

Disrupting Silence: Addressing Harmful Practices in UK Higher Education

Recultured
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Reforming Responses to Harmful Practices

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. 1. Introduction: Beyond the Stereotype
3. 2. Understanding Harmful Practices
4. 3. A Hidden Demographic
5. 4. Gaps in the Higher Education Sector
6. 5. Staff Can Be Victims Too
7. 6. Recultured's Approach
8. 7. Recommendations for the Higher Education Sector
9. 8. Conclusion: Abuse Can Affect Anyone
10. References

Executive Summary

UK universities are widely regarded as inclusive environments adopting academic excellence and personal development. However, beneath this progressive image, harmful practices such as forced marriage, honour-based abuse (HBA), and female genital mutilation (FGM) persist. These abuses are not confined to stereotypical victims; they affect individuals across socioeconomic, academic, and cultural backgrounds, including high-achieving students and staff.

This paper identifies critical safeguarding gaps within higher education institutions and outlines how Recultured, a consultancy specialising in trauma-informed approaches, supports universities in identifying and protecting those at risk.

1. Introduction: Beyond the Stereotype

Prevailing safeguarding frameworks often rely on reductive stereotypes of victims—typically young women from economically disadvantaged or culturally conservative backgrounds. However, evidence indicates that harmful practices transcend these assumptions. Victims may include:

- International students on scholarships;
- Domestic students from affluent families;
- Academic and professional staff;
- Individuals who appear outwardly confident and well-supported.

Despite their achievements, many face coercion, surveillance, and threats of disownment. Institutional disbelief, often rooted in assumptions about success and resilience, exacerbates their vulnerability.

2. Understanding Harmful Practices

Forced marriage occurs when one or both parties do not consent and/or are coerced into the union. It constitutes a criminal offence and a safeguarding concern under the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007.

Honour-based abuse (HBA) refers to a spectrum of behaviours—including (but not limited to) emotional abuse, isolation, and physical violence—intended to protect or restore perceived family or community honour.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) involves the partial or total removal of female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It is a criminal offence in the UK and a violation of human rights.

These practices are not cultural expressions; they are forms of abuse. In university contexts, they can result in:

- Mental health deterioration;
- Academic withdrawal;
- Visa and housing insecurity;
- Professional sabotage;
- Unsafe travel during vacation periods.

3. A Hidden Demographic

The assumption that victims are visibly vulnerable is both inaccurate and dangerous. In reality, those affected may be:

- Academically successful;
- From politically or professionally influential families;
- Living dual lives under coercive control;
- Isolated due to emotional manipulation or surveillance.

Their vulnerability stems not only from the abuse but also from institutional silence and the stigma surrounding disclosure. Staff often lack the training to recognise non-stereotypical victims, and existing systems may fail to accommodate the nuanced risks involved.

4. Gaps in the Higher Education Sector

Despite statutory obligations under Condition E6 of the Office for Students (OfS) framework, many universities remain ill-equipped to address these issues. Preliminary findings from Recultured's forthcoming Freedom of Information (FOI) requests reveal:

- Inadequate staff training;
- Absence of targeted support for these harmful practices;
- Confusion around handling disclosures from atypical victims;
- Neglect of staff as potential victims;
- Poor integration of these harms into safeguarding systems;
- Predominantly reactive rather than preventative approaches.

5. Staff Can Be Victims Too

Harmful practices are not confined to the student population. Staff members may also experience coercion, control, or threats. Recultured supports institutions to:

- Recognise staff as potential victims;
- Ensure compliance with employment law in not only responding to disclosures but supporting those who have been brave enough to disclose and seek support;
- Prevent professional disadvantage for those seeking help;
- Promote leadership awareness of the complexity of these abuses.

Rather than creating new reporting pathways, Recultured enhances the efficacy of existing systems.

6. Recultured's Approach

Recultured offers a suite of trauma-informed, survivor-led services tailored to the higher education context.

Bespoke Training:

- Delivered to wellbeing teams, HR, academic staff, and leadership;
- Grounded in real-life scenarios and survivor input.

Personalised Risk Assessment Tool:

- Confidential and evidence-based.
- Supports early identification and compliance with relevant policies in the sector.

Peer-Led Support Through Art:

- Facilitates peer groups for isolated students;
- Uses art as a therapeutic medium to foster resilience and recovery.

7. Recommendations for the Higher Education Sector

To address these issues effectively, universities should:

1. Explicitly name forced marriage, HBA, and FGM in safeguarding policies.
2. Invest in trauma-informed training, not generic cultural awareness.
3. Identify hidden victims, including high-achieving individuals.
4. Support both students and staff through inclusive safeguarding systems.
5. Provide confidential, survivor-informed resources beyond tick-box compliance.
6. Collaborate with specialists to integrate expert tools and survivor perspectives.

8. Conclusion: Abuse Can Affect Anyone

Harmful practices are rooted in power and control, not culture. They thrive in silence and are sustained by shame. In universities, they affect individuals who may appear to be thriving. By equipping staff, supporting isolated individuals, and collaborating with expert services, universities can become safer, more inclusive spaces.

References

HM Government, 'Multi-Agency Statutory Guidance on Forced Marriage' (2022)
Office for Students, 'Condition E6 – Harassment and Sexual Misconduct' (2023)
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