

Sexual Harassment on International Branch Campuses: An Institutional Case Study of Awareness, Perception, and Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Concerned for student safety and intrigued by how research could impact institutional policy and practice, this paper describes findings from an action research project to raise questions and awareness about sexual harassment on an international branch campus in China. Due to the multicultural environment of the campus, it was felt that culturally grounded research that adds to our awareness and perceptions of sexual harassment would be imperative to facilitate prevention strategies in similar higher education environments. Through this case study, which received substantial institutional support, we also sought to learn more about students' experiences. Different attitudes and perceptions on gender, identity, sexuality, and multicultural relationships were revealed by survey responses and interview conversations. Furthermore, data revealed that students were confused about sexual harassment consequences and responsibilities, and social media was misleading. The findings from this study point to the need for more research, especially concerning cultural attitudes and perspectives about sexual harassment, and can contribute to institutional mechanisms in preventing sexual harassment amongst an increasingly internationalized higher education community.

Keywords: action research, cultural perceptions, international branch campus, prevention, sexual harassment

BACKGROUND

The internationalization of higher education and the performance of international branch campuses are both topics that continue to be discussed worldwide. According to the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, there are 306 international branch campuses in 37 countries around the world (data updated on 20 November 2020). The largest "exporter" is the United States and the largest "importer" China with 42 international campuses (Cross-Border Education Research Team). This trend has been examined by researchers from different perspectives, notably Li and Lowe's (2016) review of the "war for talent" and its implications for cross-border education. They point out that the worldwide talent market in newly emerging economies has been extended throughout the world, but especially in Asia, where high skills are

sought at lower prices. China, with the largest market for education, nevertheless has a higher education capacity which lags behind student demand (OECD, 2016). Therefore, the country still has room for international branch campus development (Bothwell, 2019).

In China, joint-venture universities, also known as “Sino-foreign cooperative universities,” have attracted students from home and abroad for various reasons. These reasons include the fact that the institutions are *de facto* international branch campuses. As a result, students study the same programs or earn the same degrees as from their home campuses; benefit from the lower cost of living, compared with students’ home countries; and/or hope to compete in a less competitive job market in China after graduation (Farrugia & Lane, 2013; Wilkins, 2016). Currently, there are 84 joint programs in China (C-BERT, 2020), among which the most commonly recognized international branch campuses, by longevity and size, are the “major six”:

Table 1

“Major Six” International Branch Campuses in China

International Branch Campus	Founded	Undergraduate Enrollment	Graduate Enrollment	Home Campus	Host City in China
University of Nottingham Ningbo China	2004	8000	1200	University of Nottingham UK	Ningbo
Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University	2006	18000		University of Liverpool UK	Suzhou
Chinese University of Hong Kong Shenzhen	2012	6700		Chinese University of Hong Kong	Shenzhen
New York University Shanghai	2012	2000		New York University USA	Shanghai
Duke Kunshan University	2014	500 (estimated)		Duke University USA	Kunshan
Wenzhou-Kean University	2014	2800		Kean University USA	Wenzhou

A newly published article by Tenbrunsel et al. (2019) argues that cultural and demographic characteristics impact the reporting of sexual harassment incidents; for example, there are fewer reported rates of sexual harassment for Asians than for their “White counterparts.” This finding encouraged us to further explore issues of cultural differences and multi-cultural interactions in relation to the topic of sexual harassment. According to Lampman et al. (2009), sociocultural expectations can affect the power dynamics that impact individual responses and emotional differences when harassment is perceived (also see Maass & Cadinu, 2006). For example, a history of oppression and role expectations may cause women and individuals from minoritized groups to form communities of support. Paludi et al. (2006) have also investigated the impact of cultural values on how sexual harassment is understood and defined. Although Paludi et al. (2006) focus on legal definitions and the incidence rates of sexual harassment across cultures, they emphasize the impact of sexual harassment on students’ health and academic development. In short, a variety of sociocultural and legal norms complicate the issue of sexual harassment on all university

campuses; however, few locations have such a diverse array of perspectives as international branch campuses.

