

National Union of Students lobs sexual harassment smears at UK lecturers

Thomas Scripps
12 April 2018

The National Union of Students (NUS) in Britain has sunk to new lows with its publication of a libelous report branding academic staff as the chief perpetrators of sexual harassment in higher education. The report, “Power in the academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education”, was released last Wednesday.

Coming in the midst of a major strike at the universities, in which lecturers are already under intense hostile pressure from the media, the NUS might as well be a black propaganda department of the University UK (UUK) employers.

Leading nominally liberal newspapers published banner headlines denouncing university staff as sexual predators. The *Independent* ran with “Sexual harassment of students by university academics is rife, survey suggests”, while the *Guardian* screamed “Sexual misconduct by UK university staff is rife, research finds.” Murdoch’s *Times*, which led the demonisation of university staff during their strike, wrote gleefully, “Academics are worst culprits, say students in sex harassment survey”.

The 1752 Group, with whom the NUS partnered to conduct the study, describes itself as “a lobby group and consultancy set up to address the issue of staff-student sexual harassment in higher education.” Its spokespeople for the study, Hareem Ghani (NUS Women’s Officer) and Anna Bull (1752 co-founder Group,) endorsed such assertions.

Ghani commented, “We need to talk about the open secrets that plague academia, to challenge cultures of entitlement and stop abuses of power wherever they happen.”

Bull said, “... the evidence shows that this problem is systemic and of the most serious nature. It is particularly concerning that the majority of perpetrators of staff sexual misconduct appear to be academic staff...”

In truth, utterly inadequate so-called “evidence” is being used to justify such serious claims. A critical examination of the report and its methodology leads instead to the conclusion that it has been concocted to suit the narrative and interests of its creators.

Announcing the study last November, the NUS said, it would use the “expertise” of the 1752 Group to conduct a “national survey of staff and students with an anticipated 3,000 responses... as well as qualitative research examining how

institutions respond to this issue.”

This small survey pool was further skewed towards producing the desired results by the survey being specifically targeted at students who considered themselves victims of inappropriate sexual behaviour: “The survey is for all current students, as well as ex-students who have experienced sexual misconduct”. Would-be participants were then incentivised to participate by being “entered into a draw to win five lots of £100.”

According to the report’s own methodology section, this sample was then “deliberately weighted towards postgraduate students” holding NUS cards, “as previous research has shown that postgraduate students are particularly at risk of staff sexual misconduct.”

Just 1,839 of the expected 3,000 students responded. Of these, 37 percent of respondents to the survey were postgraduates, though they make up only 24 percent of the student body.

Of these, just 16 students and former students (or 0.87 percent) claimed to have been the victims of actual sexual assault or rape.

The report itself acknowledges that, “Due to lack of resources, it was not possible to make the sample representative. Therefore, this is not a prevalence study but a descriptive one, and this report does not make claims about the level of misconduct across students in the UK in general. Instead, this study captures the patterns of experiences of students.”

This dishonest caveat, which is meant to allow the study’s authors to simply ignore the results of their own study in favor of their own subjective criteria, contradicts the NUS and 1752 Group’s own claims that the study shows that sexual harassment is “systemic and of the most serious nature.”

What are the “patterns of experience of students” so coyly referred to?

According to the report, 41 percent of respondents said they had faced unwelcome sexual advances and innuendo from university staff. Sixty five (65) students reported that they had experienced non-consensual sexual contact. Of the 1,535 respondents who are currently studying, one in eight said they had been touched by a member of staff in a way that made them uncomfortable.

All of these terms are deliberately vague. It is impossible to ascertain whether the reported experiences constitute a misstep in complex human relationships or are intentionally abusive.

The respondents themselves often made precisely this point. Of those who did not report sexual misconduct to their universities, exactly half did not do so either because they, in the words of the report, were “unsure the behaviour was serious enough to report” (the most common reason for not reporting) or “did not recognise the behaviour as sexual misconduct” (the second most common reason).

Further elaborations from students cited in the study include:

- “It did not make me feel uncomfortable as we were joking so I did not need to report it”
- “I didn’t feel threatened, just awkward, so didn’t feel it necessary [to report]”
- “I felt uncomfortable about it but didn’t think it was worth reporting. It was not a very big deal”
- “It wasn’t that serious, a sharp no sufficed”
- “I dealt with it myself at the time”

For the researchers, however, “While such ‘humorous’ incidents may not be received negatively by individuals, they can also contribute to a wider culture of sexism that normalises more severe transgressions.”

These incidences are conflated by the media into incendiary statements typified by the *Guardian*: “Sexual misconduct by university staff is rife on campuses, with more than four in 10 students reporting that they have suffered unwelcome advances and assault, including sexualised comments, inappropriate touching and rape, research shows.”

What is motivating this filthy attack on lecturers?

The 1752 Group comprises academics and business people specialising in issues of gender relations and discrimination. The group takes its name from the £1,752 allocated to the organisation’s founding event in 2015.

Perhaps a name change is in order? If the same approach were applied today, the organisation’s title would run into the tens to hundreds of thousands.

The 1752 Group is involved in a number of well-funded research schemes. These include a project with the University of Portsmouth, “looking into current university sexual policies and working with focus groups of those who have experienced sexual misconduct”. This will take a share of a £2.45 million fund given by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) Catalyst Fund to address sexual harassment. A further £50,000 has been allocated to the university to carry out a “culture change” programme.

1752 is also drawing on a second HEFCE fund (of £1.8 million), to tackle hate crime and online harassment, through another research project at the University of York. This is to develop “an intersectional approach to training on sexual harassment, violence and hate crime.”

Another up to £10,000 has been made available to the organisation through a British Academy/Leverhulme Small

Research Grant into “what universities can learn from workplace policies on preventing sexual misconduct.”

The 1752 Group also works in close partnership with the international law firm, specialising in discrimination cases, McAllister Olivarius.

It’s listed “strategic priorities” include the setting up of an independent national office for sexual misconduct advocacy and support, implementing an enforceable national code of conduct that clarifies professional boundaries, ensuring all institutions record data and make publicly available reports on all allegations of sexual misconduct and implementing comprehensive sector-wide and institution-level cultural change.

The purpose of this work, and of the manufactured report into academic staff, is twofold and taken straight from the reactionary #MeToo playbook.

First, by whipping up hysteria over supposedly systemic sexual harassment, an environment is created in which ample funds are made available for campaigning and research organisations, especially their upper echelons. Second, the strict policing of sexual relations that results from such campaigns provides leverage—through the threat of sex scandals and witch-hunts—that “aspiring” academics can use against their colleagues in the professional rat-race.

The politics of the NUS aligns perfectly with this orientation. As a stepping-stone to well-paid roles in organisations like the 1752 Group, the careerists who make up the NUS are adept at using identity-based politics (be it gender, race or sexuality) to divert from their role in facilitating the marketisation of education.

The specious nature of the report, and its timing, makes clear that the NUS has allied itself with the government, vice-chancellors, right-wing media and big business against university staff fighting to defend their conditions, and the mass of students that support them.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact