Sexual misconduct prevalence survey pilot 2023

Evaluation report

Contents

Executive summary

1. Between November 2022 and January 2024, the Office for Students (OfS) undertook a project to design and test an approach to measure the prevalence of sexual misconduct in higher education in England. This evaluation report explores the pilot survey and approach taken against its objectives. We have also published a series of outputs from the pilot survey project and this report should be read alongside them.

2. Much of the current data about sexual misconduct in higher education is available only at an individual university or college level. The OfS aimed to design and test an approach to capture prevalence data at a national level, which could facilitate monitoring of trends over time to inform the OfS and other stakeholders on where to implement more effective and responsive interventions to tackle sexual misconduct. Higher education providers could use the prevalence data to evaluate the effectiveness of their systems and processes, and at a sector level inform where regulatory intervention could be targeted. A national prevalence survey could offer providers data to inform responses to the issues identified, and a mechanism for public accountability.

3. In November 2022, the OfS began work to pilot a survey as a precursor to inform the design and approach of a future wide-scale prevalence survey. The pilot's objectives included:

   - develop and test a set of questions to measure the prevalence of sexual misconduct

   - develop an approach to a national provider-level prevalence survey

   - develop a prevalence estimate and understand the outputs by key respondent characteristics.

4. The pilot project was conducted in three main phases. In phase one, a questionnaire was designed, developed and thoroughly tested, including trialling with students to refine question wording. Phase two included two pieces of survey fieldwork: a student poll conducted by a research panel to support question development and produce initial sector-level findings for future comparison; and a survey of students at 12 higher education providers that volunteered to take part. In phase three, the fieldwork data was analysed, as well as an evaluation of the pilot process and publication of the results.

5. This report evaluates the pilot against its three aims. In doing so, it identifies the following issues for exploration in subsequent work.

   - Undertake additional testing of wording within a questionnaire with non-native English speakers. The pilot questionnaire wording was tested on a small group of non-native English speakers, so future work should increase this sample size to better inform how the question wording is understood by non-native English speakers.

   - Revisit the list of sexual harassment behaviours to ensure that the question adequately captures the range of potential unwanted behaviours. The questionnaire included nine examples of these behaviours, so future work should consider how detailed this list should be while also considering how this affects the overall survey length.

- Identify ways to reduce the overall length of the survey. The average response to the survey took 12 minutes and 45 seconds, and a significant number of students dropped out mid-survey, so future work should consider ways to avoid fatigue in survey responses.

- To continue to use a managed target list approach for future prevalence survey administration, to ensure that all students eligible to respond were contacted and processes are in put in place to avoid errors or omissions from particular student groups.

- Where feasible, identify ways to minimise the collection of student personal data to minimise the burden of collecting and securely storing this information.

- Include a form of external expert review of ethics in future iterations of the survey. Due to the potentially distressing content of the topics discussed in the questionnaire, it is important that questions of research ethics continue to be fully considered.

- Identify a mechanism for including further education colleges in future iterations of the survey. Due to the different data reporting structures in these colleges, they were not included in this pilot, but their inclusion should be a priority for future work.

- Consider the timing of the survey as a key mechanism for boosting response rates. Future iterations of the survey should consider undertaking fieldwork in the summer term, to allow more time for student responses and promotion activity by higher education providers.

- Undertake more work at an earlier stage with student union representatives ahead of fieldwork, including sharing promotional materials to better publicise the survey to students.

6. Development of a national higher education sexual misconduct prevalence survey is a complex and resource-intensive undertaking. Higher education staff, policy makers and those involved in student polling should consider the report's findings in their own work to measure and address the prevalence of sexual misconduct in higher education.

Aim 1: Develop and test a questionnaire to measure the prevalence of sexual misconduct

Questionnaire development

7. The questionnaire was developed by a project team within the OfS. An external expert group was convened to advise on questionnaire content, wider issues of survey design and implementation, and research ethics. The OfS project team also engaged with other experts in prevalence survey design and management from the UK and elsewhere.

