

Where do you stand now? An evaluation of the Consent.Ed training at LSE

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Introduction

In their 2019/2020 ChangeMakers study entitled “Where do you Stand? Evaluation of Sexual Misconduct Policy at LSE”, Fonteñez et al. examined student experiences, awareness, and opinion of sexual misconduct policies at LSE. They discovered that most students were unaware of these policies, perceived them as largely ineffectual, yet believed that consent education for students was very important and should be mandatory. To address this, the LSE Student Union (LSESU) introduced an in-person consent training programme called Consent.Ed in Michaelmas term 2021, which is mandatory for first-year undergraduate students. The current ChangeMakers study surveyed first-year students who completed Consent.Ed to investigate their consent knowledge and confidence at 6-months post-training, as well as their experience of completing the programme and their attitudes towards it. We discovered that Consent.Ed did increase student consent knowledge and confidence, but did not increase students’ feelings of safety at LSE.

Literature review

A host of previous studies have demonstrated the prevalence of sexual harassment at UK universities. For instance, a 2018 survey of 153 UK institutions (Revolt Sexual Assault in partnership with The Student Room, 2018) found that 62% of students and recent graduates experienced sexual violence at university. Sexual assault has massive negative impacts on wellbeing, as it is associated with increased risk for most mental disorders, as well as negative impacts on physical health and educational and career attainments (Dworkin et al., 2017; Potter et al., 2018). Specific to college students, it has been found to be an important predictor of suicidal risk, anxiety and depression (Carey et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2015). To take action on this important issue, many universities have introduced sexual misconduct policies and reporting structures (Phipps, 2010). Universities providing consent education is additionally recommended in the literature and, as aforementioned, strongly supported by the LSE student body (Fonteñez et al., 2020; Towl, 2016). A number of studies have indicated that consent education training in academic contexts is effective in improving student consent knowledge (Borges et al., 2008; Hill & Crofts, 2020) and attitudes towards asking for consent, perceived behavioural control to obtain consent, and intentions to ask for consent before sexual activity (Ortiz & Shafer, 2018). A previous ChangeMakers study by Farley et al. (2021) additionally identified locations on the LSE campus where students reported feeling unsafe, recommending mandatory consent workshops as one potential way to improve safety. The present study therefore aimed to evaluate the LSESU’s Consent.Ed programme to identify if it is similarly effective in improving student consent knowledge, confidence, and

feelings of safety at LSE, and therein can be an effective avenue for LSE to conduct its civic responsibility in reducing sexual assault in the student community (Towl, 2016).

Methodology

We designed a survey containing close- and open-ended questions to gain an understanding of the effect in-person Consent.Ed training had on participants' consent knowledge, their evaluation of the training, and their opinions on how to improve the program. We constructed the survey using Qualtrics and disseminated it online via various LSE communication channels. Due to low initial uptake, we additionally put up posters around the LSE campus promoting the study. Data collection took place from March 14 until May 24. The survey had 46 respondents, though 12 had to be excluded due to not providing consent, incomplete answers, or not meeting the inclusion criteria. The final sample consisted of 32 valid answers, from which 63% were women, 78% Heterosexual, and 44% white. The lower than anticipated response rate, possible nonresponse bias, and homogenous sample characteristics limit the generalizability of the current findings and future research should consider additional data collection and recruitment methods to address these limitations.

Findings

Most participants (66%) had no previous consent education, but when asked if they fully understood the concept of consent before attending Consent.Ed, 56% strongly agreed. This indicates that whilst most students hadn't previously received formal consent education, they have learnt about it informally through other means. Importantly, we found that Consent.Ed benefited students regardless of previous consent education or prior consent understanding. We found that 67% of students with previous consent education reported improved understanding, with this figure being marginally higher at 71% for students without prior education. For the participants who reported fully understanding consent prior to the training, 56% felt Consent.Ed actually further improved their understanding - indicating that these students discovered they actually had more to learn about consent than they realised. This was also the case for the majority (91%) of participants who reported that the Consent.Ed material contained either none or only some new material for them, with 69% either strongly or somewhat agree that it did improve their understanding of consent.

Consent.Ed additionally improved student consent confidence: roughly three-quarters of respondents felt that the training improved their confidence to request and talk about consent, 69% felt more confident in asking for consent, and two thirds reported increased confidence in calling out sexual misconduct when they witness it.

Despite improving consent knowledge and confidence, roughly one third of students felt that Consent.Ed had no impact on their feelings of safety on LSE campus, at LSE events, and in interactions with other LSE students, and roughly 1 out of 5 somewhat or strongly disagreed that the training made them feel safer. Over two thirds of students either reported no impact or somewhat/strongly disagreed with the Consent.Ed training improving how safe they feel in LSE accommodation. This indicates that increasing student consent knowledge and confidence did not automatically result in students feeling safer.

Level of agreement	The Consent.Ed training improved how safe I feel...			
	on LSE campus	at LSE events	in interactions with other LSE students	in LSE accommodation
Somewhat or strongly agree	44%	44%	38%	28%
Neither agree nor disagree	31%	34%	38%	31%
Somewhat or strongly disagree	22%	22%	25%	38%

Roughly three quarters of students agreed that Consent.Ed training felt like a safe environment to discuss consent and felt included in the presented material, though 16% disagreed with both of these prompts. When asked how to make Consent.Ed more inclusive, responses included: “Perhaps more content on consent within LGBTQ+ spaces”, “Being more mindful of people that are triggered by constant mentions of sexual assault, disabled people, people from different ethnic backgrounds”, “Slightly uncomfortable taking part [in Consent.Ed] with people you don’t know”.

The vast majority of participants (84%) felt that Consent.Ed covered everything that it needed to, three quarters reported that they remembered ‘most’ or ‘all’ of the material, and 72% felt it was best delivered in-person. When asked about their key takeaway, responses included the acronym “FRIES” (Consent must be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific), “Its everyone’s responsibility to spot non-consensual acts”, and “If a person removes their condom during sex without your knowledge, that is rape”. Most students (53%) felt they did not need a refresher session in the future, and 28% were ambivalent. A single education session therefore seems sufficient for LSE students to feel sufficiently knowledgeable and confident about consent.

Recommendations

First, our findings demonstrate the need for and value of mandatory consent training. Given the identified differences in prior consent understanding, it is important that all students are provided with the same consent education upon arrival to LSE. We therefore recommend LSE continues funding Consent.Ed.

Second, feelings of student safety at LSE need to be investigated further. A major takeaway from the current study is that Consent.Ed did not improve student feelings of safety in various LSE contexts for more than half of participants. This may indicate that students either currently feel very safe and there is no room for improvement, or it may reflect that students do not feel safe but Consent.Ed didn’t improve this. If the latter is true, we

hypothesize that this may be because whilst Consent.Ed helped students feel more knowledgeable and confident in their own consent capability, they do not feel assured about the consent knowledge and capability of other students, and thus do not feel inoculated against other people's sexual misconduct. In line with Farley et al. (2021) recommendation, future research should further investigate student feelings of safety at LSE and how they can be improved, particularly in student halls.

Finally, Consent.Ed could consider how to make students more comfortable when discussing sexual consent. Whilst the majority of participants felt that the in-person session they attended felt like a safe environment, two participants noted they felt uncomfortable discussing consent with unfamiliar people. Consent.Ed could in the future try to increase student comfort by allowing students to sign-up to the training with friends or flatmates, and LSE more broadly could work to create a culture where open discussions about consent are normalised.

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