Regarded as a pioneering institution in China, the research site of the present case study is a “mature” international branch campus and considered an “inclusive and diverse international community” (Cai & Hall, 2015), with students and staff from more than 60 countries. International students make up approximately 10 percent of the student population on campus. Even though the university has been established for sixteen years, there has been little discussion, at the institutional level, about sexual harassment. Concerned for student safety and intrigued by how research could impact institutional policy and practice, we developed an action research project to raise questions and awareness about sexual harassment, as we will detail in the methodology. We also sought to learn more about students’ experiences and suggest prevention strategies for international branch campuses worldwide, especially for similar multicultural student communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch (2015) argue that international students are especially vulnerable due to several factors. These factors include living in a foreign environment, often without linguistic and cultural knowledge about the host country; distance from family and friends in home countries; and insufficient financial resources. The experience of living in an unfamiliar environment and, to a certain degree, the related political and sociocultural insecurity, may hinder the reporting of offensive incidents that would normally be reported to authorities in students’ own countries.

Furthermore, in Western countries, surveys show that, in most cases, few students are aware of the available legal mechanisms to report sexual harassment incidents; most who did report, were unsatisfied with the outcome (see, for example, Clancy et al., 2014). Clancy et al. (2014) suggest that policies emphasizing safety and inclusivity have the potential to improve the experiences for a diverse community in higher education; nonetheless, a better awareness of institutional and legal mechanisms for the reporting of harassment is needed.

International branch campuses boast of their cultural diversity and their ability to prepare students to be responsible global citizens and leaders. Located in dozens of host countries, these campuses can serve as a platform for cross-cultural learning and practice (Lanford & Tierney, 2016). However, faculty from home campuses and students from all over the world are facing the fact that sexual harassment exists and needs to be better defined (Charlesworth, McDonald, & Cerise, 2011), understood (Charmaraman, Jones, Stein, & Espelage, 2013), and prevented (Cody et al., 2013).

Universities are supposed to ensure the safety of students, but how safe do students feel? A study by Allen, Cowie, and Fenaughty (2020) reveals that students’ simultaneously feel “safe and unsafe.” Our research was therefore motivated by a desire to understand their levels of awareness, their perception of sexual harassment, their awareness concerning activities involving sexual harassment, and their feelings about the safety of their campus.

The awareness of sexual harassment in China has certainly increased since the “#MeToo” campaign in 2017, and many alleged sexual harassment cases have been reported on social media (Lin & Yang, 2019; Ling & Liao, 2020; Zeng, 2020). Major debates lie in the areas of academic ethics, false accusations, and, in some cases, ambiguity in a shared understanding - or a definition - of sexual harassment. Definitional issues inevitably interweave with cultural perceptions. In different cultures, the motivations and consequences are often based on cultural values. Diehl et al. (2012) discuss the results of a sexual

harassment project in relation to motivational explanations for sexual harassment and anti-harassment interventions. They believe that a thorough understanding of the mental processes and motives is necessary to inform the development of effective prevention policies concerning sexual harassment. Therefore, culturally grounded research that adds to our awareness and perceptions of sexual harassment is imperative to facilitate prevention measures.

METHODOLOGY

Action Research

The three of us have been working on the international branch campus for five to eleven years. It is an English-speaking campus, where English is not only the language of instruction, but also the work language in administration and logistics. Concerned with improving students' wellbeing (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019) and institutional support in a non-academic dimension of student life on campus, we successfully applied for internal funding for an empirical research project. We subsequently adopted an action research approach, which may be described as the intentional pursuit of action concurrently with and by informed research (Helskog, 2014). We then consulted high-level university administrators and compiled a booklet and a one-page leaflet explaining the understandings, concepts, policies, and reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment on the campus. The department in charge of legal affairs liaised with a law firm to provide a public lecture on sexual harassment, which was attended by a large number of students.

Research Questions

Our research questions and methodology were developed with the intention of: a) gathering information that could be fed back into the institutional setting (Helskog, 2014); and b) giving participants control over the procedures of the research, "intended as a counter to the implicit view that researchers are superior to those they study" (Babbie, 2007, p. 301), considering that participants are much younger undergraduate students. The research questions are the following:

1. To what extent are students on the multi-cultural campus aware of what sexual harassment means?
2. In which situations have students felt sexually harassed in their educational environment? By whom (e.g., any teacher, tutor, student, worker, guard, or others)?
3. What action would students take if they felt sexually harassed?

