

EMBEDDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE LIAISON OFFICER (SVLO) SUPPORT

Guidance for Higher
Education Institutions



FOREWORD

Almost ten years ago, LimeCulture began working with two universities to assist in the development of their response to sexual violence. This work resulted in the creation of the Sexual Violence Liaison Officer (SVLO) model. Since then, we've had the privilege of training hundreds of SVLOs from more than 80 institutions across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and worked with many more institutions to strengthen their wider response to sexual violence through improving their prevention work, their initial response, and their approaches to disciplinary proceedings in sexual violence cases.

The landscape around sexual violence in the higher education sector has of course changed dramatically in that time, with increasing numbers of institutions now taking important steps to transform their understanding of and response to sexual violence through embedding stronger governance, effective training, and dedicated support services for both students and staff.

These support services are seeing year-on-year increases in demand for support, as both students and staff gain confidence in their institution's ability to respond appropriately to their needs. LimeCulture's SVLO model has been a key part of that transformation, enabling institutions to deliver equitable, accessible and tailored support for those affected by sexual violence, underpinned by a highly trained and specialist workforce.

As SVLO services have matured and grown, we can see the enormous impact that SVLOs are having, not only on the individuals they support but also on the institutions and communities in which they work.

I would like to thank the SVLO, SVLO managers, and student services directors who took the time to share their experiences and insights as we developed this document. Our hope is that this guidance will support higher education institutions who are thinking about establishing an SVLO service, and also those who are seeking to further develop and embed their services more deeply into the fabric of their institution.

I'm hugely proud of the work we do at LimeCulture to support higher education to prevent and respond to sexual violence, and look forward to continuing to build on that in the years to come.

Stephanie Reardon

Chief Executive
LimeCulture

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INTRODUCTION

Background

- 1 The Sexual Violence Liaison Officer (SVLO) role was developed by LimeCulture in 2016 in partnership with Keele University and the University of Greenwich to ensure their institutions could appropriately support students who had experienced sexual violence.
- 2 Today, SVLOs are working within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across England, Scotland and Wales to provide support, information and help for students and staff who have been affected by sexual violence. To date LimeCulture has delivered accredited SVLO training to more than 80 universities across all four nations of the UK, suggesting that the support of an SVLO has been adopted by a wide number of HEIs as they seek to embed an effective response to sexual violence.
- 3 Different models of SVLO support have emerged as HEIs have taken different approaches to the implementation of the SVLO role within their institutions, tailoring support to their specific structures and circumstances, and the needs of their communities. However, the essential foundations, functions and purpose of the SVLO role remain the same.
- 4 Although the SVLO role was initially developed to support student victims/survivors (often referred to as 'reporting parties'), it has evolved to provide support to students accused of perpetrating sexual violence ('reported parties'), enabling institutions to meet the expectation that equitable support is available for both reporting and reported parties; and - in some institutions - to staff members who are victims/survivors of sexual violence. These are important developments to the SVLO role and are integrated throughout this guidance document.

Policy context

- 5 Since the SVLO role was developed in 2016, there has been a growing focus across the UK's HEI sector on recognising, preventing and responding to sexual violence. Rightly, students and staff have increasingly high expectations of their institutions to respond to sexual violence and promote safe places to study, live and work, which has further galvanised action.
- 6 A distinct national framework has emerged for addressing sexual violence within HEIs: Universities UK's influential 'Changing the Culture' report in 2016 and associated guidance regarding handling student misconduct cases where the behaviour may also constitute a criminal offence¹; the 'Equally Safe in Higher Education' toolkit focusing on gender-based violence in 2018 funded by Scottish Government; guidance from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in 2020, 'Tackling Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) in HE'; the Northern Ireland 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence Abuse Strategy', which encourages pastoral care for affected students; and the Office for Students' (OfS) 'Statement of Expectations' in 2021, establishing minimum expectations of HEIs in England to prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct, followed in 2023 by proposals to monitor institutional responses under the OfS regulatory framework.²

- 7 These national policy developments have undoubtedly contributed to HEIs' recognition of their responsibilities around sexual violence and, specifically, the need to put in place robust student support and resolution (e.g. disciplinary) interventions. Importantly, they are also driving expectations of the level of expertise and specialism of staff working in these areas, which are increasingly acknowledged and reflected in higher education sector research and reports.³

Purpose of this guidance

- 8 LimeCulture has developed this guidance in response to requests from HEIs seeking advice on successfully embedding SVLO support across their institutions. It aims to support those who are considering how best to embed the provision of SVLO support by clarifying the key roles and responsibilities of the SVLO role, setting out important considerations for ensuring the safe and effective provision of SVLO support, and capturing learning and insights from HEIs that have already successfully embedded SVLO models.
- 9 This guidance also seeks to support those HEIs that have already taken steps to establish SVLO support within their institutions by sharing good practice and suggesting further steps to help ensure their SVLO provision is fully embedded in their response to sexual violence.
- 10 Most importantly, this guidance seeks to raise awareness of the critical role played by SVLOs and SVLO services within HEIs. It is intended to enable further development and innovation around the SVLO role through sharing ideas and good practice.
- 11 The quotes used throughout this document are from the SVLOs, SVLO managers/co-ordinators, and senior university staff that contributed to the development of this guidance.

Terminology

- 12 The language used around sexual violence within university settings differs considerably, and definitions of sexual violence in the university context are typically set out in each university's code of student discipline or associated complaints/harassment policies and protocols. However, for the purposes of clarity, within this guidance the following terms are used:
- **sexual violence** incorporates a range of behaviours including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, voyeurism and any other conduct of a sexual nature that is non-consensual or has the purpose or effect of threatening, intimidating, undermining, humiliating or coercing a person. This includes contact behaviours such as non-consensual sexual touching and penetration, and non-contact behaviours such as degrading or discriminatory remarks, or sharing intimate images without consent.
 - **victim/survivor** refers to those subjected to sexual violence and encompasses descriptors such as victim, patient, complainant, client and survivor.
 - **reporting party** refers to students/staff who have been subjected to sexual violence whether or not they have made a formal report to the university or the Police (this individual may be referred to as the 'disclosing party' in some institutions up to the point of a formal report).

