

# **Policy for Prevention of Sexual Assault on Campus: Higher Education Students' Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Crucial to genuine transformation at higher education institutions is a commitment to eradicating sexual violence and creating safe, democratic spaces within which the institutions' broader goals may be realised. Sexual assault is a serious concern at higher education institutions and requires a comprehensive approach to address it. The aim of this article is to elucidate students' perspectives on the need for a separate sexual assault policy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Gaining the perspectives of students serves as a catalyst for sexual assault policy formulation and institutional development. In this article we draw on data generated within a larger project that focuses on addressing gender violence at UKZN. We report on a study which is located at a selected UKZN campus, and utilised an online survey which was distributed via a hyperlink accessed through student emails. Analysis is based on the responses of 265 undergraduate students in the School of Education. The findings suggest that higher education students view a sexual assault policy as a fundamental institutional obligation that has the potential to educate the university community about how to identify, prevent, report on and deal with sexual assault. Students suggest that the existing policy on sexual harassment is inadequate as a form of protection, poorly enforced, and has weak reporting mechanisms. They stress an urgent need for development of a specific sexual assault policy at UKZN that is widely communicated and engaged with. The development of a sexual assault policy which has

significance for victims and (potential) perpetrators can be informed by considering students' reflections on the personal, social, cultural and institutional elements that increase their vulnerability to sexual offences.

**Keywords:** Policy formulation, sexual assault, higher education institutions, student perspectives on policy, institutional research

## **Introduction**

*UKZN needs a policy on sexual assault because it's real and it's happening a lot on this campus (female student, participant 51 [f51])*

The exceptionally high incidence of sexual crimes in South Africa has precipitated a multitude of law reforms, scholarly and parliamentary discussions and policy initiatives. Within the South African higher education institution (HEI) context, we argue that it is imperative to engage with students' perspectives as catalysts for related policy formulation at the institutional level. We contend that in order to purge the unacceptably high rates of gender violence at HEIs, student-led policy is key.

Sexual assault on university campuses, which according to the female student quoted above is 'real' and 'happening a lot', requires comprehensive methods to prevent it, and clear ways of reporting and addressing it when it occurs. The preceding excerpt from the student survey (f51) suggests that students are mindful of the need to address the high incidence of sexual assault by means of an institutional policy. Within the prevailing institutional and social context, sexual assault experienced by students may be construed as part of everyday life, leading to its acceptance and normalisation in social relationships.

The achievement of quality education demands creating safe learning spaces and requires extensive and integrated interventions, for which institutions have the major responsibility. The American Association of University Professors (2013) asserts that the freedom to teach and to learn is inseparable from the maintenance of a safe and hospitable learning environment.

According to Lichty, Campbell and Schuiteman (2008) policy is a core component of the total campus response to sexual violence, which should include numerous elements such as services for those who are victimised, educational initiatives and monitoring and evaluation of interventions. Policies describe an institution's drive, ideals and mission (Simbayi, Skinner, Letlape & Zuma 2005). Organisations or businesses design policy with the intention to control practice, mainly in sensitive or important areas such as equity, racism and gender equality.

In the context of education, explicit and conspicuous policies to maintain system functionality and develop service and support in the aforementioned areas are essential. However, simply creating a litany of policies does not guarantee effective enactment unless plans exist for these policies to be implemented in order to have their objectives realised.

The current policy document designed to address contraventions of a sexual nature at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is the *Sexual Harassment Policy and Procedures* document (UKZN 2004). This is a detailed policy that includes definitions and forms of sexual harassment, responsibilities of different university stakeholders, and procedures for resolving complaints of sexual harassment. Addressing serious sexual assault such as rape is embedded in this policy. When reported, rape is treated like any other criminal offence. However, only reported incidents can be pursued, and an important issue that also emerges in the international literature is underreporting of sexual violence (Abbey & McAuslan 2004; Gonzales, Schofield & Schmitt 2005). Since this is also the case in South Africa for a multitude of reasons (including unsatisfactory reporting procedures, fear of stigmatisation and secondary victimisation of victims within the justice system), it is crucial that reporting processes be given serious attention.

