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# Peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old learners in further education

June 2023

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## Executive summary

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In the autumn term of 2022, inspectors undertook in person visits to all twelve further education colleges in Wales to evaluate the incidence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and review the culture and processes that help protect and support 16 to 18-year-old learners in colleges. We held workshops with learners, spoke to leaders, teachers and support staff in colleges and looked at a wide range of documents relating to existing processes involving potential incidents of sexual harassment.

We found that the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old college learners is complex and widely underreported, with many learners choosing not to, or being unsure how to, report incidents of sexual harassment for a variety of reasons. Colleges have well established learner disciplinary policies and processes and most deal effectively with the most serious reported cases of alleged peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

College systems for accurate recording and analysis of sexual harassment among learners are underdeveloped. Too often, incidents of sexual harassment are recorded and categorised within generic classifications of bullying. Many staff told us they lack confidence and feel that there is a need for more professional development and updates in relation to sexual harassment.

Where colleges have held specific training sessions on addressing sexual harassment, these have helped staff to recognise incidents and address them appropriately. Overall, there is also a lack of further education specific resources to support college staff in dealing with the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Collaborative work to address these concerns has begun recently but it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness or impact.

Our discussions with learners and staff suggest that learners identifying as female, LGBTQ+ and learners with additional learning needs may be more likely to experience sexual harassment. Sexual harassment incidents involve a mix of face-to-face and online issues.

The following recommendations should support further education colleges in their work to identify and address issues of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old learners:

- Ensure that all learners benefit from opportunities to take part in learning activities and discussions about forming and maintaining healthy relationships
- Develop strategies to prevent and tackle misogynistic attitudes and cultures developing among groups of learners
- Ensure that all relevant staff members undertake professional learning that enables them to confidently recognise and respond to sexual harassment as well as help learners develop their understanding of healthy relationships
- Ensure that all learners feel safe and comfortable in all areas of college buildings, grounds, virtual spaces, and transport

- Record, categorise and analyse instances of sexual harassment, assault and abuse in a consistent way that enables leaders to identify trends and take appropriate measures in response

The following recommendations should support the Welsh Government in its work with further education colleges to monitor and address issues of sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old college learners:

- Make clear which aspects of Welsh Government education guidance relating to sexual harassment apply to further education colleges and clarify any differences between requirements in schools and further education colleges
- Provide appropriate guidance to colleges to help them adopt a co-ordinated and consistent approach to recording and categorising instances of sexual harassment

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## Introduction

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This report considers the incidence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in the lives of young people and reviews the culture and processes that help protect and support 16 to 18-year-old learners in further education colleges in Wales. Sexual harassment occurs when a person engages in unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that has the purpose or effect of:

- violating someone's dignity; or
- creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them

Sexual harassment is unlawful under the Equality Act 2010. In our work with learners, we defined peer-on-peer sexual harassment as:

- making sexual comments, remarks, jokes either face-to-face or online
- lifting up skirts or taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing
- making nasty comments about someone's body, gender, sexuality or looks to cause them humiliation, distress or alarm
- image-based abuse, such as sharing a nude/semi-nude photo or video without the consent of the person pictured
- sending unwanted sexual, explicit or pornographic photographs/videos to someone

The report has been written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in the annual remit letter from March 2022. It also reflects a similar request from the Children, Young People and Education Committee. This review is of relevance to learners, parents and colleges as well as to the Welsh Government, statutory services and third sector organisations directly involved with young people. It follows on from the similar review of the culture and processes in maintained and independent secondary schools to protect and support young people (Estyn, 2021).

The report includes a review of existing guidance and support for further education colleges. It highlights how colleges develop and maintain a strong safeguarding culture that promotes respect and the importance of healthy, positive relationships. The report shares how strong leadership and proactive approaches encourage and empower learners to trust their tutors, challenge unwanted conduct of a sexual nature and report all forms of sexual harassment and abuse. It also identifies the factors which impact negatively on learners' well-being.

Both effective practice and shortcomings seen by inspectors during college visits are discussed, based on visits to all 12 further education colleges in Wales. The review focuses on 16 to 18-year-old learners only. During these visits, inspectors had direct discussions with young learners in interactive workshops. Learners who took part in the workshops engaged in open discussions with inspectors and shared both written and verbal feedback about their experiences and understanding of peer-on-peer

sexual harassment. Findings from activities in learner focus groups in all colleges are summarised. Throughout this report, we have used direct quotes from learners and staff and, as a result, the report contains words and phrases that readers might find upsetting.

During visits, inspectors also spoke to college leaders and staff about pastoral and tutorial provision, including provision for relationships and sexuality education. We also asked leaders and staff about the nature and prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and how colleges manage this and support their learners.

We visited further education colleges during the autumn term in 2022. This was during a particularly testing period when college learners and staff were returning to widespread in-college attendance with face-to-face delivery of most learning activities. We worked with over 250 learners and over 150 staff during our visits. We are extremely grateful to college staff and learners for their support and collaboration during a busy and challenging time. All college chief executive officers and principals responded positively to our request for their college to take part in this work as they all acknowledged the importance of tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

In addition to evidence drawn from visits to colleges, the report also provides a summary and analysis of an online questionnaire that staff in all further education colleges were invited to complete. The questionnaire was open for completion between 21 November and 8 December 2022 and received 587 responses. The questionnaire contained a mix of closed and open-response questions, and open responses were analysed to identify key themes.

We engaged with several relevant external stakeholders. We are particularly grateful to colleagues from the Children's Commissioner's Office and NSPCC Wales for their help in planning activities and for bespoke training they provided to inspectors prior to conducting college visits.

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## Background

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### Prevalence

Our report on experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales, 'We don't tell our teachers' (Estyn, 2021), found that half of all pupils had personal experience of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Our report also found that generally pupils do not tell teachers when they experience sexual harassment for several reasons. This is because it happens so regularly, pupils feel that it has become normalised behaviour, and that such incidents would be dismissed as not important, or they would be encouraged to ignore the issue.

Similarly, a report by the National Union of Students (NUS) (2019) found that almost half of all respondents had experienced some form of sexual harassment on at least one occasion. This survey was aimed at UK-based learners in further education and analysed responses from over 500 learners. The types of harassment experienced varied but included receiving unwanted sexual remarks both in person and via social media; being pressured into sexual relationships; receiving unwanted sexual images; having images shared without permission; and being stalked. The report refers to the 'normalisation' and 'tolerance' of such issues. These findings are particularly pertinent in the wider context of the 'Me Too' movement, a social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The movement's aim is to empower victims to break silence and gain empathy and solidarity from others.

### Victims and perpetrators

Ofsted's review of existing research for their 2021 review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges identified that *'Although anyone can experience sexual harassment and violence, research indicates that girls are disproportionately affected.'* (Ofsted, 2021). In our report relating to schools (Estyn, 2021), we also found evidence to suggest that twice as many girls than boys had experienced peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

According to a House of Commons research briefing, *'Disabled students and LGBTQ+ students are also disproportionately affected by unwanted sexual behaviour.'* (2022, p.6). Evidence also suggests that sexual harassment that is based on gender or sex may also be influenced by other protected characteristics. The 2020 Sexual Harassment Survey, a nationally representative survey of the UK, found that, *'Three-quarters of those who had experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months stated that another protected characteristic was a factor in their experience.'* (UK Government, 2020, p.93).

Evidence from the NUS suggests that four-in-ten victims cite their previous partner as the perpetrator of the sexual harassment they had experienced (NUS, (2019). A common form of harassment was 'revenge' type activities such as sharing explicit images. The House of Commons research briefing goes further to suggest that in the majority of cases of stalking, sexual assault and physical violence, the perpetrator was already known to the victim (2022).



## Locations

Research by the NUS states that the majority of instances of college-based face-to-face sexual harassment take place outside of class time in public places such as the street, public transport, and nightclubs (2019). However, some young people shared that they had also experienced sexual harassment on college premises and even during lessons.

In our 2021 report, pupils said that peer-on-peer sexual harassment happens more online than in school. Online sexual harassment, which is conducted through a range of digital platforms, takes many forms including sharing unsolicited sexual content, image-based sexual abuse, sexual coercion, threats and intimidation.

In 2021, Ringrose et al conducted a study on image-based sexual harassment and abuse that took into account the views of 480 young people aged 12 to 18 across the UK. The survey findings identified that just over half of the participants had received unwanted sexual content online or had their image shared without their consent. *'When asked why they didn't report the incident, around a third of people said 'I don't think reporting works' (2021, p.50).* The findings go on to say that three-quarters of the girls who took part shared that they had received unwanted pictures of male genitals. Although some sharing of images is consensual and does not amount to harassment, research by the School Health Research Network (2021) indicates that 8.5% of learners aged 11-16 in Wales had sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves.

Online sexual harassment is a growing concern for educational establishments as access to digital platforms and methods of sharing are countless and varied, with teenage girls being more affected than any other group (Ringrose et al, 2020)

## Impact

The impact of unwanted sexual behaviour on the victim can manifest itself in several ways, as outlined by the NUS (2019). Respondents cited anxiety, a desire to distance themselves from others, withdrawing from social events, changing the way they dressed, and not turning up to class as being a consequence of their experiences. Around a third shared that they had felt depressed, while 13% stated they no longer felt safe in college with the same number reporting that they had turned to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. In more extreme cases, the young people affected had considered self-harm or suicide, 13% and 15% respectively, with 7% having attempted suicide.