- **reported party** refers to students/staff who have been reported as perpetrating sexual violence, either to the university or the Police.
- **Sexual Violence Liaison Officer (SVLO)** refers both to SVLOs and Sexual Violence and Misconduct Liaison Officers (SVMLOs – often used by HEIs in Scotland); and to staff who are trained and working as an SVLO regardless of job title.
- **discipline proceedings** refer to the entire disciplinary process from initial report through to investigation and outcome, including any internal panel or process that may be established to progress an appeal or complaint. (Sexual violence is usually referred to as sexual misconduct in the context of these proceedings.)
- **Higher Education Institution (HEI)** refers to universities and Students' Unions together; where 'universities' is used, this relates to universities only, not Students' Unions.



PART 1:

DEFINING THE ROLE OF AN SVLO

KEY FUNCTIONS

“ SVLOs are a critical focal point enabling individuals to navigate complex university systems and access the support they need both within the university and in the community ”

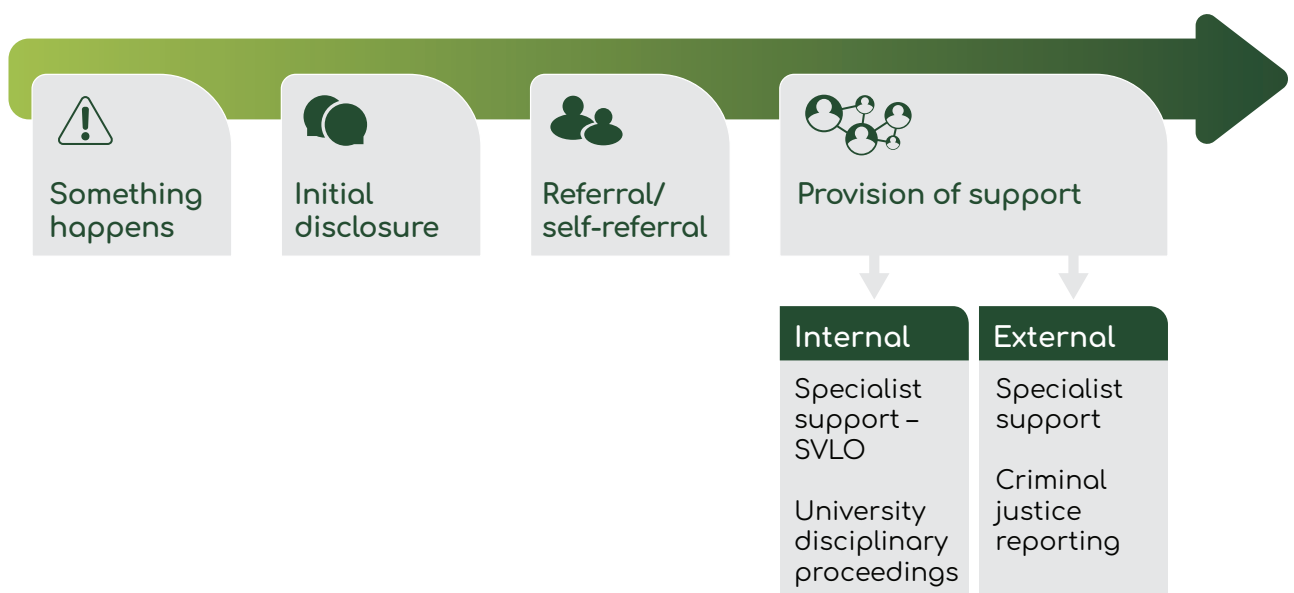
- 13** Sexual Violence Liaison Officers (SVLOs) play an important role in providing tailored support to individuals within HEIs who are affected by sexual violence (recent or non-recent), irrespective of whether or not they are involved in the criminal justice process or university discipline proceedings.
- 14** Depending on the scope of the SVLO support provided within each institution, that individual may be:
- a student;
 - a member of staff;
 - the reporting party; or
 - the reported party.
- 15** Although the nature of the support that an SVLO provides will vary from case to case depending on the needs of the individual and their circumstances, the key functions of the role will include:
- supporting the individual to make informed choices about options relating to their education (i.e. academic adjustments), work, and other aspects of their lives (i.e. accommodation, finances);
 - supporting the individual to make informed choices about options relating to their disclosure, for example reporting to the police or making a formal report to the university, and providing appropriate support throughout these processes (the extent of this support may vary depending on the role of internal teams - e.g. student conduct - or the involvement of an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser);
 - providing information to support the individual to understand the university's processes in responding to sexual violence, and ensuring they are aware of the support available within the university;
 - ensuring the individual is aware of the support available to them in the community, including Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), specialist sexual violence support and other mainstream services;
 - identifying, assessing, managing and reviewing the individual risks and needs of the individual; and escalating risk immediately in the event of concerns about the safety of the individual or any third parties;
 - escalating concerns/risks to senior colleagues to enable a holistic risk assessment (including risks to the wider community and university) to take place;
 - developing tailored support plans to address the individual's risks and needs;

- acting as a single point of contact within the university for the individual being supported; assisting the individual to access relevant university-based support, and co-ordinating that support;
- working in partnership with external services (such as an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser) to support the individual to access services in the local community or near their home;
- managing a caseload;
- maintaining and updating records of all cases including initial referral, risk and needs assessments and support plan, including any action taken; and
- ensuring due care is taken to limit the possibility of contamination of evidence in the event the student/staff member becomes involved in the criminal justice process, including by being aware of Achieving Best Evidence (ABE)⁴ and other related guidance and legislation.⁵

16 Importantly, the SVLO role is distinct from the roles of Welfare/Wellbeing Adviser, Counsellor/Therapist, First Responder, Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA), Crisis Worker or Support Worker (although SVLOs may be employed in wellbeing or other complementary roles within the institution).

