Catalysts and rationales for reporting staff sexual misconduct to UK higher education institutions.

**Key messages**

* There is much less research examining the reasons why victim-survivors do *not* report sexual violence and harassment than the reasons why they *do* report.
* In this study of students and staff who reported staff sexual misconduct to their university, the main rationale that interviewees gave for trying to report was to prevent other women being targeted
* The article argues that separating catalysts for reporting from rationales makes visible different levels of decision-making over time

# Introduction

There is currently a heightened focus on complaints processes in higher education institutions (HEIs) within the media (Lee and West, 2019) as well as in policy (EHRC 2020; Office for Students 2020), in relation to how HEIs respond to reports of sexual misconduct[[1]](#endnote-1) on campus. This trend is visible not only in the UK but also internationally in the US, South Africa, India, and elsewhere (Matthews, 2019; UN Women, 2018). HEIs are being urged to increase rates of reporting sexual violence so as to make reporting ‘the new norm’; an increase in reporting can raise awareness of sexual violence on campus, leading to more resources for prevention and response (Towl and Walker, 2019: 103; Universities UK, 2016). However, others argue that it may not be ethical to encourage reporting when there is evidence that complaints processes are performative and not fit for purpose (Ahmed, 2018; Bull and Rye, 2018). Furthermore, victim-survivors have complex and varied responses and desires for justice that may not be met by reporting (Fitzgerald et al, 1995; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Within these debates, the motivations of those who *have* reported remain under-explored, and their voices are rarely heard. Indeed, this mirrors literature on reporting of sexual violence and harassment in the workplace and in wider society, where most research has focused on reasons why women *don’t* report rather than examining the accounts of those that *do*.

This article critically discusses this imperative towards increased reporting by contextualizing it within data from interviews with students on reporting staff sexual misconduct[[2]](#footnote-1) to their HEI. It draws on interviews with 16 students and early career researchers who considered or attempted to report staff sexual misconduct to their institution, analyzing their routes towards making a formal report. This study forms part of a larger body of work on staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education (HE) (Bull and Rye, 2018; Page et al., 2019; Bull et al., 2019; Bull and Page, 2021a; 2021b). The key contributions it makes are firstly, critically examining calls for increased reporting through drawing on the voices of those who did report; and secondly, examining routes towards reporting or disclosure in more detail by breaking motivations down into *catalysts* and *rationales**,* as described below.

The article first gives a brief overview of literature on reasons for reporting sexual violence and harassment from three areas: the criminal justice system, workplace sexual harassment, and higher education. After outlining the methods, the substantive body of the article introduces the distinction between catalysts and rationales for reporting then outlines how these mapped onto the ways that interviewees discussed reporting or disclosure.

# Literature review

There is a large body of literature on barriers to reporting and non-reporting of sexual violence and sexual harassment within the criminal justice system. However, as Brooks-Hay (2020: 176) notes:

the enduring research and policy preoccupation with the problem of underreporting to the police appears to have obscured the question of why victim-survivors do report. Arguably, the answer to this question is frequently assumed and grounded in social acceptance of the idea that victims of serious sexual offenses, and indeed other crimes, will rightfully seek and access “justice” via the criminal justice system. In short, reporting is deemed to be both a right belonging to victim-survivors and the “right thing” for them to do.

