



UNIVERSITY *of York*

**Is 'lad culture' a problem in higher education?  
Exploring the perspectives of staff working in UK universities**

Final report on the project undertaken by :  
Carolyn Jackson (Lancaster University) and  
Vanita Sundaram (University of York)

## Is 'lad culture' a problem in higher education? Exploring the perspectives of staff working in UK universities

### **Context**

Concerns about 'Lad cultures' in universities proliferated in the UK print media early in 2013. Headlines have included: 'Can universities ever get rid of boozy, sexist lad culture?' (The Telegraph, 24/2/14); 'Lad culture: What can be done when it's everywhere at university?' (Independent.co.uk, 6/1/15); and 'Sexist Lads' Culture is out of control at Universities' (Daily Mail, 16/9/14).

Early reports tended to focus on anecdotal accounts of practices such as 'slut dropping' (where male students offer women lifts home after night-time socials but leave them stranded miles away from home) and 'hazing' (initiation ceremonies usually linked to male sports teams), as well as fancy dress parties with themes such as 'pimps and hoes' and 'geeks and sluts' (*The Independent*, 11/10/2012). More recently, the press have reported several cases that they have identified as reflecting 'lad culture', including the production and circulation by the men's rugby club at the London School of Economics of leaflets which had sexist and homophobic content; and students at Nottingham University singing a misogynistic chant that included a line about digging up a female corpse and having sex with it.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has been concerned about 'lad culture' for a few years. In 2012 they commissioned a small piece of research which aimed to 'provide a deeper examination of the phenomenon of "lad culture", and women students' encounters with and experiences of it' (Phipps and Young, 2013: 7). This study, which involved interviews with 40 women undergraduates from across UK higher education institutions (HEIs), concluded that 'lad culture' dominates certain spaces within HE, and that:

'Lad culture' was seen as a 'pack' mentality evident in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption, and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynist and homophobic. It was also thought to be sexualized and to involve the objectification of women, and at its extremes rape supportive attitudes and sexual harassment and violence.

More recently the NUS conducted a study of sexual harassment and other facets of 'lad culture' at university with a larger sample of undergraduate students that also included men (NUS, 2014). The survey found that male and female students reported experiences of sexual harassment including unwanted sexual comments being made about their bodies, and 60% of students were unaware of any institutional initiatives to tackle or prohibit behaviours associated with 'lad culture'.

So there is a small but growing body of recent work on lad cultures. However, existing work has considered 'lad culture' from the perspectives of students only; no research has considered whether staff at universities consider lad culture to be a problem, how they define it, what they see as the causes or triggers of 'laddish' behaviour, or whether universities are doing anything to tackle it. Such research is important, particularly in light of concerns recently expressed by the NUS that universities are ignoring laddish cultures (BBC News, 15/9/2014). Our research aimed to begin to address this gap.

### **The current study**

In this study we explored the perspectives and experiences of staff working at HEIs in the UK in order to contribute to knowledge about the phenomenon of 'lad culture' in higher education. Our research questions were:

1. In what ways are lad cultures manifest in different higher education contexts?
2. Are these manifestations problematic and, if so, how?
3. Are universities working to tackle lad cultures and, if so, how?

#### 4. Does more need to be done to tackle lad cultures in H.E and, if so, what?

##### *Sample*

We purposively sampled six HEIs to get a mixture of settings in terms of campus/non-campus, socio-demographic mix, location and pre/post-1992 status. We worked with key contacts within each HEI to determine which staff would be most appropriate to interview. At each institution we conducted an average of 12 individual interviews and two focus groups. We conducted individual or group interviews with staff ranging from senior management, such as Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans of School, and College Provosts to staff with more direct contact with students, including college welfare teams, student union officers, lecturers and security staff. Our questions to staff were based, in part, on existing research about students' experiences of 'lad culture' (NUS, 2010; 2014; Phipps and Young, 2013). Interviews were transcribed in full and template analysis was used to conduct initial coding of the data.

##### *Overview of key findings*

The analyses are ongoing. Here we provide a brief overview of key findings in relation to our research questions.

