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The nature and incidence of bullying in further and higher education

Most research on bullying has taken place in schools and we can gain a great deal of knowledge from this literature in terms of effectiveness of interventions for supporting victims. However, more recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in bullying among post-16 students, whether in further or higher education, for example, in Canada and in the UK.1–5

The most widely used definition of school bullying is the one originally proposed by Olweus, which identifies three core components:

i. There is an intent to harm or upset another student

ii. The harmful behaviour is done repeatedly over time

iii. The relationship between bully/bullies and victim/victims is characterized by an imbalance in power6

Cyberbullying has also emerged as a phenomenon at both college and university levels. Like traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying involves the deliberate intent to hurt a person or persons through the electronic transmission of messages and images which target the victim(s) repeatedly over time.7

The problem has become so serious in the UK that Universities UK (UUK) has issued a report, Changing the Culture, on sexual violence, harassment and hate crime on campus, with a list of recommendations, emphasising prevention, that all universities should take on board.8 There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that there is some continuity in perpetration between childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. In a retrospective study of 186 university students who admitted to bullying their peers, Curwen et al found that, although there was an overall decrease in the incidence of verbal and physical bullying between high school and university, a substantial proportion of the student bullies in their study had also engaged in bullying behaviour at elementary and high school levels.9 Chapell et al found that over half of the adult bullies in their sample had also bullied others during childhood and adolescence, and conclude that this history of bullying indicates long-term benefits so that the behaviour becomes entrenched and continues to be a successful strategy for improving the bully’s social status.10 Not only that, there is evidence that bullies are popular among their peers and that bystanders are often indifferent to the suffering of the victims.11

Bullying among post-16 students takes many forms and includes such behaviours as: spreading nasty rumours on the grounds of race, disability, gender, religion and sexual orientation; ridiculing or demeaning a person; social exclusion; unwelcome sexual advances; stalking; threatening someone, either directly or online; and revealing personal

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information about a person that was shared in confidence. In 2018, students in one study group were found to be 6.7 per cent more likely to be cyberbullied than the national average, and 10.7 per cent more likely to have experienced cyberbullying. In a follow-up study, the same group was found to have increased their levels of cyberbullying, with 19 per cent more students admitting to being a cyberbully.11 In another study, the group was found to have decreased their levels of cyberbullying, but only 19 per cent more students admitted to being a cyberbully. The victims reported various forms of bullying, including verbal threats, spreading false information about students, threatening to post images online, and threatening to spread rumors online. The study also found that 79 per cent of the victims had tried to resolve the bullying themselves before seeking help from authorities. Additionally, 79 per cent of the victims had experienced emotional distress as a result of the bullying.

...BULLIES ARE POPULAR AMONG THEIR PEERS AND... BYSTANDERS ARE OFTEN DIFFERENT TO THE SUFFERING OF THE VICTIMS

'Bullies are popular among their peers,'12 one study found, 'and bystanders are often indifferent to the suffering of the victims.'13 This study was conducted among college students in the United States, where the prevalence of cyberbullying is particularly high. The study found that students who reported experiencing cyberbullying were more likely to be bullied by their peers, and that bystanders were more likely to support the bully rather than the victim. The study also found that bystanders were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying, and that they were more likely to support the bully than the victim.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, have found that bystanders are more likely to support the bully than the victim, and that bystanders are more likely to experience cyberbullying themselves. This study was conducted among college students in the United States, where the prevalence of cyberbullying is particularly high. The study found that bystanders were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying, and that they were more likely to support the bully than the victim.

The role of bystanders in reducing and preventing bullying

With such a range of negative, harmful and potentially life-changing behaviours occurring on a daily basis on FE and HE campuses, we now consider how counselling-based interventions could be used to tackle the problem.

Counselling support and staff training

Student health services are alert to the outcomes of bullying, but they are already overstretched by the volume of problems that students face when leaving home for the first time to make the transition from school to college or university.26 Clearly, counsellors are trained to offer one-to-one support to the victims of bullying, and they could do so further by training other colleagues. In the context of sexual bullying, Luca argues that more staff training is necessary to help students and lecturers identify and respond to 'slut-shaming' as a mechanism for bullying. They could then offer appropriate support.26 The majority of universities have a personal tutor system, but there is no training for tutors to offer support.26 In this study, support was given on how to deal with bullying, if it is even reported. If a student does disclose an incident, the lack of practical, central, information available to students is leaving those who come forward further distressed and is resulting in a reluctance on the part of students to tell anyone anything about their problem. Furthermore, there is a need to heighten awareness among staff and students of the potentially damaging effects that bullying can have on both targets and perpetrators. But this process would be enhanced through active support from the authorities in partnership with student counselling and health services.