These findings are echoed in a review of academic literature by Our Streets Now. Our Streets Now is a movement to end public sexual harassment in the UK through cultural and legislative change. This organisation, which campaigns for the right of women, girls and marginalised genders to be safe in public space, states:

*Previous research and lived experiences show that PSH (Public Sexual Harassment) creates a constant feeling of insecurity and fear, especially for those who experienced PSH before. They change their behaviours to avoid PSH, such as not wearing certain clothes, not exercising in outdoor spaces,*

*changing the time they travel, taking different routes, not going out alone or not going out at all. Fear, anger, and anxiety are commonly experienced by victims at the moment of the sexual harassment act, and it can also lead to increased anxiety, depression, self-harm, social exclusion, guilt, and lower self-esteem in the longer term. In some cases, experiences of PSH can cause post-traumatic stress disorder or trigger episodes of PTSD, especially in people who also have prior experiences with sexual trauma or abuse. (Our Streets Now, Undated))*

## Provider role

As is the case with schools and other education providers, further education colleges have a responsibility to raise awareness of sexual harassment and respond appropriately to any incidences. The NUS report on Sexual Violence in Further Education states:

*The sooner we can open our understanding of feminism and educate young people on sexual harassment and assault, along with healthy and transformative gender relations – the sooner we will be able to eradicate toxic behaviour and attitudes that replicate and concretise themselves in the minds of young people (NUS, 2019, p.2).*

The same report found that only 14% of those who had experienced some form of unwanted sexual behaviour had reported it. Of those that did report it, only 22% reported it to their college. Interestingly, reasons for not reporting such incidents included it not being deemed serious enough and it not being perceived as problematic behaviour. Other reasons for not reporting included being embarrassed, and a fear of not being believed. One fifth (20%) stated that they would not report it as they did not know who to report it to which suggests a lack of information around the support available in relation to unwanted sexual behaviour. Respondents also cited a lack of trust in further education organisations and furthermore, a lack of clarity around the colleges' stance on such matters (NUS, 2019).

Despite the apparent lack of trust suggested by these figures, most organisations have policies and procedures in place to address sexual harassment issues. However, there is a lack of consistency in colleges' approach as some have specific policies on this matter, whereas in other organisations sexual harassment is addressed through other policies such as general bullying and harassment, student conduct, and equality and diversity.

The House of Commons research briefing (2022) recognises that further education colleges have the additional requirement of following statutory safeguarding arrangements when responding to this issue within settings that admit 16 to 18-year-old students. Furthermore, some further education institutions also work with even younger school pupils through school link activities and junior apprenticeship programmes. Further education colleges also provide valuable education and training opportunities for many adult learners which adds to the complexity and challenge of keeping all learners safe within the same environment.

Reclaim the Campus Campaign, which is a student and survivor-led campaign group that focuses on issues of sexual harassment and violence experienced by those in higher education, published a report in 2021 that looked at policies across 41 UK higher education institutions. The report included a number of recommendations which, although focussed on higher education providers, could apply within a further education setting. These included having specific sexual misconduct policies in place, collecting and analysing data, reviewing policies annually, having clear reporting mechanisms in place, stipulating clear sanctions for perpetrators, and employing Independent Sexual Violence Advisers to provide appropriate support to victims.

Following on from the Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges, the Department for Education in the UK Government recognised the need for more staff support in relation to this issue. The UK Government press release stated, *'School and college leaders will be encouraged to dedicate INSET day time to help train staff on how to deal with sexual abuse and harassment among pupils and how to deliver the Government's new compulsory Relationships, Sex and Health Education curriculum (RSHE)'* (UK Government, 2021).

Following on from our earlier review of peer-to-peer sexual harassment in schools (Estyn, 2021), the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Senedd published a policy inquiry report (2022), which states that the causes of peer-on-peer sexual harassment are complicated and reflect embedded, cultural matters and deep-rooted societal attitudes stretching well beyond colleges and other education providers.

The Welsh Government Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour (produced in conjunction with the NSPCC and Barnardo's) recognises the importance of early intervention, and the part education can play in addressing the issue of sexual harassment among young people in education settings. The report refers to promoting *'a culture where sexual bullying and harassment, digital and off line, is never tolerated and dismissed as 'banter'* (Welsh Government 2020, p.14). The same report also recognises the importance of working with external partners to ensure a rounded and well-informed response that takes all views into consideration.

*When considering incidents of this nature, it is important to identify if the behaviour is isolated or forms part of a recurring pattern. While isolated incidents could be qualified as inappropriate behaviour, a recurring pattern of sexual harassment could be an indicator of problematic behaviour as per the Hackett continuum (Welsh Government, 2020, p.8).*

To support educators with raising awareness and delivering content around sexual harassment, the Welsh Government has shared a range of resources through Hwb, its platform to provide digital services and resources to education settings. The resources within the toolkit, Step Up Speak Up (2021), include materials and guidance aimed at 13 to 17-year-olds, and have been developed specifically for senior leaders, teachers and learners. There are currently no materials aimed specifically at 16 to 18-year-old college learners. This is in the process of being addressed through a Welsh Government funded project involving Cardiff University and seven further education colleges in Wales.

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## Main findings

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### Sexual harassment among further education learners

- 1 Overall, further education (FE) learners recognise many examples of sexual harassment as behaviour they have either witnessed or experienced themselves. They told us that unwanted sexual comments, remarks, jokes (either in-person or online) or nasty comments about someone's body, gender, sexuality or looks to cause humiliation, distress, or alarm, are the most common forms. In particular, female and LGBTQ+ learners often receive unwanted comments about their appearance or looks. Female learners report that they and their female friends frequently receive unwanted messages, images or comments of a sexual nature. College leaders told us that the victims of sexual harassment are most often female learners, LGBTQ+ learners or learners with additional learning needs.
- 2 Colleges find it difficult to monitor learners' behaviour towards each other online. Learners increasingly, legitimately, use their own devices within FE settings; this makes it very difficult to detect online harassment and abuse and identify the perpetrators. Generally, female learners receive unwanted explicit images so often that they consider it as nothing out of the ordinary. Many of these images are sent via platforms or apps that delete them after a few seconds of being viewed. Recipients are often unable to tell whether the senders are known to them or complete strangers.
- 3 Learners report that it is very rare for inappropriate photographs or videos to be taken covertly by other college learners. However, they are aware of 'over the shoulder' photos being taken and used by learners to make fun of others' appearance or mannerisms. Where inappropriate images of learners are shared, these are often initially sent consensually to a partner within a romantic relationship but are later shared more widely without consent; this is commonly referred to as 'revenge porn'.
- 4 Overall, male learners believe that sexual harassment is often a result of boys trying to attract girls, or show off to their friends, but going too far and 'getting it wrong'. Learners told us that these behaviours are most common among those from male dominated vocational or curriculum areas, sports teams and social groups. As part of a particularly concerning trend, a few male learners adopt and mimic the sexist and misogynistic attitudes and beliefs of online influencers.
- 5 Sexual harassment and assault directed at male learners by other male learners is often perceived by them as teasing or so-called 'banter'; they claim that this is rarely sexually motivated. This type of behaviour and attitude risks skewing the perception of what is considered acceptable behaviour.
- 6 Learners report that whilst sexual harassment does take place in college, the most serious incidents take place in social settings outside of college where drinking and substance misuse takes place. Many learners don't feel that it is appropriate to report incidents that take place outside of college to staff members.

- 7 In a few places within college grounds and buildings, learners can feel uncomfortable and hemmed in. These can become 'no go areas' that are dominated by groups of learners, often males, who regularly intimidate and harass other learners and even staff members. Learners similarly suffer harassment on public or college buses and at bus-stops.

### Reporting and responding to incidents

- 8 Generally, college leaders do not have a clear picture of the extent of sexual harassment among learners. They struggle to accurately gauge the size of the problem due to low rates of reporting and a lack of clarity among staff members, and particularly learners, about the definition of sexual harassment. Data recording methods in relation to sexual harassment incidents are also inconsistent across the sector.
- 9 Colleges told us that incidents of sexual harassment have risen compared with during lockdown periods following the return to on-campus learning, although recorded incidents are still low. High profile social media campaigns such as 'Me Too' and 'Everyone's Invited' have raised general awareness of sexual harassment.
- 10 College leaders and governors receive regular reports on safeguarding incidents, including bullying and harassment, but these often lack a systematic approach to identifying trends in incidents of sexual harassment and abuse. A few colleges are beginning to address this, for example through new online safeguarding systems. It is too early to judge the impact of this work.
- 11 Many learners tend not to report incidents of sexual harassment for a variety of reasons. These include feeling that these behaviours have become normalised, fear of embarrassment, lack of confidence that incidents would be taken seriously or worries about potential isolation from current friendship groups. Male learners are also generally less aware of how to access support or are often reluctant to do so. Many learners say they are much more likely to tell a friend than report incidents to college staff or to a parent.
- 12 A few colleges are adopting more proactive approaches to raising awareness of sexual harassment issues and in encouraging learners to come forward and to tell the college of any incidents they experience. Most colleges provide learners with a wide range of methods through which they can raise concerns, although awareness of these is often too variable. These colleges are also intensifying efforts to encourage all staff to challenge inappropriate behaviour and to record any incidents of sexual harassment.
- 13 Colleges often use monitoring systems to identify and track inappropriate online activities as part of their efforts to minimise and tackle misuse of technology. However, these efforts are often thwarted where learners use their own devices and personal mobile data connections.
- 14 Learners are usually able to access support through pastoral staff and personal tutors, well-being officers and counselling staff as appropriate. A few colleges also provide round-the-clock online support mechanisms. Awareness of these different

sources of support is variable. Many learners who have accessed dedicated support from learner services and well-being teams speak highly of how welcoming and helpful these staff are.