Given previous research that has shown HEIs to be spaces where sexual violence is perpetuated against students (Collins, Loots, Meyiwa & Mistrey 2009; Phipps & Smith 2012; Singh, Singh-Pillay & Mudaly 2010) it is important to understand how students may be protected from becoming victims of sexual violence. We cannot ignore that these studies have also shown students to be perpetrators of sexual violence, which necessitates equivalent attention on preventing students from becoming perpetrators of sexual violence.

This article draws on the data generated within a larger project that focuses on creating a safer learning environment at universities by addressing

gender-based violence. The research question which we explore in this article is: ‘What are male and female students’ perspectives about the need for an institutional policy on sexual assault?’

## **Sexual Assault on Campuses**

What constitutes sexual assault is often poorly understood, but simply put, it involves sexual activity that is nonconsensual and unwanted (Peterson & Muehlenhard 2007). Sexual assault violates an individual’s *sexual autonomy*, which includes the right to refuse sexual activity or advances with any person, at any time, for any or no reason (Schulhofer 1998). Substantial research shows that the victims of sexual assault are mainly women and that sexual assault has serious short- and long-term consequences for victims. According to Kalichman and Simbayi (2004) sexual assault is associated with women’s risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

Research by Ben-David and Schneider (2005) revealed that many myths about man-on-woman sexual violence persist. Those which enable recidivism among perpetrators include the notion that rape is a crime of passion, it is motivated by sexual urges, that men have naturally uncontrollable sexual urges, that men who rape are ill or emotionally unstable, or that men misinterpret women’s intentions or desires. A study conducted by Yescavage (1999) revealed that women were perceived to be more accountable for rape, because when they reject sexual advances they do so as a token to preserve their image of sexual innocence and not because they sincerely do not wish to engage in sexual activity. Myths which attribute blame to women include ‘victim masochism’ (women enjoy it), ‘victim precipitation’ (women invite rape), and ‘victim fabrication’ (women falsely accuse others or exaggerate the sexual incident) (Ben-David & Schneider 2005: 386).

Male participants in the study by Ben-David and Schneider (2005) tended to minimise the severity of rape as a crime. ‘Real rape’ was conceptualised as sexual penetration of a young, vulnerable virgin who is in the custody of her father, by an armed man. In this scenario the woman escapes from the perpetrator after the crime and reports it to the police (Ben-David & Schneider 2005: 395). A previous relationship/association between a victim and perpetrator would lead to assessment of the rape as a less serious incident. Research findings in a study by Viki, Abrams and Masser (2004) confirm the perception that acquaintance rape is a lesser violation and warrants decreased

punishment compared to stranger rape.

Given these findings by other researchers, and the data from this study which allude to victims' and perpetrators' uncertainty about the crime of rape, the need for a policy becomes critical. A sexual assault policy which clearly defines what is meant by consent, sexual assault and rape, including acquaintance rape, will go far towards achieving an understanding of rape as an aggressive, antisocial, dangerous tool which is used to assert power and control.

Research on gender and sexual violence in HEIs has revealed that this is widespread on university campuses globally (Phipps & Smith 2012). Several studies in South Africa have found a high prevalence of sexual assault on South African university campuses. These include studies at UKZN (Chetty 2008; Collins *et al.* 2009), Rhodes University (Botha, Snowball, De Klerk & Radloff 2013), Stellenbosch University (Graziano 2004), and the University of the Western Cape (Clowes *et al.* 2009) amongst others. According to Gonzales *et al.* (2005) the primary reason for the underreporting of this crime is that most sexual assaults on university campuses are committed by assailants who are well known to the victims. Furthermore, survivors/victims may not report for many reasons, including fear of reprisal and exposure, peer pressure and/or lack of faith in the reporting process (Ontario Women's Directorate 2013; Fisher *et al.* 2009; Perreault & Brennan 2010).

## **The Role of Institutional Policy**

Policy can be defined as 'a written document that provides the basis for action to be taken jointly by an institution or organization' (Dye 1995: 4). The intention of such a document is to raise awareness and create mutual understanding about a situation (based on an analysis of the problems, trends, causes and potential solutions); articulate ethical and other principles that should justify and guide action; generate a consensus vision on the actions to be undertaken; provide a framework for action; define institutional responsibilities and mechanisms of coordination; and engage a variety of partners. In some cases policy is seen as crucial to maintain order in organisations, as emphasised by Roux (2002), who asserts that an organisation without policy is an organisation without control.