#### 1. In what ways are lad cultures manifest in different higher education contexts?

'Lad culture' is perceived as being manifest as 'overt sexism' at universities, and can also include elements of racism and homophobia although these were generally perceived to be less common than sexism. It is seen as predominantly linked to male students, although not exclusively; some staff claimed that their experiences of 'lad culture' had involved female students who were perceived as being 'just as bad as the boys' in some instances. 'Lad culture' was often associated with alcohol and sports (especially rugby and football) and with a 'tribal' or 'pack' mentality.

... football and beers and boorish behaviour and sexism as well ... behaviour by males that perhaps should know better but it's almost expected of them to behave in a certain way (Int 8, Inst 1, woman)

It is loud and is boorish. It is unguarded; it is objectifying women (Interview 5, Institution 2, woman)

A culture in which certain things that may seem to some - particularly the lads carrying out these behaviours - as a bit of harmless fun, as something that is enjoyable and is a normal thing to do at university, and a fine thing to make jokes about. [But it] is actually a little bit intertwined with some quite misogynistic actions. Some things that may make some people, not even necessarily females although in particular females, make them feel uncomfortable, and basically behaviour that may in a slightly disingenuous sense be claimed by those carrying it out to be perfectly innocent, but is actually quite harmful to the dynamics of the student population. (Int. 12, Inst. 1, male)

I think lad culture is not just a group of young blokes together but is tribal almost; male behaviour if you like in which they see themselves as very distinct and separate from others and especially I think is quite negative towards women ... I think it's a sort of male tribalism ... the groups that we identify do seem to have particular difficulties in relating positively to women. (Int 1, Inst 1, man)

In some institutions lad culture was seen to be an issue only in social spaces, and not in teaching and learning contexts (or if so, very rarely). However, in one of our sample institutions (a non-campus, post-92 university with only a small proportion of students living near the university) lad culture was seen to be an issue predominantly in teaching and learning contexts, and far less so in social spaces. Laddism in teaching and learning contexts predominantly took the form of low-level disruptive behaviour, such as talking through lectures, refusing to participate in class work, or using devices such as smartphones during lectures. Some participants reported witnessing behaviours directed towards female academic staff and students that were perceived as sexist. These included deriding content that covered feminist theory or issues relating to gender inequality, for example:

Another example for you, one of my department's lecturers was giving quite an interactive lecture on India and she said 'does anyone know how many women are in the [Indian parliament]? There was a cry from the back: 'too many'. In my department, I certainly encounter a lot of misogyny and 'jokes' about feminism and about women [...] (Int. 3, Inst. 4, man).

Other instances included male students talking over, or ridiculing, female students. There were also cases of female lecturers receiving offensive, sexist comments on feedback forms.

We plan to focus our ongoing analyses on what factors are associated with when and where laddism is evident, but provisional analyses suggest the following may be influential:

- a. Whether the HEI is a campus or non-campus university – lad cultures may be more evident in social spaces when the university has a campus and where a large proportion of students live on or in close proximity to campus;
- b. The discipline area – 'laddism' was thought to be more common in some disciplines (e.g. management schools and sports-related subjects) than others.
- c. The student intake – there was some indication that in institutions where the entry grades were lower laddism was more common in teaching and learning environments in some disciplines.
- d. Staff roles - staff with more 'hands-on' roles in relation to student welfare perceived 'lad culture' to be more prevalent than those in management or senior roles.

## 2. Are these manifestations problematic and, if so, how?

Laddism was primarily perceived as negative by our interviewees. However, a few commented on positive aspects of this type of culture, in particular, the role it might play in creating strong social and emotional bonds between men, as well as allowing more disenfranchised men to feel a sense of belonging to a group. These differences perhaps reflect the findings in this and other research that laddism is not 'one thing' but is more of a spectrum or continuum ranging from non-lads to 'proper' lads (often rugby lads). And as Dempster (2007) points out, even male students who practise laddism are not necessarily 'laddish' all the time; their engagements with it are often temporary, shifting and contextual.