- 15 Access to external support services such as sexual health nurses and specialist mental health services is too variable between and across regions and this adds to the frustrations experienced by learners, parents and college staff. In the best cases, colleges and their learners benefit from on-site youth workers and dedicated police officer support as well as college representation on local safeguarding boards.
- 16 Colleges have well-established disciplinary policies and systems. Although these are widely available on college websites, learner portals or in learner handbooks, learners told us that they would find it useful if they included specific reference to and examples of potential disciplinary sanctions that might be applied in the context of sexual harassment incidents.
- 17 Most colleges respond appropriately and effectively to the most serious reported incidents of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. A few colleges are working well together to use carefully managed risk assessment approaches to provide appropriate support to all parties involved in allegations of sexual harassment or abuse.
- 18 Most leaders spoke highly of the All Wales Safeguarding Procedures, although staff are often less clear on which other key guidance documents are applicable within the context of further education colleges. Learners and college staff are also less clear on the extent of college responsibilities for responding to incidents that occur outside of college.
- 19 There is a lack of further education specific resources to support college staff in addressing issues of sexual harassment and abuse. Several colleges are currently working on a collaborative project on peer-on-peer sexual harassment, supported by Welsh Government funding, to address this issue.

### Influencing the culture

- 20 Colleges undertake a valuable role in supporting learners' awareness of social, moral and behavioural issues. As part of this, tutorial programmes typically address a broad range of important topics. However, colleges do not consistently evaluate the content and quality of these tutorial sessions. Some colleges are working together collaboratively to develop and share digital resources to helpfully supplement tutorial programmes. However, a few colleges rely too heavily on learners undertaking online self-study packages, with too few learners having the opportunity to take part in well-led, worthwhile group discussions about these important issues. Only 17% of respondents to the staff questionnaire reported that their college makes arrangements for learners to take part in discussions about relationships, consent, or harassment.
- 21 A minority of colleges have recently strengthened their awareness-raising activities, and a few have begun to establish a 'call it out' culture to tackle poor behaviour. However, it is too early to gauge the impact of these developments.

- 22 A minority of colleges have established sessions for learners about healthy relationships that address sexual harassment and consent. They hold targeted workshops that cover issues such as sexual abuse, sexual harassment and domestic violence, often hosted by specialist external agencies. However, overall, only a few FE learners take part in sessions or workshops that address sexual harassment.
- 23 Overall, colleges are too inconsistent in ensuring that all learners are aware of the issues and benefit from related learning and discussion activities. Only around half of respondents to the staff questionnaire felt that their college was somewhat effective or better, in making sure that learners understand sexual harassment and respect the need for sexual consent in healthy relationships.
- 24 Around half of respondents to the staff questionnaire indicated that they would be confident in leading a session on 'sexual harassment', 'consent' or 'healthy relationships' with their learners. Only a minority feel that teachers, including those with pastoral roles, are best placed to deliver such sessions, with staff members preferring instead for specialists to do this. Staff members do feel that there is a need to provide additional education for learners on the topics of sexual harassment and healthy relationships, as well as providing additional training for themselves.
- 25 A minority of colleges are working towards becoming trauma-informed organisations with a valuable awareness of how learner behaviours can change from healthy to harmful. A few colleges have held specific staff training events on sexual harassment, and a minority are planning to do so soon. These have helped staff members recognise incidents and refer them to safeguarding leads.
- 26 A few colleges arrange workshops for cohorts of learners and their teachers/support staff in response to incidents of sexual harassment, sexism or where there is an element of misogynistic culture within a particular area. However, too few colleges take a proactive approach in providing training for staff members before incidents or issues are identified.
- 27 Just under half of respondents to the staff questionnaire feel the level of training on recognising, responding to, and helping learners understand, sexual harassment, consent and healthy relationships is 'about right'. A few individual staff members proactively identify and undertake external professional development courses that address some of these issues. Overall, colleges do not provide sufficient professional learning opportunities about healthy relationships, sexual harassment and misogyny.
- 28 Just over half of staff members feel that they have access to suitable support and guidance to help them deal with any instances of sexual harassment among learners. A minority feel that that such support and guidance should be better.

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## Recommendations

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### **Further education colleges should:**

- R1 Ensure that all learners benefit from opportunities to take part in learning activities and discussions about forming and maintaining healthy relationships
- R2 Develop strategies to prevent and tackle misogynistic attitudes and cultures developing among groups of learners
- R3 Ensure that all relevant staff members undertake professional learning that enables them to confidently recognise and respond to sexual harassment as well as help learners develop their understanding of healthy relationships
- R4 Ensure that all learners feel safe and comfortable in all areas of college buildings, grounds, virtual spaces, and transport
- R5 Record, categorise and analyse instances of sexual harassment, assault and abuse in a consistent way that enables leaders to identify trends and take appropriate measures in response

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R6 Make clear which aspects of Welsh Government education guidance relating to sexual harassment apply to further education colleges and clarify any differences between requirements in schools and further education colleges
- R7 Provide appropriate guidance to colleges to help them adopt a co-ordinated and consistent approach to recording and categorising instances of sexual harassment



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## Sexual harassment among further education learners

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The range of sexual harassment experienced by 16 to 18-year-old learners in FE colleges is broad. The prevalence of incidents of harassment is high, with most learners recognising many examples of sexual harassment as behaviour they had either witnessed or experienced personally.

### Types of sexual harassment

Learners told us that unwanted sexual comments, remarks, jokes (either in-person or online) or nasty comments about someone's body, gender sexuality or looks to cause humiliation, distress or alarm, are the most common issues. Staff members, particularly those in front-line roles, also recognise this.

*The most common forms of harassment in my experience are those comments and conversations that some consider just classroom banter. These aspects of sexual harassment need to be highlighted as unacceptable in the same ways as much more prominent instances of harassment within college. (FE staff survey response)*

Female learners in particular report that they and their female friends frequently receive unwanted messages, images or comments of a sexual nature. Female and LGBTQ+ learners also reported that they often receive unwanted comments about their appearance or looks. The types of sexual harassment taking place are influenced by both local and wider factors. Locally, the culture among young people and the layout of the college campus, including ease of monitoring, are factors. More broadly, the ease of access to digital communication, explicit images, and social media influencers, play a part. More serious incidents of harassment, including those involving intimidation, can lead to assault or abuse.

When asked what types of sexual harassment are most prevalent, leaders, teachers, support staff members and learners across different colleges, and within an individual college, often give differing responses. For example, middle leaders, teachers and support staff members are broadly aware of how frequently learners receive explicit images. Senior leaders, including safeguarding leads, are less aware of the scale of the issue because this type of incident is less likely to be formally reported or referred.

The ubiquitous nature of digital connectivity and social media channels has led to accessing and sharing of explicit images among young people becoming commonplace. Learners, particularly female learners, report frequently receiving unwanted sexually explicit images. Nearly all are sent anonymously, leaving recipients unable to tell whether they have been deliberately targeted by someone they know, or are receiving images, seemingly at random, from individuals that are outside of the college or local community. Such images are sent so easily and so often that girls and young women consider receiving them as nothing out of the ordinary. Many of these images are sent via platforms or apps that delete them a few

seconds after being viewed. This makes it difficult to prove inappropriate behaviour. Learners and college leaders report a recent increase in instances of learners in groups simultaneously receiving explicit images on their mobile devices. In each case, these images had been electronically 'dropped' into areas by users who were able to remain unidentified.

Overall, learners state that instances of inappropriate photographs or videos of them being taken covertly are exceptionally rare at college. They explain that such cases of so called 'upskirting' are far less common than they were in school; partly due to the increased maturity of the learners but also as a result of learners' freedom to wear the clothing that they choose. However, a few instances of covert 'over the shoulder' photos being taken was reported by learners. Although not revealing or necessarily sexual, in some cases these are used to target certain characteristics or individuals, for example by creating hurtful memes. In the worst cases, such images or memes are shared during lessons in an attempt to amuse others by humiliating individuals based on their appearance or mannerisms.

Staff members and learners explain that where learners do become victims of inappropriate images of themselves being shared, this is often the result of semi-nude/nude images initially being taken and shared consensually, but later being shared more widely without consent. When this happens, it is often following a relationship breakup and can be vindictively motivated, with victims most often being female and perpetrators most often being male. Sharing of nudes was described by one learner as partners/ex-partners '*treating it as an accomplishment and showing their worth*'. Where explicit images are shared without consent, this is commonly referred to as 'revenge porn'. Few learners are aware that such image-based sexual abuse is illegal under Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Court Act 2015. Very few colleges report learners being prosecuted under this act, despite being aware of such incidents.

