring key issues through small group discussions are often central features. Openly accessible resources which may act as sources of

⁶ For detailed guidance on SEEK, see the NEARI online training programme:
<http://www.nearipress.org/courses/163-first-responders-responding-to-sexual-assault-disclosures>

inspiration for the design and delivery of training programmes include the disclosure training workshop the National Union of Students (NUS) Women's Campaign has developed for students as part of the #StandByMe campaign. Another workshop on sexual harassment and violence in higher education', developed by Alison Phipps and Elsie Whittington at the University of Sussex, includes a Prezi presentation aimed at management, staff, and students and explores issues of 'lad culture' as well as responses to this.⁷

- Empathy exercises: activities which invite participants to put themselves in the place of victims are used as a way to help them understand the social, psychological, and physical impact of sexual violence, as well as the difficulties involved in disclosure. These typically involve asking participants to answer a series of questions that initially appear to be unrelated to the topic at hand, but which provide a starting point for thinking about the feelings these scenarios might bring up.
- Role play: acting out various scenarios, either by reading directly from scripts or following general directions, is used as a way to promote experiential understandings of the dynamics involved in sexual violence and disclosure. Scripted role play forms a central component of the 'Intervention Initiative' at UWE, which also provides guidelines about how to facilitate role play and gives examples of scripts.
- Vignettes: short descriptions of scenarios in which a disclosure is made are used to invite participants to think practically about what they would do in that situation. Discussing responses can be a useful way of gauging understanding of the dynamics involved in disclosure as well as knowledge about available care pathways. In online training programmes, vignettes can be accompanied by multiple-choice answers, which participants must answer correctly in order to proceed. Video vignettes form a core component of the Canadian 'Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence' online training programme.⁸
- 'True or False' questions: these are used to assess knowledge gained during a training programme, particularly in relation to myths and stereotypes surrounding sexual violence, and facts about prevalence and the effects of sexual violence. They can be presented 'live' or form part of online programmes.

⁷ <https://prezi.com/a4-tzu18k7/sexual-harassment-and-violence-in-higher-education/>

⁸ <http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/responding-disclosures-sexual-violence>

- Glossaries: list of key terms used in the training programme and related materials are often provided. For example, the NEARI ‘First Responder’ online training programme includes a glossary of key terms, such as ‘sexual assault’, ‘trauma’, and so on.

Limitations

The development of training programmes and guidelines on sexual violence in universities attests to the heightened awareness of these issues and a growing consensus on the need for them to be addressed. However, while existing programmes are making important strides, there are some limitations. First, they tend to focus on providing information about resources and support systems; while this practical knowledge is crucial, there is room for more emphasis on the lived experience and relational dynamics of sexual violence, with a view to fostering empathy. Second, they give relatively little attention to the different forms sexual violence can take, including but not limited to harassment, assault, rape, stalking, online abuse, ‘revenge porn’, forced marriage and ‘honour’ based violence. Third, there is a need to take a more intersectional approach to the issues, as dynamics such as sexuality, ‘race’ and class inform the experience and disclosure of sexual violence amongst students and some students, such as women of colour, trans people and sex workers, are placed at additional risk. Fourth, it is crucial that the links between violence and more pervasive patterns of sexism are made explicit, in order for participants to recognise how certain kinds of cultural formations on campus (for instance ‘lad culture’ in the UK) may create a context that is conducive to sexual violence (for discussion, see Phipps and Young, 2013).

