According to 2013 figures from the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office for National Statistics, sexual violence is widely underreported. Rates of sexual violence are very high among university students with sexual assaults at rates of around 10 per cent and experiences of sexual harassment at over two thirds. Of all such reports of sexual assaults, around 91 per cent are of women (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017; NUS, 2012). A substantial majority of psychology undergraduates are young women. Although the precise figures for sexual violence and harassment are sometimes contested, all such figures are high: this is not simply a problem of ‘bad apples’, it’s a more engrained cultural and social problem. So what do we know, and what can we do?
The brutal truth is that the overwhelming majority of sex offenders do not typically get prosecuted in a court, and only a minority of those who do are convicted and sent to prison. What we claim to know about sex offenders is largely based upon studies with this convicted minority. Arguably, we know more about the victim/survivors of sexual violence than we do the offenders. This is because we have sources such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which includes data on both those who report crimes that they have experienced to the police and those who do not. Sexual violence is a major public health problem and we need to take a radically different approach to tackling it.

This should begin with a strong prevention focus. The work of forensic psychologists in the area of sex offending has tended to be in terms of assessment and treatment of offenders. Evidence for the efficacy of such intervention work has not been promising (Crighton & Towl, 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2017; Towl & Crighton, 2016). In this article I make the case for a renewed focus upon prevention, and a role for university communities, which may begin to radically inform our understanding of the assessment, treatment and prevention of sexual offending.

Making reporting the norm

Psychologists working within criminal justice know all too well that sexual offending is probably one of the most underreported crimes. Increasing reporting rates is an area that remains a significant challenge in criminal justice and also for sexual health services. Historically much of the focus has been on the criminal justice aspect of tackling sexual offending, with perhaps less emphasis upon sexual health. In public health terms the benefits of addressing sexual violence at universities are potentially huge, and go well beyond the individual reputations of the institutions and the safety of their students. University communities have the opportunity to influence attitudes to women and community safety with the next generation of leaders. Yet the stark reality is that young women students are at an inflated risk of being victim survivors of sexual violence. The recent Australian research into sexual assaults and sexual harassment, with a sample of around 30,000 students, has three key conclusions: sexual assault and harassment are far too prevalent; there is very significant underreporting; and there is a need to build a culture of mutual respect at universities which is not always evident... nor indeed are students always clear on how to make reports to their university communities (AHRC, 2017).

In the UK, there are indications that reporting rates of sexual assaults in universities are on the increase. For example, the Nightline Association has recently noted an increase in disclosures of sexual violence with its confidential peer support services. Increasingly, some university leaders are being bold enough to acknowledge that at this stage an increase in report rates is a positive step: among the case studies issued recently through Universities UK (UUK). De Montfort University noted: 'We have had an increase in the number of students who have reported, which we view as a success'; and the University of Cambridge said: 'A rise in disclosures to the university will be a success criterion' (UUK, 2017). This is a direct challenge to media narratives along the lines that those universities with the highest reporting levels have the biggest problems.

Despite some positive progress, there remains a long way to go. It is only with increased reporting that university communities can ensure the provision of the support needed for victim/survivors of sexual violence (Ghani & Towl, 2017a, Ghani & Towl, 2017b). Yet no UK university yet has reporting rates in triple figures, which is what may reasonably be expected in the case of sexual assaults in view of both the Australian research and what we know about the very low reporting rates more generally in the UK for sexual offences. Of course, the figures for sexual harassment will be much higher.

I would argue that those universities with reported sexual assault rates in triple figures provides a strong indication of a university community where students trust those in academic leadership roles to ensure that there is appropriate safeguarding, support and accessible procedures and processes to engage with. Interestingly, in the Australian research, only 6 per cent of students thought that their university communities were doing enough to provide clear policies and procedures in relation to tackling sexual harassment. This figure dropped to 4 per cent in relation to sexual assault cases.

One distinguishing feature of the work in universities on sexual violence is that it has been largely initiated as a direct result of lobbying from, for example, the National Union of Students (NUS) and other activist groups (e.g. End Rape on Campus), with changes recently having been seen in the UK, US, Canada and Australia. But it is clear that the sector needs to change, and psychologists are uniquely well placed to contribute to these changes at a number of levels. First, psychologists understand the psychology of sexual offending, of both perpetrators and victim/survivors of sexual violence.
survivors, which can inform policy development at universities. Second, in terms of wider culture change in university communities, a psychological understanding of how to enact behavioural change is another level at which a contribution can be made. Third, in terms of evidence-informed interventions to contribute to prevention as part of an overall set of policies and practices, the example of bystander intervention training for students and staff derives directly from the social psychological literature. Understanding the factors that lead to individuals making a decision to intervene or otherwise are important in a better understanding of the most effective approaches to prevention. Additionally, as more and more students disclose and report their experiences this may well have a positive impact upon prevention – if reporting becomes the new norm, then this may have a deterrent impact for some prospective offenders. Thus, this would potentially change the normative expectation for the perpetrator (which currently may be broadly viewed as an expectation not to get reported). If the normative expectation was one of being reported this would be likely to play a role, at least with some prospective perpetrators, in informing their judgements about whether or not to engage in a particular act of sexual violence. This would be consistent with some clinical experience working with sex offenders, for example, in prisons.

What do universities need to do differently?

