

# Student Experience Projects

## International student sexual health Sheffield Hallam University

### Winner: Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education

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This award was created in 2016 in memory of the late Director of SOAS and Chair of our Board, Paul Webley and presented to Sheffield Hallam at the UKCISA Annual Conference at the University of Sheffield in June 2016. UKCISA was impressed with the detail and planning in the original submission and at how well the project then evolved; when Sheffield Hallam presented on their work in progress during the year there was a palpable buzz in the room. Sheffield Hallam University have tackled a difficult subject in an innovative and sensitive way. The project is ongoing and you can follow its progress on the blog listed at the end of their report below.

#### Why this project?

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Sheffield Hallam University's medical centre noted an increase in the number of female international students, particularly from SE Asia and China, seeking medical advice due to unwanted pregnancies. Research (University of Nottingham 2011) indicates this issue is affecting international students studying in other institutions in the UK.

We have also had occasions when, in confidential interviews, international students have reported feeling under pressure to enter into sexual relationships whilst studying in the UK.

These two facts indicated that newly-arrived international students needed additional help to improve their knowledge about sexual health and sexual consent.

The issues we identified at Sheffield Hallam University have been noted in research in Australia (Poljski, Quiazon, Tran 2014 and Multi-Cultural Centre for Women's Health Report 2011) which shows that international students have insufficient sexual health education when they arrive for their studies abroad compared to local students, and that at the same time some international students may become more sexually active when studying outside of their home countries.

These reports identified the current themes concerning the international student population which we believe are also applicable in the UK:

- poor sexual health knowledge
- complex attitudes about premarital sex
- reluctance or embarrassment in accessing sexual health information
- poor understanding of the role of health and advice services
- concern about high rates of unplanned pregnancy and abortion
- a link between international students entering into sexual relationships they would never consider in their country of origin, in order to ease feelings of isolation