Education institutions have a responsibility to create and maintain a safe space where staff and students 'Acknowledge the value of the individual

by promoting the intellectual, social and personal well-being of staff and students through tolerance and respect for multilingualism, diverse cultures, religions and social values, and by fostering the realisation of each person's full potential', as pledged in one of the principles and core values in the Vision and Mission Statement of UKZN (UKZN 2012). With regard to sexual offences, Marshall (1991) contends that institutions which fail to fulfill their responsibilities in preventing and addressing cases of sexual offences commit an institutional breach of trust. Singh *et al.* (2015), who studied students' fears about sexual violence on university campuses, assert that institutional response to sexual assault on campus is critical.

Often there exists a gap between policymaking and policy implementation. Research indicates that the mere presence of a policy does not ensure its effectiveness (Laabs 1998; Orlov & Roumell 1999; Owens, Gomes & Morgan 2004; Paludi 1996). As suggested by the findings of a study carried out at three Southern African universities to explore the effectiveness of official campus policies on sexual harassment by Bennett, Gouws, Kritzinger, Hames, & Tidimane (2007), a policy needs to be effective, and effectiveness is determined by a number of factors, including the obvious one: that the policy should be communicated and available to everyone at every level of the organisation.

## **University Policies on Sexual Offences**

A review of policies at several South African universities which are related to sexual offences suggest that for many universities addressing sexual assault is embedded in sexual harassment policy. The primary purpose of such a policy is to provide institutional environments in which staff and students feel safe and can pursue study and work activities without fear of unsolicited, unwelcome sexual attention or sexual crimes. Many South African universities have introduced policies and grievance procedures to deal with sexual harassment (Gouws & Kritzinger 2007).

A study by Wilken and Badenhorst (2003) focused on analysing and comparing the sexual harassment policies of selected universities in South Africa with the aim of creating a checklist of important elements that should be contained in such a policy. Eight South African universities formed part of the study. The results indicated that the sexual harassment policies of the eight universities seem to be incomplete and deficient in many respects. With the

exception of Rhodes University and UKZN, the other six universities in the sample have either an established forum/committee/panel that deals with harassment complaints, or a specific person who, with the help of a committee, is appointed to oversee this task. Two universities, namely, the University of Pretoria and Vista University, describe in their policies specific disciplinary and appeal measures in the case of an accused found guilty of sexual offences or in cases of false accusations. The rest of the sample refers to the institution's existing disciplinary code in order to implement disciplinary action.

UKZN, like the University of Stellenbosch, does not have a dedicated policy on sexual offences but has a Sexual Harassment Policy, which is meant to guide the understanding and procedures in respect of sexual harassment. This policy does not specifically mention rape, and refers to sexual assault only once in the document. According to this policy sexual harassment is conceptualised as 'unwelcome, unsolicited and unreciprocated' behaviour which has a sexual dimension (UKZN 2004:1, 2016:6 

A revised version of this policy was approved in January 2016. The 2016 version is less detailed than the 2004 version, and excludes the details of the three stages used to govern procedures for resolving complaints. The 2016 policy refers to 'Heads of Divisions' to respond to allegations or incidences of sexual harassment, and is unlike the 2004 document which specifies role-players such as Discrimination and Harassment Advisors, and Diversity Managers. It is not clear which 'Heads of Divisions' are being referred to in the 2016 policy. Through our discussions with the Human Resources staff we understand that there have been no discrimination and harassment advisors for several years.

A mechanism at UKZN to capture cases of harassment and discrimination is an online<sup>1</sup> equity data form. This form is designed to record biographical information of both the complainant and respondent (who is possibly the alleged perpetrator). It outlines various possible forms of discrimination and harassment, including those related to age, gender, religion, origin, sex, sexual harassment and sexual orientation. The form also outlines possible methods of discrimination or harassment, which include (among others) telephonic, verbal, letter, gestures and stalking. This form provides choices for the outcome of the case, and includes (among others) criminal charges, no action taken, counselling, and referral to the Diversity Unit.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.ukzn.ac.za/dhr/EQUITY%20DATA%20FORM\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/dhr/EQUITY%20DATA%20FORM_Final.pdf).

