**Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ynghylch [aflonyddu rhywiol rhwng cyfoedion ymysg dysgwyr](#)**
**This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) inquiry into [Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners](#)**

**PPSH 20**
**Ymateb gan: ColegauCymru**
**Response from: CollegesWales**

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### About ColegauCymru

ColegauCymru is a post-compulsory education charity; we promote the public benefit of post-compulsory education and learning. We also convene the further education (FE) Principals' Forum which represents Further Education colleges and FE institutions (FEIs) in Wales. ColegauCymru also undertakes research, policy development and provides practical support to FE colleges in Wales, including on work-based learning (WBL) which is a key part of FE college activity.

ColegauCymru welcomes the opportunity to submit an evidence paper to the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners. This paper has been prepared in advance of the oral evidence session scheduled for 10 March 2022 and ColegauCymru will consider whether to submit further evidence in advance of the inquiry's closing deadline of 1 April 2022.

ColegauCymru is grateful for the input of the colleges who provided feedback to help inform this response.

### 1.0 The scale and nature of the issue in education settings and how many learners are affected.

1.1 It will be important to define what exactly is meant by 'peer on peer sexual harassment'. Further education colleges suggested that this might include, but not be limited to, the following: stalking, unwanted attention, inappropriate touch, online bullying and harassment, and assault and/or threatening behaviour in the street.

1.2 Colleges reported that it is very difficult to quantify the scale of this issue in post 16 education because they often only tend to become involved when learners report issues to the college to which they then respond. There is evidence through the safeguarding and disciplinary processes that matters of this nature can and do occur. Learners frequently become affected in their peer relationships which can break down and can lead to factions in peer and in some instances in course groups.

1.3 Some colleges noted an increase in concerns relating to peer on peer abuse. One college disclosed that they had seen an increase in the number of students who are making allegations of sexual assault or rape which has taken place inside and outside college property. A few, but not all colleges use MyConcern, a software monitoring tool which enables colleges to manage and categorise concerns identified via referrals from staff, learners and external partners. In some colleges, this has enabled identification of an increase in concerns regarding consent and potential inappropriate sexual behaviour. As a result, one college has engaged an external company to work with wellbeing staff to facilitate and deliver tutorial sessions to learners on 'responsible use of social media, how to avoid threats through making better life choices and consent'. The sessions

will initially be delivered in those academic divisions where an increase in disciplinaries and concerns relating to peer on peer abuse has been identified.

1.4 Another college noted an increase in reports of harassment and sexual harassment over the last three years, with a dip in reports during 2020/21 – likely to be as a result of lockdown restrictions. The most significant finding is that over half of incidents reported involved learners with ALN as the alleged perpetrators. Further research is needed into this, although anecdotal evidence suggests that this could partly be a result of learners with ALN finding managing relationships difficult, combined with difficulties in reading social cues. It is also possible that staff and learners lack an understanding of ALN, leading to misinterpretations of behaviour.  This particular college is exploring support available for young people with ALN that can help them to manage relationships successfully and keep themselves and others safe online.

1.5 It is also worth bearing mind when trying to assess the scale of the issue that it is not uncommon for individual concerns to relate to/ include several learners.  For example, in one concern of alleged sexual assault, four learners were involved (all of whom were studying at the same college on three different courses).

1.6 Colleges have different processes for reporting concerns.  One college highlighted that learners are able to disclose harassment by calling into a wellbeing hub or sending an email to a confidential email address (viewed only by the safeguarding leads in the college). Once a concern has been reported the wellbeing/safeguarding coordinators triage the concern to add a 'category' and allocate the appropriate support.

1.7 Where MyConcern has been introduced into a college in recent years, it is possible that an increase in concerns reported could, in part, be as a result of an increase in staff awareness of the system rather than a definite increase in incidents.

1.8 However, the potential for under-reporting cannot be ruled out either.  Where learners do not want to report incidents to the police, one college noted that they encourage use of Fearless to report anonymously.  They will also include the information gathered (without using the learner's name) in local tension-monitoring and contextualised safeguarding meetings. They also work closely with colleagues in other colleges and local high schools to share information.

