

Student Consultation Panel

CONSULTATION ON DOMESTIC ABUSE AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE POLICY

22 April–3 May 2021

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed by those with permissions on the forum:

[STUDENT-CONSULTATION: Consultation on the Domestic Abuse Gender Based Violence Policy](#)

Record of contributions

In total there were **160** posts by **63** students out of the **335** registered, with **161** like/favourite ratings. There were at least **199** independent readers of the forum. Below are extracts from most 'liked' posts.

As someone who has experienced domestic violence, and subsequently been on an 8 week counselling course with 15 other women who also experienced DV, if someone was to reach out to their university of all places, or mention it in any way to someone so removed from their life, then that would almost definitely be a call for help. If they didn't want something to be done, they wouldn't say. Also if the OU acted on suspicion then one of two things would happen - nothing is wrong and the police just have a wasted visit, or potentially they could save someone's life by intervening. I guess there is also a 3rd option that the abuse could get worse as a result if the victim does not want to talk to the police, but the police have gone through a lot of training the past few years to spot the signs of DV.

I personally think it is a policy that will never/very rarely be used, but genuinely has life saving potential so I am all for it.

The language is spot on. Appropriate and clear but not so hard to read that people would be put off. Could a summary document be put together that is even easier to access and shorter? Often people in distress find large volumes of text difficult to access.

As someone with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder), I do hope that an 'autism-applicable' version will follow from this.

Fourteen pages are way too much for someone like me to deal with (especially related to such a topic). I have read the policy more than three times and still cannot retain the amount of information. A suitable (or friendlier) version would be summarised to 2 or 3 pages (maximum) and would be more direct and concise (almost like bullet-points). I appreciate that this policy is written to cover a lot of technicalities and formalities but I would definitely suggest that an alternative / easier to read and understand version co-exists with this one.

...[More]

It hurts my brain as someone with ASD and SPD for documents to fluctuate between abbreviations / acronyms and full terminology (this happens a lot with GBV). Also, if overwhelmed with information and sensory information (or merely anxious), phrases such as 'continuum of behaviours' and 'vexatious allegation' can be meaningless to someone like me, so language could be more suitable for the situation (in an alternative version at least).

1. Clarity and ease of use

a. *To what extent is this policy clear and easy to follow? Please give examples of anything that is not clear within the policy?*

Summary:

The majority of the feedback was positive and indicated that the policy was found to be relatively clear and easy to follow. Several participants noted their own experience of domestic abuse and violence.

There was some concern about wordiness with significant support for a shorter summary document designed to be more accessible. A specific benefit for this was firstly that people in distress find large volumes of text difficult to access and secondly that some students (for example those with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Sensory Processing Disorder), might find the volume of information, including numerous links, rather confusing.

Several students also thought the document could do more to ensure those accessing it were aware it was relevant to men.

Specific suggestions and points included:

- That something could be added to an assignment as a cry for help is really important and should be further emphasised.
- Perhaps include a brief summary box for each section.
- It could be clearer that the policy also applies to men suffering domestic abuse and violence.
- Fluctuating between acronyms, abbreviations and writing out in full can confuse people.
- Reference to transphobia and gender identity policy could be more upfront so more students were aware the policy could be relevant to them.
- Not so relevant for international students, for example one student commented suggested a name change to 'Domestic Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Policy for UK-based students (without children)'.
- Concern that it appears that students are expected to explain their situation to multiple parties – a single point of contact would be useful.
- The table of contents may not be displaying properly – if the related documentation is important it should be upfront.
- 3.2 could be clearer by fronting that it is likely to be only when children and vulnerable adults are involved that disclosure may be shared.
- At a distance it is hard for the OU to guarantee support – more could be done to raise awareness of coercive controlling behaviour.
- 1.1 Add in that one of the objectives of the policy is that there is something in place to help victims - perhaps add it to 1.1.2.
- 1.1.3 disclosures also need to be handled with speed because of the dangerous situation many victims may be in.
- Under procedure and 3.1 the phrase "it is impacting on your studies" - how could it not be impacting on someone's studies? It appears to be a badly worded phrase.
- Section 9.1 is unclear as to whether it only refers to malicious or vexatious allegations. It needs rephrasing or rearranging, rather than starting out with a punishment.
- The Scottish legislation should be correctly referred to as 'Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018'.
- Include the external agencies links for students. For example: Woman's Aid, Victim Support Scotland, Rape Crisis, Action Against Stalking etc.
- Some presentation formatting could help to deliver a stronger message, for example bold headings with short summaries.
- Add detail of sponsor/champion/owner.
- Enable links to jump between sections.
- Describe what the University's obligations are in given situations, for example response times can be slow.
- Signpost charities that can help – the document should include information of how a non-named advocate from a charity can communicate with the OU to advise of a student's situation.
- Needs some information about what the courses of action are for any accusation to be accepted as proven and what this then means in terms of help offered.
- Some layout and typographical issues are addressed in one student's post.
- As and when a student enrolls/registers for a module, they could be emailed AND posted, a specific student handbook that clearly identifies such services.
- Clarity on what constitutes 'impacting on your studies' is left as an open interpretation and possibly in time and use of the policy may determine whether this requires amendment.
- The OU may want to consider an e-solution that will allow a distressed individual to discreetly click to flag their distress through the email that provides the policy documents on registration to the OU and the same e-solution can be made available on the OU app as well. With simple options that allow a 'yes' or 'no' response to indicate whether an individual is experiencing abuse or violence, the same for indicating whether in immediate danger. The OU will already have the contact details so these can appear and a quick click can confirm them or an option to provide another number.
- 112 should also be included as a number to contact the police as it is additionally applicable in the EU and has been adopted by many other countries as a recognised emergency number, making the policy more relevant to international students.