The University of Cape Town and Rhodes University are guided by separate policies, namely the Sexual Offences Policy and the Sexual Harassment Policy. The Sexual Offences Policy states that ‘rape and sexual assault constitute serious misconduct’ (University of Cape Town 2008). This sexual offences policy takes into account the high incidence of rape and sexual assault in South African society, the vulnerability of women to these crimes, and the South African laws which have been promulgated in this regard.

A look at sexual offences policies at international universities reveals other dimensions. Research at 78 universities in the United Kingdom displayed great variation in the management of cases of sexual harassment over a two-year period (Thomas 2004). The findings revealed that 28% of these universities dealt with 10 or more cases, while 22% did not get any complaints at all (Thomas 2004). Twenty five per cent of the universities indicated that they were not certain of the effectiveness of their policies, 55% were satisfied, 11% were fairly dissatisfied and 2% were very dissatisfied. Many respondents acknowledged limitations of their policies.

In the United States of America (USA) the Northwest University has a ‘Nondiscrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy’ which guides the university community about several issues related to sexual offences (Northwest University 2011). These include names and contact details of persons to whom reports can be made, details on how to lodge a complaint, and when to lodge a complaint. Separate officials deal with harassment and discrimination in general, and sexual offences specifically. Clear information on accessing medical assistance and reporting to the criminal justice system is provided.

The above review suggests that many of the policy initiatives are largely reactive, put in place to address incidents that have occurred. While these are crucial, the focus on prevention does not receive sufficient attention. This article draws on students’ perspectives on the formation of institutional policy that also has the potential to educate students on what makes them vulnerable to being victims and/or perpetrators and how to prevent this from happening.

## **The Study**

The data are drawn from an ongoing larger study titled: ‘Safer Learning Environments: Addressing Gender Based Violence at Universities’. This study

is located at a selected UKZN campus that has a diverse population of resident and day students. In 2014 the undergraduate student population on this campus numbered 3544.

Researchers such as Hawkesworth (2006), Hesse-Biber (2007), Risman, Sprague and Howard (1993) and Sprague (2005) contend that a major methodological problem in studies on physical and sexual violence against women is the underreporting of such violence. Additionally, we support the notion that the best way of doing feminist research depends on the specific questions to be addressed and the context of the research. Therefore an online survey was used to access wide-scale baseline data about the nature and extent of experiences and fears of sexual violence on the university campus. The online survey comprising closed- and open-ended questions was distributed to all students via a hyperlink<sup>2</sup> accessed through student emails, as it provided a safe, confidential and anonymous space in which students could respond. Furthermore we hoped that the online survey would facilitate the sharing of their experiences and opinions. However, student response rate was very low, even after we encouraged our own students to participate during lectures and encouraged other students to do the same. The overall poor response rate alerted us to methodological challenges associated with quantitative methods in feminist research.

This analysis is based on the responses of 265 students (152 female and 113 male). The respondents were undergraduate students from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds and were pre-service teachers specialised in a variety of disciplines, including Science, Technology, Mathematics, Computer Studies, Social Sciences, Languages, Media, Education Development and Leadership, and Arts. The sample included students who lived in university residences and those who lived at home. We acknowledge that this sample is not representative of the student population on the campus. Since our focus in this article is on responses to the closed-ended question about whether the university needed a policy on sexual assault and the open-ended explanation regarding that question, this can be seen as a limited but large enough number of responses from students who felt strongly enough to participate in the survey.

In this article analysis is largely qualitative, and simple frequency analysis on the closed question is presented to show the overall opinion. The

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<sup>2</sup> <https://goo.gl/fTvcNz>.

data were initially grouped into responses from female students and from male students; responses from female students were numbered 1 to 152 and those from male students were numbered 153 to 265. The data from female respondents are represented as f(number) and those from male respondents as m(number).

The data from the open-ended question were organised into categories, then these were grouped into themes. Content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs 2008) was used to categorise themes and interpret the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings from the survey reveal that the majority (72%) of the respondents indicated that UKZN needs to have a dedicated policy on sexual assault. However, there was significant disparity between the responses of the female students and those of the male students, where 89% of the female students and 51% of male students answered this question in the affirmative. While this is not completely surprising, some explanations for diverse views are offered within the themes below. The three themes that emerged from the data are not mutually exclusive because there is considerable overlap between them, but for the purpose of this discussion they are presented separately as Policy as obligation; Policy as protection; and Policy as education.