8. The questionnaire itself was based on international examples of prevalence and 'campus climate' research, including the Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative (ARC3) in the United States, the Universities Australia National Student Safety Survey (NSSS), and the Higher Education Authority's National Surveys of Staff and Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEIs.[1] The OfS team also benefited from the work of the NATO Science and Technology Office, Research Group, 'Sexual Violence in the Military' (HFM-295), and the 'Unwanted and non-consensual sexual experiences reported by university students in Northern Ireland' project.[2]

9. These examples of prevalence surveys adopt an approach to questionnaire design which reference specific behaviours associated with sexual violence, including rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual contact, and coercion or attempted coercion into unwanted sexual acts. By asking questions which describe behaviours rather than asking if a respondent has experienced, for example, sexual assault, these kinds of questionnaires are considered to be better at providing an accurate picture of the prevalence of forms of sexual misconduct. In part, this is because respondents have a very clear idea about what they are being asked, so there is less room for ambiguity or misinterpretation. Importantly, this form of behavioural questioning means that the survey can capture the experience of those who may be victims or survivors of sexual harassment or sexual violence but who may not have previously used that term to describe the experience. The ARC3 and the Sexual Experience Survey – Short Form Victimization (sic), on which the modules on sexual violence in the ARC3 are based, have been tested for internal validity and reliability.[3]

10. Many of the example questionnaires reviewed by the OfS project team include questions about a wide range of issues associated with sexual misconduct, including measures of peer norms such as understandings of what constitutes consent, and the prevalence of acceptance of 'rape myths'. Some of these surveys also collect information about other issues, such as participants' alcohol consumption, self-reported mental health, and information about perpetrator behaviours, including stalking. While these factors have been demonstrated to be related to, or important antecedents of, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence, they were not

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[1] See the ARC3 Survey, available at https://www.arc3survey.org/; 'National Student Safety Survey', available at https://www.nsss.edu.au/; 'National Survey of the Experiences of Students in relation to Sexual Violence and Harassment', available at https://hea.ie/policy/gender/national-survey-of-the-experiences-of-students-in-relation-to-sexual-violence-and-harassment/.

[2] See https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/unwanted-and-non-consensual-sexual-experiences-reported-by-univer.

[3] See Koss, M.P., Abbey, A., Campbell, R., Cook, S., Norris, J. and Testa, M., 2006. 'The Sexual Experiences Survey: Short Form—Victimization'. Tucson, AZ, USA: University of Arizona.

included in the OfS survey. Instead, the OfS sexual misconduct prevalence pilot questionnaire focused primarily on measures of students' experiences of unwanted conduct of a sexual nature.

11. Some of the items in the questionnaire asked participants to recount difficult or potentially traumatic experiences, and so there was a risk that some respondents could find completing it distressing. In recognition of this, the questionnaire included a clear and accessible description of the research aims, descriptions of the nature of the questions, and warnings to make respondents aware of the potential risk of distress. These content warnings were added at the beginning of the questionnaire, and as new sections were presented to respondents. In doing so, we sought to ensure that participants were clearly informed about what they were being asked to do, and what was coming next, so they could exercise informed choice about taking part and continuing. The questionnaire included links in several places to national-level resources that offer support for victims or survivors of sexual misconduct. We asked providers to supply us with links to their own resources, which we then embedded in the questionnaire. We also included reminders of how to access help.

12. An independent research agency (Shift Learning) was commissioned to undertake cognitive testing of the questions with a sample of students. The purpose of the testing was to evaluate and improve the quality of the questionnaire and other research materials. The work explored respondent's understanding of each question, their thought processes and reactions as they responded, their definition of key terms and any sensitivities around wording, phrases or terminology used in the survey that could be emotionally or psychologically distressing.

13. Shift Learning produced findings and recommendations across two reports. The first report focuses on the testing of questions about sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact, the impact of experiences, and students' experiences and knowledge of reporting processes. A later round of testing focused on questions about relationships between staff and students and the potential for abuses of power.[4] Efforts were made to engage students with a range of different personal characteristics in this part of the work, including a small number of non-UK domiciled individuals. Increasing the amount of testing with non-native English speakers should be considered a key aspect of future questionnaire development activity.

Consideration: Undertake additional testing of the questionnaire with non-native English speakers.

14. The questionnaire offered respondents nine examples of harassing behaviours and asked questions designed to capture two different measures of sexual harassment. These included:

- experiences of sexual harassment behaviours since being a student; and

- experiences of these behaviours in a university setting in the 12-month period prior to survey fieldwork.