However, aspects of laddism, especially the extreme forms, are perceived as problematic. Furthermore, it is endemic and normalised in certain social contexts. For example, in our interviews staff who worked for the SU – so were staff but had very recently been students, or who were students taking a year out for a sabbatical post and then returning to study – reported that in certain social spaces sexual harassment was the norm. One SU officer said:

I do believe that it [sexual harassment/assault] is becoming the norm nowadays ... and when we spoke to students they were saying the same thing. ... we're trying to give out the message

that ... if you get touched tell us and if you haven't consented, it's uninvited, come and report it. ... If you're walking past somebody in a nightclub they can easily just touch you and grope you and ... that's kind of the problem we have and it's hoping that students turn round like I do on a night out, I turn round and say, 'excuse me, what do you think you're doing?' Whereas a lot will just think, oh I'm on a night out, that's fine, that's kind of what comes with it nowadays, which is really bad, really bad. (Int. 4, Inst 3, woman)

The SU staff we spoke to who went to the nightclubs and bars all had very similar narratives, as did the students in Phipps and Young's (2013) research. Unwanted sexual attention and touching were so pervasive that students saw it as normal, it was not something they talked about and certainly not something they reported. One SU officer told reported that:

I would never think to report it to be honest. It's never, maybe it's because it's never really scared me enough for me to think it's a problem, but I mean it could be. Yes I've definitely been touched when I've said don't touch me, I've definitely had my skirt pulled up, I've definitely had people like kiss me when I've said get away from me, and they'll just take your face and they'll just kiss you. There's not a lot you can do about it but I'd never ever think to report it.

I: Why not?

I don't know, this is the thing, I don't know and it's a good point. I wonder what stage it would have to get to to think I've got to report that. Maybe it's 'cos it's people I know, I'm not sure, I don't know.

I: ... if you felt like you wanted to report it would you know how, and do you think that it would be taken seriously?

I wouldn't know how. Taken seriously? I don't know because I've obviously not taken it seriously enough to report it, so maybe not. Like I say, I don't know what it would take to take it seriously. I've never been carried out of a club or down the street. It's always been in a club so I know I'm in the club ... it's like what would you say to report, 'cos I could give you 20 reports from one night out. (Int. 11, Inst. 5, woman)

In general then, it's likely that only serious cases are reported, and even then there will be considerable under-reporting.

### 3. Are universities working to tackle lad cultures and, if so, how?

Our sample universities were generally not actively involved in challenging 'lad culture' (although the SUs were much more active, we are separating SUs and universities here). The universities tended to be reactive, dealing with individual cases through standard disciplinary processes. Many staff expressed concern about the impact of 'laddish' behaviour in terms of vandalism to university property and disruption to other students' experiences (such as rowdiness and disrupting spaces for academic study). The notion that 'laddism' might be about gender inequality in its enactment or its impact was often absent.

The individualised and reactive approaches of the universities are, in some ways, understandable because they are basing their responses on what they know and what they are told. The places and spaces where lad culture is most evident – e.g. bars and nightclubs - are not spaces where most university staff go, so what staff know about lad culture is shaped by what students tell them. And

what staff heard from students was shaped by their role in the university and the types of contact they had with students; also, of course, by what students deemed worthy of telling. As flagged above, many forms of harassment are so commonplace and normalised that students seldom mentioned them. An additional influence on staff perceptions of lad culture was their own awareness and engagement with issues around gender inequality and sexism. Staff who theorised 'laddism' from a gender perspective were more likely to recognise even normalised forms of sexism as problematic.

Even staff who dealt directly with students around issues relating to 'laddism' tended to be focused on one particular aspect of student life, e.g. issues that arose in accommodation blocks, or those that led to a formal disciplinary hearing. So the information staff had access to was often partial and fragmented and sometimes very limited as a result. Interviewees who dealt with issues relating to 'laddism' tended to be of the opinion that lad culture was an issue, it was becoming increasingly problematic and needed taking seriously, but it wasn't a big or widespread issue. For example, in response to the question 'do you think lad culture is evident here and if so what forms does it take and what is the scale?', A Head of student Support who was responsible for disciplinary hearings replied:

Yes, certainly evident, we've certainly had disciplinaries; I think people being abusive of women ... male students, not people, male students being abusive of women staff here. Shouting like on a building site with students driving around here shouting at female students; two or three incidents of female students being accosted. Reporting at the Student Union that the atmosphere could be quite intimidating and harassing in there. So it's definitely here, I wouldn't say for a moment that it's predominant in any way ... I've had female students come and report unwanted attention or assaults or non-consensual, but I've never had the feeling this was a massive problem or there were dozens of these cases. And I also quite strongly have the feeling that it's very much disapproved of by the vast majority of the students, male and female. So I think it certainly exists but I don't think it predominates. (Int. 1, Inst. 1, man)

This view was fairly common across sample institutions, although perceptions varied across types or categories of staff, as mentioned above.