Questions

- When the person is asking for help or report could it be made anonymous?
- Will there be training for tutors and other frontline staff on this policy?
- What exactly does the OU safeguarding team do? How can they help other than refer to social services or appropriate agencies?

- In reference to section 5.5.1, what does internal support look like? (comment that it appears that there will just be signposting to national agencies or study support, which could be sorted by direct contact with your tutor). If those are the limits, that should be clear in the policy.
- Information sharing and referrals to Police and other agencies needs to be more detailed. How do the OU determine the risk and at what stage will action become mandatory to ensure the victim is provided with the best safeguarding support?
- Is there a separate policy for staff?
- What training is provided for 'DV champions'?
- Is there help and advice available 24/7? Is there a dedicated telephone number or section on all module websites to help someone?
- Where is this going to be sighted? It must be easy to find.
- Is there going to be some suggested way of flagging a contact request or message as needing special attention?
- How is anonymity of students protected throughout the processes?
- In section 4.3, does signpost if appropriate mean you'd point someone in the right direction to get help, such as pass on details of charities for the country where the student is based?
- Are these services highlighted and made accessible to students with ease early on, or does one have to become familiar with StudentHome and come across the policy by chance?

b. To what extent are the pathways of support and referrals shown in the flow chart clear?

The majority of students felt the flow chart was very clear, with some thinking it would benefit from adding links to national agencies that a student would be signposted to. Some found the colour contrast and colouring of boxes problematic. Additional points and suggestions included:

- The font may be too small.
- The mention of 'legal duty of care' is pretty cold – perhaps removing 'legal' would help.
- The flow chart switches perspectives which can be confusing
- Delete the first box and make the question part the chart title, so the flow chart itself is the answer. Then split the text in the red box into two parts: 'Is there a threat that requires an urgent response?' goes in the first box and the 999 part can stay where it is.
- Add a step which involves consulting the student on what they want to happen (if possible).
- The document should be clear about what the word threat in the flow chart means: life or death situations, physical harm, material harm?
- The third box only mentions children or vulnerable adults, but not pets, vulnerable or cherished belongings such as the family home or important relationships. From a legal point of view this may be sufficient, but for the person in the complicated abusive relationship it's not always that simple. The chart would not be clear for someone in such a situation.
- A person who decides to share this aspect of their lives is very emotionally vulnerable and fragile. This section needs to state the immediate pathway: 'If you are in this situation, take this action...'
- It is not enough to have a bullet point that says 'your tutor' because there may be too much of a delay before they read the message; it is also not enough to says student support services; it needs to say student support services on this number, this email... and you need to make it clear that there is a support policy at the helpdesk which means when a person phones and says my husband beats me.. they will be helped by a person with appropriate first contact training not a person who is not confident in what their immediate response should be.
- At the very top of the document should be:
 - If you are in immediate danger call 999. The OU is not in a position to provide an emergency response.
 - If you contact the OU about domestic abuse which involves children and/or vulnerable adults, by law the OU must take appropriate safeguarding action. If you are concerned and want to speak in confidence you can call Refuge's confidential helpline on 0808 2000 247.
 - All members of staff at the OU have been trained in dealing with domestic abuse sensitively OR If you report domestic abuse to any member of OU staff you will be directed to an appropriately trained member of staff [whichever is true]
- There should be a bit more detail about what will actually happen if abuse is reported in circumstances where children/vulnerable adults are not involved.
- Would like some sort of service level agreement that gives the end user an idea of response times.
- Maybe over-complicated – "When I came across the flow chart, I imagined how flustered a victim would be, when faced with what seems like a map of clues that might lead them to the treasure, if they follow the correct path." – might be better to concentrate on delivering relevant support with a direct path without possible divergence of multiple choice.

