

# **2025 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

## **The 1752 Group**

### **Addressing Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Experienced by Postgraduate Researchers**

#### **Relevant Rubric Area(s):**

1. Prevention: Leadership Education and Skill Development
2. Prevention: Prevention Program or Toolkits
3. Remediation: Reducing Power Differentials

#### **Description of Work:**

##### **Background and Context:**

Addressing sexual misconduct and harassment experienced by postgraduate researchers requires a different approach to provisions in this area for students at other levels. For example, postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are more likely than other students to be subjected to sexual misconduct from academic staff, but there are also very high risks in terms of career consequences for reporting such harassment or misconduct.

In England, From August 1, 2025, the regulator for higher education is adding a new condition regulating higher education institutions (HEIs) in England on preventing and responding to harassment and sexual misconduct. Under the new regulation, HEIs are required to demonstrate how the measures they take will make ‘a significant and credible difference in protecting students from behaviour that may amount to harassment and/or sexual misconduct.’

PGRs are included in general requirements relating to all students within the new regulations. The definitions encompass sexual harassment, harassment on the basis of protected characteristics such as race, gender identity and sexuality, as well as criminal forms of harassment and sexual misconduct.

In partnership with the [UK Council for Graduate Education](#) — supported by funding from the [Enhancing Research Culture fund at the University of York](#) — [The 1752 Group](#) have produced a toolkit for higher education institutions setting out what the new regulatory requirements mean for PGRs and supervisors. In developing the work, relevant research was drawn on, and two consultation sessions were held with networks of Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools, and the toolkit was reviewed by readers in a range of roles, including a sexual misconduct survivor, a current PGR, student services staff, and Doctoral Deans.

Throughout the toolkit, the voices of PGR survivors are included in the form of quotes from PGR interviewees from the research project ‘[Higher Education After #MeToo](#)’. Good practice examples are included from the University of Bath, Bangor University, and the Royal Geographical Society.

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## **Audience and purpose:**

The purpose of the toolkit is to ensure that PGRs and their specific needs and situations are included in wider work being carried out by HEIs to address harassment and/or sexual misconduct experienced by staff and students.

Therefore, the toolkit is primarily aimed at Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools within higher education who have a strategic role in relation to PGRs, as well as PGR Leads/Tutors within faculties, Schools or departments. It will also be helpful for student services and HR staff to guide conversations with Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools and to ensure that PGRs are being sufficiently considered within institutional programmes of work to address harassment and sexual misconduct.

Outside the UK, the toolkit will be useful for those in roles responsible for PGRs to assess and update their work on addressing harassment and sexual misconduct experienced by PGRs.

## **Areas covered by the toolkit**

Below, an overview is given of key areas covered by the toolkit. Further detail is given in the full toolkit.

### *Institutional Governance*

HEIs should have in place strategic committees and/or working groups as well as systems for reporting to Executive Boards and Boards of Governors/Trustees. Deans and Directors will need to ensure that PGRs' specific needs and experiences are taken into account in such institution-wide governance structures.

### *Preventing harassment before it occurs*

**Preventing abuses of power is a key aspect of prevention of harassment and sexual misconduct experienced by PGRs.** This is a significant challenge due to the deeply hierarchical nature of academia. Ways in which HEIs can prevent abuses of power include:

- Clarifying Professional Boundaries
  - We recommend that PGR Leads convene discussions of professional boundaries with supervisors and PGRs within departments and Schools (using the discussion guide in Appendix D). An institution-wide policy in this area should then be developed and this material should then be added to existing staff training and PGR professional development programmes.
- Introducing A Staff-Student Relationships Policy
  - Policies in this area must be accompanied by training around professional boundaries to support a culture where professional boundaries are taken seriously
- Minimising Power Imbalances
  - PGR admissions and supervision arrangements should include provisions to protect students against abuses of power
- Safer Staff Recruitment
  - Seeking and providing appropriate references
  - Joining the [Misconduct Disclosure Scheme](#)

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- Assessing candidates' values and behaviours relating to equity and respect in the workplace

**Addressing inequalities:** Programmes of work to address inequalities need to be joined up with Institutional initiatives to address harassment and sexual misconduct.

**Staff training:** Any staff member could potentially receive a disclosure of harassment or sexual misconduct, therefore training should be delivered to all staff. Staff involved in making decisions or providing ongoing support will need further training on the required knowledge and skills.

**PGR training:** Induction sessions must include training on behaviour that constitutes harassment and/or sexual misconduct.

**Communication and campaigns:** A central information hub with institutional information about the HEI's approach to addressing harassment and sexual misconduct must be communicated to all staff and students at least once per calendar year and be included in staff and student handbooks. The information hub must be available publicly so that prospective students can view it, and it must be included in promotional materials such as prospectuses.

