



BPA/SWIP Good Practice Scheme

Sexual harassment

Introduction

‘Sexual harassment’ is a relative recent term, dating back only as far as the 1970s, and its definition is still evolving. Sexual harassment can be carried out by persons of any gender, and persons of any gender may be victims. Although harassment of students by staff is often the focus of discussions, departments need to be aware that power differentials of this sort are not essential to sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may occur between any members of the department. Departments should attend equally seriously to harassment committed both by students and by staff, as both can have dramatically negative effects on particular individuals and on departmental culture. Departments should also be aware that sexual harassment may interact with and be modified by issues of race, ethnicity, religion, class and disability status.

There is good evidence that the proportion of incidents of sexual harassment that get reported, even informally, in UK philosophy departments is very low, and that this has created serious problems for some staff and students. We therefore urge even those staff who do not believe that harassment is a problem in their own departments to give serious consideration to the recommendations below.

Sexual harassment (EU): The EU defines ‘sexual harassment’ as ‘unwanted conduct related to the sex of a person occur[ring] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment’. This includes both harassment related to sex (e.g. hostile and dismissive though not sexual comments about women) and harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment related to sexual orientation or gender identity is often also considered to be sexual harassment. Note that sexual harassment, so defined, is not limited to one-to-one interactions but may include e.g. general comments made in lectures or seminars that are not aimed at an individual.

Sexual harassment (your institution): Institutional definitions of ‘sexual harassment’ differ greatly from one another. Some institutional definitions focus solely on sexual conduct, while others include also include non-sexual harassment related to sex.

While departments need to attend to their institution’s definition of ‘sexual harassment’, and to make use of institutional procedures where appropriate, this is not the end of their responsibilities. Where sexist or sexual behaviour is taking place that contributes to an unwelcoming environment for women (or other groups), departments should act whether or not formal procedures are possible or appropriate.

For further information on the BPA/SWIP Good Practice Scheme, please see our general guidance notes on the BPA Good Practice website (bpa.ac.uk/resources/women-in-philosophy/good-practice).

Recommendations

Availability of information and advice

- All members of the department—undergraduates, postgraduates, academic and non-academic staff— should be made aware of the regulations that govern sexual harassment in their university. In particular, they should know the university’s definition of ‘sexual harassment’ and who to contact in possible cases of sexual harassment. They should also know who has standing to file a complaint (in general, and contrary to widespread belief, the complainant need not be the victim). They should be made aware of both formal and informal measures available at their university. Departments may wish to consider including this information in induction sessions for both students and staff, and in training for teaching assistants.
- Where the University or Faculty has a list of Harassment Contacts (see e.g. www.southampton.ac.uk/diversity/how_we_support_diversity/harassment_contact_s.page), all staff – including non-academic staff – and students should be made aware of it. If no such list exists, the department should consider suggesting this approach to the university. It is very important for department members to be able to seek advice outside their department.
- All members of staff should read the advice given at www.oed.wisc.edu/sexualharassment/guide.html on how to deal with individuals who approach them to discuss a particular incident.
- All of the information listed above should be made permanently available to staff (including non-academic staff) and students, e.g. through a stable URL and/or staff and student handbooks, rather than only in the form of a one-off email communication.
- The HoD and others with managerial responsibilities (such as Directors of Postgraduate and Undergraduate Studies) should make sure that they have full knowledge of university procedures regarding sexual harassment.

Departmental culture

- The department should take seriously the harms of an atmosphere rife with dismissive or sexualizing comments and behaviour. (It is worth noting, however, that the right way to deal with this may vary. For more on this, see Saul, ‘Stop thinking (so much) about “sexual harassment”, available on the Good Practice website.)
- The department should — from the top down — cultivate an atmosphere in which maintaining a healthy climate for all department members, especially those from under-represented groups and including non-academic staff, is considered everyone’s responsibility. What this entails will vary from person to person and situation to situation. But at a minimum it includes a responsibility to reflect on the consequences (including unintended consequences) of one’s own behaviour towards women. It may also include a responsibility to intervene, either formally or informally. (For more on the range of responses available, see Saul, *op. cit.*)
- The department should ensure that those raising concerns about sexual harassment are, as far as possible, protected against retaliation.
- Departments may want to give bystander training either to staff, or to staff and postgraduates, if this is available or can be made available by the institution. This can help bystanders to feel comfortable intervening when they witness harassing behaviour. (See the Good Practice website for more information.)