



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of Speaker Meeting: “Stamping out sexual harassment and ‘lad culture’ in the university sector” 8 December 2015

Speakers:

Laura Bates, Founder, Everyday Sexism Project

Susuana Amoah, Women’s Officer, National Union of Students

David Richardson, Vice-Chancellor, University of East Anglia

Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive, Universities UK

Laura Bates began her presentation by describing that the Everyday Sexism Project has now received over 100,000 contributions from women who have experienced instances of sexism, both minor and serious. She noted that of course these contributions were not restricted to staff and students in universities; but explained why she felt the sector has an excellent opportunity to deal with some of the highlighted issues. She described the good work the National Union of Students had already done around raising awareness in this area, referencing the Hidden Marks report that was published in 2010.

She made it clear that institutions should refrain from any knee-jerk reactions of “not on my watch” and to consider what can be done to make students and staff more confident in reporting harassment to their institution and to the police. She said that while many universities may have reporting mechanisms in place but that students may not be aware of these or be afraid of damaging their academic career if they use them to report instances of harassment or abuse.

Laura Bates also raised the matter of social media and how this has added a new dimension to any harassment that students might receive, such as web pages such as ‘spotted’ or pages that rank women out of ten. She flagged that university was a time when young people are already under pressure, living away from home for the first time and particular occasions like Fresher’s week, initiations, or club nights can provide opportunities for harassment. When these are university-organised or affiliated events, it gives the impression that the discrimination is institutional and makes female students feel even less able to complain. She concluded her remarks by noting that work has begun in this area but stressing the importance that this is patchy and solutions require full buy-in from the university management.

Susuana Amoah described why tackling lad culture has been a key aspect of the women’s campaign for years. The NUS believe that as long as misogyny, harassment and sexual violence are normalised as part of the student experience, female students do not have equal access to university education. Susuana set out the findings of the NUS’ Hidden Marks report which discovered that in order to properly tackle sexual harassment and assault on campus; it must be acknowledged that this behaviour is in fact sustained within a wider problematic culture that exists on campuses across the UK, commonly known as lad culture. She noted that this was then defined by students in the NUS’ 2013 report “That’s What She Said” as group or ‘pack’ mentality

residing in activities such as sport, heavy alcohol consumption and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynistic, racist or homophobic.

Susuana Amoah also referenced the new #StandByMe campaign launched by the NUS on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. She noted that the campaign calls for a consultation which listens to the student movement and specialist services in order to develop new reporting and disciplinary guidelines and survivor support. By looking at policy, training, education and support systems, the lad culture audit confirmed that Tackling lad culture and sexual violence on campuses is not something universities can achieve by only focusing on part of the issue. As well as challenging the Zellick report, at NUS, the women's campaign are currently working with the pilot unions to develop an award criteria for local lad culture strategies. In order to achieve acceptable standards the students union and the university must show that they have together been able to; acknowledge lad culture, challenge lad culture, create inclusive social spaces and create supportive structures.

She closed her remarks with reiterating the importance of universities and students unions working together to actively preform their duty of care, putting students at the heart of the system and creating safer and accessible educational communities.

David Richardson spoke about how the issue of sexual harassment and 'lad culture' has received a heightened profile in the last few months. He set out the work that he had been doing at the University of East Anglia in collaboration with students to try and highlight issues, this included attending students union council meetings and trying to ensure that the university has effective reporting processes and that those that have been a victim of harassment have confidence in the institutions mechanisms.

He noted that there was no quick fix to this issue and what is needed is a long-term culture change, with help from within and outside the higher education sector and commitment from senior managers. As a member of the Violence, Harassment and Hate Crime Affecting University Students Taskforce he was positive about the opportunity that the sector had to tackle the issue, looking at both prevention and support. He suggested that this would begin with reviewing the processes that universities already had in place and to work with students on how to eradicate harassment. He noted that the issue goes beyond university campuses; for example, in many institutions a large proportion of students living in the local city where it was more difficult for the university cannot control the environment. Professor Richardson highlighted the need to work in partnership with local businesses, nightclubs and bars and the police to educate people on the issue.

Professor Richardson concluded his presentation by describing what more there was to do for the universities and students unions to ensure that they were engaging male students and he also suggested that the taskforce should revisit the guidance for institutions provided by the Zellick Report.

