



UNIVERSITY OF  
**LEICESTER**

THE CENTRE FOR  
HATE STUDIES

# A Catalyst for Change: Using Students' Testimonies to Shape Responses to Hate and Harassment

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# Overview

## 1. Hate and harassment in higher education

What does it look like? Why does it happen? What are the impacts?

## 2. Case studies

What can we learn from victims' accounts of hate and harassment?

## 3. Responding to hate and harassment

How should universities respond? What do students want?

**Content note:** This session covers themes of prejudice, hostility and victimisation, including specific examples and personal accounts.

# Issues within a higher education context

- Universities are not immune to the rising levels of hate and harassment experienced within wider society.
- Victims can be targeted on the basis of any assumed identity/ies, although research has focused on and uncovered prolific levels of race- and gender-based harassment.
  - 24% of minority ethnic students have been subjected to racially motivated harassment at university (EHRC, 2019).
  - 10% of Muslim students feel unable to fully engage with their course material out of fear of being deemed 'radical' and almost 50% cite broader structural barriers, such as being forced to choose between attending a university class or a religious event (Akel, 2021).
- The diversity of student communities contrasts markedly with the under-representation of minority ethnic and faith groups within academic communities. This poses specific challenges in the context of hate and harassment:
  - Lack of recognition, empathy and ownership amongst academic staff and senior leaders.
  - Unwillingness amongst students to share experiences of victimisation.

# Impacts within a higher education context

- The harms of hate and harassment are profound, lasting and wide-ranging (Chakraborti, Garland and Hardy, 2014). They include:
  - Physical injury
  - Impacts upon emotional wellbeing and mental health
  - Impacts upon families and the wider community
- The harms associated with hate and harassment within higher education can be clustered into three key themes:
  - Reduced sense of wellbeing
  - Decreased attainment
  - Increased attrition
- Every incident affects levels of trust between the victim, the university and wider society.

# Support needs and barriers to justice for victims

Wider hate studies and victim led research has shown that a range of provisions can act to support victims and/or increase the likelihood of a formal report. These can include:

Disclosing experiences without making a formal report

Validation of victim status

Trauma informed practice

Knowledge and understanding of processes and outcomes

However, a number of barriers remain which can prevent victims from accessing support or making a report. These can include:

Unaware of victim status or their right to support

Unaware of how or where to disclose or report

Lack of faith in receiving a positive outcome

Fear of being re-traumatised or of repercussions

# Our research

Our Catalyst for Change project was commissioned in 2020 in response to growing concerns about these sector-wide problems. Its aims were to:

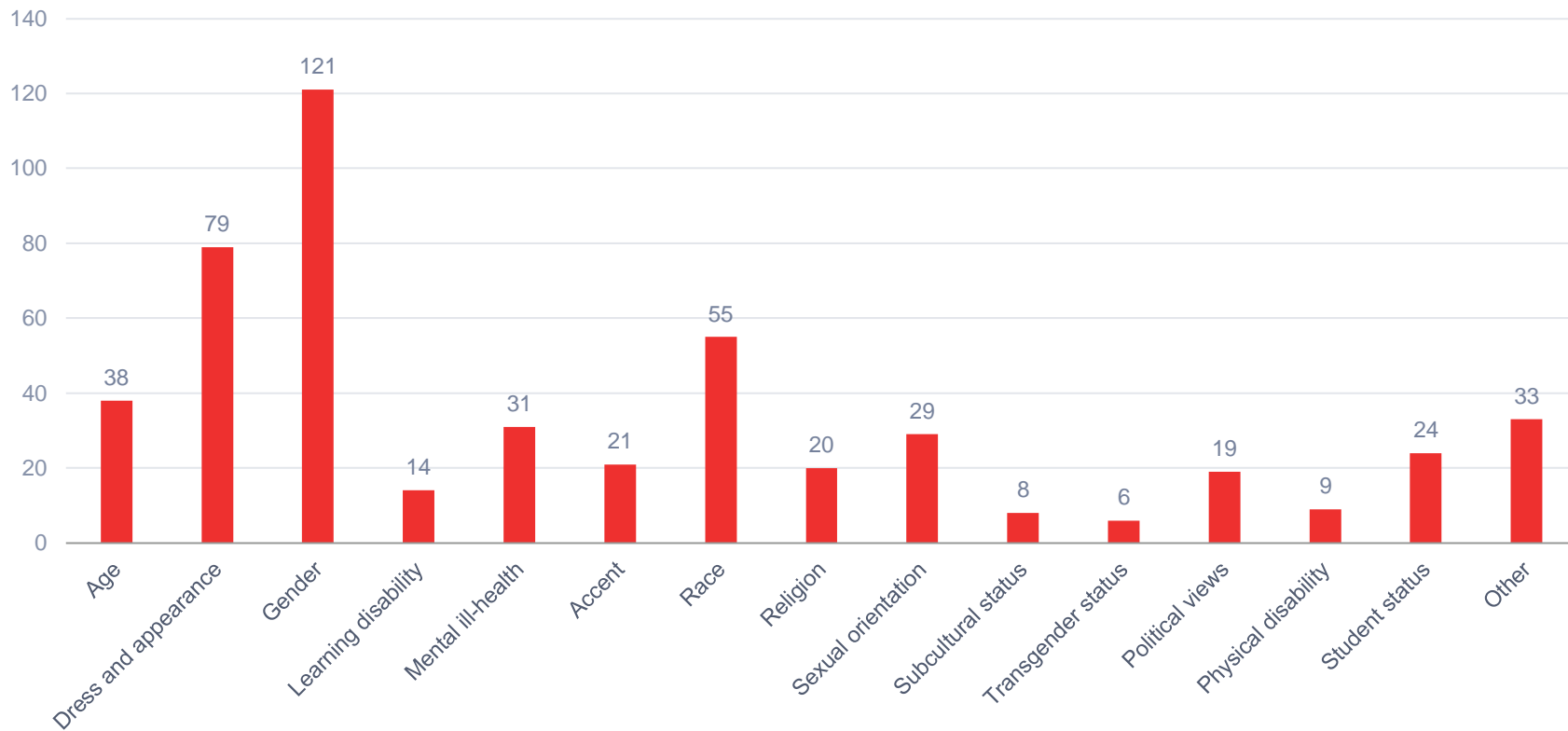
- Understand the scale and nature of hate and harassment affecting students
- Establish perceptions and uptake of reporting and disclosures
- Ascertain perceptions and uptake of support provision
- Utilise the testimonies of students, victims and survivors to shape good practice within the institution and wider sector