### ***Policy as Obligation***

Many respondents, especially female students, strongly asserted that a policy on sexual assault is fundamental for all universities because sexual assault is prevalent on campus and should be addressed:

*I believe every institution needs a policy because sexual assault is found everywhere. (f103)*

*I think that every campus should have this policy because you might never know when sexual assaults happen ... for there to be a solution to it UKZN should have a policy on sexual assault because it is likely to happen. (f16)*

Several respondents also referred specifically to UKZN; for example, ‘because

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*it [sexual assault] does take place on campus and it must stop'* (f80), and the following student emphasised this by using uppercase letters: '*UKZN MUST have a policy on it. UKZN needs this policy because there are so many students which are raped here on campus'* (f15).



olicy as prevention was also suggested by the following:

*if UKZN comes up with a Policy on sexual assault, few incidents of this nature will take place because action will be taken against the perpetrator.* (f33)

However, a few male students offered the view that such a policy is unnecessary since sexual assault is absent on the campus. A typical response was:

*I say no because what's the need for something when there's nothing to call sexual assault on campus, it's never happened. Therefore I feel we are mature enough to know the law.* (m219)

Overall there seems to be consensus that by having a dedicated policy on sexual assault the university would send a strong message about the seriousness of dealing with incidents of sexual assault. The majority of the students' responses suggest that there is a lack of awareness about current policy on sexual harassment or that the existing policy is inadequate to address sexual assault on the campus. This is evident in the following responses:

*Many students practice sexual harassment on others due to the fact there are no consequences that will be faced, as the campus does not have any policy regarding sexual abuse.* (f71)

*I feel like UKZN is not strict enough when it comes to GBV [gender-based violence] because people do physically harm each other and nothing is done with that.* (f12)

*Many people may be victims of GBV or may know someone who is a victim. In these instances these people do not have a course of action to take because UKZN does not have a policy on sexual assault.* (f108)

*Because there is evidence showing that these offences take place within UKZN and I therefore think it would be a good idea for UKZN to implement a policy to avoid future incidents. (m203)*

A common thread in students' responses to the open-ended question point to sexual assault being a common part of students' everyday lives, and that policy that deals with sexual offences on campus is a basic requirement through which the university will demonstrate its serious intent to address this issue. The following views reveal this:

*UKZN doesn't take GBV seriously. There are cases that have been reported but nothing was done to the people who assaulted others. They need to take us serious[ly]. (f39)*

*The university ... does not care about anything else except academic things while students are suffering out there and being affected in their academic work. (f62)*

Participant f62 shows some disappointment about the apparent lack of concern about students' welfare and suggest that having a clear policy will also show that the university genuinely cares about students' wellbeing and that any threat to their safety compromises their academic performance. This resonates with the assertion by Perreault and Brennan (2010) that sexual assault may affect students' academic achievement as well as their capacity to contribute to the campus community. They add that university students who have survived sexual assault rarely perform as well as they had prior to the incident, and are sometimes unable to carry a normal course load and frequently miss classes.

### ***Policy as Protection***

While the university campus is expected to be a safe space for students and staff, 91% of respondents indicated that they felt fearful on the campus. In their explanations about the need for a sexual assault policy, many emphasised that an effective policy has the potential to reduce fear and increase safety of students on campus:

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*It is important for students to feel safe on campus and that help is available to them. (f83)*

*Sexual assault is an offence that should not be taken lightly, the student needs to feel safe and be sure that the University will protect them if any such occurs. (f80)*

*It is important to have this policy because it will make other students to feel safer when they know that there is a policy which (protected) them from this kind of assault. It would be difficult to lay charges against someone if there is no policy against this assault. (m166)*

The preceding excerpts reveal that students regard policy as being important in protecting them on the campus. They see the need for clear ways of reporting and dealing with acts of sexual assault. The role of effective, well-communicated policies on sexual assault, as proposed by the Ontario Women's Directorate (2013), is to help create safe environments where everyone on campus knows that sexual assault is unacceptable, victims receive the services and support they need, and perpetrators are held accountable.