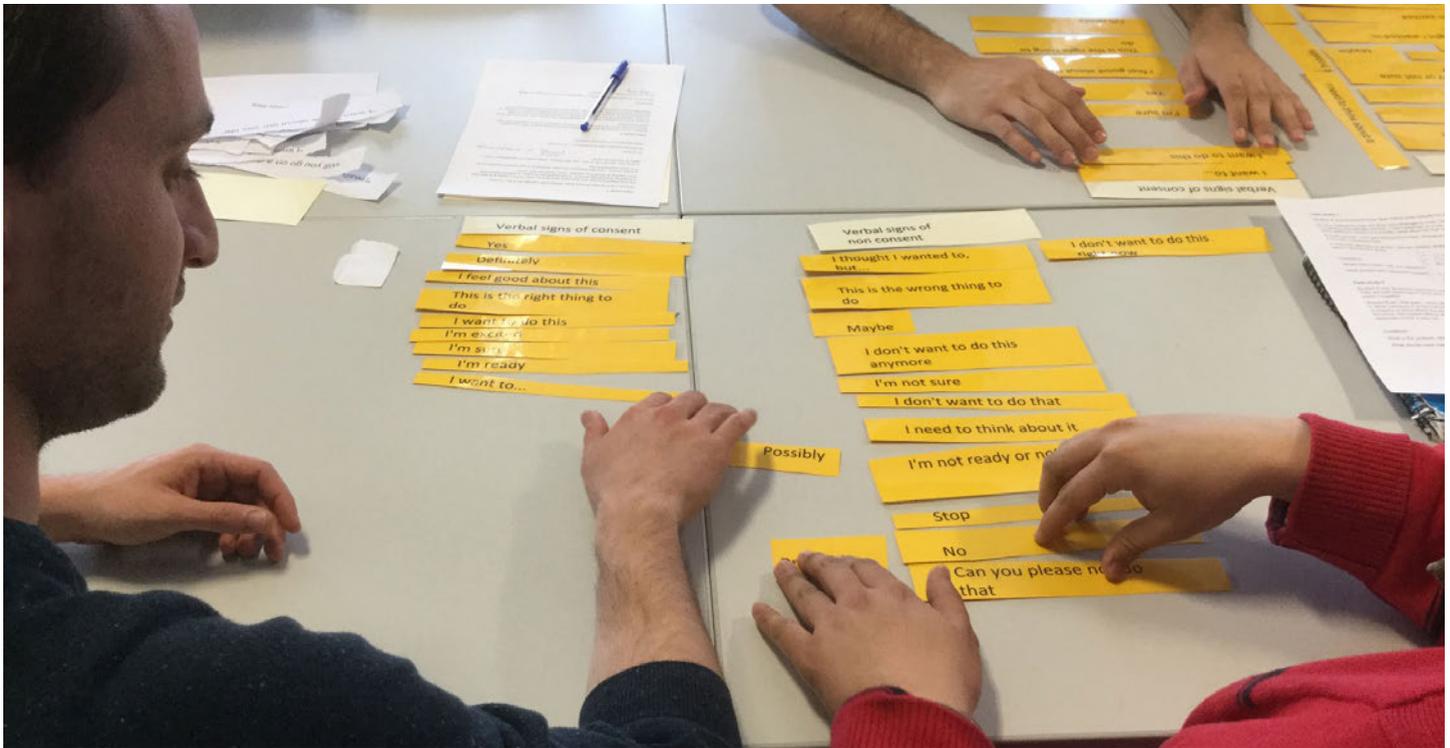


*The Paul Webley Award presented to Sheffield Hallam University by Lord Bilimoria*

and loneliness inherent in the immigration experience of international students. This in turn increases susceptibility to unplanned pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

The International Student (Sexual) Health Project was designed to:

- Improve international students' awareness of health services in the UK
- Increase their knowledge of sexual health and related issues
- Equip international students with the skills and confidence to navigate relationships in a different cultural context
- Increase international students' confidence in discussing sexual consent and contraception



Student workshop helping students to talk openly about sex

## Outcomes

As part of the project implementation, we worked with a group of international student health facilitators to create:

- Information leaflets on health services in the UK including information about access to sexual health services in Sheffield. These are now distributed during International Student Orientation and the medical registration.
- 20-minute information sessions about access to healthcare and sexual health services in the UK delivered by International Student Health Facilitators during the Orientation programme. To date this has been delivered to approximately 300 students with positive feedback.
- A two-hour session focusing on healthy relationships and sexual health to be delivered by a staff member and a student health facilitator. To date this has been delivered to 30 students, in groups of 6-8 each with students of approximately 12 different nationalities.

- An online tutorial about sexual health and contraception which will be provided to all international students via a Blackboard organisational site.

## A toolkit for other institutions in the UK

The project and its approaches have been documented in a toolkit for other universities and colleges to use if they wish to deliver similar services. This includes:

- preliminary student questionnaire (Translation in Mandarin also provided)
- job description and person specification for International Student Health Facilitator
- detailed training session for the international student health facilitators
- detailed session plan for a two-hour session on Healthy Relationships (which includes information and exercises focusing on personal communication skills, sexual consent and sexual health)
- session evaluation form

- print-ready information leaflet on Health Services in the UK (this will require minor editing to provide information about local sexual health services)
- Articulate Storyline online tutorial which can be edited and used by other HEIs

(See Further Information (page 4) to access resources on the Sheffield Hallam blog.)

## How was the project set up, run and evaluated?

The project was initiated and run by the International Experience Team in the Directorate of Library and Student Support Services. The Healthy University Steering Group is the project's strategic sponsor in Sheffield Hallam University. Operationally, the project was implemented by **Helen Paskins**, International Experience Adviser, and **Krassimira Teneva**, Head of International Experience.

The project was (and will continue to be) evaluated by:

1. feedback from students using the

materials and attending the sessions

2. feedback for other HEI/FE on the usability and usefulness of the toolkit

The impact of the project will be measured using data provided by the University medical centre (eg the drop in the number of international students with unplanned pregnancies) and in the team's own appointment records.

### What was the timescale of the project?

The project ran from November 2015 to the end of July 2016.

The first stage of the project took longer than planned as it dealt with topics which are culturally sensitive. To ensure that the session was working as intended, we involved international students in the session design and we tested it extensively with different student groups.

The project will be embedded in the range of services delivered by the International Experience Team from September 2016. The 'Healthy Relationship' sessions and the related leaflets will become part of our standard offer for international students.

### Learning points from student feedback

We gathered opinions and feedback from students during the project via:

- an online questionnaire
- informal group chats at the end of sessions
- confidential feedback sheets completed at the end of sessions

We also consulted with our Students' Union elected officers. Interestingly, there were areas of agreement but also some contradictions in student feedback.

Students consistently told us there is a need for information on healthy relationships and that they would like the information delivered face-to-face in small, same sex sessions. Feedback from students who attended the sessions was strong, with all students agreeing they had learned new things and found the sessions useful. They especially liked the information on different forms of contraception. We know therefore that we are meeting some of the aims of our project. The majority of students want the sessions to be delivered in the first month or so of enrolment at university.