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[4] See: the Shift cognitive testing reports, available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

15. The first of these was designed to provide all respondents who had experienced some form of sexual harassment an opportunity to articulate this in the survey. The second question followed the first and sought time-bound experiences to allow us to produce data about the prevalence of sexual harassment that was comparable between students who had studied at university for different periods of time. A similar approach was used for the questions about experiences of sexual violence.

16. In selecting which examples of behaviour to include in the questions about harassment, we were required to balance completeness of measure and pragmatic considerations about questionnaire length. In doing so we acknowledge that future iterations of this survey may wish to revisit the list of sexual harassment behaviours to ensure that consideration is given to the range of potentially harassing behaviours to which students may be subjected.

Consideration: Revisit the examples of sexually harassing behaviour included in the questionnaire to ensure that it adequately captures the full range of potential unwanted behaviours.

17. Data from testing the survey and from later fieldwork suggested a mean average completion of 12 minutes 45 seconds for the full questionnaire. Advice from research agencies suggested that a 10 minute limit be used to avoid participant fatigue, and analysis of metadata from the survey showed a significant number of dropout part way through.

18. It may be the case that, in future iterations, not all items of data collected in this survey are deemed necessary. We recommend that, should further work be commissioned, data requirements of the project are considered. We also recommend looking at ways to reduce the time required for respondents to complete the survey.

Consideration: Reconsider data required from the survey and identify ways to reduce its overall length and completion time.

19. Student participant feedback was collected by the survey contractor IFF after the main fieldwork was completed. Views about the questionnaire were broadly positive. Importantly, there is some evidence from both the cognitive testing of the questionnaire and from post-survey interviews that participants were generally comfortable with the direct language used in the survey and identified with the importance of the work. This echoes findings from elsewhere. Respondents to the ARC3 survey, on which the OfS prevalence survey was based, did not find it distressing, with some students finding the experience personally meaningful. While the questionnaire requires some further development, the overall approach adopted by the pilot appears to be suitable for the intended aims.

Aim 2: Develop an approach to a national provider-level prevalence survey

Provider data return process

20. The process of collecting student record data directly from providers, and then using this data to manage survey fieldwork, was central to the design of the pilot.

21. While the OfS holds extensive administrative data about the student population at higher education providers in England, it did not hold all relevant data fields for all students in the population at the time of the survey, nor does the OfS hold student contact details. A process for collecting data from providers was therefore necessary so that the survey administrators could create and manage a sample target list for each of the participating providers and use it to manage the fieldwork process.

22. A data return process was designed to supply OfS, via the appointed research agency (IFF), accurate survey population data for the pilot. Data on the student population was requested from each of the participating providers before fieldwork took place.[5]

23. IFF research contacted students directly and asked them to participate. After fieldwork, non-pertinent data, such as contact information, was removed before the remaining student data and students' responses to the survey were transferred from the contractor to the OfS for analysis. OfS analysed the data, then returned it to participating providers, subject to quality checks and thresholds to ensure respondent anonymity, before publishing sector-level findings.

24. This managed target sample list meant that it was more likely that all eligible students were contacted to take part and, that those contact processes were managed in a consistent way across the whole sample, to avoid errors or omissions of particular groups. For example, it ensured that students could only take part once, opt-outs could be properly managed, and communications could be targeted so only those who had not responded were sent reminders. It was also necessary to test this approach as in future, if a larger scale survey were to be rolled out, a managed target list would limit opportunities for 'gaming', where particular groups of students might be 'cherry picked' to send the survey to, and other groups could be purposely excluded so they are unable to answer the survey.

25. The data return was also beneficial from a survey design perspective. It allowed for demographic information to be collected from the provider rather than the student as part of the questionnaire. This meant the survey was shorter which reduced the likelihood of dropouts, and it was hoped, improved the quality of demographic data. The range of student demographic information collected on the whole student population as part of the pilot was also important for supporting the analysis of data in later stages of the project, particularly the process of weighting data to help mitigate the potential of nonresponse bias. Weighting is a statistical technique used after data has been collected to help improve the accuracy of findings.

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[5] See 'Sexual misconduct prevalence pilot survey: Technical report to the OfS' for details of this process, available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

> **Consideration:** Use a managed target list for administration of future iterations of a prevalence survey.