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

We used a mixed methods approach, consisting of an online survey with open-ended questions and individual in-depth interviews. The goal of the study is not to generalize but to explore participant experiences with context and detail. Importantly, for our empirical approach, we had wide-ranging institutional assistance for the project. First, the Research Ethics Committee (equivalent of an Institutional Review Board in other countries) helped with the design of the survey, which was then sent out by the university residential management team to all students (more than 8,000). In addition, the University Counselling and Wellbeing Service and two senior members of the University Management Board offered us guidance concerning policy-making and operational matters. The university library ordered all reading materials we requested.

In the survey, we tried to strike a balance between multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. After explaining the research goals, survey purposes, and the consent with confidentiality information, questions about awareness of sexual harassment appeared at the beginning of the survey.

Questions were presented in a logically deductive way (from general to specific) so the awareness probing was scaffolded. Most questions offered three options - Yes, Not Sure, and No - because we needed the survey to be respondent friendly (Gehlbach, 2015). In spite of the popularity of Likert scales, we considered the sensitivity of the topic and discussed the format with academics having expertise in survey design (they are also ethics officers). We agreed that a location on the continuum (a four- or five- level format) could place students in a forced and uncertain choice-making situation. We also sought advice from colleagues on two possibilities: “Not Sure” or “How Sure” (with a four- or five- level scale). Their feedback was unanimous in favour of “Not Sure”: “It is more straightforward this way, for example, if you’re not sure, you’re not sure.” Open-ended questions gave us more of the students’ voice, and we did need to learn from their meaningful answers, genuine comments, opinions, and feelings to guide us in designing the interview questions.

Interviewees volunteered by emailing us in response to the final statement in the survey: “Please email us if you would like to be interviewed.” Knowing the number of interviews was rather small, we prepared and conducted these conversations in great detail, enabling “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). We also tried to encourage interviewees to tell us their stories, and after we drafted our awareness and prevention booklets, we contacted them for “member checking” (Harper & Cole, 2012). Basically, this research opportunity made it possible for the institution and students to connect. Observations and discussions with both students and staff members on other occasions were also noted in our field memos.

Ethical considerations were taken into account with tremendous help from two ethics officers. Questions were carefully worded to minimize, as much as possible, students’ emotional pain should they recollect unpleasant experiences. The first page of the online survey earnestly explained the purposes of the project and the anonymity policy, followed by an option of continuing or discontinuing the fourteen questions. Among 618 respondents, 615 chose to continue out of a student population of 8,000; thus, almost one out of eight students were interested and completed our survey to contribute to the research project. We started each of the interview conversation by thanking them for volunteering, and a common response was “You’re welcome. It seemed interesting”; or “I was just curious.”

While anonymity can be preserved for an online survey, with face-to-face interviews, we guaranteed confidentiality. We presented participants with two documents: *Information Sheet* and *Consent Form*, clearly stating their rights and where they could seek assistance if they felt disturbed after participating in the study. Given the English-language policies of this institution, we were able to generally carry out our project in English directly. Documents were all in English, but participants were made aware that, if they needed a translation, a Chinese version could be provided. Similarly, some interview conversations were in Chinese when participants wished to switch. After each interview, we filed the *Consent Form* with the interviewee’s signature, and they kept the *Information Sheet* with the project description as well as contact details of the University Research Ethics Committee. Each form of data was treated with utmost discretion and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Remaining faithful to data, inductive coding was adopted to acquire deep and comprehensive insights. Some codes emerged as surprising to researchers, who kept in mind existing themes from the literature review but meanwhile kept an open mind in exploring new themes and subthemes. Empirical material was highly valued, although traditionally inductive coding could be challenged by capturing too

many codes and losing focus (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), the researchers were cognizant of trying to find a balance between exploring the complexity of data and limiting a practical number of codes.

Researchers' Reflexivity Statement

Inspired by the work of Galesie & Tourangeau (2007), we modified our survey questions meticulously, trying to present enquiries with a neutral tone without betraying our feminist perspective, as the framing of the survey and interview questions could affect respondents' answers. We are each female and concerned about social injustice, bullying, and discrimination. Being conscious of our own identities, we reflected on our practice and developed our reflected attitudes when relating to participants and exploring their perspectives (Nilson, 2017). We asked both female and male experts to help refine our questions.