A further problematic is the virtual silence within existing training programmes on the issue of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated by staff against students or other staff (usually at lower levels of the institutional hierarchy). This issue has recently come to wider public attention in the United States, where a series of high-profile cases have been reported in the press. These include cases made against the professor and ethicist Thomas Pogge of Yale,⁹ the Dean of the University of California law school Sujit Choudhry,¹⁰ and an assistant professor named Blake Wentworth at Berkeley.¹¹ A recent

⁹ <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/05/23/world-famous-ethics-professor-named-in-sexual-harassment-complaint/>

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/10/sujit-choudhry-uc-berkeley-law-dean-resigns-sexual-harassment-lawsuit>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/11/uc-berkeley-sexual-harassment-scandal-protests>

campus climate survey undertaken across twenty-seven HE institutions in the US with over one hundred and fifty thousand participants suggests that sexual assault and misconduct against students by staff is a systemic problem. The issue is exacerbated at postgraduate level, with greater numbers of women graduate or professional students who had experienced sexual assault or misconduct identifying the offender as a faculty member compared to women undergraduate students (Cantor et al., 2015, p.xvii). While there is a lack of detailed research on this issue in the UK, the NUS ‘Hidden Marks’ report lists academic and non-teaching staff as one of the three categories of offenders reported by women students who had experienced stalking, violence, or sexual assault (Students, 2010). A 1995 study found that sexual exploitation of students by staff in UK higher education (HE) institutions was pervasive; this text was published with a new preface as an e-book in 2013 in recognition of the continuing problem of sexual exploitation in HE (Carter and Jeffs, 2013 (1995)). Recently, a number of feminist scholars in the UK have drawn attention to the ways in which sexual harassment of students by staff is frequently made to ‘disappear’ by university management and administration (Page, 2015; Phipps, 2016; Whitley, 2015; Whitley and Page, 2016). This issue has also been highlighted by recent media articles discussing the secrecy surrounding sexual harassment and the containment strategies used to protect perpetrators,¹² as well as the difficulties involved in bringing formal complaints of sexual harassment against university staff.¹³ In the Spanish State, recently, different cases of violence against students by staff in the universities of Granada, Barcelona and Santiago de Compostela have opened the public debate around the usefulness of current pathways in universities, which have in many cases proved insufficient. These cases have inspired protests and responses from students' groups, feminist activist and student/teacher alliances, that have underlined the need to push universities into taking useful and applicable measures.¹⁴ Ensuring that sexual harassment and exploitation of students by staff is included within first response training is likely to be a particularly vexed issue in light of the significant PR problem this presents for university administrations. It will also necessitate that attention be paid to the ways in which dynamics of postgraduate study as well as discipline-specific working conditions may facilitate sexual harassment and exploitation of students by staff.

¹² <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/suspension-is-a-feminist-issue/2016601.article>

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/09/academia-winning-sexual-harassment-complaint>

¹⁴ <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/libertades/29708-falta-reaccion-ante-acoso-sexual-aulas.html>

Thinking differently about first response education

With these limitations in mind, it is worth exploring alternative sources of inspiration for the development of first response education initiatives. The aim is to consider how such programmes can promote a more engaged and involved understanding of the lived realities of sexual violence in university contexts, and perhaps contribute to creating more open cultures in which disclosures of all kinds are facilitated and better supported. To this end, the term ‘education’ is preferable to that of ‘training’, signaling as it does an ongoing process of learning.

Student campaigns

Student campaigns have been central to bringing the issue of sexual violence to wider attention both within and outside academia, and could usefully inform the development of first response education initiatives. These campaigns are particularly notable for taking an inclusive approach to the issue of sexual violence that ensures diverse groups and experiences are represented, and also for examining issues of violence as caught up with and informed by broader patterns of inequality. Examples of key campaigns include the ‘I Heart Consent’ campaign, a joint initiative by the NUS women’s campaign and Sexpression UK, for which workshop guides and toolkits are available.¹⁵ The ‘It Happens Here’ campaign at Oxford includes education, advocacy, and outreach programmes, and provides advice on how to support survivors.¹⁶ The Oxford campaign is especially notable for its development of a free app, ‘First Response’, which aims to support survivors and those close to them by providing detailed information about key resources, support services, and contacts, as well as more general information about sexual violence. The app was programmed by university students and can be downloaded to mobile devices or viewed online.¹⁷ In the Basque Country, as well as in different locations in the Spanish State, self-defense courses have been organised by student groups and alliances. Those courses abandon the idea of ‘personal self defense’ based in solely physical techniques to implement a model of training focused on consciousness rising, sisterhood, empowerment and other feminist principles. Often these training courses are organised by student groups alongside less radical/critical critical courses offered by universities.