Against this common sense assumption, existing studies on people who do report to the police shows that their ‘motives [are] varied and complex’ (Lievore, 2005: 36). Brooks-Hay, in interviews with women in Scotland who had been subject to sexual assault, described four key themes in reasons for reporting: individual and therapeutic reasons, such as for personal safety or to get ‘closure’; perpetrator-orientated reasons, such as not wanting them to get away with it; social and moral responsibility in taking wider action for change and to prevent the perpetrator targeting other women; and the decision to report being influenced or even taken by someone other than the victim-survivor (2020), a theme that is echoed by Lievore’s findings in a similar study (2005). Similarly, Taylor and Norma’s interview- and survey-based study of Australian women who had reported sexual abuse - including childhood sexual abuse - to the police, found that the desire to protect other women was also a strong theme, and this constituted a form of ‘symbolic protest’ whereby they reported even though they knew that they were unlikely to get justice. Similar reasons emerged from a mixed-methods study of attrition in UK rape cases. Kelly et al. found that the most common reasons service users gave for reporting were to sanction the perpetrator (69%, n=122); to protect others (57%, n=101); because they thought they should (50%, n=89); and fear of the perpetrator (44%, n=79) (2005: 42). Variations in the findings across these studies can partly be explained by differences between the samples, for example women who are subject to domestic abuse had different rationales to women who were deciding whether to report sexual violence outside of an intimate relationship (Brooks-Hay, 2020: 188).

Sexual harassment within the workplace is an issue of discrimination (even if it may constitute a criminal offence) and therefore reasons for reporting may differ from those outlined above. While there is a vast literature on non-reporting, there is much less work examining employees’ reasons *for* reporting sexual harassment within their organisation. A significant exception to this is the US Army survey of 145,300 respondents which found that the most common reason for reporting was to stop the offender(s) from hurting others, with 53.94% of women respondents citing this reason, closely followed by ‘someone you told encouraged you to report’ from 53.65% of women respondents. The next most common reason was ‘to stop the offender(s) from hurting you again’ with 40.54% of women respondents choosing this (Morral et al., 2015). Protection of self and others therefore emerges even more strongly in this study as a rationale for reporting than in studies of reporting to the police. However, the distinctive culture of the military may mean that these findings are not generalizable to other settings.

Research into sexual harassment and violence within higher education shows similar patterns to the findings above. The National Academies of Sciences outline the very low rates of reporting and note that ‘only a very small literature examines how women respond to their experiences of sexual harassment’ (2018: 79). However, in this setting there are also differences to both the workplace and to the criminal justice system. Students are on the whole younger (a factor tentatively associated with higher levels of reporting (Kelly et al., 2005)), and a study of hypothetical reporting behaviours found that students state they are much more likely to report sexual harassment to their university than to the police (Stanton: 2015: 21). However, despite these factors that could lead to higher levels of reporting, rates remain low; a national survey of staff-student sexual misconduct in UK HE found that while 41% of respondents (n=1839) had experienced sexualised behaviour from staff, only 10% of this group disclosed or reported it to their institution (National Union of Students, 2018: 31). As this example shows, similarly to studies of workplace sexual harassment, research into sexual violence in HEIs often relies on survey-based methods that ask why the respondent did *not* report the harassment but fails to ask those who reported why they did so. In this way, non-reporting is problematized, while reporting is seen as a response that requires no explanation. The opposite is closer to reality; non-reporting is far more common so should be seen as the default response. Furthermore, reporting is counter-intuitive because it tends to lead to negative consequences for the complainant (Bull and Rye, 2018; McDonald 2012: 9; National Academies of Sciences, 2018: 82). Therefore, exploring the accounts of those who did attempt to report, as this article does, can shed light on factors that might encourage more people to do so.

The assumption that an institutional response to sexual misconduct should work towards making reporting the norm (Towl and Walker, 2019) is therefore not entirely straightforward. As Fitzgerald et al. note, we need to‘critique the assertion that confrontation and reporting are invariably both appropriate and effective**,** [as] victim responses are complex and multidimensional’ (1995: 119). Indeed, the decision to report is not a one-off, but instead is an ongoing one (Taylor and Norma, 2012: 30) and any sense of justice that is obtained through this process is ongoing and fluid (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Furthermore, in the studies described above, the topic of why people reported is taken as a whole (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Kelly, 2005; Norma 2012). However, Brooks-Hay (2020: 182) notes that ‘reporting to the police for some victim-survivors was precipitated by a crisis point (e.g., family breakdown, child contact, or personal safety concerns)’. This article details how such ‘crisis points’ or ‘catalysts’ interlink with wider ‘rationales’ for reporting, allowing more nuanced analysis of routes to reporting.