We had experts support from the Research Ethics Committee and Counselling Service team, each of whom scrutinized our questions and the survey procedure.

FINDINGS

Awareness and Perceptions

The first question was about what sexual harassment means and more than 72 per cent of students believed that they knew exactly what it means. The second question asked what could be considered as sexual harassment. Although 19 individuals (2.12 percent) chose the option of "Other possibilities," we did not find any specified contents in the provided text box. Questions 3 and 4 were straightforward, and the two questions were closely related; therefore, their answers seemed to be consistent. Then, we asked about "friends." When it came to friends, the "Yes" count was more than double and "No" less than half. This was astonishing in the beginning but, later on, when we talked to students and colleagues, we often heard similar narratives: "Although it never happened to me, it's not been rare among my friends" (See Table 2). Later, during interviews and casual chats with colleagues, the reluctance of admittance could be sensed from speakers both verbally and non-verbally (e.g., avoiding eye contact). Only two female individuals clearly told a researcher that they had been sexually harassed – one said by a foreigner, and the other one preferred not to say by whom.

The following questions moved to the realm of cultural understandings. For Question 8, on "being more tolerant because of cultural differences," we offered an extra option because this discussion proved to be slightly more complicated.

Table 2

Survey Questions 1-8

Survey Questions 1 – 8	Yes	Not Sure	No
1. Do you think you understand what exactly sexual harassment means?	72.26%	25.91%	1.82%
2. Which one(s) of these do you consider to be sexual harassment (can be more than one answer)?			
Someone expresses sexual feelings in your presence	17.75%		
Someone makes unacceptable sexual gestures in your presence	27.46%		
Someone shows pornographic images to you	24.22%		

Someone touches your body and it makes you uncomfortable	28.46%		
Other possibilities please specify:	2.12%		
3. Based on your understanding of sexual harassment, have you ever felt that you were sexually harassed in a school / university environment?"	21.17%	12.41%	66.42%
4. Based on your understanding of sexual harassment, have you ever felt that you were sexually harassed <u>outside</u> campus by someone from your education circle (e.g. teacher, tutor, student, worker, guard, or others known from schools / universities)?	24.45%	10.22%	65.33%
5. Based on your understanding of sexual harassment, have you heard from <u>friends</u> who have ever felt that they were sexually harassed by someone from their education circle (e.g. teacher, tutor, student, worker, guard, or others known from schools / universities)?	55.68%	13.19%	31.14%
6. Do you think social / legal understandings of sexual harassment are different by culture?	69.34%	17.15%	13.50%
7. Being a student on a multi-cultural campus like XXXX (the name of the University), do you feel confused about the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors?	36.50%	24.09%	39.42%
8. If you feel sexually harassed by someone from a different culture, would you be more tolerant if you think that there are cultural differences around appropriate behavior?	4.03%	7.33%	28.21%
Extra option for Question 8: Depending on what happened:	60.44%		

During the interviews, one student smiled at this query and said: "I'm sure I'll be more careful if I was dating a foreign student, as that was what my parents told me before I came here." I pressed on asking what being "more careful" meant, and the answer was "I don't know" with a giggle. I sensed the increased sensitivity and moved on to "How about your friends?" With no exceptions, students were more relaxed talking about their friends, but understandably cautious about their teachers, especially when they were "Westerners."

The survey results showed that nearly 70 percent of the students believed that social and legal understandings of sexual harassment are different by culture; however, nearly 30 percent would "not at all" be more tolerant of inappropriate behaviors by someone from a different culture. This prompted us to subsequently ask interviewees whether they expected people from a different culture to adapt to and respect their own cultural understanding about sexual harassment. This question of who adapts to whose culture was also raised when discussing the topic with some academics on campus. The main strand of answers naturally led to a host-or-guest position. However, some argued there should not be a host-guest issue; instead, it should be an equal and neutral zone where everyone observes others' values, expectations, and habitual behaviors.