Artistic interventions

The topic of sexual violence has long been of concern to feminist artists, and some recent works by students may be of interest in the development of first response

¹⁵ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/i-heart-consent-guide>

¹⁶ <https://ithappenshereoxford.wordpress.com>

¹⁷ <http://www.firstresponseoxford.org>

education initiatives. In 2014, the visual arts student Emma Sulkowicz of Columbia University undertook an endurance performance piece entitled ‘Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)’, which involved her carrying a mattress at all times while on university premises. Sulkowicz reports having been raped by a fellow student on her first day as a sophomore student at Columbia, and undertook the project in response to the university’s handling of the case. As she explains, the performance is intended to highlight the weight of sexual violence on victims and to highlight institutional indifference;¹⁸ Sulkowicz later became one of twenty-three students to launch a federal complaint against Columbia using the gender equity law Title IX. Still images as well as video clips from Sulkowicz’s performance are widely available online. These media could be incorporated into first response education programmes as a way of prompting discussion about the impact sexual violence can have on university students, including its psychological, physical, social, and academic dimensions. Visual media may be an especially effective means to communicate the impact of sexual violence to participants who find it difficult to empathise with such experiences. In the university of Coimbra in Portugal, the project ‘Des(a)fiar a Violência Sexual. Partilha e denúncia situações de Violência Sexual’ drew on collective debates and discussions with women in higher education on experiences of sexual violence. As a result, a publication that contained different contributions by participants was launched. The fanzine-type publication included drawings, collage, poems and narrations around sexual violence.¹⁹

Theatre

A recent one-day conference on ‘Sexual Harassment in Higher Education’ (SHHE) at Goldsmiths, University of London²⁰ included a reading of a play called *The Girls Get Younger Every Year* by Phil Thomas. The play depicts a female postgraduate student becoming embroiled in an abusive relationship with an older male academic, and follows her attempts to seek help from fellow students as well as academic staff. A compelling piece of theatre, it spotlights the issue of sexual harassment of students by staff and provides insight into the lived realities of sexual violence and disclosure. Theatre could be used as part of first response education as a way to help trainees understand the relational dynamics that surround sexual violence, to appreciate the difficulties involved in making a disclosure, and to develop empathy for victims. This could be an especially effective strategy for introducing the issue of sexual violence on campus to those who may be sceptical about the need for first response education. At the end of the programme participants could be invited to re-write parts of the script of

¹⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/03/emma-sulkowicz-mattress-rape-columbia-university_n_5755612.html

¹⁹ <http://www.asbeiras.pt/2016/04/revista-aborda-a-violencia-sexual-com-relatos-e-poemas-de-estudantes-de-coimbra/>

²⁰ <https://shhegoldsmiths.wordpress.com>

the play to think through best practice when dealing with disclosures of sexual violence. Theatre interventions are currently being piloted in the US Army as part of SHARP (Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention) training. The training is said to be especially effective in heightening awareness, promoting dialogue, and facilitating empathy. Regiments where the training has been implemented have seen an increase in reporting.²¹

