

Further information:

Lucy McQuillin
Tel: 01202 961037

E-mail: press@bournemouth.ac.uk

Healthcare lecturers from across the UK speak out about student abuse

Healthcare lecturers from some of the UK's new universities are being increasingly subjected to abusive emails, sexual advances and harassment from students, a national study from Bournemouth University (BU) has found.

Sara White, a Senior Lecturer in Adult Learning from BU's School of Health & Social Care, has spent the last two years interviewing academics from across the UK about problems and grievances they have faced.

Among other incidents, lecturers told of a student who threatened to spread rumours about a lecturer if an essay was not passed, another had received sexual remarks about her clothing and one academic experienced "wandering hands all over my buttocks".

Sara said: "Many of the lecturers interviewed feel that students' attitudes and expectations have changed over the past five to ten years. Young people are becoming more 'militant' in how they view and are treated by services and organisations, resulting in unreasonable demands and poor behaviour.

"In addition, academics feel that students are often unaware about their behaviour and that many young people are being brought up in an aggressive manner, where swearing is common place."

The nationwide study also found that the development of new technology had resulted in a perceived increase in "electronic communication attack", where lecturers received rude or abusive messages via email or mobile phone. In particular, academics interviewed expressed concern about the volume of emails sent by students to staff and the expectation that lecturers would respond immediately.

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Sara added: "Many of the academics I spoke to had previously worked in a healthcare setting and had direct experience with dealing with aggressive behaviour from patients. However, it was very clear that many found these incidents very distressing and for some they had to take time off from work, despite the excellent support given by Higher Education Institutions. For me, that was very shocking."

Whilst academics commented that the support provided by university HR departments was very good, Sara is calling for Higher Education institutions to revisit the grievance policies and work more closely with Students' Unions.

Sara explained: "Many of the academics interviewed feel that existing policies are written in a language that students don't understand and that the majority of students believe these policies only apply to staff. In addition, academics feel it is important that there is dialogue between lecturers and first year students, with involvement from Students' Unions, about what is considered to be harassment and acceptable behaviour."

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- (1) Examples of 'upwards harassment' by students:
- One academic recalled a student "coming in effing and blinding" and then saying: "You are so boring, f**king boring."
 - An academic received an email that said: "You can f**k me if you pass my essay."
 - Another academic revealed that "a student with disabilities offered me £1,000 to write his dissertation."

For further media information contact Lucy McQuillin on tel: 01202 961037 or email: lmcquillin@bournemouth.ac.uk

For interviews with Sara White contact Lucy McQuillin on the telephone number above.