17 Moreover, the SVLO role is a critical element of the whole institution approach to sexual violence, and many SVLOs will also be involved in the design and delivery of prevention strategies alongside their response work.

“Supporting students who have experienced sexual violence helps you build a picture of what happens within your community, where it happens, when it happens, why it happens, how prevalent it is. This understanding is fundamental when it comes to prevention.”



FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF SVLO SUPPORT

“ SVLO support should be accessible, equitable, and trauma informed ”

- 18 SVLO support should be accessible, equitable, and trauma informed.
- 19 Across all the key functions of the SVLO, there are four fundamental principles underpinning the delivery of specialist support to both reporting and reported parties:
- the provision of tailored, ongoing support;
 - effective assessment and management of risk;
 - working in partnership; and
 - establishing and maintaining professional boundaries.

Providing tailored, ongoing support

- 20 The support offered by an SVLO should be tailored to the needs of the individual being supported.
- 21 To tailor support, an SVLO should complete a risk and needs assessment and put in place a support plan that sets out exactly what support is being provided and any actions required. This will need to be updated regularly as circumstances and the individual's needs change.
- “We support the person, not the experience they had.”**
- 22 Ongoing support from an SVLO is key to ensuring the institution is able to deliver support in addition to what might be offered by a first responder to a disclosure of sexual violence.
- 23 For example, a first responder will assess an individual's immediate risks and needs and then signpost or refer into more specialist support. The SVLO (who may also be a point of disclosure) will be the continuing liaison for the individual across their next steps, which might include engaging with counselling, making referrals to external support services (e.g. ISVA, SARC), or formally reporting to the university's disciplinary process.
- 24 The level and duration of support provided by the SVLO will vary case by case and will depend on the needs of the individual and the support plan put in place by the SVLO to meet those needs. For example, such subsequent interventions resolve any outstanding concerns or needs and SVLO support is no longer required; or it may be that the individual may require further or different support from the SVLO as time goes on (for example, support throughout an internal disciplinary process, or in relation to ongoing wellbeing concerns).
- 25 It is critical that the SVLO clearly communicates to each individual the scope of the support they can provide so that those accessing support are aware of the boundaries in place, what the university can offer, and what other support is available in the local community. This will enable the SVLO to manage expectations appropriately.

“Lots of students have said it’s been really nice to have someone to speak to and to know what their support options are. Sometimes we feel like we can’t help them if they don’t want to go through a formal process but actually students are saying it’s good just having someone there to have a conversation with and get support.”

Effective assessment and management of risk

“ A clear risk management strategy is an essential foundation for an effective institution-wide approach to sexual violence ”

- 26 In cases of sexual violence within HEIs where risk is dynamic and may change over time, the institution must regularly identify, assess, manage and communicate risk so that safe and proportionate mitigations can be put in place.
- 27 Risk in relation to sexual violence in HEIs can be broadly defined through three overlapping categories – individual, evidential, and organisational. This enables a holistic understanding of risk that prevents elements from being missed or incorrectly weighted when making decisions.
- **Individual risk** – this includes risks posed to any one individual within the sexual violence case – students and staff. This may include, for example, risks to mental health and wellbeing for the reporting party, the risk of social isolation for the reported party, and the risk of vicarious trauma for supporting staff members. Considering risks to individuals, rather than looking at all risks within a case that involves multiple individuals, allows for better preventive and responsive support, and for support options to be put in place for all parties. It also enables the continuation of risk management actions after the conclusion of, for example, a disciplinary case. Importantly, an individual’s needs must be considered alongside any associated risks in order to tailor the support that the SVLO provides. These include any specific support needs that enable effective working with that individual, for example an interpreter, the need to pray/worship at specific times, childcare arrangements, etc.
 - **Evidential risk** – this refers to risk around any current or future criminal justice proceedings, including in relation to evidence held by institutions. This evidence may include CCTV footage, screenshots of social media interactions, and the account (verbal or written) of the individuals involved in the case. Where the institution holds such material, they have a duty to record and store it appropriately. It is important to note that such information may be requested (in a criminal justice context) after a student has left an institution.
 - **Organisational risk** – this refers to risks to the wider HEI and local community resulting from sexual violence, as well as reputational risk posed to the institution (the latter usually in relation to being ill-equipped to respond).
- 28 SVLOs are integral to an institution’s approach to risk in sexual violence cases across each of these categories. It is important to recognise however, that SVLOs are not solely accountable for risk.
- 29 Rather, they play a key (and often co-ordinating) role in the identification, assessment, management and appropriate escalation of risk throughout the risk cycle. For example, an SVLO may help identify risks and needs which they will then assess and suggest mitigations for. Importantly, the SVLO may also need to elicit information around risks directly from the individuals they are supporting.

- 30** When embedding SVLO support within an institution, it is critical that risk considerations within the SVLO service are integrated into existing risk governance structures and, where existing structures are not fit for purpose for sexual violence cases, that these are reviewed and refined.
- 31** SVLOs should be working within an established institutional framework for risk and safeguarding, and the route for risk escalation within the SVLO service and across the wider institution must be clearly defined. SVLOs should be responsible for putting in place a risk review schedule and for continuing to collaborate with key internal and external partners to manage the evolving risks and needs of those they are supporting. (This may also be carried out by the SVLO manager/co-ordinator in order to maintain an overview of risk.)
- 32** Any management and support plans should be communicated where relevant by SVLOs to the institution's risk group (e.g. executive committee), who may require oversight of a certain level of risk across the three risk categories noted above.
- 33** Key enablers, therefore, of an effective approach to risk by SVLOs are:
- a clear institutional approach to risk to which the SVLO service is integral;
 - initial and ongoing risk assessment and management;
 - defined escalation routes and follow-up action; and
 - the use of a common risk assessment model across teams supporting the individual.