Survivor accounts

The campaigning group Blank Noise collective in India has developed some especially innovative artistic interventions. In 2006 they launched a campaign entitled ‘Dear Stranger’, which involved stopping people on the street and inviting them to read anonymous letters from survivors recounting their experiences of sexual violence.²² Similar strategies could be utilised as part of first response education, with accounts of sexual violence and disclosure experiences sourced from students in HE. Participants could be invited to read these accounts individually, with each participant reading a different account. A discussion could then be facilitated about their thoughts and feelings. This could nurture empathy among participants by inviting them to engage with survivor testimony first hand. Sourcing such survivor accounts would also help to build a picture of the various ways in which both individuals and institutions fail to support students who disclose sexual violence, and therefore further traumatise survivors (Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2001) and to explore the phenomenon of ‘institutional betrayal’ (Smith and Freyd, 2013). Accounts such as these could also be used in other ways, for instance in discussing how staff can better support students across a range of different scenarios, with participants invited to suggest specific measures which could have been taken in each situation to improve the student’s experience. This strategy may lend itself well to both sharing resources across and embedding knowledge within institutions through the development of an online archive collecting accounts of sexual violence and disclosure in HE. The archive could be modelled on and informed by existing archives elsewhere, such as ‘Strategic misogyny’,²³ ‘Academic sexism stories’,²⁴ and ‘Being a woman in philosophy’.²⁵

²¹ https://www.army.mil/article/167299/SHARP_New_approach_to_training_with_interactive_skit/

²² <http://blog.blanknoise.org/2006/05/dear-stranger.html>

²³ <https://strategicmisogyny.wordpress.com>

²⁴ <http://academicsexismstories.gendersquare.org>

²⁵ <https://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/category/sexual-harassment/>

Additional considerations

Recruitment

Some universities may choose to incentivise uptake of first response programmes through accreditation, while others already include first response training as part of their mandatory staff induction process. These kinds of strategies have benefits as well as drawbacks. A key limitation of such recruitment strategies is that they can encourage a ‘check box’ and ‘quick fix’ mindset that limits engagement with the training. However, if recruitment is done on an entirely voluntary basis, it may be that those members of staff who already find themselves tasked with supporting survivors — often women and LGBT people known to be active on gender issues — will continue to shoulder this responsibility and will be the only ones who volunteer for the training. In this way, uneven distributions of labour ordered by hierarchies of gender and sexuality may become further entrenched, and those already positioned as ‘institutional killjoys’ (Ahmed, 2015) may find themselves further marginalised.

Evaluation

Most training programmes already in place include some kind of evaluation or assessment, often via self-report measures focused on the perceived usefulness of the training. Others, such as the ‘Intervention Initiative’ at UWE, are using controlled trials before and after training as a means to measure both attitudinal and behavioural change. In thinking about how to assess educational initiatives delivered as part of the USVSV project, the question of exactly what the evaluation methods used are intended to measure will need to inform the design of training programmes. It is important that assessment measures reflect the needs of students who experience sexual violence. It is also crucial to note that because European universities do not currently audit rates of sexual assault, it will be difficult if not impossible to demonstrate progress by this measure (Bows, Burrell, and Westmarland, 2015, p.31).

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Further resources

Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children (Canada)

- Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence (free online training course, requires registration)
<http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/responding-disclosures-sexual-violence>
- Overcoming barriers and enhancing supportive responses (resource document)
http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/sites/vawlearningnetwork.ca/files/LN_Overcoming_Barriers_FINAL.pdf

End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) (USA)

- Training module on understanding the dynamics of sexual violence:
<http://www.evawintl.org/Library/DocumentLibraryHandler.ashx?id=42>
- Training module on the impact of sexual violence on victims:
<http://www.evawintl.org/Library/DocumentLibraryHandler.ashx?id=656>

National Online Resource Centre on Violence Against Women (USA)

- Special collection of online learning tools on violence against women from VAWnet:
<http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/OnlineLearning.php>

New England Adolescent Research Institute (NEARI) (USA)

- First responders: Responding to sexual assault disclosures (online training programme):
<http://www.nearipress.org/courses/163-first-responders-responding-to-sexual-assault-disclosures>

Ontario Women's Directorate (Canada)

- Developing a Response to Sexual Violence: A Resource Guide for Ontario's Colleges and Universities
http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/ending-violence/campus_guide.shtml#toc5ax

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