# Methods

This paper draws on data from a wider study on HEI’s responses to staff sexual misconduct, for which interviews were carried out with 15 students and one early career researcher who experienced sexual harassment and/or violence from academic staff during their studies and attempted to report this to their institution or the police. Interviewees were recruited via two routes: following participation in the National Union of Students’ survey into staff sexual misconduct (2018) (n=11) or after contacting the author for support or to share their story (n=5). Ethical approval was given by the University of Portsmouth’s Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics committee. All names have been changed in the analysis below.

All interviewees had been subject to sexual misconduct from academic staff in UK HE in the ten years to 2018, and all but one had attempted to report to their institution; the final interviewee had attempted (unsuccessfully) to report to the police, and was still considering reporting to her institution. Although the study was open to all genders, interviewees were all women. Four were undergraduate students when they experienced the misconduct and the others were postgraduates, barring one early career researcher who reported on behalf of herself and several PhD students. Five were international/EU students of whom two were students of colour and eleven were white British. The identities that are not represented in this study – most notably British students of colour, and trans, non-binary, male, and queer students – are important, and this data is therefore necessarily partial.

Interviews included a question that asked participants to discuss how they came to the decision to report to their institution, which elicited extremely lengthy responses which have been analysed for this article. Further details about the method can be found in Bull and Rye (2018). It is important to note that the theorization of catalysts and rationales was arrived at through analysis of the interviews, and future research needs to explore whether these categories makes sense to victim-survivors. Finally, interviewees were at different distances from the experience of reporting; some were still within the reporting process and others several years out of it. Therefore, while the discussions below reflect how interviewees talked about their routes towards reporting at the time of interview, these perspectives could change over time.

# Findings

This article focuses on accounts of the decision to report or disclose to someone within the institution. While this might sound simple, it was not. Multiple, overlapping reasons for disclosure and/or reporting were discussed by interviewees over the course of what were sometimes very complex accounts. The decision to report could rarely be narrowed down to a single point in time. Initial disclosures could prove ineffective, leading to the decision-making process having to happen all over again in light of this response, or previous decisions *not* to report were later revisited by interviewees in light of changed circumstances.

It proved helpful, conceptually and analytically, to break down the motivations for reporting into two aspects: the immediate catalyst or trigger that affected the timing of reporting, and the deeper rationale for why interviewees wanted to take this step. As noted above, Brooks-Hay (2020: 182) identifies ‘crisis points’ that precipitate reporting; these are what I am labelling ‘catalysts’. ‘Catalysts’ is a more appropriate term than ‘crisis points’ as catalysts could also be positive changes in circumstances such as students finishing their degree; feeling strong enough to report (for example, due to an improvement in mental health); having a change in personal circumstances; or **being validated by a third party that the harassment was not acceptable.** In contrast to these catalysts, the *rationale* for reporting was the fundamental, underlying reason interviewees gave for this decision. Rationales tended to involve lengthy reflections around whether this was the right thing to do and usually involved a deeply considered decision (except for those who reported without intending to, as discussed below). As such, most interviewees described in detail their reasons for taking this decision. However, there was some overlap between catalysts and rationales. Below, across the first four subheadings I discuss the four main rationales for reporting interviewees described, also describing the specific catalysts that precipitated these reports, before introducing two further catalysts in the final section.

## Rationales for reporting

### Attempting to prevent other women being targeted

In line with previous studies of reporting to the criminal justice system (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Taylor and Norma, 2012) and reporting within the US army (Morrell et al., 2014), preventing other women being targeted was the main rationale that most interviewees gave for reporting. Seven interviewees discussed this explicitly as a rationale for their report, and all but one of the others at some point during the interview mentioned their concern for other students who might be targeted by the same member of academic staff, or by other academic staff in a climate where sexual misconduct and/or bullying was accepted. As Carla described:

One of the reasons [for] starting this formal complaint was to partly ensure that he wasn’t able to be in a position where he could do this again (Carla, PhD student).