The degree to which colleges can gauge the extent of written harassment via electronic means is variable. Different colleges have different systems in place to try to detect online abuse. Whilst colleges can apply filters to identify inappropriate words and phrases being used on college devices, they cannot accurately capture the full extent of digital forms of harassment. Learners increasingly, legitimately, use their own devices within FE settings, and this makes it very difficult for staff to detect online abuse.

*Students need to be more aware of what is classed as harassment using a mobile. They are constantly using phones to send messages and things can escalate very quickly. (FE staff survey response)*

A few college leaders express concern at what they believe is a relatively recent increase in instances of potential coercive control of learners within relationships. They speculate that learners who have been in romantic relationships during lockdown and strict social distancing phases of the pandemic may be unfamiliar with interacting socially outside of the relationship. They suspect that the return to wider social interactions with other young people may exacerbate issues of jealousy, leading to attempts by one partner to manipulate and control the other.

A minority of female learners feel that the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of a few male learners are increasingly being shaped by overtly sexist and misogynistic social media influencers and/or music tracks. During breaks at college, they sometimes hear male learners express or repeat misogynistic or sexist comments that they have heard online, they believe with the intention of provoking a reaction.

*It is difficult to sit with them in lessons after hearing what they have said.*  
(Female learner)

*Boys can say things to show off in front of their mates... Boys who make these comments get offended if they are tackled about them and say 'don't get upset, it's just a joke'. It makes you feel as if you're over-reacting, it makes you feel horrible.* (Female learner)

*My 17-year-old son recently told me about a disturbing conversation he had with his peers about acceptable attitudes towards women.* (FE staff survey response)

*TikTok, YouTube videos etc. are the biggest sources of influence on young male adults and there are some very toxic influencers that are popular.* (FE staff survey response)

Many male learners believe that incidents of sexual harassment they witness or hear about are a result of boys trying to attract, or express their attraction towards, girls but going too far and getting it wrong with inappropriate language or actions. They believe that deliberately disrespectful or hurtful comments are less common but explain that there are instances when rejected advances can be followed-up by spiteful or hurtful language or actions by boys. Male learners are aware that female learners often receive unwanted sexually explicit images, but they often believe that the senders are nearly always 'random men' that could be anywhere in the world.

Among male learners, rude language, teasing and 'banter', including the use of offensive language is relatively common, but not commonly recognised or reported by victims or witnesses. A few male learners explain that within friendship groups, boys can say or do things to tease each other which could be classed as sexual harassment or assault, but that these actions are not sexually motivated. This type of behaviour within male dominated groups can risk skewing the perceptions of participants in terms of what is considered normal or acceptable.

LGBTQ+ learners explained that they are frequently targeted by other learners because of their sexuality, gender identity or appearance. Among a few learners, homophobic language is prevalent, and the word 'gay' is commonly used as an insult. Overall, learners whose appearance is alternative feel that they are more likely than their peers to be targeted for hurtful comments. In a very few cases, LGBTQ+ learners described instances of harassment that can take place within their community, with gay male learners inappropriately targeting more marginalised LGBTQ+ learners.

## Prevalence of sexual harassment

Leaders record and monitor their colleges' responses to complaints and issues

raised by learners, including those related to sexual harassment. However, overall, college leaders find it difficult to gain a clear picture of the full extent and nature of sexual harassment among learners. The reasons for this include the high overall prevalence of sexual harassment, the broad range of sexual harassment types and uncertainty in their categorisation, as well as low rates of reporting by learners. Colleges focus on the most serious incidents involving assault, abuse or intimidation, however, the degree to which colleges are able to gauge the extent of the much more common-place lower-level harassment is variable. Staff members acknowledge that the number of incidents reported are likely to be the *'tip of the iceberg'*. As a result, the culture among learners can be opaque. Learners explain that *'staff don't always understand what happens and the undercurrents involved'*. Thirty percent of respondents to our FE staff survey believed that sexual harassment of college learners by other college learners was fairly or very common. Thirty-five percent believed that it was fairly or very uncommon, and 32% didn't know. Over 63% of respondents had no experience of dealing with any incidents of sexual harassment between learners.

A minority of senior and middle leaders have seen a substantial upward trend in the number of learners coming forward to report incidents of sexual harassment since the full return to campus following the disruption of the pandemic. They speculate that this may, in-part, be a result of an increasing awareness among learners of what constitutes sexual harassment and an increasing willingness to report incidents. However, staff members also suspect that this could be due to the negative impact of lockdown on the development of learners' social skills. In particular, it may be a consequence of learners feeling that they can *'say and do things more easily'* having been communicating so much online. Overall, staff at many colleges have noticed that learner behaviour has generally been worse since the return to in-person teaching following the pandemic *'probably because of missing out on social development during lockdown'*.

*The lockdown and restrictions due to COVID-19 over the last few years has meant that young people don't fully know how to socialise in an appropriate way with each other. They aren't mindful of what they say to each other and don't understand the consequences of their actions if they behave badly online.* (FE staff survey response)

Staff and learners report that the prevalence of sexual harassment varies between different groups of learners as well as across different locations and vocational or curriculum areas. In most instances the perpetrators are male and many of the targets are female. Staff members and female learners report that sexual harassment is most commonly perpetrated by groups where a chauvinist culture has formed. This is most often seen within male dominated vocational or curriculum areas, sports teams and social groups.

*More harassment stems from [learners enrolled on] traditionally 'male' courses such as construction, plumbing, electrical installation and sports – rugby, football etc.* (FE staff survey response)

*I haven't witnessed any actual harassment lately as I have been in a mainly male classroom but I have heard male students talk about women in general*

*in a derogatory manner.* (FE staff survey response)

A majority of staff members with oversight of learner behaviour across their colleges report that sexual harassment is more likely to be reported by learners with additional learning needs (ALN) than those without. Accusations of sexual harassment are also more likely to be made against male learners with one or more identified ALN, in comparison to those without ALN.

A few college leaders explain that over the last few years, an increasing number of learners have presented with mental health difficulties. This has resulted in additional, previously unrecognised instances of sexual harassment being disclosed as part of discussions or therapy sessions: *'these learners often don't realise that they are the victims of sexual harassment'*.

### Locations and circumstances

Overall, learners report that, whilst sexual harassment does take place in college, the most serious incidents take place in social settings outside of college. Female learners in particular experience unwanted touching and groping at social gatherings such as at clubs, pubs and house parties. The readiness of learners to report any such incidents to their colleges varies significantly between different individuals and different colleges. Many learners do not feel that it is suitable to report incidents to staff members if they take place outside of college.

Learners and staff members report that substance use, in particular alcohol, plays a significant role when it comes to sexual harassment and assault between learners outside of college. Staff members explain that alcohol also plays a role in terms of what learners interpret as acceptable. Learners are less willing to pursue any incidents that they have suffered if they were drunk at the time, due to them being less sure of what happened. Male learners report that more disrespectful behaviours are normalised in social settings: *'alcohol makes it a whole different story', 'you will get sexual harassment at every party'*.

Across a few areas within college grounds and buildings, groups of male learners intimidate and harass other learners during breaks. In a very few cases, female staff members are also subjected to sexual harassment in the form of inappropriate comments by such groups.

*There have been instances of male learners making overtly sexual comments about female staff within earshot and there need to be ways of combating that. If young males feel it is acceptable to talk about teachers using that language, then how are they talking to their peers?* (FE staff survey response)

Learners explain that the physical environment, including the shape and nature of indoor and outdoor spaces, combined with the presence of groups of intimidating learners, can lead to 'no go areas' for other learners. One LGBTQ+ learner explained that despite hoping to use a designated study space, she turned away because *'it would be like throwing a chicken into a fox den'*.

Other locations where learners report suffering or witnessing sexual harassment include public or college buses and bus-stops. Inappropriate or hurtful comments can

be made to learners and sometimes shouted at pedestrians. Many learners aren't sure of their college's responsibilities for monitoring and responding to poor behaviour on transport to and from college. A very few learners told us they feel so uncomfortable on college buses and at bus stops that they have decided to make their own way to college or have their parents drop them off and pick them up. A very few learners also told us that bus drivers do not challenge inappropriate behaviour and, in the worst cases, may even behave inappropriately themselves.

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## Reporting and responding to incidents

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### Providers' perception of the nature and scale of the problem

Overall, college staff feel that the incidence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment has increased substantially since the return to on-campus learning following the recent COVID-19 pandemic. A minority of colleges also told us they were seeing more incidences of learners having the confidence to challenge perpetrators when such issues occur. Despite this, there are very few recorded incidents of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in all colleges and most leaders recognise that the real scale of the issue is substantially underreported.

Although leaders feel that the issue is underreported, many told us that the number of reported incidents has been increasing over the last five years. They suggest this increase can be explained partially by the impact of the 'Me Too' movement resulting in more learners now understanding what is meant by harassment and abuse. Leaders feel that a major area of need is in the education of male learners to help them fully understand key issues such as consent and the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate comments and behaviours. A few colleges display posters or materials encouraging learners to report any concerns, for example by displaying useful information in college toilets.

Providers' perception and understanding of the nature and scale of peer-on-peer sexual harassment are hindered by many learners not reporting incidents of peer-on-peer sexual harassment they experience or witness regardless of whether these occur within or outside college. When such incidents are reported, data capture on peer-on-peer sexual harassment is inconsistent, both between and within colleges.