An effective sexual assault policy is necessary for the following reason, stressed by a male student: '*In order to halt even the notion or thought of such barbaric activity*' (m193).

According to participant f10, a policy on sexual assault is essential not only for the protection of students but also for the institution, by enabling students to '*deal with and it and the policy can only protect the university ... addressing the issue even if it has not occurred.*'

It was clear that without having the perpetrators adequately dealt with, victims contend with ongoing fear and insecurity:

*It's horrible to be a victim, I'm even scared to walk around campus at night and seeing that person every day it really breaks me apart and brings back the whole picture of what happened. (f1)*

*Victims need not suffer alone, perpetrators need harsher punishment for their behaviour. UKZN is supposed to be a learning environment. One shouldn't feel unsafe. (f57)*

Similar to the assertion by Kalichman and Simbayi (2004) that sexual assault is associated with women's risk of sexually transmitted diseases, the urgency to prevent sexual assault was emphasised by participants. They linked this to the need for protection from other serious consequences for women, such as unwanted pregnancy and infection, as seen in the following excerpt:

*UKZN needs it [a policy] because [a] lot of students are falling pregnant and also they end up being HIV positive. (f61)*

The following response indicated that a policy could serve a protective function by raising awareness about sexual assault and preventing hopelessness amongst victims:

*Most of the time some students have been victims but they not aware and they do not know what to do and who to tell, that is why some they commit suicide. Students ... need to be educated and know the rules and the law about sexual assault. (f7)*

The helplessness felt by victims of sexual assault at UKZN is a pervasive feature of the preceding responses. Even though we had not included a question on awareness about the existing Sexual Harrassment Policy, through an analysis of their responses on the need for such a university policy it was clear that students are unaware of the existence of 'Procedures for Resolving Complaints' (UKZN 2004: 4). The data elucidate the feelings of vulnerability, defencelessness and powerlessness of victims of sexual violence. Students require a safe environment that will facilitate the reporting of sexual violence in a secure and confidential manner, without fear of further victimisation.

The majority of the respondents suggest that the messages that a policy can send about sexual assault can powerfully shape students' understandings of sexual assault, their rights, mechanisms for reporting, and protection. Fear was a common discourse in the responses. The need to reduce fear of sexual violence amongst students, as discussed above, is related to the imperative to reduce fear about reporting sexual violence. This view was exemplified by participant f4, who asserted that '*because some fellow students have been victims of sexual assault and they did not report it because they were scared and have no idea where to go for assistance.*' The role of a policy which details clear consequences for perpetrators/potential perpetrators, and which could

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dissuade them from engaging in this crime, was highlighted. The following two responses are illustrative of the latter:

*[UKZN] does need a policy so that perpetrators of this sort of violence are aware and will face the consequences of their actions if they go against this policy. This will make them afraid to commit such crimes. (f2)*

*UKZN needs to establish a policy against sexual assault or any form of violence to ensure that possible perpetrators are aware that there are airtight consequences - this will instill fear and may ensure they do not act out - right now, they feel that there are no consequences, therefore they have nothing to lose. (f103)*

The discussion in this theme demonstrates the protective value of a policy on sexual assault which, if disseminated and implemented, would potentially increase safety and reduce fear. This was underscored by a large number of participants, who valued a policy on sexual assault for its powerful potential as a deterrent to perpetrators.

### ***Policy as Education***

The need for policy for awareness in one form or another is a persistent feature of the participants' responses, as well as of the literature on policy which was reviewed. The majority of the respondents mentioned the need for clear communication of what constitutes sexual violence; for example '*Students often don't know what sexual assault is. If there is a policy on sexual assault then it can be up to them to read it and know about it*' (m164).

Participants showed awareness that what constitutes gender/sexual violence may be poorly understood amongst students and may be perpetrated unknowingly: '*Students need to be taught about these issues because sometimes they do it not knowing that it not acceptable*' (m159).

This is an important consideration, and may give us insight into the high prevalence of sexual assault by students and enable us to find strategies to address this in our classrooms.