For two interviewees, the catalyst that led them to act on this rationale was leaving or thinking of leaving their institution; they felt that if they weren’t around to monitor the behaviour of the staff member who had harassed or assaulted them they needed to notify others for the safety of future students. Andrea described how she was keeping an eye on the staff member who had harassed her:

I was like, well, if he stays here, I’m someone who knows what he’s done and what he’s capable of, and I can watch him. Right? I can warn the next girl I can see around him and tell her to be careful (Andrea, Master’s student).

Similarly, by reporting Ally combined the wish to prevent harm to other women with her own need for closure and a sense of ‘doing the right thing’:

I didn’t want to leave thinking that could happen to the next woman, and I didn’t actually expect much from it. I didn’t go in wanting revenge at all, or even justice actually, at the start. I literally just wanted to tell someone, so that I knew I’d done the right thing, and could move on to have a fresh start, I guess, so it was all over (Ally, PhD student).

Ally’s reflection here on what her rationale for reporting was ‘at the start’ indicates how this position could shift over time, in response to the experience of going through the complaints process. Also important in this quote is the belief that informing their institutions would be an effective means of protecting other students, and that the role of complainant would simply be lodging the report and passing the burden of this knowledge over to the institution (a belief that was misplaced; as outlined in Bull and Rye (2018)).

The rationale of reporting to protect other women can be understood as a form of social justice activism. As Ally’s and Andrea’s quotes show, this was future-oriented, thinking about the students who would come into contact with ‘their’ perpetrator in subsequent years. It was a micro-social form of activism, oriented towards the imagined group of women who might be harassed in future by this academic. This drew on interviewees’ ability to recognise sexual misconduct while it was occurring, knowledge that they had developed through their experiences. As discussed in Bull and Page (2021b), boundary-blurring and grooming behaviours were not always immediately recognised as such by interviewees, the patterns sometimes only becoming clear in retrospect. Several interviewees realised in retrospect that the member of staff who had targeted them had a *modus operandi* that they would recognise if it happened to someone else, possibly even before ‘the next woman’ recognised it herself. In this way, although institutions did not necessarily treat grooming or boundary-blurring behaviours (Bull and Page, 2021b) as disciplinary matters, interviewees themselves were poised and ready to warn others.

Notably, as the quotes above show, many interviewees stated their reasoning in specifically gendered terms as oriented towards other *women*. This shows a political consciousness of sexual harassment as a form of discrimination against women as a group, further suggesting that these interviewees were using complaints processes as a form of activism. Furthermore, this small-scale activism could set the scene for getting involved in trying to make wider change:

So it spurred me into doing something, and trying to change the department’s policies, trying to change the group’s approach, trying to change the university’s approach, and being involved much more actively with trying to fix the situation so that other people don’t have to go through the same process that I did (Fiona, PhD student).

However, while Taylor and Norma (2012) describe reporting to the police as a form of ‘symbolic protest’ because they didn’t expect to get justice, many of the interviewees in this study went into the complaints process with faith that it would be effective, even if this faith was later broken.

### Fighting injustice

Similarly to Ally’s reason for reporting as ‘doing the right thing’, for many interviewees an important rationale was to act on the sense of injustice that they felt as a result of their experiences.

The initial complaint was brought about a few months or so before I actually submitted my thesis. So it coincided with a particularly stressful time, that I was writing it up, and didn’t particularly want to be involved in this, but equally felt that I had to be. It just didn’t square with my principles not to be involved […]. The other part was just, I have a very strong belief in, I guess, you know, in the equality of women, and women being treated reasonably – everyone being treated reasonably in the workplace, and this behaviour had made me feel so uncomfortable, and confused, and stressed, and isolated, that I didn’t want anyone else to go through that (Fiona, PhD student).