Incidences of sexual harassment or abuse are typically monitored via regular reports to senior management teams and governing boards as part of college safeguarding procedures. In the best cases, leaders reflect on previous years' findings and identify any trends which they may need to react to. For example, as part of the annual reporting process, these colleges seek to identify any hotspots (such as among particular groups of learners or curriculum areas) and areas for concern before updating their plans for improvement. One college is working on an in-depth analysis of sexual harassment among learners with disabilities or additional learning needs. An increasing number of colleges are investing in specific safeguarding software packages to record and help manage all safeguarding concerns, including incidences of sexual harassment and abuse, including incidences that happen outside of college, where appropriate.

### Reporting peer-on-peer sexual harassment

Across society, only a small proportion of sexual harassment incidents are reported to anyone in a position of authority (UN Women, 2021). Similarly, few of the learners we spoke to said that they had reported any incidents of a sexual nature to their

college, despite many female and LGBTQ+ learners having experienced or witnessed sexual harassment among learners.

*Sometimes reporting can make the problem worse, you can be labelled as a snitch.* (FE Learner)

A minority of male learners state that they would be hesitant to report anything they witnessed; *'not my place, not my business'*. They explain that they are more likely to intervene than report and that issues *'tend to get sorted'* among friendship groups. Few male victims of sexual harassment report or tell anyone. College staff members suspect that many males are reluctant to report incidents, citing embarrassment and male pride as potential reasons.

From our conversations with learners and staff members, it became apparent that an unknown number of incidents remain unreported because the behaviour has either become normalised or is not recognised by learners as harassment; *'most girls just laugh it off'*. This concerning trend appears particularly true of online sexual harassment including the sending of unwanted images.

Many learners perceive that some incidents which could be classed as sexual harassment are not serious enough to report. A very few learners commented that they fear a potential stigma around reporting and therefore are reluctant to report incidents unless they are particularly serious. Many learners told us that they would rather tell a friend than a teacher, parent, or another adult, explaining that telling a member of staff would make it more serious. Other potential barriers to reporting mentioned by learners include potential embarrassment, fear of losing control over what happens next and the potential for reprisals or isolation – for example by other learners blocking or unfollowing them on social media platforms. Learners in several of the LGBTQ+ focus groups we held mentioned that they had negative experiences of reporting sexual harassment when they were in school and, as a result, they lost confidence when it comes to asking for intervention and support from college staff.

Most learners are aware of a range of alternative ways of reporting incidents of sexual harassment. These typically include online reporting, safeguarding buttons on websites or intranet portals, QR codes on learner identity cards and elsewhere, via college mobile apps, by using a dedicated safeguarding telephone number, via course/pastoral tutors or coaches, student welfare officers and well-being teams. A few learners said that it was easier to speak up in school as perpetrators were more likely to be known to them, whereas in college there are many more learners whom they do not already know, and this makes reporting the details more difficult.

Senior leaders explain that when learners do report sexual harassment to their colleges, they tend to do so by approaching a trusted staff member. This may be a staff member with a dedicated pastoral role, such as a learner services staff member, or a subject tutor who may or may not also have pastoral responsibilities. Colleges report that learners' use of electronic reporting systems, such as 'concerns' buttons on the college website/app or email addresses, is very rare. Learners themselves appear to have a low awareness of these options. The degree to which learners would feel ready to approach learner services staff to report any issues varies between colleges. In many colleges, learners know where staff with responsibilities



for welfare are located. Even if they have not had to do so, learners feel confident that they could approach these staff members to report any incidents.

However, in a few colleges, learners express frustration at the lack of clarity around where to go for support. They have been *'told of job titles but don't know who they are or where to find them; they might be hiding away in an office somewhere; need more hands on-deck'*. A few male learners, particularly those who do not already receive any other forms of support, explain that they are less likely to approach support staff due to a lack of male support staff members who they can talk to.

Female learners explain that they don't come forward to report more incidents because they fear staff would not feel comfortable in addressing sexual harassment, and that behaviours of perpetrators may be trivialised or excused.

*Staff are open and willing to help you, but they don't always understand the issues and tell us to just ignore it. (FE learner)*

At the most proactive colleges, more learners feel that reporting incidents of sexual harassment to a staff member at the college is an appropriate course of action. These colleges focus on raising awareness among learners as to what constitutes sexual harassment and encourage learners to come forward if in doubt.

Arrangements for capturing, recording and reporting on incidents of sexual harassment vary significantly between colleges. Where learners come forward to disclose serious incidents, records are kept, and monitoring of actions take place. However, the systems for classifying and tracking incidents of sexual harassment and abuse are often unclear.

Incidences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment are identified as a separate category within data records in only a few colleges, while in many colleges such incidents tend to be recorded under more generic categorisations such as bullying and harassment. Instances are often classed into relatively broad categories, with the sexual nature of the issues being lost. These differences and inconsistencies in approaches compound the issue of the underreporting of sexual harassment incidents and result in an inability to identify, monitor and report trends in the incidence of sexual harassment and abusive behaviours. As a result, colleges are unclear as to the extent of harassment, bullying, intimidation or assault of a sexual nature. This impedes their ability to track trends in sexual harassment and gauge the effectiveness of their work in improving the culture among learners. The complexity of some cases of bullying and harassment that involve multiple issues is also cited as contributing to confusion and inconsistency regarding data collection and reporting.

In many colleges, sexual harassment incidents are reported mostly to well-being and learner services staff rather than via personal tutors or subject teachers. Most incidences that are reported are done so by learners, although in a few cases parents report issues via safeguarding staff. In a very few cases, colleges have been alerted by learners who were concerned about a friend's welfare. Cultural factors may also influence willingness to report incidents because of cultural identity and religious factors. On a separate note, staff told us that a few learners have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment or abuse in the home, and this may result in high tolerance thresholds of what they perceive as acceptable behaviours.

Learners and staff often told us that many girls in particular seem to have progressively become desensitised to sexual harassment because of its widespread prevalence and that such behaviours have gradually become more and more normalised across society. Most learners say they would feel comfortable with approaching a member of staff to share their concerns. However, few said they would choose to follow up on the most commonly experienced incidents as these are so normalised and regular.

Although generally across all colleges learners are encouraged to come forward and report incidents as soon as possible after they happen, such incidents also tend to come to light when the learner is accessing support for another reason or during lessons. For example, they may talk about previous incidents when they attend counselling sessions or because of triggers such as curriculum content in subjects like psychology, sociology or health and care classes.

Most of the referrals to specialist support staff are made via personal tutors or learning coaches that learners have spoken to. These staff tend to make the referrals using the safeguarding button on the staff intranet portal. A few staff told us that in the past low level inappropriate comments might have been challenged at the time, but often were not reported, but now leaders are trying to change that culture by encouraging staff to record such incidents where possible.

Colleges usually monitor online activity taking place on college devices or networks. For example, online systems may flag activities involving accessing inappropriate websites, content, social media activity or internet searches. Most colleges make this clear to learners at the start of their course through codes of conduct and policies relating to the acceptable use of technology. Despite these precautions, learners often avoid such scrutiny by using their own devices and personal mobile data contracts.

### **Availability and effectiveness of support for victims**

Colleges make a wide range of support available to learners, including access to pastoral support staff and dedicated well-being teams. Most colleges employ their own counsellors, and a few colleges use external organisations to provide online support and resources which learners can access at any time of day or night. Learners using the online facility can chat to professionals or other young people, with chats being monitored by professional workers trained in dealing with mental health issues. However, overall awareness of well-being support services is often relatively low among male learners and a few learners feel there generally isn't enough emphasis on support for male victims of sexual harassment.

Many learners told us how much they value the opportunity to visit learner services and well-being areas within college to talk about any difficulties or concerns they may have. Many colleges have located and developed these facilities carefully and sensitively to make them as accessible and welcoming as possible.

Many learners who have accessed support from learning services or well-being staff spoke highly of how approachable, understanding and helpful the staff are in helping them deal with a variety of issues. As well as providing support directly to learners,

staff also help refer learners on to a variety of internal and external support services. This may include college counsellors, general practitioners or other agencies who are able to provide direct support to learners. A few learners feel that some staff need more training as they said that they don't know how to respond, often say the wrong thing or just keep signposting them to other staff for support without any follow up to check that issues are addressed. However, the availability of services such as sexual health nurses varies substantially depending on policies with local areas and child and adolescent mental health services is often difficult to access without prolonged waiting times. Accessing mental health support can also be complicated further as learners turn 18 years of age due to moving from specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services (AMHS).

### **Support for learners in coercive relationships**

Student welfare officers in one college provide important one-to-one support to learners who are experiencing problems within coercive relationships, for example by ensuring safety plans are in place and working with learners to help them establish appropriate boundaries.

Learners who report concerns relating to sexual harassment are usually invited to meet with trained staff or well-being leaders to talk through any alleged incidents and to help identify support needs and follow up actions that may be needed, particularly if the alleged perpetrator is also a learner at the college. When there is such an issue, specialist staff usually meet with the learners and also the tutors to put actions in place to support learners. Most colleges recognise and emphasise the importance that learners feel listened to and are confident that the college follows through on their actions. A very few learners who had experienced and reported such incidents to college staff told us that college staff had met with them on several occasions after the initial issue was raised and reported that they felt that the college had dealt with the issues appropriately.

