



No Place for Hate

Hate crimes and incidents in further and higher education: sexual orientation and gender identity



national union of students

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Foreword

Colleges and universities are traditionally viewed as bastions of free thought and expression, providing students with an environment in which to grow personally as well as academically. They are also viewed as places where students are at liberty to hold different ideas, viewpoints and opinions.

For many lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) students, college and university is also a time where they are able to explore and define their gender and/or sexual identities, unrestrained by previous school and family life. Such an environment is destroyed when students are targeted by antisocial behaviour or crime because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Unfortunately, this report shows that these negative experiences are a reality for some students. Moreover, in many cases, these incidents occur in and around the college or university campus, perpetrated by fellow students.

This NUS report contains some distressing finds. Nearly one in three lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) students reported that they had experienced at least one hate incident related to their sexual orientation some time during their current studies. Almost one in two trans respondents (45 per cent) reported that they had experienced at least one hate incident motivated by prejudice against their gender identity.

Perpetrators of hate crime are often perceived to be hate-fuelled individuals who plan attacks upon their victims, but the reality is that the majority of perpetrators are everyday people. Indeed they are often fellow students who commit these acts within the context of their everyday lives.

While it is vital that further and higher education institutions prevent serious forms of hate crime such as physical assault, it is equally important to address 'low-level' hate activity. Our research found that these incidents, particularly if they are persistent, often have major repercussions on the victim's long-term mental health. And while these incidents may not necessarily constitute criminal offences, the acceptance of these types of behaviour such as tolerating the use of degrading and homophobic language, can create an environment in which conduct may escalate from 'mere' words to threats, vandalism and violence.

Hate incidents of all types also have broader implications. They not only affect the individual victim, but also their family, friends and the wider community both on- and off-campus. These experiences encourage mistrust, alienation and suspicion in student bodies and wider society, resulting in isolation and exclusion.

While our findings are deeply concerning, our report also offers clear and practical approaches for institutions, students' unions and others to make a positive difference to students' lives.

Every student has the right to express themselves without fear, whether that is in their lecture theatre, in and around their institution or in broader society.

Vicki Baars - NUS LGBT Officer (Women's Place)

Alan Bailey - NUS LGBT Officer (Open Place)

Pete Mercer - NUS Vice President (Welfare)

Executive Summary

This report is one of a series of four reports by NUS, which explores the extent and nature of hate incidents among students across the UK. While this report focuses on the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) students, the other reports focus on disabled students, Black* students and students with a religion or belief. The reports are part of a larger project funded by the Home Office to reduce student victimisation.

Across the four reports we found that 16 per cent of all respondents had experienced at least one form of hate incident at their current institution. Moreover, compared to victims of non-bias incidents, those who experienced hate incidents were more likely to be repeatedly victimised and suffer more negative effects as a result. Despite this, few of these hate incidents were reported to authorities and consequently the affected students received little support from their institution or law enforcement agencies.

These reports in full can be downloaded at:
www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/

About the research and respondents

Our research gathered the experiences of 9,229 students from across both Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sectors and is the first nationwide student-specific research into hate crime of this scale.

Respondents were asked to report victimisation under a range of categories, and were then asked to indicate whether or not they believed the incident to be motivated, or partly motivated, by the perpetrator's prejudice against their membership, or presumed membership, of the following protected characteristics: race/ethnicity, religion/belief, disability, sexual

orientation and gender identity. This allowed us to compare bias and non-bias incidents.

The majority of those surveyed (89 per cent) were studying in England. Six per cent were in Wales, two per cent in Scotland, and three per cent in Northern Ireland.

Sixty-eight per cent of our respondents were at university while 28 per cent were at a further education or sixth form college. Smaller percentages were studying at adult and community learning providers, work-based learning providers, or specialist colleges.

Seventy per cent of respondents were female and 29 per cent were male. 0.6 per cent preferred not to select while 0.4 per cent stated that their gender identity was not the same as assigned at birth.

Eighty-seven per cent of the students surveyed were heterosexual (7,974). The remaining respondents listed their sexuality as:

- lesbian: two per cent
- bisexual: five per cent
- gay: four per cent
- preferred not to say: two per cent
- other: 0.8 per cent

* NUS uses the term Black to describe students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent.

Key findings

The following summarises the headline findings of our research on students who have been targeted, or are worried about being targeted, because of prejudice against their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Fears of victimisation

Gay and lesbian respondents were more than 10 times as likely as heterosexual respondents to have concerns about being subject to abuse because of their sexual orientation.

Almost half (46 per cent) of trans respondents reported that they were very or fairly worried about being subject to abuse because of their gender identity, as did 34 per cent of those who opted not to disclose their gender identity.

Respondents frequently described how they hid their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and were cautious about when and where they went out, for fear that they would become vulnerable to bias-motivated victimisation.

“I pretend I am straight to people I don’t know very well or people I feel will react badly. I introduce my partner as my ‘friend’ at these times to avoid possible verbal or physical abuse.”

The extent and nature of hate incidents

Thirty-one per cent of lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) students surveyed had experienced at least one hate incident related to their sexual orientation some time during their current studies, compared to 2 per cent of heterosexual respondents.

Nine per cent of LGB respondents had experienced one or more forms of physical abuse, while 7 per cent of LGB students had received abusive, threatening or insulting written communications.

Fifty-five per cent of trans respondents said had been a victim of threatening, abusive or insulting words, threatening behaviour or threats of violence.

The majority of these respondents believed this was motivated by prejudice against their gender identity.

Twenty per cent of trans respondents had experienced at least one incident of physical abuse, while 38 per cent had experienced at least one incident of verbal abuse, threats of violence or threatening behaviour.