LimeCulture's model risk and needs assessment for SVLOs is available in our Sexual Misconduct Risk and Needs Assessment Toolkit in the Resources section of our website: www.limeculture.co.uk

Working in partnership

“ The SVLO service should have clear referral protocols in place to help each individual access the support they need from the right service, at the right time ”

- 34** Due to the complex nature of sexual violence and the impact on those affected, it is likely that the individual being supported by the SVLO may have a range of needs that are better met by other professionals and/or services. The SVLO will be a conduit for individuals to access that support. The SVLO should identify relevant information and support to facilitate access and/or make referrals on behalf of the individual to other internal services such as:
- Student Support Services (e.g. mental health support, counselling, academic adjustments);
 - Accommodation and/or Security Services;
 - Student Conduct/Discipline;
 - Staff HR, Employee Assistance Programmes, and grievance processes (where relevant);
 - Students' Union.
- 35** It is therefore important that the SVLO has a good knowledge and awareness of the range of services available, both internally within the institution and externally in the community.
- 36** It is also important that internal services are aware of the availability of specialist SVLO support within the institution and how to signpost or refer individuals should they have concerns or receive a disclosure. To embed this, and in recognition that individuals can and do disclose sexual violence to different people across the institution, SVLOs may deliver training and information sessions to other teams within the institution (e.g. academics, Faculty Leads) to ensure they know about the support SVLOs offer and how to signpost or make a referral into SVLO support.

Students' Unions

- 37** Students' Unions (SUs) often have the benefit of being sited within the HEI but governed and operated separately from the university, allowing for an element of independence and choice for the student about where they may disclose sexual violence or seek to access support. It should be noted however that the extent of support offered by the SU to students will vary considerably between HEIs. SUs may also be more familiar with supporting students – and particularly, reported students – through disciplinary proceedings, given the advocacy role they often hold. There may also be opportunities for SVLOs to engage with SUs in the development and delivery of activities to engage the student community in conversations about behaviours and consent, and to raise awareness of the support available.
- 38** Some institutions have trained SVLOs within their SUs – they will either operate across the institution or specifically within the SU. In each scenario, it is important to clarify where the boundaries lie between the work and cases they may pick up within the SU, and their responsibilities as an SVLO within the university SVLO service.

External partners

39 SVLOs should also develop and maintain effective working relationships with a range of external partners, including statutory agencies and voluntary services. To this end, depending on the needs of each individual, SVLOs should expect to be working in partnership with:

- Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs);
- Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), or Sexual Assault Response Co-ordination Service (SARCS) in Scotland;
- local specialist sexual violence services providing counselling and support;
- public health services (such as sexual health, GP and mental health);
- local authority safeguarding teams;
- local or national organisations who provide specialist support (for example, those working with specific ethnic minority groups, or other groups such as LGBTQ+, sex workers, older people, etc.) or who focus on particular forms of abuse (e.g. so-called honour-based violence, female genital mutilation, technology-assisted abuse); and
- other local services that may provide support, for example, Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) or community domestic violence support, disability support organisations, etc.

40 Many SVLO develop strong partnerships with external services by arranging to visit community services and/or inviting external services onto campus to raise awareness.

“We have developed links with both internal services such as Student Wellbeing and external services such as our local SARCs so that students can access multiple services, often at the same time, to start building that support network around them.”

41 These partnerships and pathways are also critical in enabling referrals into the SVLO service from external agencies (with consent from the relevant individual). Effective communication and referral processes between agencies and an understanding of one another’s professional roles are crucial in enabling the SVLO to provide accurate information to students/staff members, and facilitate access to appropriate support to meet their needs. It is good practice for the SVLO service to have clear referral protocols in place with local partner agencies to enable the individual being supported to access the support they need from the right service, at the right time.

Information sharing protocols and confidentiality

42 SVLOs will need to understand the statutory requirements for information sharing and confidentiality, particularly in relation to responsibilities to safeguard adults and children.⁶ The rationale for any decision to breach confidentiality without consent, e.g. to prevent harm to either the reporting party or a third party, should be clearly explained by the SVLO to the individual they are supporting at the outset of the first conversation. This will be particularly important to clarify across the institution where staff outside the SVLO service may have received the initial disclosure, or where other internal teams (such as student conduct or the SU) are routinely involved in the ongoing provision of information and/or support (i.e. in disciplinary proceedings). This should be underpinned with robust internal information sharing protocols and clear policies and procedures for sharing risks.

- 43 Additionally, it will be of benefit for SVLOs to have information shared with them by other professionals, services and agencies. Therefore, SVLOs should also establish information sharing protocols with the range of external agencies and services (including but not necessarily only those noted above) that may be required to respond to the needs of the individual the SVLO is supporting.

CASE STUDY

Working in Partnership, University of Aberystwyth

A first-year undergraduate living in university halls submitted a named report via Report and Support involving incidents of racial abuse and sexual misconduct by a third-year student also living in halls. An SVLO met with the disclosing student the following day, worked to ensure their immediate safety and wellbeing, and provided detail on options available internally and externally. The disclosing student was fearful of repercussions from the reported student, and decided they would like to go home to consider next steps. The disclosing student was experiencing financial difficulties.

The SVLO contacted the academic department to cover a period of absence and organised a train ticket home through the university finance team. The SVLO scheduled a meeting upon the student's return where they decided to pursue internal and external reporting options. The SVLO referred the student to the local sexual violence specialist organisation during the meeting and contacted the discipline team to arrange a discussion for the student about the internal disciplinary process. The SVLO continued to meet with the discipline team to share some barriers the SVLO was aware of, and to discuss the precautionary actions implemented.

The SVLO continued to co-ordinate both academic support, helping to submit assignment extensions and exam adjustments, and emotional support, via the wellbeing service, for the reporting student. The SVLO also received updates from external partners about the student, with the individual's consent. All updates from external and internal services were communicated to the student (as per their choice) via the SVLO to minimise risks of re-traumatisation.