One individual commented on the phenomenon of wolf-whistling and said in Italy it would be a mere compliment, not an offence, while another said it would be a sexist gesture towards mainly females. Similarly, a non-Chinese student said that when she walked in the gym and a lot of young men were staring at her, it actually made her feel more confident; however, one of our Chinese female interviewees claimed that “I’m not happy with my body and often feel embarrassed being stared at.” A Southeast-Asian student of Chinese descent told us that she would stare back if a man stared at her as the staring action is considered a rather rude behavior. A male Chinese student told us:

None of my friends, girls, are happy with their body – none at all. They either believe they’re overweight, or they think they’re too thin. I know a girl who is perfectly well-shaped, but she always complains about her weight; she even takes medicine to lose weight. They’re not confident, that’s why. I heard people saying that feminist women are often fat and ugly, but at least they’re confident.

Participants also talked about some feminist stereotypes in society. Students (both female and male) invariably advocated that there should be more charitable views on feminists (for example, “some employers label them as troublemakers”); and in the educational systems, there should not be any gender-biased policies (for example, some programs in universities only recruit male or female students). One female participant jokingly mentioned that she would only talk to females about feminism because “men usually see it as a negative thing.”

Prevention

As one major part of the project, we produced two documents aimed at informing students about prevention measures and reporting mechanisms: one with meticulous technical details in fourteen pages and one succinct leaflet with the most important information on just one page (double-sided). Before designing these two documents we asked questions in the survey regarding reporting sexual harassment (See Table 3).

Table 3

Survey Question 9-10

Survey Questions 9 – 10	Yes	Not Sure	No
9. If you think you have been sexually harassed, would you report it to someone?	60.22%	34.31%	5.47%
10. If yes who would you report to? (Can be more than one answer)			
Family	16.48%		
Study mates	19.37%		
Personal tutor	10.85%		
Residential college tutor	10.30%		
Wellbeing service / university counsellor	9.20%		
Legal office in university	12.23%		
Equality and diversity committee (EDC)	2.34%		
Dignity network	1.51%		
Police	15.38%		
Other possibilities please specify:	2.34%		

Nearly 35 per cent of students were not sure whether or not to report, which to us was alarming. Then we asked who they would tell. Just under 20 percent chose their peers and around 15 percent answered that they would report to police. In the text box of “other possibilities please specify,” six typed in “friends”

and one said, “Friends on campus, possibly someone who knows the perpetrator.” Several answered “close friends or boyfriend / girlfriend,” and some gave other different answers:

“Supervisor / mentor”

“Supervisor of the harasser”

“Well-being service”

Question 11 was for the near 40 percent who were not sure or not to report: “If you would not report to anyone, please explain why not.” Twenty-nine responses were entered, and the reasons for not reporting mainly lie in these feelings and assumptions:

“Embarrassed / shamed”

“Useless”

“Afraid of bullying”

“No evidence / proof”

Some elaborated that they would worry about their reputation being damaged as people might think that they had “given wrong hints.” One response was “Maybe it’s my fault.” A few comments indicated that reporting would be “useless” as “they won’t be punished anyway.” One said, “No one cares.” Some believed that the possible consequence of further bullying would be too frightening therefore they would choose not to report, and the last category was about providing evidence or proof. One of them said: “I will be very nervous when they ask me for evidence.”

One comment stood out: “If he or she regretted about it and apologized sincerely, then this was not a serious sexual harassment. I can let it go, but we probably cannot be friends anymore, which is why, sometimes to keep the friendship, people will hesitate.”

Based on these responses we compiled a fourteen-page booklet and a one-page flyer to explain relevant concepts, to advise preventative guidelines as well as to inform students about the main reporting mechanisms on campus. Thousands of copies were printed and distributed, as part of a bigger and long-term project focusing on prevention.

The last question of the survey was intended to find out how students perceive reported sexual harassment cases, given the recent prevalence of such stories on social media: “Do you believe that in many cases people who claim to be sexually harassed are making a fuss unnecessarily?” 8.59 percent said yes, 20.55 percent not sure, and 54.91 percent no. Right after the Yes / Not Sure / No option, we provided a text box “Please explain why,” and 14.95 percent typed in their thoughts. There were 52 comments altogether, and the longest one had 417 words. We grouped the quotes into four themes: Victim’s View, Bystander’s View, Accused’s View, and Supporters of Our Project. We provided short comments following the most impactful long ones.