Institutions have policies regarding equality, diversity and harassment. Furthermore, some institutions are moving towards 'zero-tolerance' policies on sexual harassment, but implementation is often difficult. For example, at one institution staff pointed to a zero-tolerance policy, instigated by the SU Equality Officer, that was in place within the SU venue on campus. To ensure the policy was enacted and policed the SU officer had trained venue staff, especially the bouncers, about the policy, what to look out for and how to deal with issues. The university was clearly supportive of this, and pointed to it as a way to tackle laddism, and a major success. However, when we interviewed the SU officer responsible for it, her narrative was not as celebratory:

The policy was passed no problem, it's been making it procedure for the security staff here that's been the hurdle ... part of it is the attitude of the security staff ... they do take their role really seriously and also the power that comes with that about being able to kick people out. And yet they are nervous to kick out someone who might be being lied about about harassment. They'll always point out that two or three years ago a girl said that a guy harassed her and it turned out that he hadn't and that was her ex-boyfriend. But yet they're really reluctant to err on the side of, well it should be a safe space anyway.

She also told us about difficulties with the training, which she did alone:

But they've [the (male) security staff] been quite tight knit and difficult. I've been trying to get in touch with them all year actually. They have small staff meetings and so on and I never get invited at the right time or they tell me last minute and my calendar's full. So I think there's a bit of reluctance. So the training so far, yeah, it's just me and that's partly what I'm worried about because when I go, because this is the last time I can be around thankfully [laughs], there needs to be, this needs to be a collective responsibility, not just me. (Int 13, Inst 1, woman)

This is a problem: if initiatives to challenge lad culture rely on the passion of individual SU officers who are in post for a very short time, the initiatives are unlikely to be successful. They need sustained and collective commitment and need to be supported by formal policies and procedures regarding 'lad culture' in its various manifestations.

#### 4. Does more need to be done to tackle lad cultures in H.E and, if so, what?

Most initiatives to tackle lad culture are student-driven, which in many ways is appropriate and to be applauded. But it does raise issues about continuity and top-down commitment as flagged above. Universities could do more. We finish with a few examples of what Universities could do.

- Listen to students – ensure there's dialogue between students and the university about these matters.
- Acknowledge that lad cultures may exist and be willing to engage with and learn from other institutions, **and students**, about them. There's a tendency to be defensive. Institutions may not want to acknowledge they have issues with lad culture for fear of bad publicity. As one interviewee told us:

universities are rather notoriously secretive about [problems] ... people will very quickly tell you of the areas where they're successful. It takes quite a lot of probing for anybody to say actually we have a real problem with drink or with drugs ... I think we should wash dirty linen in public on the grounds that dirty linen exists everywhere to a certain extent, and it's better washed really. (Int. 1, Inst. 1, man)

This interviewee recommended that universities engage in dialogue about lad cultures (via email lists, for example) and set up a working party about them.

- Ensure there are clear and appropriate policies on, for example, sexual violence, and that staff are trained in how to respond.
- Ensure that reporting policies are clear and widely known.
- Take issues seriously when they are reported and deal with them effectively. Some staff felt they were not dealt with properly because of pressures not to be too heavy on students because of retention issues:

You need to take effective action when something, when it steps over the bounds ... But I don't think that is as clear cut any more. I think there's a lot of emphasis in universities all throughout that we need to keep the students whatever. I think there is a lot of fudging of how you deal with behaviour effectively. I think that doesn't help.

I: So there's pressure not to be too heavy on them?

Yeah ... we've stopped fining anybody now. We used to fine and for a number of reasons we're not doing it now. Now with a lot of cases I think it didn't help, fining, I think speaking

and getting people to understand what they've done wrong in some cases is fine. In some cases it [not fining] will be seen as weakness and the lad culture type of offences will probably think it's a laugh if they haven't got a fine ... I don't think they would see being brought in and made to sign a piece of paper as being a proper sanction. (Int. 2, Inst. 5, man)

- Be aware that lad cultures can exist among staff as well as students, and in teaching and learning environments as well as social spaces.
- We suggest that our findings might inform future institutional gender equality initiatives, such as Athena SWAN or the Gender Equality Mark, where policies and actions to tackle 'lad culture' could be incorporated as a vital element of developing gender equal institutions.
- Ensure that gender equality training is a fundamental aspect of training for staff with responsibility for student welfare and that all staff are involved in some form of unconscious bias training.

