

## Sexual harassment needs reporting at university

We at York are not doing to enough to combat harassment and hate crime

By Dom Smithies

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When I was told the results of Nouse's FOI - that there were fewer than 25 cases of (alleged) sexual violence (harassment, groping, assault, abuse, etc.) over the last five years - I was stunned. For a university of 18 000 students, such low numbers are beyond alarming. These numbers are not an indication that York isn't affected by the sexual violence we know to be rife on campuses across the country; it's an indication of a grossly irresponsible failing of the reporting systems currently in place.

Universities UK put together a taskforce to review misconduct guidelines, particularly focusing on sexual violence and hate crime. They shared various national averages for reporting rates relating to sexual violence at universities with the most conservative figure, 6.8 per cent, coming from governmental research on full-time students. Even with the conservative estimation of 6.8 per cent we should have around 1224 reported cases at York; yet we have fewer than five and a rate of 0.03 per cent.

In my capacity as Community & Well-being Officer, a number of student survivors have shared their experience with me. Particularly since the Consent Talks began earlier in the year, they've been honest, not only about their shocking experiences, but also about their concerns regarding support and the reporting mechanisms available at York. In many reported cases of alleged sexual violence, issues are dealt with at a local level and through mediation instead of going through more formal processes. This

can often be the most appropriate way of handling them. While having a devolved welfare system through our colleges has many perks – it's familiar, more accessible and carries less stigma (as they deal with any and all welfare issues), the pitfall comes when students don't know this option is there for them, or if they aren't comfortable with going to someone in their college.

Colleges don't necessarily record all of their incidents centrally. This is wrong. In order to understand the scale of an issue, it's necessary to have centralised recording; a lack of provision for such documentation is unacceptable.

The risk facing the University is that if they improve the processes and raise awareness of them it'll lead to more reporting, which may indicate a greater problem. So, a bizarre misconception that there's an incentive for the University to stick its head in the sand and act like there isn't a problem is leading to inadequate support for students during their time here and failure on behalf of the University to exercise their duty of care.

There are a whole host of issues which contribute to the worrying case of under-reporting that's evident at this University – the flawed system, the lack of awareness of the system and the culture around reporting. The latter is the hardest to change – there are a lot of challenges that students face when reporting something as serious as sexual violence.

It's a great step forward that the University has created a taskforce to address this incredibly important issue, I urge that they stay on track with achieving everything that's necessary. In my view and from the contact and conversation I've had with students, what is necessary is more awareness raising, formal training for more staff, effective dissemination of written guidance and an update to the policies and processes.

As students will know, YUSU officer elections are about to take place so I won't be in post for the resolution of these issues. I can only ask that students continue to demand that the support and provision they receive from the institution, in any and all aspects of their experience, is as good as it can be.

Our institution does care, but it's up to you as students to do what you can to keep a spotlight on sexual violence so the University continues to do more.



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