Victims’ View

Till now, not a single case during the #MeToo movement has been proven as a false rape claim.

Exposed sexual harassment issues often involve unequal power structures between actors and victims. Actors are much more likely to have stronger influence and control of public opinions.

This student seemed to be quite well-informed but also worried about the “power” and “influence” often owned by the “actors.” Indeed sometimes powerful people can even use their influence to end the investigation. (Tippett, 2018).

There should not be any notion of “fuss” if sexual harassment takes place, because I think the boundary of whether being sexually harassed depends on the victim. If he or she feels offended,

then someone must stand out to deal with it. Otherwise, when it gradually becomes worse and worse it will be too late to stop. So, in the beginning when it feels uncomfortable it should be stopped.

We used the word “uncomfortable” in our survey, and repeatedly we saw and heard the word in students’ answers. “How uncomfortable is unacceptable” was discussed later at length, both privately and in groups with students, which revealed that the biggest issue might be the definitional confusion. We tried to elaborate on the definitions in the booklet in the hope of providing “relief” and/or “reinforcement” of students’ past possibly unpleasant and/or confusing experiences (Ashton, 2014; Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin, & Murphy, 2016):

It has violated human rights, and the victims cannot protect their rights if they remain silent. Everyone needs to be protected, although they have a different understanding of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment should be treated seriously, no matter in what kind of forms. Refusing or hesitating to report sexual harassment will only indulge offenders.

This quote implied that the definition depends on each individual, and it echoed with other chats in contending that “not reporting will only give [sexual offenders a] ‘green light’ on offending.”

More than a dozen comments stated that it is “the most basic right” to protect oneself and to be heard. For instance, one respondent said, “Even it is possible that someone is making a fuss out of some kind of reason but without actual investigation, we should not hold the bias in the first place.” One student emphasized that, in a university setting, self-protection awareness may be low because students consider their studies to be their first priority. This student also believed that sexual harassment is barely reported because merely the topic is considered taboo: “It’s too hard for the victim to speak up in the first place, not to mention sexual harassment can cause serious mental trauma and make one feel insecure in an environment that one is supposed to be safe in.”

In our second question, we gave one possible scenario where “Someone touches your body and it makes you uncomfortable,” but back then we did not know that “uncomfortable” appeared so many times in students’ responses. One typed “As long as a perpetrator is making her or him uncomfortable, then she or he is being sexually harassed.” Another put it more emotionally: “If someone feels sexually harassed you have to believe them as they are the victims and it encourages other victims to come forward; instead of ‘victim shaming’ them by telling them that they are ‘making a fuss unnecessarily,’ you should think that they might have really got hurt, physically or mentally. There is no fussing about this!”

Another thematic word was “shame,” and we did not use this word in our survey. It emerged from the data. One student typed: “People are shamed enough to talk about sexual harassment. Those who claim to have been harassed are not likely to say something unimportant. How is it unnecessary?” Another one explained: “People tend to put the stigma on the reporters; therefore, underreporting and self-shaming is a much bigger issue than the harassment itself.”

The word “important” occurred with exclamation marks multiple times: “Sometimes what others think not important is actually very important for the victims!” “Unnecessary? That cannot be a joke. More than important and necessary!” “If we don’t report what happened to us, it will encourage the one who harasses us to further harm others, and, more importantly, they get worse and worse.”

Another comment also mentioned the #MeToo Movement: “Based on my understanding of #MeToo I think sharing their stories is good, and it emphasizes women’s attitudes, and I’m sure there are many other reasons, but if a woman doesn’t speak up for herself and thinks too much of how other people

might criticize her, then who else would speak up for her? She must stand on her own feet and believe in herself and fight for her rights.”

Two comments touched upon the cultural environment: “In China, people are not encouraged to speak out the fact that they are sexually harassed, especially when they’re involved with foreigners. So those who claimed to have been harassed must have thought about it very seriously. They went through [a] very hard time to make the decision, whether to report or not to. In this case, if it’s reported, then it must be very bad. They wouldn’t be making a fuss unnecessarily.” Another one came to the issue of definition: “Sometimes, it is really a blurred area of sexual harassment, but it hurts us because things like this are not easy to tell others. If this person admits having been sexually harassed, it might mean that they were very close already. But if you’re close with someone, maybe from another country, where they don’t believe that is sexual harassment, then people will say ‘well just a misunderstanding.’ But it hurts. I think they should know that it hurts.”

