

Sexual Consent: the significant knowledge gap within the LSE Community

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See this report presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/tioYB3wPVVs>

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

TW: This report contains discussions of sexual consent and sexual assault that might be upsetting to some

INTRODUCTION

The last years have witnessed a rising awareness of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the higher education sector due to both the MeToo movement and the increasing demand by students for universities to address the issue. In the last 5 years, since MeToo, there has been an increase in attention towards providing some insight into how serious and prevalent SGBV in higher education is. For example, a report by The Student Room showed that 62% of students and recent graduates have experienced sexual violence, whilst only 6% of those students reported their experience (The Student Room, 2018). LSE has taken some first step to address this issue of sexual misconduct by providing a definition of its consent policy. The Student's Union has also introduced a consent education package which included in-person workshops for the first time this academic year, 2021/22.

Sexual consent education is increasingly used as an educational tool for sexual violence prevention among a number of higher education institutions (Beres, 2020, 227). The emergence of consent-focused prevention training is relatively recent and coincided with policy reforms which relied more heavily on affirmative models of consent (Beres, 2018). Affirmative consent is consent that is informed, voluntary and active. The literature surrounding sexual misconduct prevention has stressed the role of training and education in ensuring individuals have the knowledge and skillset on how to identify, resist and also intervene in coercive sexual behaviour. Importantly also, it allows students to critically engage with gendered sexual scripts by incorporating conversations concerning gender, sexuality and power. Achieving a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent and sexuality more broadly is vital in enhancing student wellbeing and safety.

Despite the increased spotlight consent education initiatives have recently received, there still exist significant deficits in student preparedness for sexual opportunities they will encounter upon leaving home. The shortcomings of institutions or prior education concerning sex translate into students being acutely attuned to the importance of consent. It is important for institutions of higher education to acknowledge the reality that not all incoming students will have received age-appropriate education and it is within their responsibility to address these deficits as part of a preventative intervention model to address sexual misconduct.

The goal of this study is to provide an evidence base for understanding the level of consent knowledge within the LSE Undergraduate community. In order to align a consent strategy with the needs of the student community, it is vital that we understand the level of knowledge on which we can build upon. For this reason, this report seeks to gain an overview of student consent knowledge by asking the research question '*How do LSE Undergraduates perceive their own consent knowledge and experiences of consent education, prior to LSE intervention*'.

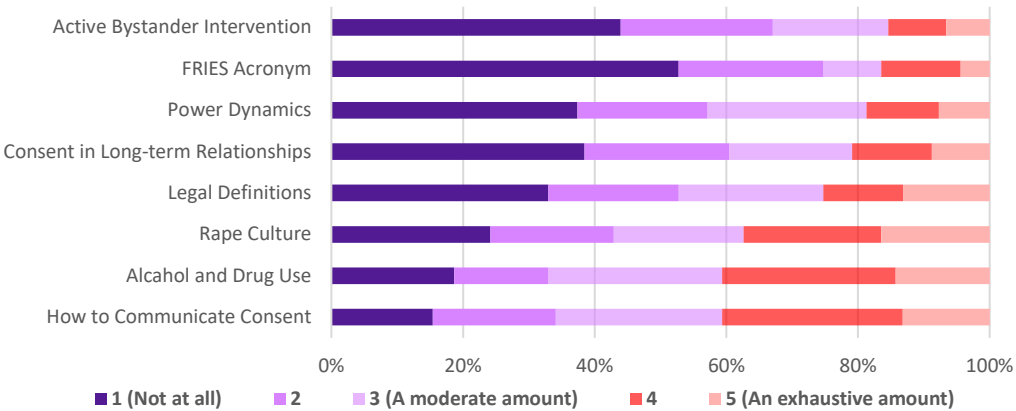
My study reveals a significant knowledge gap concerning sexual consent, both regarding previous experiences with consent education as well as students self-reported perception of their knowledge on the topic of sexual consent. My study also highlights the shortcomings of traditionally relied upon sources of consent education, notably, institutions of prior educations and parents/guardians. Thusly, I conclude by urging LSE, alongside other institutions of higher education, to take ownership of a consent strategy which involves mandatory comprehensive workshops to help address this deficit.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was distributed among LSE Undergraduates using convenience sampling. Participants (N=101) completed this, answering both close- and open-ended questions. The survey had an inclusion criterion of having **not** attended an LSE SU Consent.Ed session. Participants were asked a series of questions about their perceptions regarding (1) The extent and quality of their sexual consent education external to LSE; (2) Their own sexual consent knowledge; (3) To reflect upon their experiences with sexual consent education; (4) Demographic information.