This statement mirrors Brooks-Hay’s (2020: 184) findings that one of the key reasons for reporting is a sense of social and moral responsibility. Fiona links her decision to report into her belief in women’s equality in the workplace. This rationale was catalysed into action – some time after the harassment ended – by being contacted by another student who was reporting the same lecturer.

For some interviewees this sense of injustice was personal rather than linked to wider political beliefs, but it still involved a sense of wanting to stand up to behaviours they felt were unacceptable. Gemma, like Fiona, did not initially intend to report (as described below), but once she started the process, her anger at the sexual harassment she had been subjected to spurred her on and became part of her rationale:

[I kept going with the complaint] because I was so angry. I was really pissed off. It’s not acceptable for someone to treat someone that way, and if I’d given up it would have been like letting him win, in a way (Gemma, undergraduate student).

Similarly, for Carla the sense of injustice was related to the experience of exploitation. As noted in Bull and Rye (2018), for half the interviewees, sexual misconduct occurred alongside bullying behaviours. Carla’s supervisor was bullying her and her fellow PhD students as well as sexually harassing the women students in the group. His manipulation and controlling behaviour had ‘brainwashed’ her and her colleagues, but gaining some physical distance from him while on holiday, alongside an experience of injustice relating to her academic work, worked as a catalyst and allowed the spell to lift:

In my case, in particular, what prompted me to complain was because he said that if I went on vacation for two weeks with my parents during Christmas and New Year’s, that he would remove me as author from the paper. I was first author because I had written most of the paper and I had done the majority of the work. And he wanted to remove my name, he said because I should be able to respond during vacation. […] At that point, the brainwashing had been lifted for a few weeks […] and I realised that he was a complete nutter, that the only thing he wanted was to control everyone and to exploit them as much as he could for what they could give (Carla, PhD student).

As with the other interviewees who had experienced ongoing grooming and/or controlling behaviours, the level of emotional control that Carla’s supervisor had cultivated over her clouded her view of the situation for a long time, and it was only when this lifted that she was able to see his behaviours clearly enough to realise this was not normal and try to report him. As the next theme explores, she also realised that she had to try and get herself and her fellow PhD students out of this damaging and toxic situation.

### Protecting oneself physically and emotionally

Continuing the theme above, standing up for one’s own safety can be seen as a form of fighting injustice in that both are ways of defending one’s right to be present in academia. For a smaller group of interviewees, defending oneself from either physical or emotional harm was the most important rationale for reporting, and for two interviewees, this rationale overlapped with the catalyst.

Fears around their own physical safety were crucial for these two interviewees. This was the catalyst for Aditi after her PhD supervisor confronted her in their lab one night and made thinly veiled threats that she needed to sleep with him in order to continue with her PhD. Immediately after this happened, as she described:

I got so scared, I was shivering, because already it was almost 10pm and it was too late and [no-one was] in the university except we two. So it was really scary, but I had to say yes to him because if I say no to him then he becomes aggressive, he can do anything to me in the lab, and there were not proper CCTVs everywhere. So I had to be a bit careful and I was nodding to him for everything, but that was the scariest day of my life.

She was too frightened to go into work for two or three days after this and set up a meeting with her head of department to disclose what had happened in order to feel safe enough to go back to the lab. Here, the catalyst and the rationale are the same. This was to some extent also the case for Cathryn, an early career researcher who reported to ensure her own safety after becoming pregnant as well as on behalf of PhD students who were targeted by the same member of staff:

[He] was grabbing and kissing me forcefully when there was no one else around, you know, smacking my backside forcefully, things like that. [Then] I fell pregnant, and at that point my mindset changed because I didn’t want him touching my bump, and I didn’t want him touching my child (Cathryn, postdoctoral researcher).