Nicola Dandridge thanked the NUS for the work that they had already done in this area and described what areas the taskforce will be looking into. She set out that the taskforce's work and recommendations will build on the range of activity already going on in universities to address harassment and violence against students and to ensure an inclusive, safe and tolerant environment for all students.

Nicola Dandridge described that although sexual harassment or other forms of harassment may require different approaches, there are also commonalities in how an institution might respond effectively, such as; having in place a proper and transparent process for handling complaints, managing social media on campus and creating a visible culture of zero tolerance of harassment and violence. She explained how students will often have multiple identities and as such, can suffer harassment on many accounts. She noted that the taskforce will also be an opportunity to engage with the Government's Call to End Violence against Women and Girls.

She set out the other members of the taskforce and the decisions taken at the first meeting of 17 November (the full list of members can be found [here](#)). She noted that the time-frame for the programme of work was tight, with a final report and guidance, examples of good practice and recommendations for institutions, to be ready for September 2016. In describing the initial responses from universities she set out a few key themes that had begun to emerge, stressing that these were still in the beginning stages, the list was not exhaustive and there was more work to be done. These themes could form the basis of an overarching framework for developing effective institutional responses. They included:

- Creating a safe environment free from intimidation, harassment and fear by promoting a **culture of inclusivity and zero tolerance** e.g. setting behavioural expectations for students and making clear to students the implications of failing to meet these expectations
- Providing **clear information** to students on what they might expect from an institution, including support networks and information on **referral pathways** so they know how to report concerns
- Implementing a visible and effective mechanism for students to **report** concerns
- Having mechanisms in place to review whether referral and reporting pathways, along with complaint procedures, are effective
- Having in place **appropriate support and advice** for students who raise concerns; including **appropriately trained staff**.
- Having appropriate **policies** in place to challenge and prevent harassment, bullying and hate incidents/crimes
- Having a clear, consistent and transparent **process** for responding to and investigating student concerns in a timely fashion that is followed across the institution
- Implementing a process of **regular review** so that procedures remain effective
- Ensuring there is **high level oversight of procedures** at appropriate intervals
- Having appropriate **external links** (with the wider community, police etc)

Q&A and discussion

It was commented that this issue has gained prominence in recent years. Others agreed and it was felt that **social media** could be a large factor in this increase because of websites like 'Spotted' and 'Unilad'. It was also mentioned that the local police force were very committed to stamping out inappropriate behaviour but did not necessarily have the correct training to tackle this effectively. Others remarked on the shocking level of cyber bullying, they noted that there was a large amount of literature in schools on this and therefore perhaps what we see at university level is something that has been **ingrained in people at a younger age** and that social media is created to be polarizing. However, others suggested that social media could provide an opportunity to shift culture. It was also discussed how the sector shouldn't underestimate the **psychological impact** that this can have on students and how important it is to empower students and staff to be part of the solution.

Some attendees reflected that with the **change from grants to loans** there is a strong likelihood that students may decide to attend their local university, and therefore bringing up different challenges such as students commuting to university on public transport or those that have joined from the same school who may have no each other for some time and bring school relationships to a new environment. The sector needs to be able to **address the variety of the student experience** when working to tackle this issue. This was flagged perhaps there was a need to do something earlier on this issue in schools and warned that the sector hasn't seen the full scale of the issue as yet, and in working in partnership with the police and community, those cities where there is more than one institution have a great opportunity to share best practice.

Many attendees welcomed the Government's commitment to this issue where it had previously been unwilling. It was noted that in other sectors there were commitments to **women in leadership positions** such as the FTSE-100's 30% club, whereas women in the higher education sector were still much unrepresented.

It was suggested that universities should look into working with focus groups of students to ensure that their views on any agreed approach should be taken into account. While it was generally agreed that the **senior representatives must lead the work**, a bottom up approach also has validity. The group discussed the idea that whatever is decided must be **aimed at the whole community** as women can be institutionalised into lad culture in same as men way warned that the sector should be prepared for the improvement in processes leading to an increase in reporting, and it was noted that the length of time that police investigations can take must be considered as part of the taskforce's report.

Finally one university member noted that their institution had decided to **reject the recommendations of the Zellick Report** which led to discussion that that the Zellick Report needs to be challenged more widely than by the sector as it includes references to police responsibility, and this is an area which MPs and Peers may be able to address through the parliamentary process.