26. Evaluation interviews with colleagues at participating providers highlighted that the data return process was more burdensome than had been anticipated and required significant resource to complete. This was further complicated by a conflicting Data Futures transformation programme submission deadline which occupied many of the data teams at participating providers.[6]

27. The data return element of this project constituted the sharing of a large quantity of personal data, including special category data. This requirement to share student data before fieldwork created a barrier for some providers volunteering to take part. Because participation was voluntary, there was no statutory requirement in place for providers to rely on in their decision-making processes. They were therefore required to identify their own legal basis for sharing data, independent of OfS, and hold the risks associated with doing so accordingly.

28. While the processing of requested personal data was proportionate given the pilot project needs, we are mindful of Principle C of the UK GDPR on data minimisation which states that personal data shall be '...adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed (data minimisation)'.[7] Given the inherent risks around sharing large volumes of personal data, the additional work it implies for provider data teams, and the scale of existing sector wide student data return processes, we recommend that future iterations of the survey should give further consideration to how effective survey management could be achieved in a way which minimises the requirement to collect student data.

> **Consideration:** Identify ways to minimise the collection of student personal data.

External advisory group and research ethics

29. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, there is a potential risk with all such surveys that participants could experience emotional distress or even harm as a consequence of participating in the work. This risk would be exacerbated if the survey was poorly designed or improperly managed. There was also a risk that providers may lack confidence in the survey because of concerns around the appropriateness of its content.

30. An external expert group was convened for the duration of the pilot as part of a risk-mitigation strategy. The purpose of the group was to offer guidance on best practice in sexual misconduct prevalence survey design, and to advise on minimising the potential for harm to participants and wider issues of research ethics.[8] The group comprised academic experts, researchers with experience in running prevalence surveys, and experienced practitioners with student services

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[6] See www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/data-futures/the-programme.

[7] See https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/data-protection-principles/a-guide-to-the-data-protection-principles/the-principles/data-minimisation/.

[8] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/prevent-and-address-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/survey-of-sexual-misconduct/.

or student-support backgrounds. The group considered the OfS proposals for the pilot and had the opportunity to question representatives from the research agencies under contract with the OfS to undertake this work about their approach to research ethics.

31. The group's recommendations had a material impact on the design of the work. For example, interview schedules and participant contact procedures were amended to accommodate insights drawn from trauma-informed research principles (safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment, cultural sensitivity, etc.) to manage risks around harm and safety. The group also offered helpful comment and challenge on the pilot research design and the questionnaire as it was developed. They also commented on approaches to data analysis and proposals for publishing results.

32. Engaging with recognised experts and including a process of external scrutiny of ethical considerations greatly enhanced the quality of the project. It is therefore helpful to consider how a form of external scrutiny could be included in future iterations of this survey so that this important but sensitive work would continue to benefit from external expert engagement and challenge.

> **Consideration:** Include a form of external expert review of ethics in future iterations of the survey**.**

Exclusions from the survey population

33. The pilot was initially open to all registered higher education providers. However, because further education colleges collate and structure student data in a format (the Individual Learner Record) that is different from other higher education providers (which submit data via the Higher Education Statistics Agency data return), we took the decision to exclude them from the pilot. This was a pragmatic resourcing decision and related to the pilot only. Identifying a mechanism for including colleges in future iterations of the survey should be a priority.

> **Consideration**: Identify a mechanism for including further education colleges in future iteration of the survey

Aim 3: Develop a prevalence estimate and understand the outputs by key respondent characteristics

34. Data analysis and data quality issues from the pilot are covered in detail elsewhere.[9] This section of the document sets out the pilot fieldwork process and evaluates its suitability for producing robust prevalence data.

Pilot fieldwork

35. The pilot included two separate pieces of fieldwork. The first of these saw an independent research agency (Savanta) commissioned to conduct a polling exercise via its research panel. The purpose was to test and to help refine the questionnaire that was to be used later in the main prevalence survey pilot. While this was an important aspect of the overall pilot activity, this kind of approach is unlikely to yield provider-level data on sexual misconduct. This is beneficial as part of a pilot exercise, but it is unlikely to be a suitable standalone option for future iteration of the survey. We discuss the findings elsewhere and include a description of process below, but we do not propose to include this as part of the process evaluation in this document.