There is no room for neutrality. To do nothing (or for that matter the minimum) is a betrayal of students, given what we know about the rates of sexual assaults at universities. University communities have a responsibility to ensure that we do what we can to ensure that students thrive educationally. If we know that for many students (most probably in triple figures in UK universities in view of their size) one barrier to this is sexual violence, we should tackle it. But in terms of wider public health responsibilities too, sexual violence can, for example, result in the transmission of HIV and STIs or cause unwanted pregnancies. There can be some significant mental health and wellbeing impacts too, given links between sexual violence and depression, anxiety and PTSD. University communities can benefit from drawing upon psychologists’ expertise to ensure the most effective approaches in increased disclosures, reporting, psychological support and educational outcomes.

We need to ensure that support is provided to students who have experienced sexual violence, and we need to ensure that this happens in a timely and respectful fashion. Key to getting this right psychologically is ensuring that the principle of the empowerment of the student reporting sexual violence is kept as a core principle of our policies and practices (Towl, 2016). Psychological studies, such as Albert Bandura’s work, on the importance of the link between self-efficacy and more positive adaptation and resultant mental health outcomes can be useful in providing some empirical support for such policies. Of course, fundamentally there are ethical and values-based reasons for supporting such self-determination and empowerment. In practical terms this means that key decisions about the progress of any such reporting procedures must stay with the student. For example, questions that need addressing include whether or not to use the services of a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (for either health- or criminal-justice-based reasons, or both) and whether or not to report to the police. If university communities seek to take this authority away from reporting students, out of some misplaced sense of protecting wider institutional interests, the result will be even fewer reports. That would be a failure in the duty of care to the individual student and would not in any meaningful way protect wider institutional interests. To allow a perceived institutional interest to trump such individual need may well look unethical to many of us as psychologists. And the need for such professional considerations is something that can be promoted by psychologists at an institutional level.

Student unions have played key roles in contributing to tackling sexual violence at universities. This is an area where universities and student unions can work potentially very effectively together. One powerful indicator of institutional commitment is through the provision of resources. Durham University has a full-time member of staff to address the issue of tackling sexual violence.

Staff training and the training of student leaders

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**Key sources**


Ghani, H. & Towl, G.J. (2017a). Do the right thing. www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/do-the-right-thing


Towl, G.J. (2016). The Weinstein of academia can no longer be tolerated. tinyurl.com/y8elky34


too, is important. Increasingly universities are routinely providing consent training for new students along with bystander intervention training too. There is some encouraging evidence in support of the efficacy of bystander interventions, but much of it does not focus upon behavioural outcomes. Next steps should include drawing upon the empirical evidence upon how we may best reduce rape and attempted rape amongst young women students.

There is some promising early Canadian work, including a randomised control trial that evaluated the ‘Enhanced Access, Acknowledge, Act’ programme, showing a reduction in attempted and completed rapes amongst participants at a two-year follow up when compared with a matched control group (Senn et al., 2017).

Within the sector there has been some discussion and debate about whether or not such sessions should be compulsory or not. Arguments for such compulsion include sending out a clear message about the fundamental importance of understanding consent. If a university community would require students to go on say, fire safety training, why not make such a requirement on consent training too? Arguments against can tend to reflect a concern that those compelled to attend may comply with such attendance but not internalise such learning. Also, it would be inappropriate for those prospective students who have already experienced sexual violence to be compelled to attend such workshops if they do not wish to do so. There are some practical challenges around compulsion to attend too. What happens with distance learners? Who monitors attendance? Sometimes despite claims of compulsion there is little policing in place. How will a student declining to attend be addressed?

Pragmatically one way of addressing this is to make it a normative expectation that students attend. Some universities have year-round communications strategies in relation to tackling sexual violence, with widespread poster campaigns across campuses. Next steps would include raising the issue of tackling sexual violence at university open days for prospective students. This sends a clear message to parents and prospective students that the university community is taking this societal problem very seriously. Of course, some universities may fight shy of this for fear of reputational damage arising from acknowledging a problem, which many would prefer not to exist. However, the problem does exist, and the track record of denial as a psychological mechanism for change is poor. Much better, surely, to be honest and transparent about the problem and to share the steps being actively taken to address it. Prospective, young women, students in particular, may well feel happier about being part of an institution that takes their safety and wellbeing sufficiently seriously as to not duck difficult issues such as tackling sexual violence.

The Office for Students, as the regulator for higher education (due to be fully operational in April 2018), clearly needs to show some leadership in this challenging area if it is to fulfil its promise as having student interests at its heart. As a starting point, it could potentially effectively require universities to publish figures for sexual assaults accompanied by actions taken. Perhaps we could also introduce a national kitemark for actively tackling sexual violence, which could build upon the Athena Swan programme for women in science? The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) or a similar such body, could potentially administer such a scheme.

Student unions have rightly been critical of the sector for not sufficiently addressing this important area, and there is little doubt that tackling sexual violence at universities has the potential to contribute to prevention and to help provide the educational, physical and mental health support to students. Why wouldn't we want to do that?

Psychological theory and the applications of theory clearly have a role in contributing to policy and practice in this important area of public health and student wellbeing. There may also be opportunities for us to inform the literature on what we know, or what we think that we know, about sexual offending. As psychologists, we surely can and should ensure that we make a full contribution to helping address this challenging area of public health.

Vice-chancellors have the opportunity to show the courage of visible leadership on this. However much such courage is needed from university leaders, it does not compare to the courage of a victim/survivors reporting their experiences. As psychologists and as a sector, we need to do the right thing.