CASE STUDY

Developing Local Support Pathways, University of Stirling

At the University of Stirling, when relevant, the SVMLO Co-ordinator invites local and specialist support providers to SVMLO network meetings (held three times a year) to keep all parties updated on changes and processes, and to build relationships. In addition, external support providers are regularly invited to host pop-up stalls on campus to promote their services and raise awareness within the University community. The University has facilitated an arrangement with the local rape support centre to have a case worker based on campus once per week with bookable appointments to remove the need to travel off campus. The University has also put in place direct referral forms and an information sharing protocol with Forth Valley Rape Crisis and Stirling Women's Aid, which streamlines the process and ensures essential information is passed over securely and effectively. A further direct referral form has been put in place between Victim Support Stirling and the SVMLO team.

Establishing and maintaining professional boundaries

- 44 It is important that SVLOs ensure the individual they are supporting is made aware of and fully understands the need for the SVLO to maintain professional boundaries when providing support. This will help to ensure individuals can retain choice about what happens next with their information, and also minimise the risk of the SVLO holding information that may be disclosable in any criminal proceedings.

“ Maintaining clear professional boundaries enables SVLOs to provide safe and effective support ”

- 45 It is critical for HEIs to ensure that wider stakeholders across the university (i.e. discipline/conduct colleagues, faculty leads, safeguarding leads, SU representatives etc.) and in relevant community services (i.e. Independent Sexual Violence Adviser Service, Sexual Assault Referral Centre, Police) understand the purpose and the boundaries of the SVLO role to enable an effective and holistic response, and to avoid duplication and confusion for individuals accessing support. For example, ensuring that SVLOs work closely in a complementary way with ISVAs, where SVLOs focus primarily on supporting individuals to navigate the internal landscape and relevant support, while ISVAs undertake their functions in the community and the criminal justice process, is critical in delivering clear and effective support, and managing the capacity of the SVLO.

“Universities are increasingly expected to do a lot more because mainstream services are under such pressure ... there is a role for [universities in] responding to sexual violence but not to replace specialist sexual violence centres, the Police...”

- 46** It is important to recognise that an individual's experiences of sexual violence may constitute criminal offences. Some individuals being supported by an SVLO may also be involved in the criminal justice process – either from the beginning of accessing support from the SVLO or in the future. Where a criminal investigation and/or prosecution is under way, the HEI must take steps to reduce any potential conflict and avoid contamination of evidence (whether there is an existing disciplinary case or not).
- 47** Support from an SVLO can still be provided for those involved in the criminal justice processes but it will be important to ensure that professional boundaries are in place and record keeping arrangements are robust and in line with the HEI's policies. The extent of the role of the SVLO must be carefully considered alongside ISVA support where this is in place.
- 48** Where an SVLO is providing support to an individual involved in internal disciplinary proceedings, it will be equally important to ensure professional boundaries are in place and agreed across key internal teams (e.g. student support, SVLO, and conduct teams) to enable effective assessment and management of risk, clear channels of communication relating to the disciplinary process, and to ensure support is proactively and appropriately provided in light of the progress of disciplinary proceedings and their subsequent outcomes.

“SVLOs acting as a point of contact for students who are involved in disciplinary proceedings can really help contain further retraumatisation. These proceedings can be overwhelming for students and involve repetition of disclosure. Having a familiar face before, during and/or after an investigation meeting or a disciplinary proceeding can make such a difference.”

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO THE REPORTED PARTY

- 49** The HE sector has recognised the need – and has increasingly been expected – to provide equitable support to reported parties in cases of sexual violence.⁷ This expectation was made ever clearer for institutions in England by the OfS in 2021, when its Statement of Expectations emphasised the importance of, ‘...in the event of a disclosure about an incident of harassment and/or sexual misconduct, both the reporting and responding parties having equitable access to appropriate support prior to the decision to launch a formal investigation, for the duration of any investigation, and following its outcome.’
- 50** The core skills and functions of an SVLO, including risk and needs assessment, can equally be applied to a reported party in cases of sexual violence.
- “Whether we work with reporting parties or reported parties the bottom line is the same: we are working with traumatised students. The way they understand and live that experience may be at opposite ends, but as students at our university, we need to ensure that they all feel supported in a non-judgmental and empathetic way.”**
- 51** Where institutions offer SVLO support for reported parties, a trauma-informed approach should be taken. Appropriate boundaries and practical measures should be put in place by SVLOs to minimise any potential challenges or risks where both reporting and reported parties are accessing SVLO support. The same SVLO should not support both the reporting and reported party in any one case.
- “We’ve extended our SVLO service to support to both parties – ensuring everyone gets support is something we’ve managed to do and will continue to do.”**



PROVIDING SVLO SUPPORT TO STAFF

- 52** Some HEIs have made SVLO support available to staff members who have been affected by sexual violence.
- 53** While it should be recognised that institutions have different contractual relationships with staff compared to students, any institution-wide approach to sexual misconduct should always include consideration of how staff affected by sexual violence may be supported.
- 54** Staff disciplinary, complaints, or grievance processes follow a different structure and procedure to student conduct processes, and staff will be expected to meet the requirements of staff conduct policies and contracts of employment. However, support for staff can be effectively provided within this framework by SVLOs with the appropriate parameters, boundaries and confidentiality protocols in place.
- 55** SVLOs supporting staff will need a clear understanding of staff disciplinary processes, and will need to work closely with Human Resources to understand signposting and referral pathways for staff support. This may include, for example, specialist counselling through Employee Assistance Programmes (noting however that some such programmes may not provide specialist sexual violence support). Importantly, the SVLO role in relation to staff should not seek to blur the boundaries with Human Resources or line management functions, in the same way as clear boundaries are maintained between SVLOs supporting students and the staff operating university conduct processes.
- 56** Finally, it is important to consider within the SVLO model – even those purely focused on support for students – how staff members who are involved in sexual violence cases may be offered appropriate support. Staff may be witnesses to sexual misconduct, or the first point of disclosure for student cases, and therefore support and training options for them must be considered, at least at an institutional level if not directly within the SVLO team.

WHO SHOULD UNDERTAKE THE SVLO ROLE?