36. Fieldwork for the polling exercise took place between 1–23 August 2023. A total of 3,017 surveys were completed, with respondents being drawn predominantly from the Savanta panel. The survey was sent to a sample of current undergraduate and postgraduate students studying for a higher education qualification at a range of English providers. Those studying at providers taking part in the later main pilot exercise were excluded to avoid the chance of surveying the same people more than once. Quotas were set on age, gender, study level, study mode, and domicile to ensure that students recruited for the survey resembled the populations of interest.

37. This part of the work enabled us to test and refine the questionnaire and created an opportunity to develop the framing of the questions that were used in the main pilot. It also offered a second set of prevalence statistics as a helpful counterpoint to those produced via the main pilot survey.[10]

38. The second piece of fieldwork was a survey conducted by engaging with a set of volunteer providers and their students. In January 2023, the OfS included information about the proposed pilot survey in an email to all accountable officers at providers in England, inviting expressions of interest to participate. In exchange for participating, providers would receive the results of the survey for their institution back from the OfS. Some 42 providers expressed an interest in the work, with 12 eventually agreeing to take part. These ranged from small specialist providers with around 600 students to large multi-faculty institutions with around 30,000 students. The volunteer providers were geographically spread across England.

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[9] See links to analysis report and Tableau visualisation, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

[10] For a discussion of findings from that aspect of the project, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

39. Participating providers were asked to return a set of data for their students, including key demographic and course information, as well as contact details.[11] This information was then used by the contractor appointed by the OfS to undertake the fieldwork (IFF research). They created a list of students to contact at each provider so they could ask them if they would be willing to participate in the survey.

40. Because we wanted to understand the prevalence of sexual misconduct in higher education, all students at those providers were potentially in scope. Several practical criteria were set to ensure consistency between providers. These included a requirement for students to be over 18 at the start of their course, that students were currently studying for a higher education qualification, and that students began their course before the 1 January 2023. This gave a survey population of approximately 130,000 students. To mitigate the expected low response rate, and to simplify the process of selecting individuals to include in the sample, all students in the population were contacted and asked to participate.

41. Fieldwork was initially proposed to take place before the summer break at the end of academic year 2023-24. This was, however, delayed. The decision was therefore taken to pause fieldwork until September 2024 to avoid surveying students during the summer break.

42. There were several reasons for this delay. Some providers faced difficulties generating their data return for the prevalence project because of a timing and resources clash between the pilot survey and Jisc's Data Futures transformation programme.[12] The OfS project team had identified this as a potential delivery risk in the planning phase of the work and mitigations were put in place. For example, providers were able to submit the requested student data in different formats, depending on how 'data futures ready' they were. However, a number of providers still found that both the resource requirements for the prevalence pilot data return, and the challenges of the Data Futures infrastructure project, were greater than anticipated. Several providers were in the process of updating their Data Futures return at the point of the deadline to provide the completed sample template for the prevalence survey. Moving the fieldwork timings to the autumn relieved some of this pressure, allowing providers more time to generate and submit their data for the pilot.[13]

43. The delay to fieldwork had a few advantages. Several providers did not wish to confirm their participation without seeing the final version of the questionnaire. By delaying fieldwork, we were able to share the questionnaire with providers including the student-facing messaging about the survey content and the signposting to the support services, before the final deadline to confirm participation. Delaying fieldwork also allowed time for additional testing of the questionnaire.

44. However, an implication of the timing of fieldwork was that it potentially had a negative impact on the overall survey response rate. For example, not all students had returned from their summer break at the time fieldwork started. We also understand that at some participating

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[11] See the Sexual misconduct prevalence survey pilot: Technical report, page 9, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

[12] See https://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/data-futures/the-programme.

[13] See the consultation pages on the OfS website, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/prevent-and-address-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/consultation-on-a-new-approach/.

providers, relatively little promotional activity took place around the survey because the first few weeks of term are very congested in terms of communications. Where messaging was sent to students, some providers pointed to the likelihood that it would be lost among the high volume of communications received on a wide range of different topics at that time of year.

> **Consideration**: Consider the timing of the survey as a key mechanism for boosting response rates. We suggest future iterations of the survey consider undertaking fieldwork at alternative times of the year.