Some suggested that victims may not recognise when they are being sexually assaulted: '*Many sexual acts are committed to both male and female*

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*that people are unaware that they are being assaulted and violated’ (m189).*

It was clear that many respondents were of the view that sexual assault may be persistent on campus due to ignorance amongst perpetrators and victims. They saw policy as having an educative purpose:

*Because this is where the student will be informed about everything that has to do with the violence and understand it because some of us do not understand it some are victims but they don't know, some are perpetrators but they [are] not aware. (m162)*

In addition to educating the university community about what constitutes sexual violence and how to identify it, an overwhelming majority of the participants mentioned a policy having clear information about the consequences and thereby serving as a powerful deterrent:

*So that perpetrators will be aware of the punishment they will get after being involved in this kind of violence and it will be safer. (f40)*

*The policy should be addressed and be out bold, so that the university should not experience such acts, because the consequences are well established. (f95)*

Participants in this study called for a *bold* policy, with *well-established consequences*. This call by participants indicates that students are unaware of the Sexual Harassment Policy that exists at the university.

Several respondents suggested that there continues to be silence around sexual violence, and that a policy on sexual assault would remove the veil of silence:

*UKZN does need a policy on sexual assault as this offence is not something that can be swept under the carpet. (f74)*

*UKZN needs a policy on sexual assault because within our residences many students are victims but afraid to voice out, some even feel it is a usual and an accepted thing. (f41)*



an imperceptible way the excerpts below draw our attention to

students' lack of awareness of UKZN  Existing Sexual Harassment Policy:

*Yes, because some of fellow student has been a victim of sexual assault and they did not report it because they were scared and have no idea where to go for assistance. (f5)*

*UKZN needs to make organisation or the meeting whereby they would teach about this issue; it can be meeting. (f53)*

*Most students need to read about it so that they become aware of it. Therefore there must be its documentation. (m180)*

This finding raises concerns about students' awareness of the enforcement, distribution and communication of the existing policy, as well as its accompanying reporting mechanism procedure.

## **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this article are part of a broader study that attempts to create a safer learning environment by preventing gender/sexual violence on campus. While the sample is not representative of the student population, qualitative analyses of a large enough sample of students who were interested enough to respond to an online survey provides us with a catalyst for further enquiry and discussion.

Students in this study pointed to a high prevalence of a wide range of sexual assault on the campus. They identified a sexual assault policy as a fundamental institutional obligation that has potential to educate the university community about how to identify, report and deal with sexual assault. It is apparent that there is inadequate awareness about the existing policy on sexual harassment. Students' widespread ignorance about the policy that currently exists to address sexual assault on campus is indicative of the need for more effective ways to engage with them about the content, purpose and location of relevant policies. Having the policy available on the internet is necessary but not effective, as it is not accompanied by effective engagement with the students.

By studying both sexual harassment policies (2004 and 2016) and consulting with the Human Resources department we have learnt that there has

been no university advisor for discrimination and harassment for several years. This, together with the insights from the student data, suggests the need for one or more dedicated staff members who deal with formulation, review, communication and implementation of policy.

Furthermore, students assert that the campus community's understanding of what constitutes sexual assault and the policies and procedures are important to their application.

Understanding students' expectations, fears, ambitions and commitments provides a catalyst for formulation of policy. The creation of spaces for intellectual engagement with all stakeholders, especially students, could initiate policy development in this regard. A sexual assault policy can be informed by considering students' reflections' on the personal, social, cultural and institutional constituents that increase their vulnerability to sexual offences.

Students' understandings of policy as an obligation as well as for protection and education point to possibilities for creating policy not just as a mechanism for control by outlining procedures to deal with offenders, but as a powerful resource for prevention. The students indicate that a dedicated policy on sexual offences can be construed as a vehicle for the promotion of safety. In addition to having the potential to conscientise students about what constitutes sexual offences, and what measures are in place to seek help and support, policy can serve as a significant educational resource.

As educators in higher education, drawing on students' perspectives we see the need to create opportunities at curricular level for intellectual engagements through deliberations on policy formation and policy reform. As co-constructors of policy as living documents, students may be encouraged to reflect on their own practices that are likely to transgress the rights of other students.

Policy is meaningless unless effectively communicated and deliberated upon. How might we engage with them in our classrooms? Engaging students in critical reflection and dialogue has the potential for transformative work that seeks out and creates alternative identities, thereby addressing victimisation as well as perpetration.

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