### **On-site support services**

Learners at one college benefit from accessing campus-based youth workers and pastoral coaches who offer one-to-one support sessions. College counsellors are also available on-site. The college has established beneficial well-being hubs at each campus and these offer drop-in support sessions to learners.

Colleges usually offer support to learners even when they do not wish to take the incident further. Generally, colleges report alleged incidents of sexual assault to the police and provide relevant support to victims. However, often learners do not wish to take matters further.

### **Scope of colleges' responsibility**

Most leaders and staff feel that their college makes expectations about learner conduct clear and state that they will challenge inappropriate learner behaviours. However, learners and staff are less clear on the scope of the college's responsibility and authority in terms of addressing behaviours that happen out of college.

### **College logs out-of-college incidents**

When learners, parents or the police make the college aware that an incident involving sexual harassment has taken place outside of college, this is logged on the college's safeguarding system. Relevant staff invite the learner to attend a planning meeting in order to identify support where necessary and any actions that need to be taken, particularly if the alleged perpetrator is also a college learner.

Although most learners told us that staff generally challenge inappropriate behaviour during lessons, a minority of learners feel that colleges should monitor learner activity more closely in and around college, outside of lessons, to help prevent or challenge anti-social and inappropriate behaviour. For example, they feel issues at breaks and lunchtimes are either not monitored or are often overlooked by staff.

### **Behaviour team helps address issues around the campus**

One college has established a behaviour team that is tasked with addressing low level incidents, including sexual harassment, in and around college. Operating as part of the safeguarding and well-being team, a behaviour officer patrols communal areas and issues learners with 'improvement notices' if they misbehave, where they feel it is appropriate to do so. They also notify the learners' parents of the improvement notice. Staff feel that such parental involvement is important and effective. This initial action can be escalated to stage 2 or stage 3 where necessary which will involve other specialist or senior staff. The behaviour officer also visits tutorial sessions to set out group rules and learner agreements on request from faculty staff when particular groups have been identified as a cause for concern.

Colleges generally respond appropriately to more serious cases of sexual harassment and abuse, including following relevant safeguarding procedures and protocols as necessary. However, college staff find dealing with cases where perpetrators are under police investigation for alleged sexual harassment and abuse involving another learner particularly difficult to manage as guidance on issues such as information sharing can be unclear. A few staff expressed frustration with not being kept up-to-date on actions arising from reported incidents.

A few colleges use a shared risk assessment tool for such incidences to develop safety plans to help keep victims and alleged perpetrators away from each other, for example by adjusting learners' timetables. This tool contains and considers information on background details, threat, aggravating features, mitigating features, risk severity, control mechanisms, parties responsible and contact phone numbers of key staff. Staff find this risk assessment approach particularly helpful when dealing with cases of alleged sexual harassment and abuse. The colleges also put safety plans in place including a list of expectations for each party to sign and agree.

### **Disciplinary arrangements, policies and systems**

Colleges generally have comprehensive and appropriate disciplinary policies and procedures, and these are widely available or accessible via college websites, learner portals or learner handbooks. Disciplinary policies and procedures set out

clearly the different stages of the disciplinary processes, including appropriate distinctions between informal and formal stages, different levels of misconduct and the range of disciplinary sanctions that may be applied. Staff and learners are not always clear how specific allegations of sexual harassment and abuse would be investigated by the college and what types of disciplinary actions would be likely to be applied.

A few learners suggested that it would be useful if specific examples of actual/potential scenarios and associated potential disciplinary actions were included in supporting activities or materials used during induction to illustrate and emphasise how seriously the college will treat allegations of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. A few learners also feel that college processes can sometimes be too focused on perpetrators with not enough consideration given to the negative impact on the victims. Others feel that tasking curriculum managers with dealing with disciplinary incidents sometimes leads to variability in the way in which similar incidents are dealt with and resolved.

*Staff are open and willing to help you but they don't always understand the issues and some tell us to just ignore it. (FE learner)*

*College systems are good at keeping some people apart if there have been bad incidents – but sometimes they are just put into a room to make up. This is not helpful. (FE learner)*

A few pastoral staff told us they are trained in restorative justice approaches and find these useful when dealing with alleged incidents of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and abuse. These approaches focus on educating rather than punishing offenders. Leaders in one college have recently established a set of relationship management procedures to help address issues such as peer-on-peer sexual harassment. This includes a tiered approach relative to the severity of the incident with support being provided to both victim and perpetrator. A few colleges also told us that in a very few cases learners were found to have made false accusations of sexual harassment by other learners.

Maintaining continuity of learning for all parties involved in allegations of sexual harassment during the periods of investigation and internal disciplinary action or external investigations by the police can be particularly challenging in cases of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and abuse. For example, in one college where a learner was charged but not prosecuted following allegations of serious sexual assault, leaders described how they had to manage and keep the learners apart on site. This involved undertaking a risk assessment for each learner, providing appropriate support to both parties and putting in place clear arrangements to try and make sure that learners stayed in different zones of the college outside of lesson times. Other leaders explained that keeping learners apart where necessary is particularly difficult when learners attend the same course and alternative groups are not available.

### **Learner perceptions of staff roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness**

Learners told us that most college staff challenge inappropriate comments or

behaviours if they witness these. However, a few learners told us that some staff do not challenge inappropriate behaviour particularly in and around communal areas of the college.

Learners talk quite openly about how they feel in and around college campuses. Female and LGBTQ+ learners are particularly vocal about when and where there are issues around college sites. Learners often feel that staff need to be more vigilant and provide more adequate supervision outside of lesson times to help prevent or address inappropriate behaviour. Many feel staff need better training to equip them with the right knowledge and skills to teach learners about this issue and to enable them to respond appropriately when learners report incidents to them.

Most learners say that, when incidents are reported, the college deals with them appropriately and to their satisfaction. Learners who come forward to report incidents of sexual harassment often state they do not want any follow up actions, and many are said to be particularly reluctant to involve external agencies. Many students also recognise the pressure that staff are under in terms of providing support.

Even though some learners may not want further action, these learners often say they just want to talk to someone. They often talked positively about the support given by pastoral coaches/tutors and well-being/safeguarding teams when an issue has been identified. Most female and LGBTQ+ learners we spoke to told us they are confident that their course tutors will deal appropriately with any issues raised and reported that the positive relationship with tutors is particularly beneficial. A few learners who had had negative experiences in school in relation to sexual harassment told us that they would be more comfortable raising issues in college as they say it is a much more inclusive environment.

### **National guidance**

College leaders and safeguarding practitioners feel that the All Wales Safeguarding Procedures are clear and helpful, as is the Wales Safeguarding Procedures app for mobile devices. College leaders also regard Welsh Government guidance on dealing with sharing nudes and semi-nudes as being helpful. National safeguarding training resources were launched in November 2022 and senior leaders welcome having new standards around training for staff as some feel this has been a weakness in Wales over recent years.

College staff state that the Welsh Government Hwb toolkit and resources, including teaching guides, for upskilling education staff across Wales are good but awareness of the Hwb is not yet as widespread in FE colleges as in schools. Many college staff feel that more bespoke guidance for FE colleges would be beneficial and would be particularly welcomed, as would training packages developed specifically for FE staff.

### **Collaborative working and partnerships**

Colleges usually work closely with local safeguarding boards and children's and adult safeguarding teams within local authorities. They also involve the police and other external agencies in the very few serious cases, for example through safeguarding panels. Other examples of relevant external agencies include sexual assault referral clinics, GPs, police, youth justice services, social services and Women's Aid. Several

colleges are also working with Cardiff University on a Welsh Government funded research project on peer-on-peer harassment. This aims to develop a set of resources, improve reporting mechanisms and achieve a fuller understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment across the further education sector.

Where collaboration and joint working is less effective, colleges are not included in membership of key groups, such as local safeguarding boards. This makes sharing of information and co-ordination of actions particularly difficult and frustrating for college leaders and staff.

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## Influencing the culture

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### Education and personal development

All colleges ensure that guidance on learner conduct and behaviour feature as part of worthwhile induction activities during the first few days after learners enrol at college. These activities are often helpfully framed within the broad context of ‘respect’, providing a solid foundation to underpin the culture that the college aims to establish. The conduct and behaviour elements tend to take the form of short, high-level presentations by staff members and do not directly reference issues relating to sexual harassment. A majority of colleges invite external agencies to events such as freshers’ fairs where they raise awareness of personal safety and provide resources such as anti-spiking drinks’ caps, condoms and personal alarms. A few colleges also begin setting the scene in terms of behaviour, values and respect with prospective learners as part of open day and wider transition activities.

Despite personal and social education not being a statutory duty for FE providers, colleges help to nurture learners’ personal development alongside their academic and vocational learning. Typically, colleges’ tutorial and pastoral programmes usefully address a broad range of worthwhile topics including personal and online safety; global warming and net-zero; substance use and misuse; bullying; county lines; racism; equality and diversity; Prevent, healthy living including diet and exercise; Welsh language and culture; mental health and resilience; study skills and revision. A minority of colleges also have well-established sessions dedicated towards healthy relationships that address sexual harassment and consent as part of their pastoral programmes.