When it came to the ideal delivery of session, the answers were mixed. The questionnaire results revealed that students would most like to have trained student facilitators to lead the sessions. However, the verbal feedback revealed that students preferred to have all staff, or one staff and one student facilitator to lead the sessions. Students reported feeling uncomfortable about the ability of a student to lead a session in the verbal feedback. Other students reported that they would feel comfortable with a trained student to lead the session.

We had not initially anticipated a staff member being involved in running the sessions, but based on student feedback we are reconsidering this. We will continue to gather feedback from students. We will be trialling sessions in the future run jointly by a member of staff and student health facilitator, and sessions run entirely by student health facilitators.

### Learning points from staff feedback

Fortunately our project was well supported by wider teams in the University for several reasons. Firstly, there had already been a request for running sessions on healthy relationships, sexual consent and sexual health because our medical centre had reported increased



*Information leaflet on health services in the UK*

numbers of students seeking abortion due to unwanted and unplanned pregnancies.

This issue had already been identified and so there was already awareness, willingness and motivation to put efforts into tackling the issue. The project has fitted well into the aims of the "Healthy University" strategy at Sheffield Hallam, which involves promoting the welfare and wellbeing of staff and students. This has meant that the project has received greater exposure and support. The project is being worked into the routine work of our team, rather than being a one-off project.

We are taking a long-term view of the project, which has also helped with its planning. It means that we have kept an open mind and have been willing to learn from what works and what doesn't work, and to continually improve the project work.

### Challenges getting staff commitment

It has not been an entirely easy journey to get support from all teams.

Some staff members, who we hoped to involve more greatly in the project delivery, have been unable to commit much time or resources. To overcome this issue we had to be flexible and be prepared to take on areas of the project more directly ourselves. There has also been some apprehension and fears expressed by some staff about the aims and content of the session. We have generally overcome these doubts by carefully explaining why we are running the project and have shared positive feedback from students who have participated in the sessions we run.

Involving the opinions and voices of the students is incredibly powerful, and we would recommend using that as a tool to get buy-in for a project. We have gathered lots of feedback and opinions from students about what they want, and how they want the information delivered. Knowing what your students want and need I think is crucial and should be considered during the stages of project planning where possible.

### Challenges employing student health facilitators

We recruited four student health facilitators. It was a competitive application process, involving an application form and interview. We recruited one (British) male, and three (international) females. We recruited two facilitators who can speak Mandarin.

On reflection, our expectations of what the student health facilitators could achieve by themselves were initially too high. We expected that after we had trained the facilitators they would be capable of creating session content fairly quickly and easily, with us supporting rather than leading on the content. We also expected that the facilitators would be able to run the sessions by themselves more or less straight away. We were expecting to be equal collaborators with the

facilitators, rather than steering the session design.

This did not turn out to be the case, and in general the facilitators were more comfortable for us to take a stronger lead on the session content rather than designing it from scratch themselves. One student was frequently unable to attend training sessions because of study commitments, and therefore it was a mutual decision that the student would no longer work in that role.

To overcome these problems, we decided to design the session ourselves, and then invite opinions from the facilitators about our suggested material. We then led three sessions ourselves, and had the facilitators observe us and then discuss opinions and feedback from the session at the end. We feel that this extra support was necessary and we now feel confident that the facilitators have the skills to deliver the sessions themselves in the future. It is likely that we will run the sessions jointly with the facilitators to increase their confidence and experience before the facilitators run the sessions entirely by themselves.

### Conclusions

The strength of this project is that there is a firm commitment to embedding it into our offer to students and that it is continuing to evolve. We are continuing to refine our materials and session content as we reflect on what has worked and not worked so well during the sessions. Good feedback from staff, students and our facilitators confirms that our project was needed and valued. The project has demonstrated that with limited resources we can still reach a large number of students. All students who have attended the healthy relationship sessions have confirmed they have learned something new. We believe that the project will continue to grow in the future and we look forward to

refining and developing the sessions further.

There is significant interest in modifying the materials (online tutorial and session) to suit UK as well as international students. This is something we could consider doing once the project is properly embedded in the standard service offer for international students.

### References

Poljski C, Quiazon R, and Tran C. (2014). Ensuring Rights: Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services for Female International Students in Australia. In: *Journal of International Students*, Vol 4 no 2 pp. 150-163

University of Nottingham (2011) *Investigation into the Mental Health Support needs of International Students with particular reference to Chinese and Malaysian students*, available from: <http://bit.ly/2cLSmZe>

### Further information

As we continue working on the project, the blog is live and being updated. The blog includes links to useful websites and resources and the toolkit: <http://bit.ly/2cLWFE8>

**This project was run by Helen Paskins, International Student Adviser and Krassimira Teneva, Head of International Experience.**

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