45. The survey was open for six weeks. It opened on 25 September 2023 and closed on 3 November. Students were sent a personalised link to the survey generated for everyone on the target list. These were initially sent to students' institutional email address, with a later reminder email sent to personal email addresses. A small number of text messages were used to test response rates. The number of reminder emails was capped at two. This was in recognition of the sensitive nature of the research and that an invitation received to their institutional account would strengthen the legitimacy of the research.

46. Limiting the number of invitations was proposed in the planning stages of the project as a mitigation against the risk of causing emotional distress to students and was set out in the Data Protection Impact Assessment produced for the work. This was driven by a recognition that students had not directly opted-in to being contacted about the survey. While an opt-in was not necessary in this instance, it was felt that this should be considered, and that extra care should be taken around the process of inviting students to participate. Invitation emails were clearly labelled with content warnings so that students would not be surprised when opening them. During fieldwork, very few concerns or complaints about these emails were received from students. This may suggest that there is scope to increase the use of reminder emails in any future iterations of the survey.

47. Similar care was taken over the use of personal email addresses to contact students about participation. These were included in the data requested from providers, and so were available to use. However, initial invites were sent to university emails only with the strategy being reviewed ahead of the first reminder. Given the relatively few opt-outs or concerns raised following the initial invitation, we moved to a strategy of using students personal email addresses. The IFF technical report covers this process in more detail and suggests that using personal email addressed might be a more effective method of reaching participants.[14]

48. IFF maintained regular contact with the providers throughout the period leading up to the start of fieldwork. They produced a set of digital promotional materials that providers were encouraged to use to promote the survey with their students. This included a pre-notification email to share with students, outlining the background to the research, links to relevant privacy information, and the survey purpose. They also produced a survey website for students, which included more information about the survey and a set of FAQs.

49. To encourage greater engagement and participation, the OfS contracted student union representatives at participant providers to ask them to promote the survey among their

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[14] See 'Sexual misconduct prevalence pilot survey: Technical report to the OfS', page 20, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

students using the promotional materials that IFF had distributed. It is unclear how successful this intervention was. However, the small number of qualitative interviews IFF completed with students after the main research revealed that none had seen any promotional materials on campus or on social media. Engaging early with student unions and local groups may allow them more time to plan promotional activities and other actions to support the survey.

> **Consideration:** Undertake more work at an earlier stage with student union representatives ahead of fieldwork, including sharing promotional materials.

50. During fieldwork, providers had access to an online portal where they could monitor the number of interviews achieved for their institution in real time. The OfS also had access to the portal to review the progress of all providers and a breakdown by key characteristics. Progress of completed interviews was slow. There was an initial peak when the email invitation was sent out but this decreased until the first reminder email was sent four weeks after the start of fieldwork. A further reminder was sent a week before the end of fieldwork.

51. Text messages were also sent to a small selection of students to test the likely response rate of using this method. These were sent to those students who IFF only had a personal email for, and who had therefore only received one reminder. The IFF technical report points to the relatively poor number of responses returned via this method.[15]

Data quality and response rates

52. The issue of data quality is covered at length elsewhere.[16] The discussion in this document is limited to findings around the availability of data and the implications for future iteration of the survey.

53. The response rate for the survey (the proportion of those who were eligible to participate and who went on the answer survey questions) was 4 per cent.[17] The polling activity, which included the use of incentives, achieved a similar response rate. While this response rate is comparable with single-institution sexual misconduct prevalence studies conducted elsewhere in the UK, it is significantly lower than other student surveys that the OfS uses to collect student experience data, including the National Student Survey (circa 70 per cent) and Graduate Outcomes Survey (circa 50 per cent).[18] Due to the nature of the project, no response rate target was set for the prevalence pilot. However, there was an aspiration that the approach to survey administration would yield more responses than was eventually achieved. Some of the

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[15] See 'Sexual misconduct prevalence pilot survey: Technical report to the OfS', page 4, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

[16] See 'Sexual misconduct prevalence survey pilot - Analysis report', at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-evaluation/.

[17] Note the differences in this figure between the survey contractor IFF and the analysis produced by the OfS. OfS figures exclude more responses for data quality reasons. For more detail on this, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey- pilot-2023-evaluation/.