While for Aditi and Cathryn, protecting themselves physically was a catalyst to reporting, for Andrea, protecting herself *emotionally* by trying to take back control was a longer-term rationale:

[I was] just feeling completely powerless and feeling as though he’d just pushed me into this situation, I’d not even put up a fight, I was just very passive and that I had no power to change my situation. I was like, I need to do something to regain some sort of sense of self-control (Andrea, master’s student).

Trying to report, for Andrea, was part of the process of regaining control but as above, this was coupled with a desire to protect others from the same behaviour.

### Reporting for academic/career reasons

Carla’s account, above, gives an example of how it is difficult in cases of sexual misconduct or bullying from academic staff to separate academic from non-academic complaints. For 12 out of the 16 interviewees, the sexual misconduct occurred from a member of staff who was teaching or supervising them and so access to teaching or issues relating to their academic work and career progression were a major factor in deciding to report. Interviewees all had strong academic identities and were passionate about their disciplines, but this put them at greater risk of staff sexual misconduct, for example through putting up with sexualised behaviours in order to access teaching or supervision.

As well as Carla, another example is Sara, for whom the rationale for her initial disclosure was to stop the harassment. This led to her department arranging a distressing and unsatisfactory mediation meeting with the lecturer. Following this, the catalyst and rationale changed:

Finally, I spoke to my counsellor about this, and she told me that this is really inappropriate and I should report him. I was at the end of my degree, and I didn’t know if I wanted to get into the trouble of reporting […]. I didn’t know what would happen. Our university has a lot of information about what would happen if you report about another student but doesn’t say anything about what would happen if you report a lecturer. And obviously I didn’t want to ask anyone to avoid the risk of questions about why I needed to know that. Eventually, I had to mention this issue in a mitigation form, and that’s how the matter came out (Sara, undergraduate student).

Sara was catalysed into making a formal complaint by needing an extension on her dissertation (the mitigation form mentioned above). At the time of the complaint, she was at the end of her degree, so rather than her earlier rationale of trying to stop the harassment, at this point she was trying to avoid academic failure so she could continue onto postgraduate study. Her counsellor’s advice supported her in this decision. Sara’s account shows how separating catalysts and rationales for reporting can allow the different levels of decision-making over time to become clearer.

## Further catalysts for reporting

The four sections above have detailed the main rationales for reporting interviewees gave, alongside the catalysts that triggered these. There were two further catalysts evident in interviewees’ accounts that are not covered above: reporting without intending to; and reporting as part of a group.

### Reporting without intending to

For three interviewees, the catalyst for reporting occurred when someone else disclosed their experience to the university. While in the US there exist policies of ‘mandatory reporting’ where disclosures are reported, even against the victim-survivors’ wishes, this is not the case in the UK. Gemma, an undergraduate student, had gone to her students’ union with a friend to discuss the lack of support from their department for their mental health needs. Gemma’s friend was aware of the sexual harassment that Gemma was experiencing from a lecturer and mentioned it to the students’ union advisor. Gemma described:

I was like, “Oh God.” Anyway, as soon as that was mentioned, the Student Union advisor immediately was like, “What’s this? Tell me everything.” So I did, and she was like, “This is the problem here. I mean, sure, the department have been rubbish, but this is a really, really massive issue.” I remember leaving that meeting like, “Oh dear.” (Gemma, undergraduate student)

Gemma dropped out of university as a result of these experiences but with the support of the students’ union she lodged a formal complaint. Notably, she had not been intending to report, but her friend’s disclosure catalysed her into doing so, and as noted above, her sense of injustice and anger became her rationale for seeing the complaint process through to the end.

Another catalyst was having another staff or faculty member within the institution – such as Sara’s counsellor, as above – label the behaviours the student was experiencing as unacceptable. As Brooks-Hay (2020: 185) notes, the role of third parties in influencing the decision to report, or even reporting on behalf of the victim-survivor, can be important, as the next section also demonstrates.