VICTIMS OF BULLYING RUN A HEIGHTENED RISK OF MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS, INCLUDING DEPRESSION AND SOCIAL ANXIETY

The impact on mental health

For the students who are the targets of such bullying behaviours, the experience is unpleasant and distressing in the short term. However, for some, there are longer-term negative consequences for their mental health and their academic career. Bullying affects the target’s self-esteem and often leads to social withdrawal from peer groups. Consequently, victims of bullying run a heightened risk of mental health disorders, including depression and social anxiety. For example, Schenk and Frenmouz found that college student victims of cyberbullying were more likely than non-bullied peers to suffer from depression, anxiety and a range of psychosomatic complaints, as well as academic difficulties.26 Research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students confirms the negative effect of bullying on the mental health of targets. One National Union of Students (NUS) survey found that one in five LGBT students, and one in three transgender students reported at least one form of bullying on campus; many reported that they had to pass as ‘straight’ in order to protect themselves from homophobia and transphobia.30 Rivers and Valentine et al report on the extremely negative effect that such treatment had on the mental health of staff and students.31 In extremis, this could lead to suicide.

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Training student bystanders and authorities

Some pioneering work has already been done in colleges and universities, in particular through the voluntary work of students in a variety of peer support roles, such as the LGBT+ student networks and befriending new students in halls of residence. Giovanzola and Malikiosi-Loizos document the development of peer support systems at the University of Athens where the need was felt for students to be trained in empathy and active listening as well as basic communication and counselling skills to address such issues as adjustment to college life, separation from family, loneliness and relationship difficulties.32 Yet, despite their effectiveness, such systems are slowly being implemented in other European universities. Well-designed peer support systems at primary and secondary school levels have been shown to be effective in alleviating the suffering of victims of bullying.33 The most effective systems seem to be those that are embedded in a whole-school policy.34 Similarly, it would seem that peer support systems at college and university level would benefit greatly from being part of an institution-wide policy to reduce and prevent bullying.

Unfortunately, this overall commitment to addressing the issue of bullying among students is not evident in most universities.35 However, bystander training is one of the key recommendations from the UUK Taskforce, which provides case study evidence for its effectiveness at university level.36 College and university counsellors potentially could play a key role in this process by offering training and support to peer supporters, students and hall of residence wardens and ambassadors, in order to empower these students to challenge bullying when they encounter it and to demonstrate alternative non-violent ways of dealing with relationships.

Anti-bullying policies

The UUK Taskforce recommendations are timely in making recommendations which, it is to be hoped, will become embedded in all college and university policies and codes of conduct. Such policies exist in some universities, but student perception is that the authorities provide very little protection.37 It is essential to consider systemic influences of bullying that may be embedded in the culture of the university. Shirar and DeMartini, in confirmation of NUS surveys, argue that cyberbullying (such as posting offensive material online) appears to be rooted in a laddish culture typified by such bullying behaviour as ‘slut-shaming’ as a mechanism for subduing women as well as LGBT students.38

Luca argues that more staff training is necessary to help students and lecturers identify and respond to ‘slut-shaming’ as a mechanism for bullying. They could then offer appropriate support.26 The majority of universities have a personal tutor system, but there is no training for tutors to offer support.26 In this study, support was given on how to deal with bullying, if it is even reported. If a student does disclose an incident, the lack of practical, central, information available to students is leaving those who come forward further distressed and is resulting in a reluctance on the part of students to tell anyone anything about their problem. Furthermore, there is a need to heighten awareness among staff and students of the potentially damaging effects that bullying can have on both targets and perpetrators. But this process would be enhanced through active support from the authorities in partnership with student counselling and health services.

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As they argue, the behaviour is the symptom, not the risk. Instead, prevention by whole institutions could play a significant part in heightening awareness of the systemic influences on bullying in FE and HE settings. London Routledge; 2016 (pp127–141).

The issue of bullying between peers is a serious matter for FE and HE students, with the potential to play a critical role in preventing such behaviour from continuing unchecked. Such behaviour, as research demonstrates, continues into the workplace, and consequently bullying must be tackled across the lifespan.

## References