**Gathering and using data to assess risk:** Data to assess risks of harassment and sexual misconduct and take preventative steps can be obtained from online reporting systems, formal reporting, informal disclosures, or institutional surveys.

**Fieldwork and field trips:** An area where there is heightened risk of harassment and sexual misconduct is fieldwork and field trips. HEIs could take action to mitigate these risks in relation to both individual and group fieldwork, including:

- Conducting risk assessments
- Providing training
- Providing safety resources
- Promoting peer networks
- Setting cultural norms and expectations through leadership

**Harassment perpetrated by those outside the PGR's institution:** This may involve placements, attending conferences, applying for funding with external collaborators/mentors, developing collaborations with industry partners, or working with a supervisor from industry. To mitigate risk, HEIs could:

- Establish a code of conduct with relevant external partners and the PGR
- Establish a supervisory agreement with industry supervisors
- Ensure relevant partner organisations have policies and procedures for preventing and responding to harassment and sexual misconduct

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## *Short-term responses when harassment occurs*

**Acting on informal disclosures:** Often PGRs do not wish to make a formal, named report about their experiences. Wherever possible, choice and control as to next steps should be left with the person who has been targeted. An HEI should consider the following options:

- informal/precautionary actions and a risk assessment
- a proactive investigation instigated by the institution
- support options

**Interventions for those responsible for harassment/sexual misconduct:** A student or staff member may be identified as at risk of causing or having caused harm to others but nonetheless may remain a member of the department or academic community. In such situations, there are steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of (further) harm occurring.

**Reporting and investigation:** E6 requires HEIs to have an effective reporting mechanism and an investigatory approach that is fair, credible, and in line with natural justice, and to include in their central information hub details on how students, staff and others can report harassment and/or sexual misconduct and how the information received in connection to harassment and/or sexual misconduct will be “handled sensitively and used fairly.” The Worker Protection Act suggests that there should be multiple reporting routes to ensure that the worker “is not required to report an incident to the perpetrator or someone who they may feel will not be objective.”

While these procedures are normally held by central service teams, staff should “have a clear understanding of a provider’s relevant policies and procedures.”

**Reporting to funders:** Research funding organisations (RFOs) have recognised their role in setting out and upholding expectations in relation to unacceptable behaviours in research. In line with this role, many RFOs require notification of upheld findings (and sometimes open investigations) relating to any personnel working on research they have funded. RFOs often require funded organisations to have relevant policies and reporting mechanisms.

## *Longer-term response after harassment occurs*

To minimise the impacts harassment and sexual misconduct have on gender and other inequalities, the following should be addressed:

- Remedies at the end of a reporting process (academic, financial, pastoral, moral)
- Wider cultural or research environment issues that may have been revealed by reports or investigations
- Enhancing transparency and openness in institutional responses to harassment and sexual misconduct.

**PGR voice:** In addition to established committees with PGR representation, HEIs should consider how PGRs with relevant lived experience (whether they disclose this or not) can be consulted on policy and practice in accessible, trauma-informed and non-exploitative ways.

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## **Additional resources**

Additional resources to support implementation of the toolkit are available at [www.1752group.com/pgrs](http://www.1752group.com/pgrs). These include:

- An editable version of the table of action points from the toolkit as a [Word document](#)
- Resources to support PGR leads to run professional boundaries workshops for PGRs and supervisors
  - We have developed a guide to such discussions to be run by PGR Leads or other relevant personnel within a department/research group/school.
  - there is one set of slides for workshops with PGRs and a different set for staff.
- A draft scale used to assess attitudes towards sexual harassment myth acceptance in the workplace to assess attitudes among PGRs and PGR supervisors towards sexual harassment and professional boundaries. This scale is currently being tested and is available in [its draft version](#) [Word document] for use in evaluating attitude change before and after training for staff and PGRs in HE.
- A guide for Deans and Directors or others with strategic institutional responsibility for PGRs to open up a discussion with HR and student services (and if relevant, the student complaints team) about supporting good practice in relation to preventing and responding to harassment and sexual misconduct experienced by PGRs (see appendix A of [the toolkit](#)).

## **About the authors**

[The 1752 Group](#) is a UK-based research and campaigning organisation founded in 2016 to address sexual misconduct in higher education. They take a research-informed approach to create resources and support sector-wide and institutional change to enable higher education institutions to address this issue. Find further information about how The 1752 Group are delivering both staff and student workshops on their [consultancy & training webpage](#).

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## **To cite this report please use the following format:**

Anna Bull and Kelly Prince (2025). Addressing harassment and sexual misconduct experienced by PGRs. The 1752 Group/UK Council for Graduate Education.

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