A survey was used to gather the views of 565 University of Leicester students with an additional 39 follow-up interviews.

# Catalyst for Change: an overview

- Of the 565 respondents, 227 (41%) disclosed having been subjected to some form of hate-based harassment whilst registered as a university student.
- 15 identity characteristics were identified as having been targeted, including: gender (59%), race (27), sexual orientation (14%), religion (10%), learning disability (7%), transgender status (3%), mental health (15%), accent (10%), age (18%) and more.
- 80% of these incidents occurred on University premises, including: halls of residence (34%), a department/school building (26%), the Students' Union (25%) or a workshop room (12%).

## Characteristics targeted





## Catalyst for Change: an overview

- 74% of participants disclosed feeling upset in response to the incident(s), 55% felt vulnerable, 15% felt suicidal, 24% wanted to leave the University, 27% cited a decrease in attendance and 28% discussed a decrease in attainment.
- Despite the extreme nature of impacts, only 28% of victims had reported or disclosed the incident(s) to anybody and 23% had accessed support.
- Barriers to reporting included: not thinking that it would be taken seriously (51%), not thinking that it would help (59%) and previous bad experiences of reporting (12%).
- Of those who reported, most went to a member of university staff.

# In the victims' words: case studies

- Three case studies have been chosen to illustrate some examples of hate and harassment as described by those who have been subjected to it. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities.
- These students explain the context in which they were targeted, their interpretation of the events, the impact of the incident(s) and the barriers that they faced in the aftermath.
- Following their experiences of hate and harassment, each victim within these case studies chose a different route: (a) not reporting or disclosing, (b) disclosing only and (c) formally reporting.

## Case study 1: the experience of hate

Jade, an undergraduate student who had been subjected to hate on the basis of her gender, accent, nationality and political views:

*“I get the whole you know ‘oh you love the IRA, you support the IRA, you didn’t give a shit when they were bombing Manchester and bombing London and you liked that they did that, don’t you’... I open my mouth and things just sort of change, and I’ve grown accustomed now to noticing that change and noticing it whenever someone realises how I speak or where I come from ... it’s just very noticeable now.”*

*“It isn’t black and white. This stuff, it isn’t just race, it isn’t just sexual harassment.”*

# Case study 1: the impact of hate

*“That’s taken me over a year to minutely deal with what I went through... To actually be able to sit down and say that was really horrible that I went through that, rather than play it down... I felt there’s no movement for a person like me but there is for my friends so I sort of just said well I guess we move on and take it on the chin and not say anything... I just don’t want anyone to think she’s just the angry drunk Irish girl... I never wanted people to look at me and see that stereotype.”*