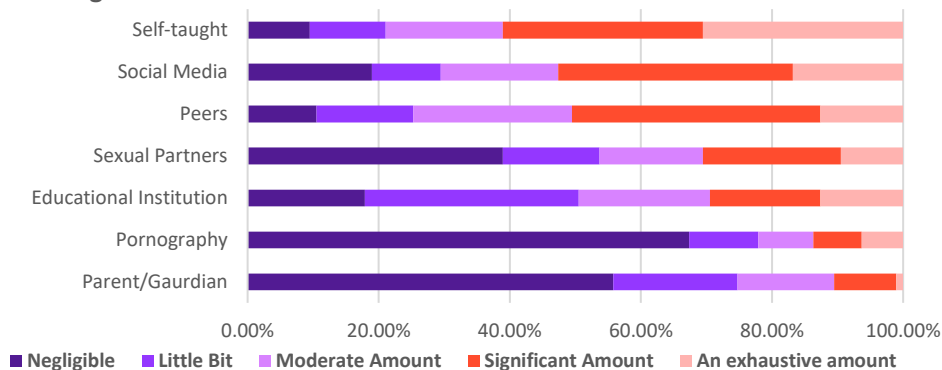
FINDINGS

Please select your level of knowledge on the following consent topics?



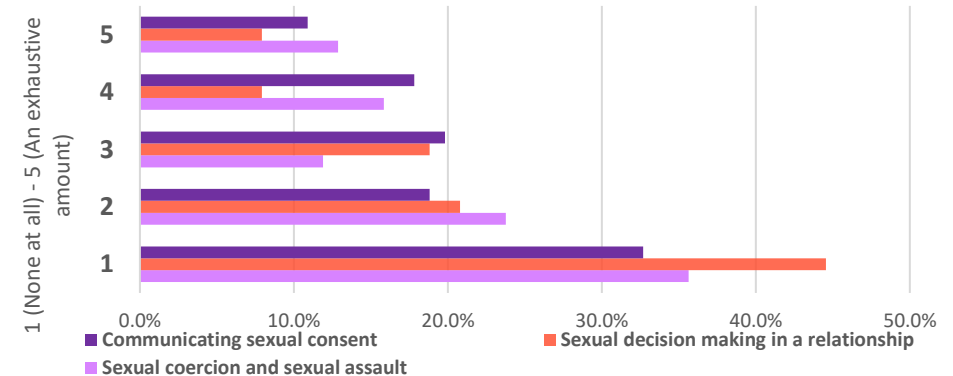
LACKING CONSENT KNOWLEDGE: LSE Undergraduates lack confidence in their understanding on the various dimensions of consent knowledge. **5 out of the 101 participants** said they had moderate or greater knowledge on 8 listed dimensions of consent education. The 8 dimensions were chosen as they are the topics covered in the LSE SU consent workshops. The proportion of all 'no knowledge at all' responses across the 8 dimensions was **33%**. Furthermore, the combined responses of 'a good amount' and 'an exhaustive amount' was only **17%**. This supports the claim that Universities should stop assuming consent knowledge among the student body.

How much sexual consent knowledge have you gained from the following sources?



SOURCES OF CONSENT EDUCATION: Both educational institutions as well as parents/guardians, the more traditionally relied upon sources of consent knowledge (Byers et al, 2017), are significantly underperforming. Over 50% students stated that they gained no knowledge at all, or only a little bit, from the educational institutions they attended prior to LSE. Additionally, 62% stated that a significant amount or all their knowledge was self-taught. This begs the question: can we rely on students to take the initiative to learn about something so vital to student wellbeing and safety? Furthermore, is it not the students that lack this intrinsic motivation to educate themselves on this topic the very people we want to target with consent initiatives.