A minority of colleges hold additional targeted workshops that cover different issues such as sexual abuse, sexual harassment and domestic violence as well as healthy relationships. Such workshops can be open to any learners who wish to attend but are often aimed at cohorts who are deemed vulnerable or higher risk, such as learners with additional learning needs or male-dominated groups. However, overall, only a few FE learners take part in such workshops.

*A more consistent approach is needed across the college for all students to take part in workshops/sessions regarding this. (Staff survey respondent)*

External organisations such as Women’s Aid, Victim Support or the YMCA often run or take part in these workshops. Other third-sector outreach teams, local authority specialist staff, the police or the British Transport Police are also used. Only a few respondents to our FE staff survey (15%) were aware that external agencies had been brought into their colleges to work with individual learners or groups.

All colleges have pastoral programmes that most of their 16 to 18-year-old full-time learners undertake throughout each academic year. In many cases, learners engage with these in groups as part of weekly or fortnightly staff-led tutorial sessions. The way that pastoral/tutorial responsibilities are allocated to staff members varies



between colleges. Some maintain a more traditional approach where teachers have pastoral responsibility for one or two groups of learners alongside their subject teaching role. Others have put in place teams of specialist pastoral staff to undertake this aspect, freeing teachers up to teach additional subject lessons or vocational sessions. A few colleges use both approaches depending on the campus or the type of provision. For example, they have specialist pastoral staff for A level learners but ask teachers in vocational areas to undertake the pastoral duties for vocational learners. Many colleges use digital learning resources to supplement their pastoral programmes. Some colleges are working together collaboratively to develop and share such resources. A few colleges rely too heavily on learners undertaking such self-study packages for this aspect of their development.

*The tutorial programme should be stronger in these elements with guidance and support for lecturers to run such sessions. (Staff survey respondent)*

Some colleges centrally design and plan their pastoral sessions, with individual staff members taking responsibility for refining, personalising and delivering the sessions. At other colleges, separate curriculum or vocational area teams or individual staff members are left to design and plan their pastoral sessions separately. Where provision is not planned centrally, it is difficult for colleges to ensure the content and quality of these sessions. Overall, colleges are too inconsistent in ensuring that all learners are aware of the issues around sexual harassment and benefit from related learning activities. For example, personal tutors may have access to the materials but not all tutors choose to use them or discuss sexual harassment and related issues with their learners.

*There are external agencies that we can book, but the responsibility is on personal tutors whereas I think that this should be a college-wide initiative. (Staff survey respondent)*

*Make sure that there is comprehensive material available to lecturers and training for them to be able to deliver it confidently. (Staff survey respondent)*

Overall, provision for learning about how to establish and maintain healthy behaviours and attitudes when it comes to issues of attraction and relationships is inconsistent and often weak. Too few learners have the opportunity to take part in group discussions, led by teachers, tutors or specialists, about these important issues. Too many learners, including those who had been enrolled for a year or more, told us that they had not taken part in any sessions or discussions at their college that addressed sexual harassment or healthy relationships. The majority of learners felt that taking part in sessions and discussions on how to establish and maintain healthy relationships would be beneficial for them or their peers.

Where learners do have the opportunity to take part in sessions on healthy relationships, these tackle worthwhile issues. The healthy features of relationships, potential red flag behaviours and the reasons why some learners are reluctant to report inappropriate behaviours and incidents are some of the topics commonly addressed.

*All students should receive lessons on healthy relationships. (Staff survey respondent)*

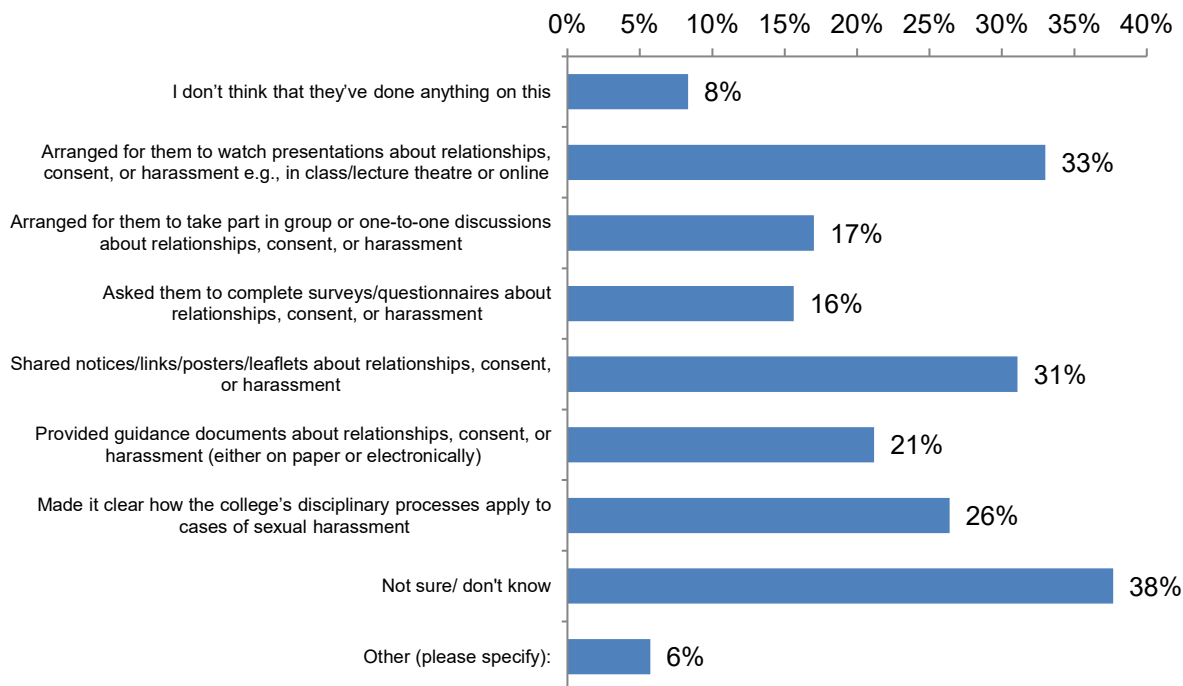
As part of our survey, we asked FE staff members how confident they would feel if asked to lead a 'sexual harassment', 'consent' or 'healthy relationships' session aimed at a group of 16 to 18-year-old learners. Nearly half (48%) of respondents who were willing to rate their level of confidence said that they were 'not at all confident' or 'not so confident'. Thirty-five per cent were 'somewhat confident' and 18% were 'very' or 'extremely' confident.

*Tutors have to run the tutorial session and I know of staff who feel very uncomfortable teaching this subject; I am one myself. This may be because there has never been any formal training. (Staff survey respondent)*

This lack of confidence among staff members is also reflected in their responses to the survey question about who they believe is best placed to deliver such sessions to learners. Over two-fifths of respondents (41%) chose 'specialist external agencies.' The smallest proportion of respondents (7%) chose 'lecturers or teachers.' Nearly a third (29%) chose 'staff members with personal or pastoral tutor roles', with 14% selecting 'learner/student services or other support staff' as being best placed.

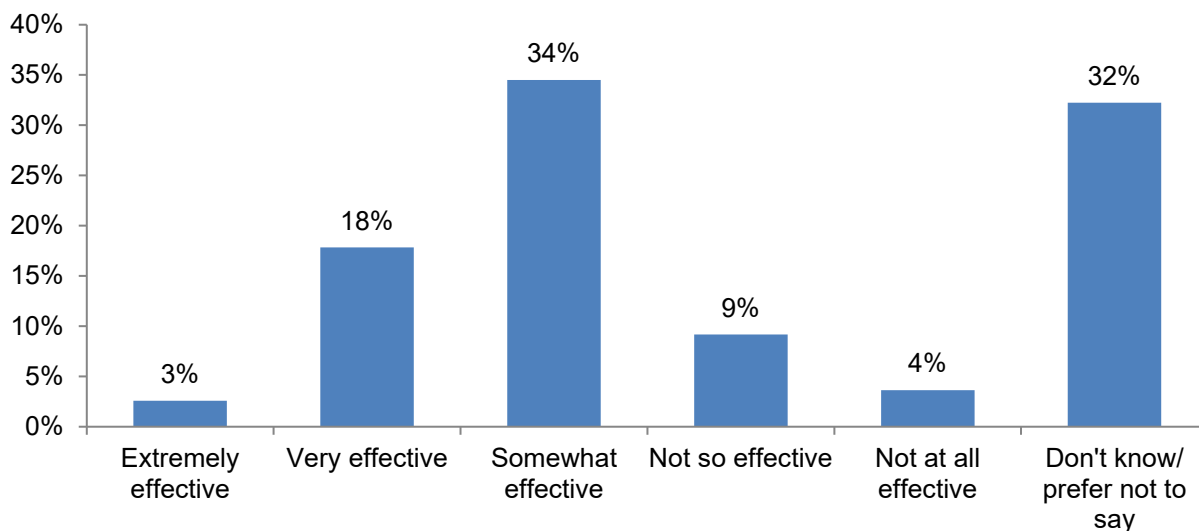
Staff members' survey responses about what had been done to make sure that learners understand sexual harassment, showed that over a third (38%) were not sure. One third identified arrangements for learners to watch presentations in classes, lecturers or online. Nearly as many (31%) indicated that their college had shared relevant notices, links, posters, or leaflets. Only 17% of respondents stated that their college had arranged for learners to take part in group or one-to-one discussions about relationships, consent, or harassment.