2. Glossary

Does the glossary include everything you would expect it to?

By and large, students participating found the glossary useful. Suggestions and comments included:

- Definition of student could be included – for example, 'has the status of those individuals studying micro credentials been resolved?'
- Format to give focus to headings and subheadings so that readers can find what they need easily.
- 'Tricked' may not be the right word, under child and childhood sexual abuse – grooming comes to mind more.
- For physical abuse, add spitting and non-fatal strangulation – MPs and campaigners have successfully pushed for non-fatal strangulation to be added to the new, Domestic Abuse bill and it should also be added to the document.

- In the entry on 'Gas Lighting', there is variation between 'gaslighting' (one word) and 'Gas Lighting'/ 'gas lighter' (two words). For clarity and consistency, it should all be the one-word format.
- Hyperlink the keywords in the document to their definitions (but enable a return to section).
- 'Age' is missing but should be included as a protected characteristic.
- It may be beneficial to refer to professionals internally or externally who have expert knowledge in this area.
- The definition of Intimate Partners could specify polyamorous or polygamous relationships.
- Anger management could be considered.
- Under the heading HBV/HBA mention is made of breast ironing – should this not have its own entry as it is not defined or referred to elsewhere?
- The glossary may be more helpful near the start of the document.

3. Supportiveness and Tone

To what extent is the tone of this policy supportive in a way that is appropriate to the subject matter? Is there any part of the policy that does not appear to be supportive and if so any suggestions about how this might be changed?

For example, if you wanted to disclose an issue around this nature to the OU, to what extent would this policy encourage you to do so?

There was a mixed response to this question, largely positive or 'as expected' of a policy, with many points echoing those made under 1a, including with regard to accessibility and need for a summary document with clear signposting to support agencies early on. The link for alternative formats should be at the start and more prominent. A few students felt the policy may be going beyond the remit of the OU as an education provider, and several students felt the policy was not entirely useful for international students. There was also concern that the OU's statutory duties around safeguarding may deter students from disclosure – that this is a legal requirement should be very clear. There should be clear reassurance that the University will act with utmost care and that all staff have been trained to respond in a sensitive and discreet way. It was noted that the policy may not be the first port of call for students and there should be more easily findable, accessible support with clear signposting. Some students were concerned the policy did not feel sufficiently accessible to men facing domestic abuse.

Other comments and suggestions included:

- A short video may assist with signposting.
- Some students questioned the necessity of the policy, as it could be found rather intrusive, with the OU going beyond its remit to provide teaching and learning and 'be supportive' – it may only be relevant in relation to deferrals, extensions, discretionary postponements and the like.
- Section 4.1 is badly written and suggests students outside the UK are an international institution – it does not appear to be very supportive of international students – perhaps scrap the whole sentence and maybe add the international part as a clause to one of the other sections, if they're needed at all, since the advisers would need a good understanding of support available locally across the world if it is to be helpful.
- It might be better as an awareness document with signposted help and advice mentioning services and shelters, perhaps suggesting a Buddy scheme.
- A summary or easy access document that doesn't necessarily include the definitions of abuse or OU policy but rather has a focus on where to get help and support and makes clear what the OU can offer would be helpful.
- A one-page summary of policies as the first page works well – immediately accessible, so the reader can straight away assess relevance and key points, perhaps including inks to relevant organisations.
- The student has to know that if they ask for things not to be taken further, that will be respected.
- There should be a distinction between students directly reaching out for advice and support and disclosure within a tutorial or assignment that should not necessarily be acted on.
- The document should acknowledge that students may be unable to study if they have an abusive partner because of the control exerted by that partner.
- The policy is unlikely to be the first point of call for anyone who needs it – what to do in an emergency and important contact details should be more easily accessible.
- With any type of violence, harassment or bullying, it is always the shift in culture that is key and the people who have experienced and survived should always lead on policy and procedure.
- All the important information needed by the policy users should be available to them in a quick and easy way, before having to look at the policy in depth.
- It is good that it is inclusive and acknowledges that domestic abuse can occur in any relationship and the many forms which this can take
- It is good to acknowledge there may be instances where the OU is one of the few places a person can communicate with.
- Would it be possible to merge the safeguarding section perhaps at the top because it's a case of blink and you will miss that part?
- Encouraging students to come forward should be highlighted.
- A question about who the audience is for the policy.
- The policy states that the OU is there for students if domestic abuse/gbv is impacting on their studies, but should an individual feel that the place they are safest sharing their experiences is the OU, even if they don't feel it's impacting their studies, then they should still be able to.
- There need to be processes to ensure that disclosures to multiple people are dealt with clearly – for example with several tutors on a forum, one should be responsible not several or zero.
- There should be a process for students to feedback on whether they felt their situation was appropriately managed.