[18] See for example: 'Sexual Violence Among Higher Education Students in the United Kingdom: Results from the Oxford Understanding Relationships, Sex, Power, Abuse and Consent Experiences Study', Bridget Steele, Michelle Degli Esposti, Pete Mandeville, David K. Humphreys, 2023 (sagepub.com), available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08862605231212167; and 'Is This Normal?', The 1752 Group, available at https://1752group.com/is-this-normal/.

factors believed to have contributed the low response rate have been discussed in this document already (e.g. survey timing), as have considerations for improvements in future iterations of the work.

Difference between the student poll and the main pilot survey

54. As noted above, the pilot included two distinct pieces of survey fieldwork. The first was a poll conducted via a research panel with a sample of students. The second was a piece of work that took place by working directly with a group of volunteer providers and made use of an extensive student data submission process. While both phases of work use the same basic questionnaire, they yielded quite different results. For example, polling results showed higher prevalence rates for both instances of sexual harassment in the past 12 months, and for unwanted sexual contact (assault/violence) in the past 12 months than the later survey of students at providers. Because of differences in the design and implementation of the two pieces of work, it is not possible to say what might be driving the differences in finding with any real confidence. However, some key differences in the design of the two approaches to surveying students are worth considering. These include the process by which participants opted-in to taking part, and the understanding of characteristics of the people who were invited to participate in the work.

55. In both pieces of fieldwork, we sought to understand how representative the responses were of the wider population of students. This process was easier for the main pilot because the data return process that was established as part of this work offered us a good understanding of the characteristics of all possible respondents. This allowed us to compare the characteristics of those who did respond to those who did not, to see if there was any systematic difference. This gave a clearer picture of any potential bias in response rates and allowed us account for these in the analysis. By contrast, although in the poll we tried to find a representative sample, this was not always successful. We also had a poorer understanding of where the panel was drawn from, and so we were less able to account for potential sources of bias.

56. Another key difference was the process by which students opted-in to participating in the survey. Though in both surveys there was an opt-in process (i.e. students choosing to respond), the polling work constituted a double-opt. This is because poll responses were made up of those people who both opted-in to participating in the prevalence survey, and who had previously opted-in to being part of an incentivised research panel. By contrast, the main pilot survey had no such double opt-in.

57. Both forms of data collection should be understood as being part of a wider pilot exercise to understand the feasibility of the OfS running a national prevalence survey of sexual misconduct, and so findings from each should be caveated within this context. However, because of our more complete understanding of the sample characteristics in the second fieldwork exercise, we were more confident in placing greater weight on these findings in our wider work on harassment and sexual misconduct.

Conclusions

58. The experience of running the pilot survey has shown the benefit of a centrally managed approach to survey administration. The mechanism used for the pilot was effective to the extent that it offered an excellent understanding of the survey population, which allowed the findings to be weighted to mitigate against the chance that those who took part in the survey are systematically different in some way when compared with those who did not participate. This was particularly important given the low response rates. However, the approach proved to be burdensome for some participating providers. Future iterations of the survey should identify ways to maintain the centrally managed approach, while minimising the requirements for providers.

59. We have gained confidence in the design of the questionnaire, but work remains to limit its length, and to better integrate the different sections to reduce some of the dropouts as people progress through the questions.

60. Perhaps the most significant finding is the challenges around response rates. While not unusual for surveys of this kind, in future iterations of this survey the relatively low response rate would present issues for developing robust provider-level data, particularly for providers with small cohorts. The work to increase response rates is one of the most important areas of activity required should the survey of this kind be rolled out in the future. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that even with a better response rate it could still be difficult to obtain useable results for smaller providers, especially by student characteristics.

61. The following considerations are made on the basis of the pilot work:

- Consideration: Undertake additional testing of the questionnaire with non-native English speakers.

- Consideration: Revisit the list of sexual harassment behaviours to ensure that the question adequately captures the range of potential unwanted behaviours.

- Consideration: Identify ways to reduce the overall length of the survey.

- Consideration: To continue to use a managed target list approach for future prevalence survey administration.

- Consideration: Where feasible, identify ways to minimise the collection of student personal data.

- Consideration: Include a form of external expert review of ethics in future iterations of the survey.

- Consideration: Identify a mechanism for including further education colleges in future iterations of the survey.

- Consideration: Consider the timing of the survey as a key mechanism for boosting response rates. We suggest future iterations of the survey consider fieldwork in the summer term.

- Consideration: Undertake more work at an earlier stage with student union representatives ahead of fieldwork, including sharing promotional materials.