Bystander’s View

Approximately 10 comments were neutral. One such comment stated that reports of sexual harassment were “different from case to case, because everyone has different understandings to sexual harassment and various extent of tolerance.” “Because we have our basic sense of sexual harassment, we should be able to make a judgement.” “It depends on a lot of things.” Other students implied that sexual harassment might not be worth reporting: “It could cause psychological disorder, if you have to go through that.” “They could be mentally disturbed, if not justified.” Some believed that it would be too difficult asking for justice: “Nobody can reject the report from any victim but reporting a harassment itself is kind of difficult because harassment usually doesn’t leave any evidence.” Moreover, several comments sounded rather pessimistic: “Maybe nothing will change.” “Because they may be feeling in danger about what happened, but it is a personal feeling which mostly depends on oneself; as someone else, we cannot simply decide if it is unnecessary or not. There is nothing we can do.”

Accused’s View

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some respondents took a different tone that accused women of “[misunderstanding] men who are trying to take care of them or just to help them. They think men are trying to harass them just because they misunderstand.” Some said that “feminist women can feel uncomfortable about others’ behaviors and it’s totally a personal thing, and there’s no such standard to ‘help’ others judge.”

Also, there were a handful of comments that expressed concerns about the accuracy and veracity of accusations: “Perhaps. Although the definition is clear, it depends on our state of minds at that time. Maybe we are drunk, maybe we agreed on consent, but next day the person regrets it. It’s hard to say.” Another student asked the following question: “What if some people allegedly claim so but with wrong purposes?” And a third student contended that “sometimes it is not even sexual harassment, but people still make a fuss about it, and this makes real sexual harassment incidents diminish in importance.”

Supporters of Our Project

We were pleased to see comments expressing support for our project: “It is an important issue to discuss. It will improve our awareness, whatever the result is.” “This is a big deal. The survey is great.” “This is undoubtedly a serious problem. I’m happy that you’re asking us.”

This open-ended question elicited 52 answers, and we thoroughly read them at different times to understand students’ perspectives and feelings. During the interviews, we tried to probe into their deeper thinking on the topic. Participants were extremely open in expressing their opinions and even told us about

some sources they utilized for information on similar issues. These were undergraduate students in their early years in higher education, so they also shared with us the rather radical differences between their high school environment and university life, “especially this university, with so many foreigners.” We placed an emphasis on probing the multicultural setting on the international campus, and they further confided to us about their relationships with peers from other cultures.

DISCUSSION: PURSUING ACTION AND RESEARCH OUTCOMES

To introduce practical, effective, and specific prevention measures to students, we needed to gauge the awareness of sexual harassment on campus, where more than 8,000 students study together, with approximately 10 percent from other countries. Although respondents were exposed to a variety of social media platforms, 27.74 percent were not sure, or did not know exactly, what sexual harassment meant. Comparing the fact that at least 1 in 4 participants admitted that they were unsure about the meaning of sexual harassment with the interview data, we were quite alarmed about the level of awareness. One quote from an interview: “You have no idea how ignorant my friends are, and they even believe that they’re supposed not to know much about these things.”

An international student posted on social media about the survey: “What’s going on in this university? Are people harassing people... sounds scary.” We acted, and plan on continuous advocacy, knowing some students might not readily understand. Prevention is never an easy job, exactly because when it is successfully prevented, people would not realize how bad it could be if it happened. At the presentation we made for the university funding committee, we showed two pictures (Figure 1 and Figure 2):

Figure 1

The Local Church Built in 1872



Figure 2*The Local Church On Fire in 2014*

It was an extremely painful real-life example. This was the local church built in 1872 for people in the community, it is not only a landmark, but also a place where many people put their memories and hearts. However, in 2014, a fire happened. It was reported that the irreversible damage could have been prevented. The lesson was bitterly powerful, and concerned citizens and officials took preventative actions against future fires. The university funding committee unanimously agreed that similar prevention measures against sexual harassment should be carried out, even if the effort might be misunderstood, or even if some might see them as “scary.”