### Reporting as part of a group

As Whitley and Page (2015) argue, HE complaints processes assume that an individual student or staff member will make a complaint against another individual. The data from this study shows that this is often not how it works in practice. Six interviewees reported as part of a group (two within the same group), and this functioned as a catalyst for reporting or for moving from informal to formal reports, as Carla’s account shows:

All of us, I think, complained separately at different time periods […] Separately, I had talked to people […] who were in positions to be able to give advice, and at first, they weren’t sure how to deal with it because one, they weren’t sure how true – if anything that I was saying was real, and second of all, I think that they felt that if it was true, then if this person was so vindictive, it was going to be difficult to do something very rash, and that the best way to do that was to have the department deal with it.

So the only way to have that work would have been [for] all of us, united, to complain. And that was the only way it was going to work, because otherwise I think that at most, what would have happened was that each of us would have asked for a change in supervision, but then we would still have this label of ‘trouble-maker’. […] So the only way to have done things cleanly, it felt, was that if we united together to say that we were all suffering from the same problem (Carla, PhD student).

As Carla describes, advantages of making a group complaint were that they felt more likely to be believed and less likely to be labelled as trouble-makers. In addition, they were able to support each other throughout the lengthy and traumatising complaints and investigation process. For several interviewees, simply knowing that they weren’t the only one shed a different light on their experiences, and made them feel like it was possible to report, catalysing their ability to act:

The knowledge that it had happened to other people was huge, because it felt like it would be much, much harder to deny if many people all turned round and said, “We’ve all experienced this.” It felt like people’s allegiances, and what his power might be, would be significantly diminished if there were lots of us saying, “This happened to all of us,” you know, “This isn’t a one-off. Everyone experienced this.” And I think that was really the biggest factor in feeling like I could say something, and the validation that it was a thing, that actually what had happened was worthy of raising (Fiona, PhD student).

As Fiona’s comment shows, reporting as a group could work against some of the common reasons for not reporting that are found across the literature on sexual violence reporting, most notably, thinking the experience wasn’t serious enough to report, being concerned about retaliation, and being worried that they wouldn’t be believed (National Union of Students, 2018: 31). In particular, the social norm of minimising violence against women, which Sundaram and Jackson found was characteristic of UK HE staff members’ discourses of sexual violence (2020), could be countered by validation from other women who had had the same experiences from the same staff member.

# Concluding discussion

Against previous studies that have focused on barriers to reporting, this article has analysed why students and staff *did* report staff sexual misconduct to their institution. Interviewees’ accounts were complex, and decision-making tended to unfold over the course of months or years, in some cases continuing after the interview. In order to make visible the different levels of decision-making, I have suggested that it is helpful to separate out the route toward reporting into two separate aspects: the catalysts or triggers for reporting, and the underlying rationales. The most common rationales that interviewees gave for trying to report staff sexual misconduct were to prevent other women being targeted and protecting oneself physically or emotionally. Further rationales identified in interviewees’ accounts were ‘doing the right thing’ or fighting injustice; and reporting or disclosing in order to be able to continue their careers. Distinct from these underlying rationales, catalysts for reporting describe specific triggers. These included a change in situation, such as the interviewee leaving the institution or becoming pregnant; finding out that others had also been targeted by the same perpetrator and reporting as a group; a third party disclosing their experience; or being validated by someone within the institution that what they had experienced was not ok. In some instances, catalysts overlapped with rationales, such as when an escalation in the misconduct meant that an interviewee needed to report to protect themselves or others, or where the misconduct led to an immediate barrier to continuing their career.