## 2.0   2.0 The extent to which this issue also occurs outside the formal education setting, including online.

2.1 Much of the content of the response to the previous question is also relevant here.  Incidents frequently take place outside of colleges and are often online. Matters can also be referred in via the police or parents.  However, incidents can often be a mixture of in-person and online.  The constant use of online messaging apps means inappropriate behaviour can be continuous rather

than localised to a particular setting.  What is reality and what exists in a virtual environment seems to be becoming blurred for some young people.

2.2 One college noted that although they had not seen an increase in reported cases the 'explosion' of use of social media during lock down on platforms such as Tiktok and Snapchat has made sharing of sexual images easier.

2.3 This relates to the experience of another college who noted a number of incidences relating to harassment/bullying occur online, with messaging apps such as Snapchat/WhatsApp being used. When speaking with learners who have sent such messages or images, it takes some time to explore with them the impact receiving such messages has on a person.  This appears to be due to the fact they cannot see a person's reaction immediately, unlike if they were saying something face to face, and hence this seems in their view to "reduce" the seriousness of the actions.

2.4 Another college had seen 41 per cent of reported incidents relate to harassment of learners outside the college and 15 per cent related to online harassment or abuse. While it is harder for the college teams to manage the se incidents, the college emphasised that support for learners is constantly reviewed as well as significant effort made to improve collaboration with external support organisations.  Learners who disclose incidents at this college are encouraged to report to Fearless or 101 and regular reminders are sent to staff and learners via internal communications. The local police sergeant has also informed the college of a new service about to be released in this area – Streetsafe – for female staff and learners to report if they feel vulnerable or uneasy walking to college.

## 3.0   The impact on pupils' learning, mental health and well-being.

3.1 Unsurprisingly, learners who are subject to the inappropriate conduct are generally upset and distressed by the experience.  This can lead to anxiety/ panic attacks or even increased use of alcohol or other substances.

3.2 There can be significant impact on learners and their mental health and well-being.  Family and peer relationships are also affected. There is also potentially an effect on learners' attendance and behaviours.  Situations can then arise that place learners in a disciplinary position. Many learners will keep things to themselves and only disclose when a situation has spiraled. Colleges are also mindful of the potential impact on young people when they do not speak to someone.  It is important that platforms like Togetherall.com are available to learners in order that support can be provided 24/7.

3.3 Where those who are alleged to have been abused, and those who are alleged to have abused their peers are studying in college, significant support is required to ensure that both parties feel supported and safe – especially where there may be an ongoing court case for example.  This

might mean that timetables need to be adjusted to ensure that opportunities for learners in related concerns to 'meet' are negated as far as possible. Attendance may also be negatively impacted; learners may disengage in class or struggle to complete work they ordinarily would manage without problems.

3.4 Following the reporting of a small number of serious incidents, some colleges recorded that some students are on safeguarding plans, and certain cases have resulted in police investigations. One college reported a few incidences of students in the current academic year who have been pregnant or recently experienced a termination who have since received bullying about their decision to either continue the pregnancy, or end the pregnancy. This has been from peers who were their friends or previous partner.

3.5 Friendship issues can be identified and have led to allegations of harassment/ bullying. Learners may have moved groups to avoid those who are causing issues. This can lead to disruptive/ aggressive behaviour which may be out of character

3.6 Learners may disclose historical abuse on hearing of others' experiences. They may not have been aware that they have experienced peer sexual abuse (they were drunk; the abuse was perpetrated by someone known to them; online abuse) but then make the connection. Disclosures can be challenging as learners may feel they won't be believed; they feel guilty/ responsible for the abuse or feel it may cause more 'issues' with the alleged abuser.

## 4.0 The impact on education settings and staff, for example in terms of discipline and the extent to which harassment among learners has become 'normalised'.

4.1 Many colleges believed that learners have normalised some aspects of these types of behaviour (for instance, where learners respond to requests from their friendship groups to share information) with some being comfortable sharing naked images with their peer groups. However, colleges noted that they do not have evidence about how widespread this is other than in the specific cases where they have taken action.

