

Is 'lad culture' a problem in Higher Education? Exploring the perspectives of staff working in UK universities.

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Background

Student 'lad culture' has become a national issue. The phenomenon, often associated with the website Unilad, has become a catch-all term for anything from boozy boisterousness to casual misogyny and even sexual abuse. But despite numerous media reports on laddism, universities still have little idea of how widespread its effects are. (Guardian.co.uk, 05/04/2013)

Over the last 2-3 years we have witnessed in the UK a sharp increase in the number of concerns voiced about 'laddism', 'laddish' or 'lad' cultures in higher education (H.E). However, the ways in which lad cultures are manifest in H.E., as well as the pervasiveness and effects of them, are largely unknown.

Concerns about lad cultures in H.E. have been reported in the press, where newspaper reports have 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); 'hazing' (initiation ceremonies usually linked to male sports teams); as well as more widely reported events such as fancy dress parties with themes that have included 'pimps and hoes' and 'geeks and sluts' (*The Independent*, 11/10/2012). Concerns have also been fuelled by websites such as UniLad – a misogynist website which has featured rape-supportive articles - which has a related Facebook site with over 500,000 'likes'. In addition, 'Rate your shag' Facebook sites were set up linked to various universities, on which students gave marks out of ten to people (who were sometimes identified) on their sexual prowess. These and other similar practices and instances have been broadly labelled as aspects of 'lad culture'.

The National Union of Students (NUS) was sufficiently concerned about 'lad culture' to commission 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 concluded 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.

The small amount of research conducted so far on lad culture in H.E. does suggest there are reasons to be concerned about it. 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.

Study design and methods

The present study drew on data from six higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK, and used a combination of interviews and focus groups to explore the perspectives of staff with varying levels of responsibility for students in each institution. The staff who participated in the project ranged from

senior management to security staff, resident tutors and Students' Union staff. The sample institutions were selected on the basis of characteristics that are known to influence institutional culture, such as campus/non-campus status, socio-demographic mix and pre/post-1992 status.

Semi-structured interviews were held with most staff, in particular those who were solely responsible for students in their role, such as Deans, Provosts, Heads of Subject, and Security Managers. Where a number of individuals held similar roles, such as college tutors or Students' Union staff, we undertook focus groups to facilitate sharing of experiences, stimulate discussion and highlight similarities and differences in their understandings and views on 'lad culture'.

Findings

In total, 60 individual interviews and 18 focus groups discussions will have been held. In all cases interviews explored perceptions of: what constitutes lad culture; whether lad culture is a feature of their institution; how it manifests itself at their institution; whether 'lad culture' is problematic; whether such cultures are new; and how the institution responds and might respond.

At this very early stage of analysis, preliminary findings suggest that some staff at HEIs acknowledge the need to tackle 'lad culture' in a pro-active manner; that 'lad culture' manifests itself in similar ways across settings in terms of sexism and homophobia; and that gender equality must be embedded at every level of the institution in order for lad culture to be tackled sustainably. It is noteworthy that staff in varying roles rejected the notion that 'lad culture' was evident at their institution and, further, some denied knowledge of the phenomenon more generally. Among these participants, 'laddish' behaviour – if acknowledged as present at the institution – was narrated as 'boys being boys', or as 'students in high spirits'. An additional aspect of this narrative was that female students were equally, if not more likely, to participate in 'laddish' behaviours and to promote elements of 'lad culture', such as heavy drinking, initiations, and chanting.

These early findings suggest that 'lad culture' or 'laddish' behaviour more generally exists across institutions, but may manifest itself in more broadly than in relation to heavy drinking or sports culture. 'Lad culture' was not consistently narrated as problematic by all staff across or within institutions. We suggest that staff at HEIs could be more fully informed about the multiple ways in which 'lad culture' may be manifested among students and staff at HEIs in order to more easily recognise its existence, identify the problematic elements of these behaviours and contribute to challenging 'lad culture'. We suggest that HEIs should critically reflect on ways to enhance existing structures, policies and practices to create contexts which are conducive to gender and sexual equality.

References:

Phipps, A. and Young, I. (2013) *That's what she said: Women students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*. London: NUS.