“I was out clubbing with university friends. They would make it difficult for me to have a good night out with my friends – when at the bar they pushed and shoved, punched or kicked when I ordered drinks – on the dance floor they would be dancing behind me and throw themselves into the back of me and push me over.”

Location of incidents and perpetrator profiles

Strikingly, a large proportion of incidents occurred at the victim’s place of study. The exception being in cases of vandalism, property damage or theft, which predominantly occurred at or near the victim’s home.

Moreover, many of these incidents occurred in the afternoon and evening, presumably during college and university campus open hours. In almost half of the cases (45 per cent), the perpetrator was believed to be a fellow student.

The bulk of hate incidents were perpetrated by white male assailants, often young people in groups, who were not known by the victim.

“What is most worrying to me is that I and the perpetrator are both Year 1 Social Work students.”

Reporting of hate incidents

Our research showed that hate-related incidents against LGBT students went widely unreported. Some 8–13 per cent of incidents involving prejudice against the victim’s sexual orientation were reported to the victim’s institution. Levels of reporting to the police were even lower.

Those who did report incidents often chose to do so to academic staff (42 per cent) or student officers (29 per cent), rather than non-teaching staff (12 per cent).

Reasons given for victims not reporting incidents to their institution included shame and embarrassment, fear of reprisals and retribution, and concern over having to disclose personal details.

Reasons for not reporting hate-related incidents to the police fell into three broad themes: the incident not being 'worth' reporting, personal fears or concerns and a lack of faith in the criminal justice system.

Institutions responded to reports of such incidents in a variety of different ways – many positively, but some negatively.

“The member of staff was one that I trusted and was concerned over my behaviour in class. When I reported the incident I was offered support and some time off for when I felt unwell.”

The impact on victims

Victims of hate incidents were much more likely than victims of non-bias incidents to report problems as a result of their experience, particularly related to their mental health, acceptance of other social groups and, to a lesser extent, their studies.

In one in four incidents involving prejudice against the victim's sexual orientation and one in five of incidents involving prejudice against their gender identity, the victim reported mental health problems. Victims talked about how the experience(s) had led to higher levels of depression, anxiety, difficulty with sleeping and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Many respondents had feelings of distrust towards strangers and peers alike, and explained that they went out of their way to avoid certain groups of people as a result of victimisation. This finding clearly demonstrates how hate incidents affect community cohesion by encouraging mistrust and suspicion and, in turn, increasing isolation, exclusion and barriers to communication.

One in 10 incidents involving prejudice against the victim's sexual orientation and 9 per cent of those related to their gender identity affected the victim's studies. Respondents commonly reported that their

grades, attendance and participation in university or college social activities were adversely affected.

Of those reporting an effect on their studies, more than half stated they thought about leaving their course as a result of victimisation.

“I had to go into counselling. I suffered from nightmares, panic and anxiety attacks. I stopped speaking to new people. I had to see a psychiatrist and take antidepressants and panic and anxiety medications. I had to change my university course and defer a year to get away from the people abusing me.”

Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations are aimed at FE and HE institutions and organisations working with them. However, they may be of interest to law enforcement practitioners and agencies as well as students' unions. We hope that these recommendations will be considered by all colleges and universities and will help in the development of a cross-sector strategy to tackle hate and prejudice experienced by students across the UK.

1. Demonstrate a firm commitment to equality and diversity

FE and HE institutions should demonstrate a strong commitment to equality and diversity and work to celebrate these values through clear and widely publicised codes of conduct, equality and diversity policies, and complaint and reporting procedures.

2. Develop preventative and educational activity on prejudice and hate

Colleges and universities should work to foster good relations among students and raise awareness of what constitutes a hate incident and the negative impact of this behaviour on the victim. This might include discussion and interactive work within the classroom, as well as through events that celebrate diversity and encourage integration.

3. Stop or mitigate against hate incidents

FE and HE institutions must make it clear that hate-related behaviour is not acceptable, through the active

enforcement of student codes of conduct and the institution of zero-tolerance policies.

4. Establish multi-agency, joined-up approaches to tackling hate

Colleges and universities should work to establish partnerships with local police authorities, voluntary sector organisations and authorities to develop a cross-sector strategy to reduce hate within, as well as outside, the institution.

5. Strengthen existing support services

FE and HE institutions should ensure that those working in their counselling and advice services are aware of the mental health impact of hate incidents and recognise that even low-level incidents can have serious implications for victims' long-term mental wellbeing and self-confidence.

6. Establish strong LGBT support networks

LGBT clubs and societies often act as a support network for students who may be, or may have been, victims of hate incidents or hate crimes. These should therefore be provided with financial backing and support, to ensure open access to their services. Colleges, universities and students' unions should also ensure that LGBT clubs and societies are well connected to wider support services within their institution.

7. Encourage reporting of, and maintain systematic records on, hate incidents

Many respondents did not report incidents because they believed them to be too trivial, or that reporting would not make a difference. Students need to know that hate incidents are taken seriously and that reporting them influences preventative work, as well as potentially leading to disciplinary action against perpetrators.

8. Provide flexible options to report hate incidents

Colleges and universities should establish a variety of mechanisms for reporting hate incidents. This might include self-reporting online and on-campus reporting and advice centres, as well as publicising third party reporting through other agencies.

9. Promote greater confidence in reporting mechanisms

Better protocols for interviewing and debriefing victims of hate incidents are needed, together with assurances of confidentiality for victims, who often fear reprisals. Victims should be assured that their reports will be taken seriously and will be consistently and thoroughly investigated and recorded.

10. Provide clear guidance on the law

It is vital that guidance on what constitutes a hate crime, the rights of victims, and the criminal justice procedure itself, is developed and made available to students.