4.2 There is certainly evidence in disciplinary hearings where peer relationships have broken down that learners have normalised their behaviours. For staff, behaviour is becoming more of an issue to deal with. One of the impacts of the pandemic report by several colleges is that there is a lack of maturity with learners, compared to pre-Covid cohorts. One college observed that the general behaviour issues are those usually expected among slightly younger learners, such as those aged around 14. The pandemic may appear to have had a significant impact on the social-emotional development of adolescents. There is also a lack of understanding about the online world and again in that regard, behaviours have become normalised.

## 5.0 The specific impacts on particular groups of learners, for example older pupils, girls and LGBTQ+ pupils.

5.1 Colleges did not report a consensus on this issue. Some highlighted the impact on LGBTQ+ learners and noted that they had experienced control in relationship issues particularly with girls. Another college had experienced only two significant reported incidents, both of which involved 16-19 age learners without protected characteristics and others noted the greatest impact was on girls and young women.

## 6.0 The effectiveness of existing policies and guidance, and the identification of potential solutions and improvements.

6.1 Some colleges reported reviewing their policies in this regard in order to be consistent with the Keeping Learners Safe (KLS) guidance. They reported that policies and procedures are appropriate and are implemented.

6.2 It is important to work with the perpetrators of harassment to ensure behaviour change and not just disciplinary consequences in order to secure better long-term outcomes. One college highlighted the instance of a male learner with communication difficulties who messaged female students within the class individually. The communication took a concerning turn when he started to ask questions about bra sizes with the peer group. He was asked to stop but continued. One of the female learners discussed this with her peers and discovered that they were all receiving similar communication. The male learner received a disciplinary and was referred to college welfare services and engaged with the 'Stop it Now' campaign from the Lucy Faithful Foundation. The female learners received support via their personal tutor and welfare staff. Welfare staff went through Childline sexting information and CEOP resources. Parents were notified.

6.3 As referenced above, colleges have employed a variety of solutions including engaging external companies to work with wellbeing staff to facilitate and deliver tutorial sessions to learners on 'responsible use of social media, how to avoid threats through making better life choices and consent'.

6.4 In relation to prevention, colleges identified the provision of appropriate and regular staff training; challenging inappropriate behaviours, and delivering an educational, preventative tutorial programme (including digital literacy & safety) as constructive solutions, along with bilingual resources that can be used with learners. Staff in some colleges have also undertaken training and activities to enable a strengthened approach to safeguarding, for example on exploring anxiety; making sense of mental health problems; young people's wellbeing; safeguarding children; domestic abuse, coercive control, and; Peer on peer abuse: management and reporting.

6.5 One college noted that they had recently submitted a bid for funding to create a three strand initiative around these issues through the use of a six week workshop led by sexual health professionals. This would illustrate different types of relationships so the students can discuss what they observe in a safe environment along with safety measures for students moving around their local communities or to and from college. The same college also recently became a pilot college for a sexual health clinic to try to promote safe and healthy, intimate relationships.

6.6 Support strategies need to be focused towards friendship and relationship boundaries, robust education sexual health programmes and education, information and managed debate about what constitutes a healthy relationship. This needs to take place in post-16 settings rather than simply being seen in the context of the new Curriculum for Wales in compulsory education and waiting for more positive behaviours and attitudes to filter through.

## 7.0 The effectiveness of the roles of a wide range of statutory bodies in respect of this issue, including the police, social services, local authority education departments, pupil referral units and schools themselves, and the extent to which a multi-agency approach is being taken where appropriate.

7.1 Colleges noted that multi agency approaches are taken in regards to these matters when they arise and when appropriate. However, some identified that more work and clarity is needed in this regard.

7.2 Colleges noted incidents of involving police in regard to vulnerable learners who have been involved in such incidents and ensuring that appropriate guidelines are followed. Some colleges reported making use of the "Stop It Now" foundation to support learners who were subjected to inappropriate conduct.

7.3 It is important for each body to be clear about its responsibilities and the limits of those responsibilities.

## 8.0 The effectiveness of the Welsh Government's joint response across all its relevant departments with a focus on education, social services and community safety and its inclusion of non-devolved services such as the police and the criminal justice system.

8.1 Some colleges noted that this is well represented in KLS.

## 9.0 The impact of online content and influences on young people's attitudes, and the wider context of online safety and potential legislation at Westminster.