57 Recruiting the right individuals to the SVLO role is vital in ensuring a stable, effective and credible support service. This is especially important to consider where SVLOs are being drawn from across the institution, where the role will be delivered in addition to substantive roles. Key characteristics and skills that institutions have identified as essential for SVLOs include:

- being a good, active listener;
- having empathy and sensitivity;
- being accessible and flexible;
- possessing emotional resilience;
- being able to work within defined boundaries and manage expectations;
- being client-led, able to strike the right balance between giving someone all the options/information available to them, and being guided by them about how much they can take on;
- being knowledgeable about university processes;
- understanding power and control dynamics; and
- demonstrating social modelling around 'difficult' or 'taboo' topics.



PART 2:

EMBEDDING SVLO SUPPORT

MANAGEMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF SVLO SUPPORT

“Effective governance, management and co-ordination are essential for a successful SVLO model”

58 Many universities have reflected on the significance of effective governance, management and co-ordination in embedding SVLO models within their institution.

59 Due to the nature of sexual violence, it is now well understood that the true prevalence of incidents of sexual violence is far higher than reported. This makes it extremely challenging to predict the level of demand for SVLO support and the number of SVLOs any single institution may need. However, it is clear that a single/lone SVLO will not be sufficient to support all those from a single institution who are in need of support. A cadre of SVLOs will be required by institutions who wish to provide safe and effective support to reporting and reported parties, providing resilience as well as the opportunity for choice, for example in the gender of SVLO that provides support.

60 As such, it is crucial that SVLOs do not work in isolation and instead form part of an effectively managed support service.

“Having SVLO roles mean they can take the time needed to support the student – the quality of the support has improved, and feedback reflects this.”

61 The SVLO service should have specific policies and procedures that relate to its operational delivery, and which articulate the unique requirements of the SVLO service compared to those of other services within the institution.

62 It is important that the SVLO service is visible across the institution, not only to the student body but across staff members, senior university stakeholders, and within operational and strategic governance structures.

63 Routes into the SVLO service for students/staff members should be robust and clearly communicated throughout the HEI including, in particular, with students and any staff likely to have contact with students and who may become ‘first responders’ in receipt of initial disclosures.

“We have seen more students coming to us directly as a service, not via someone else.”

“Since attending training with other colleagues I know there are other staff like accommodation who are trained SVLOs in the same institution, so I know students are going to be met with a supportive and appropriate response across the university.”

64 The SVLO service will need to liaise with and refer to other internal teams and/or services (such as student conduct/discipline) and as such should have robust information sharing protocols in place, including with the Students’ Union, to enable the effective delivery of support and the appropriate management and communication of risk.

65 The SVLO service will need to have access to an effective case management system to enable robust and confidential recording of case information for those it supports.

- 66** HEIs have reported that a distinct SVLO manager/co-ordinator role is vital both to embedding SVLO support within the institution, and ensuring the effective operation of the service. The individual(s) in this role will co-ordinate support and oversee case allocation, and should have a good understanding of the specific functions of an SVLO. They should be able to provide clarity about the levels of commitment required for the SVLO role, the pattern of hours, how workloads will be prioritised, and how cases and SVLOs will be managed and overseen to ensure the integrity, availability and accessibility of support. The support of the individual's line manager will be critical in ensuring that the SVLO is able to dedicate an appropriate proportion of their time to the role (especially where this may not be their substantive role) and that appropriate service levels can be achieved.
- 67** SVLO services should publish service levels and response times to help manage expectations of support and responsiveness. It will be the role of the SVLO manager/co-ordinator to ensure that the SVLO is able to deliver the expectations of the service, and this should be routinely monitored.
- 68** The SVLO manager/co-ordinator should be well-placed to resolve challenges at a local level, and escalate key themes, priorities and risks through institutional governance structures where required. The SVLO manager/co-ordinator will also play a lead role in ensuring the visibility and impact of the SVLO service across the institution (including through reporting key data and outcomes), and establishing and maintaining relationships and referral pathways between internal service and key external agencies.
- 69** Those with responsibility for managing/co-ordinating the SVLO service should complete specialist training that equips them to understand the context in which the SVLO is working, the boundaries of the role and the appropriate management of caseloads.
- 70** In some HEIs the SVLO manager/co-ordinator will also carry their own caseload.

Training

- 71** Due to the complex nature of sexual violence cases, it is essential that all SVLOs undertake a full, comprehensive and accredited SVLO training course that provides them with the core competencies and skills required to carry out their role safely and effectively.
- 72** SVLOs should have access to continuing professional development (CPD) training to ensure that they can maintain professional skills and competencies, and respond to new developments and trends. This should include training on the university specific context and frameworks. SVLO refresher training should be undertaken by existing SVLOs at least every three years.
- 73** The manager or co-ordinator responsible for the SVLO service should regularly assess and maintain an overview of the training and development needs of SVLOs and put in place plans to address those needs.
- 74** In addition to specialist training, SVLOs should also have access to regular management and clinical/wellbeing supervision to support them to maintain professional boundaries, engage in reflective practice, and protect their own wellbeing by mitigating the risk of vicarious trauma and/or burn-out.

CASE STUDY

Value of Effective SVLO Service Co-ordination, University of Stirling

The University of Stirling considers that effective service co-ordination ensures Sexual Violence and Misconduct Liaison Officers (SVMLOs) are confident and supported in their role and service users receive a consistent and professional service. At Stirling, staff from across the university hold the SVLO role in addition to their substantive roles. The co-ordination sits with one individual (the SVMLO Co-ordinator) within Student Support Services as a defined part of their role, with identified staff as cover for leave/sickness. Students and staff can disclose/report incidents through the Report and Support tool, which the SVMLO Co-ordinator oversees. Access to systems and mailboxes is also held by a small number of senior managers in Student Support Services to prevent a single point of failure, whilst also being mindful of confidentiality.

There are three full SVMLO network meetings per year placed in diaries a year in advance to accommodate busy schedules. These are to deliver updates, discuss case studies, receive training, and build a community within the SVMLO team. In addition to these, there are two dedicated 1.5-hour CPD sessions per year, usually with training from an external provider, and monthly informal drop-in sessions with the Co-ordinator open to all SVMLOs. There is also a Teams site for anonymised discussion year-round along with ad hoc updates.