**Figure 1: FE staff member survey response to the question - What has your college done to make sure that learners understand sexual harassment, for example, as part of learning about healthy relationships and sexual consent? Tick all boxes that apply**



When asked about how effective their college has been with their efforts to make sure that learners understand sexual harassment and respect the need for sexual consent in healthy relationships, over a third (35%) rated their college as 'somewhat effective', with 21% selecting 'extremely' or 'very' effective. Only one in eight respondents (13%) indicated that their college was 'not at all' or 'not so effective'. Nearly a third (32%) did not know or preferred not to say.

**Figure 2: FE staff member survey response to the question - How effective do you think your college has been with these efforts to make sure that learners understand sexual harassment and respect the need for sexual consent in healthy relationships?**



When asked what else their college should be doing to prevent and deal with sexual harassment between students, staff members most commonly suggested providing additional education for learners on the topics of sexual harassment and healthy relationships, as well as additional training for staff members.

*There should be a comprehensive tutorial package which covers these types of topics. Healthy conversations should be encouraged and supported. Staff should be well-trained and supported by specialists. Young people need to be supported to learn what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour.* (Staff survey respondent)

Most colleges regularly use messages on digital display screens, and learner portal or website landing pages to raise awareness of key issues. These often focus on well-being and behaviours, for example, bullying and harassment, or celebrating diversity. A few colleges proactively encourage staff members and learners to 'call out' unacceptable behaviours and report any incidents of possible sexual harassment. At a minority of colleges, leaders have recently introduced or strengthened awareness raising activities, for example with dedicated campaigns aimed at establishing a 'call it out' culture. However, it is too early to gauge the impact of such recent developments.

*We are currently developing a campaign to cover this and other wellbeing/safety issues that have become more prevalent post-pandemic.* (Staff survey respondent)

### Professional learning for staff members

General safeguarding training is well established across the FE sector in Wales. Professional learning and training activities help staff members recognise the warning signs of emotional harm, neglect, physical and sexual assault and abuse, as well as how they should interact with learners. A minority of colleges are working towards becoming trauma-informed organisations and, as part of this work, they focus on recognising when behaviours change from healthy to harmful. A few colleges offer further training to help staff members establish and maintain a positive, healthy culture among learners and staff members. However, overall, there is an inconsistent approach to undertaking and disseminating professional learning on the topics of healthy relationships, sexual harassment and misogyny.

At the time of our visits, many staff training programmes did not address relationships and sexual harassment well enough. Colleges did not have arrangements in place to ensure that suitably trained and prepared staff members supported all learners by having them take part in discussions about forming and maintaining healthy relationships. Our evidence suggests that few learners across Wales take part in such learning and personal development activities during their time at college.

A few colleges had recently begun to introduce these aspects into their professional learning programmes, and a minority were planning to do so. Examples of relevant professional learning activities planned or recently introduced by different colleges included training on peer-on-peer abuse, restorative justice, active bystanders, harmful sexual behaviours, banter, sexual harassment, healthy relationships, and

positive cultures. In a few cases, individual staff members, including teaching and learner support staff members, had proactively identified and undertaken external professional development courses that addressed some of these issues.

### **College staff training**

Following a tragic incident that did not involve the college, senior leaders commissioned specialist training to help college staff members identify and respond to peer-on-peer abuse, harmful sexual behaviour, bullying and banter. Senior leaders at the college feel that the training was highly valuable, giving clarity to staff members about what constitutes sexual harassment as well as how they should respond. In the past, such incidents would likely have been responded to inconsistently by individual staff members and not always referred to safeguarding leads where appropriate. Thanks to this training, most staff members are well placed to recognise sexual harassment among learners. More cases of sexual harassment are now appropriately referred to the college's safeguarding team, enabling them to identify any trends as well as respond to individual instances.

A few colleges have held specific training events to help their staff members better recognise sexual harassment which has helped to increase the reporting and referral of incidents. Around half (53%) of respondents to our FE staff survey were happy that the level of training available to help them recognise what constitutes sexual harassment was 'about right', with 42% stating that it was 'too little'. When asked about the training/professional learning available for them to help college learners understand sexual harassment, consent and healthy relationships, 45% of FE staff members who responded felt that 'too little' was available and 43% felt that the level of training was 'about right'.

*Train staff better, have a set week where all personal tutors cover this in group tutorial. Have further awareness raising activities with students, including where to go for help. (Staff survey respondent)*

Nearly half (47%) of respondents felt that the level of training for staff on how to respond to incidents of sexual harassment between college learners was 'too little', with 43% stating that the level of training was 'about right'. Among the staff members who were willing to rate their confidence in dealing with any future instances of sexual harassment between learners, 28% said that they were 'extremely' or 'very' confident, and 49% were 'somewhat' confident. Only 23% stated that they were 'not at all' or 'not so' confident. During our visits, a few male staff members explained that they feel uncomfortable dealing with issues related to sexual harassment among learners.

*Make sure all staff are trained to deal with it, not just support staff and learner services. (Staff survey respondent)*

Over half (56%) of the staff survey respondents felt that they had access to suitable support and guidance to help them deal with any instances of sexual harassment among learners. Only 12% stated that such support and guidance was insufficient or not available; 19% wished that the support and guidance available were more helpful and 14% weren't sure.

A few colleges address pockets of sexism, sexual harassment and/or misogynistic cultures by arranging workshops. These are generally delivered by external organisations to the cohorts of learners involved and the staff members who work with them. However, too few colleges take a proactive approach in providing training for staff members before incidents or issues are identified.

Only 6% of respondents to our FE staff member survey were aware of any external agencies being brought into their colleges to deliver training or professional learning to staff on issues relating to sexual harassment among learners, with 2% aware that external agencies had been in to help develop or share relevant resources. The majority (64%) of respondents did not know whether external agencies had been brought in to help with any issues relating to sexual harassment among learners. Many staff commented that there is a clear need for specific training and resources for staff and learners in further education colleges.

*I think we need further training, stand-alone training for sexual harassment. (Staff survey respondent)*

*We need more training events for staff and engaging activities for ALL students. (Staff survey respondent)*

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## Methods and evidence base

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The findings of this report are based on an analysis of evidence from a national, anonymous questionnaire of FE staff members as well as visits to all 12 FE colleges in Wales.

College visits involved the following activities:

- Meeting with the college chief executive officer/principal
- Focus group meeting with female learners
- Focus group meeting with male learners
- Focus group meeting with LGBTQ+ learners
- Interview with senior and middle leaders
- Interview with teachers and support staff members
- Scrutiny of relevant college documents, including policies, plans, records, and reports

Colleges were asked to identify up to 12 learners who had been at the college for a year or more, to take part in each of the three focus group meetings. The focus group activities were a blend of oral discussions and writing activities. This was to enable learners to voice their views and experiences, whilst at the same time allowing quieter, less confident or more introverted learners to write down their thoughts. All the contributions by learners were anonymous; inspectors did not ask learners for their names and no other staff members were present during the focus group meetings.

### Providers visited

Bridgend College  
Cardiff and Vale College  
Coleg Cambria  
Coleg y Cymoedd  
Coleg Gwent  
Coleg Sir Gâr  
Gower College Swansea  
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai  
NPTC Group of Colleges  
Pembrokeshire College  
St David's Catholic Sixth Form College  
The College Merthyr Tydfil

### A note on the staff questionnaire

The FE staff member questionnaire was issued via written request to college chief executives/principals asking them to share a link to the electronic survey with their staff members. The survey was open for completion between 21 November and 8 December 2022. In total, 587 responses were received of which: 50.4% of staff

members indicated that they worked as a lecturer/teacher/tutor; 16.5% of respondents had middle leader/manager roles; 15.3% were in learner support roles; 14.6% in business support roles, and 5.2% had senior leader/manager roles; 3.6% of respondents selected 'other' in relation to their current role. Respondents were able to indicate that they held multiple roles, for example, both teacher and middle leader. The survey contained a mix of closed and open response questions, with the open responses being analysed to identify key themes.



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## Glossary

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<b>Coercive control</b>	Women's Aid define coercive control as an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour. (Women's Aid, 2022)
<b>Hackett continuum</b>	Hackett's continuum presents sexualised behaviour as a range from 'normal' to 'inappropriate', 'problematic', 'abusive' and 'violent'.
<b>Harmful sexual behaviours</b>	Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB) can be defined as: sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. This definition of HSB includes both contact and non-contact behaviours such as grooming, exhibitionism, voyeurism and sexting or recording images of sexual acts via smart phones or social media applications. (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2020)
<b>Influencer</b>	Someone one who exerts influence; a person who inspires or guides the actions of others often by generating interest via social media posts
<b>Meme</b>	An amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media
<b>Peer-on-peer sexual harassment</b>	Persistent unwanted conduct of a sexual nature by a child towards another child that can occur online and offline. Sexual harassment is likely to: violate a child's dignity, and/or make them feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated and/or create a hostile, offensive or sexualised environment. (Department for Education,2021)
<b>Revenge porn</b>	The sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person, without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress
<b>Upskirting</b>	Taking photographs or videos underneath a person's clothing without their consent

## Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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