Separating catalysts and rationales for reporting can allow different levels of decision-making over time to become clearer, against understanding reporting as a single, time-limited decision. Rationales for reporting were often linked into interviewees’ longer-term wishes for justice, as previously outlined in studies of justice for sexual violence survivors (Bull and Page, 2021a; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). However, even when interviewees had a clear rationale for reporting, without a catalyst this rationale could remain dormant. Indeed, one interviewee had notreported to her institution but to the police, and at the time of interview (some years after the assault) was still considering whether she should do so. In addition, separating out these two levels of decision-making helps make visible the ways in which the decision to report could be influenced or even taken by someone other than the victim-survivor (see Brooks-Hay, 2020), whether through reporting as part of a group or disclosing to someone who treated it as a report (which in the UK is not the norm).

The findings in this article reveal similarities and also differences with previous research on why women report sexual harassment and violence. A key difference with Taylor and Norma (2012) or Brooks-Hay’s (2020) interviewees who reported to the police is the faith in the efficacy of reporting that many interviewees in this study had. However, this faith proved to be misplaced as institutional responses did not address complainants’ concerns (Bull and Page, 2021a). One finding that is consistent with other studies is the desire to protect other women. While in literatures on reporting to the police (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Kelly et al., 2005; Lievore, 2005; Norma and Taylor, 2005) and the study of the US army (Morral et al., 2015), this is an important factor, it seems perhaps even more important in this study, mentioned by almost all the interviewees. This heightened importance may be in part because the ‘other women’ that interviewees wanted to protect were more visible to them due to being in a relatively closed institutional or disciplinary community. However, this study is distinct from research into the criminal justice system as it focuses on victims of discrimination (even if some of their experiences constitute a criminal offence). Many of the victim-survivors in this study, by focusing on harm to other women as well as themselves, were responding to this as discrimination, i.e. manifesting solidarity with others in the same position as themselves.

However, as Brooks-Hay notes, this narrative of protecting other women means that ‘the onus of responsibility for the perpetrator’s behavior is (again) put back onto women’ (2020: 189). This raises the question of whether complaints processes are an appropriate mechanism for raising concerns related to discrimination or safety at work/study. Given this evidence that students and staff in HE are reporting discrimination or harassment issues primarily in order to protect themselves and others, the current practice of an individualised complaints process where protections for the wider student and staff body are not necessarily considered is problematic. Instead, sexual misconduct in HE needs to be treated as a discrimination issue, a health and safety issue, and a safeguarding issue.

There are various policy implications of these findings. First and foremost, institutional complaints processes need to be adapted to make sure they are able to address the motivations for reporting described above, i.e. protecting oneself and others (see for example The 1752 Group and McAllister Olivarius 2020). **These adaptations should include** provision for group complaints, and **a requirement for risk assessments to be carried out as soon as a report is made or disclosure of sexual harassment is received (Westmarland, 2017), in recognition that catalysts for reporting might have safeguarding implications such as an escalation in the abuse or other students being targeted. Secondly, t**ime limits on reporting should be removed and **institutions should explicitly enable alumni reports against current members of staff**. Thirdly, institutions can create mechanisms to catalyse reports, for example by reaching out to victim-survivors. Finally, the call for increasing reporting of sexual misconduct in higher education to institutions (Towl and Walker, 2019) needs to be qualified in order to support a more student- and victim-survivor-centred approach. It does not make sense to encourage reporting if institutional complaints processes are inadequate and put the complainant at risk (Bull and Rye, 2018). Nor are mandatory reporting of disclosures, as required by US Title IX processes, a helpful way forward as they violate the principle of the victim-survivor retaining control and choice over their experience (Bull et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a balance to be found between victim-survivors retaining control and choice in making the decision whether to report or disclose, and the burden of responsibility falling on the institution, rather than the complainant, to carry the case forward.

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1. This term is defined as sexualised abuses of power by academic, professional, contracted, and temporary staff in their relations with students or staff in higher education that adversely affect students’ or staff’s ability to participate in learning, teaching or professional environments. For a full discussion see The 1752 Group and McAllister Olivarius (2020: 31). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This article uses the UK usage of the term ‘staff’ to refer to both professional and academic staff (i.e. faculty) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)