Coverage of sexual consent topics at prior educational institutions



SHORTCOMINGS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: Prior educational institutions are not providing incoming students with a robust sexual consent education. When asked to respond on a 5-point scale, how well various topics within Consent Education were covered in school prior to University, an average of **47.6%** of participants responded with the lowest response 'not at all', with the second most common response being 'a little bit'. This shows that prior educational institutions, such as schools and colleges, are not providing incoming student with sufficient education on the topic of consent. This negatively impacts student preparedness for sexual opportunities upon leaving home and contributes to the pervasiveness of perpetrator behaviour on campus.

"I'm at the end of my time at LSE, and I realised that I have not even been institutionally taught sexual consent education before. This survey made me realise how little I know on the subject, and it concerns me greatly"

As evidenced by my findings, there is still a long road to go in achieving an acceptable level of consent knowledge among the LSE Student Body. It is necessary for higher education institution's such as the LSE to no longer *assume consent knowledge*, but rather acknowledge and address the significant knowledge gap among the student community that this study reveals.

Currently, the consent initiatives at LSE have been spearheaded by the LSE Students Union, who encourage the completion of an online consent training, alongside introducing an in-person consent workshop (Consent.Ed) for the first time this academic year. However, Consent.Ed is limited due to the lack of institutional support through funding and endorsement, resulting in the programme lacking efficacy.

Sexual consent education has been largely student led. My study reveals the significant deficit in consent knowledge among the LSE student body. It is time for institutions of higher education, such as that of the LSE, to take accountability and ownership of filling the pervasive knowledge gap regarding sexual consent.

RECOMMENDATION: INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION OF CONSENT EDUCATION

Based on my finds, I recommend a greater commitment of resources, accountability and responsibility, that goes beyond the Students' Union and across the whole institution to increase the legitimacy and efficacy of the Consent.Ed initiative.

➤ **MANDATORY CONSENT WORKSHOPS**

- Consent classes to be delivered to all incoming undergraduates and taught postgraduates on a mandatory basis
 - This would both improve attendance and improve legitimacy of the initiative

I suggest that this is timetabled into LSE For You, either utilising the welcome pre-essional format, or within Week 0 or 1.

Furthermore, I suggest the LSE employ an opt-out system under which certain students can be exempted from the workshop when appropriate. An opt-out system should be available in order to prevent potential emotional distress and harm caused. These students could in turn be directed towards survivor friendly workshops as an alternative option.

➤ **PERMANENT MEMBER OF STAFF**

- Introduce a permanent member of staff within LSE/LSESU who has the operations of Consent.Ed written into their job description
 - Prevent the loss of momentum between each academic year
 - Improve LSE & LSE SU collaboration which will be essential for the introduction of mandatory workshops

LIMITATIONS

My study has several limitations, notably regarding my population sample. Whilst the sample size was sufficient to provide illustrative data concerning the degree of consent knowledge throughout the LSE Undergraduate student body, the sample size as well as the sampling method (convenience sampling) doesn't allow the data to be described as representative (Lavrakas, 2008). Furthermore, given the relatively small sample size, no conclusion could be drawn concerning the demographic distribution of responses. This area would be an interesting avenue for further research.

Self-selection into the survey also poses a limitation. This indicates the population includes those who feel consent is a worth talking about and thus could be more likely to have greater knowledge on this topic. However, given that this self-selection bias would likely result in an underestimation of the knowledge gap, this limitation does not take away from my conclusion that points towards a significant knowledge gap regarding sexual consent education among the student body.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

6 respondents chose to disclose information about their past trauma.

This is a pervasive issue and has a huge impact on the lives of real people within our own student community. We owe it to the student body to play an active role in preventing this type of behaviour by diminishing the consent knowledge deficit.

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