Institutional support was crucial for the success of this research project. The topic is considered sensitive in Chinese higher education, but it did not hinder the university from fully endorsing the project. The number of books in the university library related to sexual harassment increased from fewer than five to more than 30. An experienced lawyer was invited to give a presentation on the topic. By the end of the presentation, we invited questions from the audience, and there were only a couple of enquires, which indicated that the sensitivity level was, as expected, high. After the whole-campus survey, a series of awareness-raising actions took place before the end of the first semester of the 2018-2019 academic year.

During the following semester, an information booklet and a one-page flyer were distributed across campus. Based on the survey results, nearly 40 percent of respondents would be unsure about reporting - or would not report if they were sexually harassed. To protect their rights and dignity, detailed explanations and clear instructions were provided in the booklet, including cultural and legal matters, possible scenarios in a study environment, and the reporting mechanisms. When asked whether they believed that, in many cases, people who claim to be sexually harassed are making a fuss unnecessarily, slightly less than 55 percent chose “No.” It is important to note that this was a hypothetical question, and it was framed as if it happened to others, not to the respondents themselves. It did make a significant difference if a question was about “yourself” or “your friends.” For example, less than 25 percent of respondents felt that they had been sexually harassed, whereas more than 55 percent understood that their friends had been sexually harassed.

During interview conversations, both female and male participants stated that they never had been made uncomfortable by sexual behaviors - but that their friends had experienced unpleasant interactions.

They were also cautious when talking to researchers and when signing the consent forms. A student said that she only volunteered because she could tell that we were female researchers through our email addresses.

The university gives safe sex lectures regularly, but participants indicated that the specific topic of sexual harassment was “quite interesting” to talk about, particularly at an “official” level. One participant recalled that it was always some international academics who delivered the safe sex seminars because “Chinese teachers just wouldn’t talk about it.” Another student showed us several social media articles (on their mobile phone) about some cases, trying to make a point: “If something happened in any Chinese university the official discourse would be different in their ‘tone’ or ‘different’ meaning they would be trying to cover up. Read these articles and you can sense that.” Both of these interviewees expressed that our project had set a different institutional tone, as it was aiming to protect students from unethical and inappropriate behaviors.

Volunteer students struck us as forward-thinking and open-minded, but we wished there were more interviewees. We conducted four formal interviews. While we are grateful that the interviews were open and rich in detail, we are aware that this is a limitation of our study. Future research could conduct similar projects on other multicultural campuses, including international branch campuses, to enhance the transferability of our findings and add to our understanding of sexual harassment in other educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

Potential harm can be avoided through preventative programs, and students need to have greater awareness and protect themselves. Many students were confused about sexual harassment consequences and responsibilities, and social media was misleading. Therefore, guidelines for effective consent and evidence keeping were clearly explained in our booklet. By the end of 2020, when most students got back on campus after a crucial stage of the Covid-19 crisis, another public lecture was delivered covering awareness and prevention of sexual harassment, and this time with a short British [video](#) about consent that encourages people to be as polite about sex as they are about tea.

This project was only the beginning in preventing sexual harassment on multi-cultural campuses in and beyond China. In the future, more detailed documents and pertinent training need to be implemented and infused in student life. Should students come from a Chinese high school where dating is almost forbidden, or should they feel vulnerable as they are far away from their home countries, institutions should ensure that students have access to people they can talk to in confidence when they feel confused, people they can report to when they are taken advantage of, and people who can help and support their recovery process when there is harm or damage to their mental health and dignity.

This research project was funded by the university, and the management board has designated two senior members to help establish an anti-harassment policy. With the increasing number of joint programs and international campuses all over the world, we hope that such policies can be implemented through university practices, students are safe, and potential perpetrators are deterred.

We would like to close with two students’ chat with us:

Student A: I have a strong sense of self-protection and I know a lot about law.

Student B: What law, Muslim law, Indian law, American or Chinese law? Can they really protect you? Or are you just saying to yourself: “Oh I’m not going to this pub; I’m not doing gym; I’m not even talking to that guy whom I like; but no, no, no, I want to be safe.

Student A: That's not what I meant.

Student B: Then tell me, what do you mean?

Researcher: That's a good start ...

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