### *Summary*

Based on the evidence available we conclude that lad cultures are an issue in HE. That's not to say that all, or even most, men students are laddish – certainly those who perform laddishness to extremes seem to be a small minority. Furthermore, as Dempster (2007) points out, even male students who practise laddism are not necessarily 'laddish' all the time - their engagements with it are often temporary, shifting and contextual. So laddism may not be a dominant form of masculinity in terms of numbers, i.e. a minority of male students are laddish, certainly in extreme forms. But people who are numerically in a minority can dominate space and shape the climate and culture, and lad culture seems to dominate some aspects of university life, notably certain social spheres. In these social spheres aspects of lad culture are so normalised that many students tend to accept it as the way things are: it's normal; unremarkable and may not even be distinguished as part of a marked 'lad culture'.

Some instances of lad culture come to light because they are picked up by the press. But indications are that the vast majority of incidents go unreported. And many aspects of lad culture are not visible, nor made visible, to most university staff, and there is a tendency to view and treat 'laddish' behaviours as stand-alone incidents rather than as part of a wider culture of gender inequality. This project, whilst a standalone project in its own right, was intended to be a pilot for future work, and we are currently working on ways to extend the research further. But data from this project suggest that a culture shift which is supported by formal policy and procedure at the institutional level needs to occur in order for 'lad culture' to be recognised and tackled in a consistent and sustainable way.

### **Dissemination and outputs**

We have already presented aspects of our project on many occasions, including:

1. Are 'laddish masculinities' a problem in higher education? Exploring the perspectives of HE staff. *European Educational Research Association conference*, 1-5 September, Porto.
2. Is 'lad culture' a problem for Higher Education? Exploring the views of staff in UK universities. *Society for Research into Higher Education Conference*, 11-13 December 2014, Wales.
3. Are 'laddish masculinities' a problem in Higher Education? Reporting on the perspectives and responses of Higher Education staff. *Gender and Education Association Interim Conference*, 9-11 December 2014, Melbourne.
4. Invited seminars at Sheffield Hallam University (6 November 2014) and Queen Mary, University of London (23 April 2015).
5. 'Lad cultures in Education' part of Lancaster University's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Public Lecture series, Lancaster University, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2015. This was filmed and an abridged version is available here: <http://youtu.be/JqVNEoRuFoA>



6. Three invited lectures in Canada, one at Western University and two at University of Guelph-Humber, 17<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> February 2015.
7. Research seminar at the University of York, 11 March 2015.

### Planned outputs

#### *Monograph*

We have been invited and strongly encouraged by the series editor, Professor Wayne Martino, to submit a proposal to the series *Critical Studies in Gender and Sexuality in Education*. We intend to submit a proposal by July 2015.

#### *Peer-reviewed journal papers*

So far we have focussed on analysis and work-in-progress presentations rather than publishing. However, both of these provide a solid platform for the writing we have planned for the coming months. We have already submitted an abstract to the *Journal of Gender Studies* special issue on 'Laddism, rape culture and everyday sexism'. We expect to hear an outcome from this process in Spring 2015. We will submit a further two to three journal papers from the project to high-quality journals in 2015 and early 2016. Target journals include *Studies in Higher Education*, *Gender and Education*, *British Educational Research Journal*.

#### Public engagement and impact

We will explore means of using the findings from this project to influence institutional policies and processes. We will work with our participating institutions, and bodies such as the Equality Challenge Unit, to explore ways of using our findings in developing institutional audits or awards for challenging 'lad culture' at the levels of policy, process and culture. We will write articles for the press, including *The Guardian* (who have expressed interest), *The Conversation* and *THE*.

We have a dedicated project website and Twitter account:

<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/ladculturehe/>

@LadcultureHE

Carolyn Jackson and Vanita Sundaram  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2015

### **References**

- Dempster, S. 2007. Degrees of Laddishness: Masculinities within the Student Experience of Higher Education. PhD diss., Lancaster University.
- Phipps, A. and Young, I. 2013. That's What She Said: Women Students' Experiences of 'Lad Culture' in Higher Education. London: National Union of Students.