

Responding to Student Disclosures of Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Guidance for Staff

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The University of Oxford is committed to fostering a safe environment in which harassment and sexual misconduct are not tolerated.

Full details of the University's policies and procedures on harassment and sexual misconduct, including available support services and reporting options for students can be found at [Supporting Students at Oxford: Preventing Harassment and Sexual Misconduct](#).

Colleges will have their own policies, procedures and sources of support. This document is intended to support University and college processes, by outlining how staff can respond to disclosures and signpost students in a supportive and trauma-informed way.

A disclosure occurs when someone shares information about an incident of potential harassment or sexual misconduct. A student may approach any member of staff, at any time, to seek emotional or practical support, and advice and information on reporting options following an experience of potential harassment or sexual misconduct. This could have been an incident involving another student, a staff member or a third party. It could be a specific incident, or an ongoing situation, it could have happened recently, or a long time ago, within or outside of the University context. The person disclosing may be the reporting student, or the actual or alleged reported student.

Talking about an experience of harassment, bullying, domestic abuse, or sexual misconduct can be extremely difficult, and students may have overcome multiple barriers before deciding to speak to someone. The reaction of the person receiving the disclosure can determine how someone processes what happened, and whether they choose to access support going forwards.

Understanding how to appropriately respond to disclosures, and what to do next, will equip you with the knowledge and skills to appropriately support individuals, act in their best interests and signpost them to services that are best placed to provide specialist advice and guidance on the options available. Staff are not expected to offer ongoing or long-term emotional support to

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students. This guidance outlines how to respond in the moment, and highlights key policies, procedures, support and reporting options for students at the University of Oxford.

Confidentiality and safeguarding

Be clear about the limits of confidentiality prior to a conversation, to allow the student greater choice about what they disclose. You can explain that confidentiality will be respected and consent will be sought wherever reasonably possible for any sharing of information, but that in certain limited circumstances information may need to be shared for a justifiable reason, for example if there are concerns about an imminent risk of serious harm or a statutory safeguarding concern. There are additional safeguarding obligations if the sexual misconduct involves someone aged under 18, which require a referral to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, or engagement with the Local Authority Designation Officer within 24 hours of disclosure if the incident involves a staff member. Be mindful of safeguarding responsibilities in terms of your specific remit, as some roles may have additional responsibilities. ¹

Receiving a disclosure: initial response

If a student is making a disclosure to you, here are some important things to hold in mind during the interaction:

- Remain calm and grounded – this will help the individual manage their own emotions and is especially important if they are distressed or upset.
- Respect the individual and support the student from the assumption that they are telling the truth. Fear of not being believed is one of the biggest barriers people face when seeking support. It is not your role to judge or investigate what happened, but to ensure they feel safe, heard and supported.
- Remain compassionate and non-judgemental. Avoid expressing shock, doubt or trying to problem solve, instead focus on listening.
- Be mindful of the questions you ask and the language you use, for example avoid asking too many questions, or probing questions for additional information that the student isn't readily offering. Don't label, define or describe someone else's experience for them. People process things in different ways and at different rates.
- Gently interrupt to ensure you do not hear too much detail. This is especially important if what they are disclosing constitutes a criminal offence. For example, *"Can I just pause you there – this sounds like an incredibly difficult experience, and I am so glad you're talking to me. I want to make sure I can connect you with someone who is qualified to support and*

¹ There are some circumstances where you may need to disclose a students' name when seeking advice on next steps following a disclosure. This allows necessary steps to be taken, for example the taking of legal advice or imposition of protective measures where there is a risk of harm, or if the issue relates to two students who are working in close proximity in a department.

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advise you properly. Would you mind if I share some information about the services available to you?". This will ensure that the individual does not need to repeat their disclosure to multiple people, as this can be emotionally taxing and re-traumatising. It will also protect you from hearing too much, which may have unintended consequences for any potential legal proceedings or criminal justice processes if the disclosure constitutes a criminal offence.

- Consider emergency, immediate and urgent needs – for example, do they need an ambulance or medical treatment? Have they asked for the police to be called? Are there any safeguarding concerns? In cases of sexual violence, is there [forensic evidence](#) that may need to be preserved?
- Separate your own experiences from the students' – there are ways to respond with compassion, understanding and empathy without self-disclosing your own experiences or opinions about what the student is sharing. Gently interrupting and supportively signposting the student to specialist services also protects you emotionally. Hearing disclosures of harassment or sexual misconduct can be distressing and triggering for us as professionals, for a variety of reasons, and we encourage staff to keep their own wellbeing in mind. If you experience distress or uncomfortable emotions during or following a disclosure, there are options for you to receive support outlined in the 'Support for You' section below.

