

Universities Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence Sussex

Executive Summary

The Universities Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence project is a partnership of seven universities across the UK, Greece, Italy and Spain, with associate partners from all these countries plus Latvia and Serbia. Each partner university has developed, piloted and evaluated a training programme for staff on receiving disclosures of sexual violence from students.

This report covers training delivered during 2017 to staff at Sussex and Brighton Universities. The training was preceded by a needs analysis at Sussex, which included a questionnaire completed by 300 students and focus groups with students and staff. This exercise indicated that students at Sussex lacked awareness of who to disclose to, and that staff required support to handle these disclosures.

USVSV Partner Universities

- Universitat Rovira I Virgili (Spain)
- Universidad del Pais Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibersitatea (Spain)
- Università degli Studi di Torino (Italy)
- Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Greece)
- Brunel University (UK)
- University of Sussex (UK)
- University of York (UK)

The training

The project team at Sussex designed a two-tier training model: non-frontline staff (e.g. faculty, library staff, general professional services staff) received a 90-minute session, and frontline staff (e.g. counsellors, residential advisors and student advisors) received a more comprehensive 4-hour session. In total, 112 members of Sussex staff attended training: 71 for the 90-minute sessions, 33 for the 4-hour sessions, and 8 Heads of School also attended a separate one-hour session. 40 staff at Brighton University (an Associate Partner in the project) also attended a 90-minute training session. The majority of these participants were women, perhaps due to the self-selecting nature of the process.

Key training messages:

- Sexual violence is an **umbrella term** which refers to any (contact or non-contact) activity of a sexual nature that is unwanted
- 'Violence' refers to violation (including verbal as well as physical harassment) as well as physical force
- Sexual violence can happen to anyone, but is a **gendered** phenomenon and also reflects other **intersecting inequalities** such as race, class and sexual orientation
- **Rape myths** play a key role in preventing disclosure, and must be counteracted
- Trauma has **varying effects**: there is no one 'typical' response
- **Empathy** is key: our response must be centred on the survivor
- **Empowerment** is also crucial: survivors are the experts on their own experiences and situations, and must not have choices taken away from them
- It is imperative to **know and signpost** survivors to the most appropriate support services whether on campus or off as appropriate
- It is also important to consider **self-care** and maintaining boundaries,

Key findings

Following the training sessions, participants were given an evaluation form. 30 completed forms were returned. In-depth interviews were also conducted with seven participants within one month of the training.

Responses were generally positive. Positive feedback included:

- Rather than learning 'facts', our trainees felt they had learned an *approach* to empathising with survivors and being reflexive about violence and trauma.
- Respondents generally felt positively towards the material and were able to connect to wider issues such as 'lad culture'
- Many absorbed the message that survivors' experiences should be the focus
- In the longer training sessions, respondents commented that learning practical techniques for responding to people impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder was particularly valuable.

Recommendations for improvement included:

- Respondents would have liked more information about the specific procedures and referral pathways at Sussex. However, as the Care Pathway was being updated during our training delivery period, it was not possible to give this
- Feedback was mixed about whether future training sessions should be delivered to diverse or homogenous groups (in terms of job role).

There are ongoing requests for further training at both universities. Building on this interest, we have filmed a version of the training which will be uploaded onto a learning platform as a webinar so that staff can undertake the basic level of training at their own convenience.

Recommendations

Following this pilot project, our recommendations for continuing this work at Sussex are as follows:

Adoption of a more coordinated approach to services for staff and students

Both students and staff would benefit from clarity with regard to what services are available, and the care pathways in place.

Training should be mandatory for frontline staff

Disclosure training is desirable for all staff in order to create a more open and empathic culture at the university, to encourage survivors to come forward, and to redistribute the emotional labour of providing support. This training is absolutely necessary for frontline staff, particularly in relation to specific Sussex procedures and the updated Care Pathway, and other staff should be encouraged to attend.

Face-to-face sessions should be delivered to staff in similar roles

This may not always be possible, and feedback on this aspect of training was mixed, with some respondents enjoying being trained with members of staff they would not normally work with. However, other trainees felt that it would have been more beneficial to be trained with staff in similar roles so that shared difficulties and issues could have been discussed and the content could have been more tailored. We would therefore recommend that training groups should feature staff who are in similar roles where possible.

For staff who cannot attend face-to-face sessions, awareness should be raised of the online webinar

For new staff, and staff who might find it difficult to attend face-to-face training, the webinar should be publicised. This will be available soon.

The University's policies and procedures for supporting both student and staff survivors of sexual harassment and violence should be clarified urgently

These policies should be communicated as widely and clearly as possible and described in an easily accessible area of the website.

The University should provide support for staff who are supporting students or colleagues with disclosures

The pilot training emphasised that staff should exercise self-care when supporting others. The University should enable this by signposting counselling services, making it clear that staff should be able to talk to their supervisors/managers for support, and having easily accessible self-care resources online.

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