To help ensure consistency across the service, SVMLOs are provided with detailed guidance including 'scripts' on aspects such as clarifying expectations and the boundaries of the role; email templates; a step-by-step flowchart for the initial session; and guidelines to ensure appropriate case note writing.

SVMLOs need to feel supported, with clear expectations and processes, and should feel part of developing the service, being encouraged to put forward training suggestions and discuss how the team is best co-ordinated.

Supervision for SVLOs

- 75 All SVLOs, whether supporting reporting or reported parties, or both, should have access to robust and regular management supervision and clinical/wellbeing-focused supervision.
- 76 There is no single method for overseeing the management of an SVLO's caseload, and there is no set standard around the number of cases an SVLO should be managing (as there are multiple factors such as risk and complexity that will have a significant impact on an appropriate caseload). However, management supervision should consider how the SVLO is operating in their role, what their current and future capacity looks like, and whether they require any additional training or support to continue working in this role.
- 77 Clinical/wellbeing-focused supervision, on the other hand, focuses more specifically on supporting the SVLO as an individual, enabling them to reflect on their practice within the role, and whether there are any concerns or conflicts that require talking through with an independent person.
- 78 Both of these elements of supervision should be factored into every SVLO service and be in place before SVLOs begin working in their roles.

“I don't think we can expect SVLOs to give a good service if they aren't supported themselves.”

Assessing the efficacy of the SVLO service

- 79** It is important that a robust data set for the SVLO service is in place to measure the efficacy of the service, including data to understand the equitability and accessibility of SVLO support. This will help to support ongoing service improvement, and allow the service to demonstrate outcomes and its value in the whole-institution approach.
- 80** There will be no one determinant for what is considered to be a ‘good’ service; however, measures may include:
- uptake/number of reports;
 - service level performance (for example, is the service available as expected/advertised);
 - feedback from students;
 - feedback from staff (those who may be supported directly by the services and/or who may work closely alongside SVLOs);
 - demographic data relating to those accessing the service;
 - outcomes data at the conclusion of the service (for example, whether the supported individual remained engaged in their course, or left university but is doing well in their recovery); and
 - institution and community awareness of/confidence in the service (i.e. through feedback from internal and external partners).
- 81** As well as informing the service’s future development, such data enables the service to monitor and review SVLO support, identify challenges and gaps, explore new ways of working, and target engagement. It can also provide important evidence of the value of the service in the context of the whole-institution response and promote understanding of the demand for support from an SVLO.
- 82** All individuals accessing SVLO support should be encouraged to provide feedback about the support they have received, with various options available including verbal, written and online.
- “We’ve seen the SVLO service come a long way in recent years. We’ve gone from 4 to 16 SVLOs. What I see is how it’s helped students complete their degrees because a lot of them would have stopped previously. It can be the difference between dropping out and seeing them through to completing their course.”**
- “Seeing our students going through to graduation – moments like this, we see how amazing the service is.”**
- “I’d like to continue to gather feedback from students so our processes and support are student-informed.”**
- 83** This data should be used to regularly monitor and review the scope of the support provided by SVLOs.

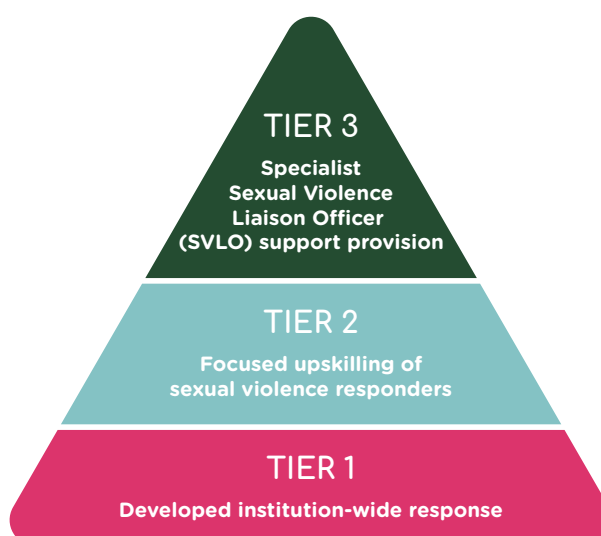
THE WHOLE-INSTITUTION APPROACH

“ A whole-institution approach to sexual violence is critical to embedding SVLO support ”

84 It is an important foundation of effective SVLO support that HEIs take a whole-institution approach to sexual violence that incorporates both prevention and response.⁸

85 A whole-institution approach to sexual violence should be considered in three key tiers:

- **Tier 1** - Ensuring awareness and understanding of sexual violence and appropriate behaviours, and the support available, across the whole institution in order to create a safer culture.
- **Tier 2** - Upskilling ‘Ambassadors’ or ‘Responders’ to recognise responses to trauma and the importance of trauma-informed communication, respond to disclosures of sexual violence appropriately, and signpost or refer individuals to support.
- **Tier 3** - Establishing a highly trained cadre of specialist SVLOs who can respond where sexual violence is disclosed, reported or suspected, delivering ongoing, tailored support to individuals.



86 In practice, these tiers incorporate key elements such as training for staff and students, awareness/education activities and targeted campaigns, prevalence and cultural audits, the establishment of clear and effective response and support pathways, and effective risk governance.

87 The role of the SVLO within the whole-institution approach is to be the focal point for tailored, ongoing specialist support, acting as a single point of contact for the individual accessing support, and enabling onward referrals where needed. The SVLO should use their specific experience and expertise to inform the development and evolution of whole-institution approaches to sexual violence.

“Introducing SVLOs has allowed us to push sexual misconduct issues up the agenda by having an official process. Before, it would have been support staff picking this up but now having SVLOs legitimises there is an issue.”

- 88** Having a designated senior stakeholder within the HEI who will drive forward the response to sexual violence and champion the SVLO service is critical in ensuring SVLO support can be sustainably embedded within the institution.

“We do still have barriers from up high in terms of not being allowed to post anything about sexual violence on social media channels, for us that’s a barrier and internal gatekeeping.”