If you are unsure what to do after hearing a disclosure, and want some advice whilst maintaining student confidentiality, you can request a no-names consultation and/or debrief through the Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service by contacting: supportservice@admin.ox.ac.uk or the Harassment Advisory Service: harassment.line@admin.ox.ac.uk.

Support and signposting

Support is available to all students, regardless of whether they wish to make a formal report, and regardless of the nature of their disclosure. Each service will provide tailored specialist support and outline the options available to the student, as well as providing emotional and practical support. [Supporting Students at Oxford: Preventing Harassment and Sexual Misconduct](#) has further details on each of these services, along with additional support available to students.

It is important that the person making the disclosure has as much choice and control over what happens next as possible, including whether they want to make a formal report or complaint, and whether or not they are ready or willing to access support. You can refer students and empower them to access the most appropriate service depending on what they have disclosed.

It is helpful to familiarise yourself with the specialist services, policies and procedures to use following a disclosure. This is both to protect yourself, as well as the student, and means they can make an informed choice about the next steps that feel right for them. College and University processes vary, so possible options can depend on the context of what happened.

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Support options

You are encouraged to signpost students to further specialist support, whilst providing help within the remit of your role (e.g., facilitating academic support arrangements), to ensure you are not providing ongoing support outside the remit of your role.

Sexual Harassment, Violence, Domestic Abuse and Stalking – the [Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service](#) provides confidential, impartial emotional and practical advice and support, guiding students on their next steps, including reporting options, emotional, physical health and academic needs, and support managing safety and risk. Students can [self-refer](#) or be referred by a staff [member](#) or ask to meet the [Independent Sexual Violence Advisor](#).

The Harassment Advisory Service – offers confidential, impartial guidance for individuals experiencing harassment and/or bullying, and can discuss reporting options and support around policies and procedures before or during any formal or informal action. You can search for identity specific advisors at the bottom of the [Find an advisor page](#), contact [your local advisor](#) or email harassment.line@admin.ox.ac.uk

SU Advice - Oxford SU Student Advice is a free, independent, and confidential information and advice service, which works to empower students by giving them the information they need to navigate difficult situations, and make the decisions that are right for them.

Support for you – Hearing disclosures about harassment and sexual misconduct can be upsetting and challenging. If you have been impacted by what you have heard, you can access support via your manager, welfare lead, or the [Employee Assistance Programme](#), and can also ask colleagues to debrief with you, without naming the student directly.

Support for Students who have been Reported

If a student is the subject of a report or they have been accused of harassment or sexual misconduct, they can access the [Reported Student Service](#) in cases of sexual misconduct, or the [Harassment Advisory Service](#) in cases of harassment.

Reporting options:

Students who have been affected by harassment or sexual misconduct have both informal and formal options. There is no single right way to respond, so the most important thing is to ensure they have all the information they need to make an informed choice that feels right for them.

In some cases, informal resolution may be appropriate. This could include a structured conversation, clarification of expectations or other practical steps. It can be facilitated by a Head of Department, Director of Graduate Studies, or Senior Tutor.

If a student decides to make a formal report about harassment or sexual misconduct, the process will depend on whether the report concerns another student or a member of university staff. Support is available from the services listed above to guide students through all stages of the reporting process, including when deciding whether to report. They do not need to go through the process alone.

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Here are the various reporting options depending on the relationship between the two parties involved in the complaint:

Formal reports about **students** are to be [submitted](#) to the [Proctors' Office](#) and considered under the University's [Student Disciplinary Procedure \(Non-Academic Cases\)](#).

Formal reports about University **staff** are to be submitted to the relevant Head of Department and are considered under the University's [Procedure for Complaints of Harassment Against University Staff](#).

Colleges will have their own reporting procedures. Where applicable, students are strongly encouraged to consult their college for further guidance and to familiarise themselves with college specific procedures for reporting harassment and sexual misconduct. When an incident occurs between two students within the same college, it is likely that college procedures will be followed.

Students may seek support following a report being made, including students who witnessed an incident, or students who were named in the report e.g. actual or alleged reported students. It is equally as important to signpost these students to relevant support services as outlined above, as well as to be mindful not to provide ongoing or long-term support beyond the remit of your role, or support to both parties involved in the same disclosed incident(s).

Further details, including how to submit a report and the relevant procedures, is available at [Supporting Students at Oxford: Preventing Harassment and Sexual Misconduct](#).

Policies and Procedures:

[Supporting Students at Oxford: Preventing Harassment and Sexual Misconduct](#)

[Student Disciplinary Procedure \(Non-Academic Cases\)](#)

[Statute XI: Code of Discipline](#)

[Harassment Policy](#)

[Student-Staff Relationships Policy](#)

[Equality Policy](#)

[Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech](#)

Colleges will have their own policies and procedures. Where applicable, students are strongly encouraged to consult their college for further guidance and to familiarise themselves with college specific approaches to harassment and sexual misconduct.