- The OU should ask 'what does successful implementation of this policy look like', which is not necessarily clear in this case.
- The policy should be considered in terms of the diversity of OU students, including international students where cultural understandings and the law may be very different and the policy should be accessible to all students. Some of the ideas and concepts are fairly abstract and may not translate clearly or with the same meaning as they have in English.
- It would be better for the OU to adopt a different definition in the introduction, so that it is not then in contradiction to the OU summary statement. You cannot state that you recognize all forms of GBV but use the Scottish government's underlining definition of 'an abuse of MALE power and privilege'. The UNHRC define GBV without bias: Gender-Based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms.
- Right at the outset and in simple terms the policy should state that any person making a report of Domestic Abuse or GBV will be listened to and taken seriously. That the OU will then work WITH the complainant to establish what help they need. This puts the individual at the heart of any support offered. The OU support representative can then help signpost as agreed and supported by the individual concerned. The diagram within the policy could reflect this as a first step before legalities, study issues etc.
- Some sort of acknowledgement around data retention may be necessary. If this eventually goes to a court situation the initial report could form part of any evidence disclosure package.
- 'As a survivor of violent abuse I would just like to point out that calling 999 for someone if they don't ask for it is a really dangerous idea...please do not do this to someone, let them be the judge of their own situation, they personally know the abuser more than you. You will be throwing petrol on a naked flame.'
- The tone is quite technical.
- It may be better just to signpost anyone to existing public and third sector services.
- The most useful part was the visual map; a map like that in an accessible place on the website would be helpful.
- The word support is mentioned so many times but clear examples are given in only few places under point 5. For example, point 3.4 says 'If you wish to share concerns about another student, you can contact your Student Support Team who will be able to take the details of your concern and provide the relevant support or signposting.' This could usefully include more detail.
- Maybe the document could be split up as part of an online format with drop down content under headings to be less intimidating.
- Explain the difference between domestic violence and gender-based violence.
- It would be good to know there was real support available from the OU, not just a policy.
- Within the OU there should be a way to 'report abuse' when someone feels their personal safety is being threatened or a way to block other individuals (students) when not interested in reading what they have to say, as happens with some other forums.
- There should be further student feedback sought in the future to see if any gaps are identified.
- Section nine to be rearranged as noted above.
- There needs to be more specifics about the OU's responsibilities and what it will actually do.
- The opening paragraphs in the introduction are confusing regarding definitions and nations.
- There should be some emphasis on a proactive approach as well as being reactive.
- Is it possible to put an easily visible button on each page that would return the screen instantly to the Student Home Page or similar, and any way the document cannot be found in browser history?

Other comments:

- The definition for Emotional, Mental and Psychological abuse uses the phrases 'the aim', 'they use tactics' and 'exert control', which infers that the abuse is premeditated and conscious, which may not be the reality, as there are many circumstances that lead to all forms of abuse. The definition may be better described by focusing on the outcomes, rather than definitive causes.
- It is essential for advisors to be sympathetic, considerate and at least aware of the victim's plight, in all aspects of domestic abuse and violence. It is imperative to have at least an acquaintance with what is obviously a sensitive subject. Without conflict of interest or confirmatory bias, the advisors need to recognise the sensitivity of the victim's experience.
- Mental wellbeing is prominent on the 'Help Centre', but domestic abuse does not have a standalone subheading, which might be clearer than trying to navigate pages, especially if those looking are in an agitated state.

Date: 17 May 2021