*“It’s all of these tiny things that add up to something bigger... I was privileged to have my support system in place, because if worst came to worst I probably wouldn’t have been here right now.”*

# Case study 1: no disclosure or report

*“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 think I’m so aware that if anything is going to happen there needs to be solid evidence behind it ... And because it was mostly verbal, I didn’t have that evidence I felt I needed.”*

## Case Study 2: the experience of hate

Olivia, a postgraduate student who had been subjected to hate on the basis of her gender:

*“He’d wait until there were only girls in the house and get really aggressive. Say that women are stupid, why are we at Uni and we should be more submissive to men... It was a scary experience because I’m not massive and he’s really tall, on a sports team and quite big and strong, like there was no way I would’ve been able to do anything if he’d come any closer.”*

## Case study 2: the impact of hate

*“I was scared to go downstairs in case he came back, when you live with someone it’s really difficult to avoid someone, so for two days I couldn’t face leaving my room... My home felt really unsafe.... I didn’t want to bump into him on campus, it changes everything really, you’re constantly looking out thinking how do I avoid people.”*

*“Uni is that one time where for a lot of students it’s your first time away from home, it’s stressful enough, I was trying to write a dissertation whilst struggling with all this. And you need to feel safe at Uni...”*

## Case study 2: disclosing hate

*“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... I was told because I didn’t there was nothing the Uni could do because it’s your word against his until charges are pressed.”*

*“I didn’t want to [press charges] at the time because I didn’t want to ruin anyone’s life, do you know what I mean? Like yes I was really struggling but I knew I could get over it. I’d dealt with stuff like this before I came to Uni so it wasn’t a massive thing, I didn’t want to ruin someone’s life.”*



## Case study 3: experience of hate

Jasmine, an undergraduate student who had been subjected to hate on the basis of her sexual orientation and mental health.

*“I’m bisexual and it was my housemates. They would just pick up on that and make comments about it. They know I’m seeing the counselling service and they’d make comments about that... They’d make comments like ‘go kill yourself’. So yeah they’d definitely pick up on those two as things to harass me about.”*

## Case study 3: the impact of hate

*“[The harassment] made me feel awful.... I was very much debating moving out, it put me in a deep, deep dark place. My attendance dropped from 80% to 20% if that. I just couldn’t get out of bed for three, four weeks.”*

*“Counselling and stuff really helped, but I was lucky that I was already doing counselling beforehand and even though I was priority it still took them six weeks. So I think if that had happened [without any counselling] it would’ve been incredibly hard. Yeah it didn’t put in a good place at all, really bad.”*

## Case study 3: reporting hate

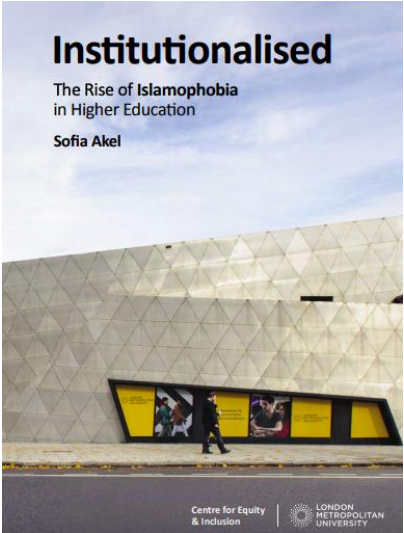
*“The process was alright, but long. I submitted it in February and they only just got back to me literally a week ago [3 months later]... And when they emailed me it was literally like 50-100 words and didn’t explain how they came to their conclusion, how they did anything. It just said we’ve decided not to take formal action, which is fine, but it didn’t say why they decided that, it was literally like 50 words... I would’ve preferred just to have heard why they reached their outcome.”*

# How are universities responding to hate and harassment?

- Currently, there is little consensus in terms of how Universities respond to hate-based victimisation.
- Reporting on practice and outcomes and sharing data is not commonplace.
- As student numbers grow, identifying safeguarding issues and having enough appropriate staff to respond is a concern.
- Informed voices tend to be lacking in shaping institutional policies and practices surrounding prevention and responses.

# Growing sector wide recognition of hate and harassment

**Report + Support**



# What do students want?

Validation when  
disclosing

Understanding  
where to go for help

Knowing what to  
expect when  
disclosing/reporting

A judgement free  
response

Anonymous  
reporting and  
support

Receiving feedback  
on judgements

Feeling safe on  
campus and at  
home

Preventative  
measures

Academic and  
emotional support

# Thank you for listening!

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