9.1 Colleges agreed that this needs to remain an ongoing focus, with one highlighting that it would be helpful if legislation prevented the use of anonymised clone social media accounts which can hide the identity of people who behave inappropriately.

9.2 It will be important for the Welsh Government to engage fully with the relevant Westminster legislation to ensure that the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment and online harm more generally is addressed in an appropriate way.  Potential unintended consequences must be taken into account.  Some learners (and others) may wish or need to access certain online services anonymously.  They should not be prevented from seeking help and support by having to verify their identity or age, for example in cases of sexual abuse or even for issues such as eating disorders etc.

## 10.0 Schools, colleges and local authorities' collection and use of bullying and harassment data, as relevant to this issue.

10.1 Approaches to collection and use of data connected to this issue varied.  Some colleges noted that they have an extensive data set on interventions (which include sexual harassment) and attitudes to welfare (where the focus mainly on mental health).  One is considering looking at extending the "I'm OK" survey to include sexual health as this is an important issue.

10.2 Several colleges reported that they use MyConcern, a software monitoring tool which enables them to manage and categorise concerns identified via referrals from staff, learners and external partners. Another college highlighted that this needs to be actioned by the Regional Safeguarding Boards.

10.3 Consistent data collection, recording, categorising (and sub-categorising) of incidents is crucial to understanding the extent and nature of peer on peer sexual harassment.  Some colleges suggested that the development of a standardised approach across the education sector – schools, colleges, local authorities and higher education – could be beneficial.

## 11.0 The role of families, parents, and carers, as relevant to this issue.

11.1 Colleges wanted to see greater family, parental or carer awareness and education on this issue.

## 12.0  The role of the new Curriculum for Wales in developing healthier attitudes towards relationships and sexuality issues.

12.1 While the new Curriculum for Wales can play a positive role over the years ahead, this cannot be seen as the complete solution to this issue.  It will also take several academic years for the impact to be felt in post-16 provision.  Colleges noted that healthier attitudes to relationships and sexuality need to be included in post 16 and higher education.

12.2 Some colleges said that they would welcome the development of bilingual post 16 resources which could help educate learners about appropriate behaviour and support interventions where learners behave inappropriately.

## 13.0  Welsh language

13.1 The Committee needs to take into account any Welsh language dimensions to this inquiry or the potential solutions and recommendations that result.  This means that recording systems for cases, supporting resources etc. to use with learners must be bilingual.  Likewise, there may be a staff training or development aspect to ensure that learners who wish to report or discuss cases through the medium of Welsh can be supported to do so.  The ability of a person to use their first language when discussing incidents that are likely to have caused distress is vital.

## 14.0  Other relevant issues

### 14.1 Good practice

14.1.1 There is much good practice in colleges to raise awareness and address these issues as evidenced elsewhere in this submission.  In addition, one college highlighted how they shared information during a campaign in 'Sextember' to highlight the dangers, and share information about support services along with information about the law.  They also regularly advertise services such as welfare drop in and staysafe email as well as linking with external agents to provide expert support and training.  The college also recommends apps such as 'Zipit' which are available from Childline.  These suggest humorous gifs in response to requests for sexualised images and are used as a diffusion technique for those who do not want to report.

### 14.2 The wider picture

14.2.1 Some colleges were keen to emphasise that the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment should not be viewed in isolation.  It should be seen as part of a bigger picture of concerns, for instance around knife crime and/or other types of non-sexual harassment, aggression or behavioural issues.  Solutions therefore should not be limited to just specific resources to deal

with peer on peer sexual harassment (although welcome) but need to look at the wider spectrum of support and engagement of learners to enable them to fulfil their potential as future citizens and responsible members of communities.

14.2.2 A toolkit focused on peer on peer sexual harassment or a new way of consistently recording incidents will not be sufficient to achieve this. Neither will a cautious approach, relying on the new Curriculum for Wales with its focus on developing healthier attitudes towards relationships and sexuality issues to solve this issue over time. Attitudinal change takes time to embed but we cannot simply hope that future generations of young people will not be subject to or take part in peer on peer sexual harassment. There is a limit to what any education system can achieve on its own: this is part of a wider societal problem. A holistic approach that goes beyond existing activities and thinking is required.

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