“Having an SVLO service shows that the University is taking ownership that these incidents do happen.”

CASE STUDY

Effective Governance and a Whole-University Approach, University of Chester

The Unacceptable Behaviours Group was set up to address issues that might be negatively impacting students’ experiences.

The Group aims to create a culture of respect and inclusivity where unacceptable behaviours are recognised, actively challenged, and not tolerated; to improve safety, and respond robustly and effectively to incidents of unacceptable behaviours when they occur in the university community; and to support staff and students to know their options and receive appropriate support, be respected, supported and empowered to make decisions which are right for them, and understand how to appropriately respond to and support those who have experienced unacceptable behaviours.

The group is chaired by the Dean of Students and brings together a broad range of stakeholders including Chester Students’ Union, Student Services, academic leads, and students. Key achievements include the Group’s collaboration with Cheshire Police and Crime Commissioner to secure Home Office Safer Streets funding, leading to the implementation of the SVLO Service at the university, with 25 staff members trained as SVLOs. In addition, consent workshops, bystander intervention, handling disclosures and first responder training packages were rolled out to staff and students. The Zecure safety app was piloted and highlighted ‘safe spaces’ locally where staff had received training to support those feeling unsafe. Additional CCTV and lighting were installed and a Safer Taxi Scheme trialled.

The Group continues to review, evaluate and guide the university’s response to sexual violence, using staff ‘pulse’ surveys, student surveys and qualitative data from those with lived experiences; and evaluating the impact of training programmes and awareness raising work. Progress is reported to the University of Chester Student Voice and Experience Committee, Mission Committee, the University Council and the Equality Forum.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR SVLO MODEL

Scope of SVLO support

- 89 The scope of the support provided by an SVLO will vary between institutions depending on a range of factors, for example the make-up of the student body, what other support is available internally, and what support is available externally within the local community.
- 90 It is important that the scope of the support offered (whether to students only, students and staff members, reporting parties, or both reporting and reported parties, for example) is clearly defined and well communicated so that teams across the institution, external agencies, and those who are being supported are aware of the boundaries around the support that can be provided by an SVLO.

Choosing the right SVLO model

- 91 Since the SVLO role was first introduced in 2016, LimeCulture is aware that HEIs have adopted different approaches to embedding the SVLO model within their institutions. These exist on a broad continuum but essentially fall into two main categories: a centralised team of SVLOs (a so-called 'hub' model); and trained SVLOs positioned across the university (a 'hub and spoke' model). Whichever model is chosen by a university (and it may be a combination), it should be informed by their own specific considerations, for example university structure, location, student demographics, existing services and specialisms, funding, and institutional preference.
- 92 A **'hub' model** comprises a centralised team of SVLOs within a relevant area of the university – for example, within student support/wellbeing services. An SVLO in a hub model will often spend most (if not all) of their working time as an SVLO, and feed into associated work across the institution (i.e. campaigns/policy development). Given the proportion of time spent dedicated to this work, there will often be fewer SVLO roles in a 'hub' model as compared to a 'hub and spoke' model. The SVLO will regularly communicate and liaise with staff outside of the central team and will most likely receive referrals from other areas of the university, but ongoing case and line management will tend to lie solely within the central team. SVLOs in a hub model will most likely use systems and case management processes already in place within the institution, such as those utilised by university counselling and welfare services. They may also play a proactive leadership role in prevention, training and awareness raising.

- 93** A **‘hub and spoke’ model** has trained SVLOs positioned across the university, with most taking on the SVLO role in addition to their substantive role. There are likely to be a greater number of SVLOs within an institution with a hub and spoke model. The SVLOs across the university are managed through a central co-ordination point, most usually sitting within central student services, but the SVLOs may not be based within the same team as the co-ordinator. SVLOs in a hub and spoke model may be academics, sports staff, Students’ Union staff, chaplains, librarians, Halls of Residence or other staff, allowing for diversity and reach across the institution. SVLOs may be given access to existing central systems or share notes and records with central support staff who will input these into the relevant systems as part of an ongoing case management role. SVLOs may also engage with broader prevention work across the institution.
- 94** Each model has its own strengths and challenges, all of which will need to be considered and addressed when developing and embedding the service.

“All of our SVLOs are based within student support team. I think the benefits of that are that we are all on the same team, and probably communicate a bit more with each other.”

“There are benefits [to a hub and spoke model] in the sense that when we have internal cases it is easy to manage conflict because we are spread out.”

	Hub model	Hub and spoke model
POTENTIAL STRENGTHS	Simple day-to-day management and co-ordination of SVLOs, usually due to the number of SVLOs and centralised working practices.	Opportunity for a more diverse make-up of SVLOs and greater reach across the university – enabling a range of different experiences and inputs, and widening student choice.
	Easily able to standardise practice, and support provision for students across the SVLO team and ensure consistent resourcing.	Usually a larger cadre of SVLOs to allocate cases to, especially useful in separating support for reporting and reported parties, and avoiding conflicts of interest if students are already known to members of staff.
	Time within SVLO role to contribute to prevention and awareness-raising activity, informed by learning from case work.	Lower up-front costs to establish the service where existing staff incorporate the SVLO work into their substantive roles.
	Lower costs associated with training, CPD and supervision (as there are usually fewer SVLOs).	Potential for greater service sustainability in the event of staff attrition.
POTENTIAL CHALLENGES	Usually, fewer (and therefore less opportunity for diverse) SVLOs to allocate to cases.	Standardising practice across a (usually) larger cadre who may be across different areas of the university requires more time and attention, and greater reinforcement.
	Higher costs associated with hiring new staff (or replacing the previous staff workload of existing staff to allow them to be dedicated to the SVLO role).	Potential for different or disparate case management systems; allowing access to centralised case management systems for staff who wouldn't usually have access to welfare systems.
	More of an impact on team capacity and availability of SVLO support to students/staff if one SVLO is absent.	Potentially higher training, CPD and supervision costs due to an often larger number of SVLOs.
	Supporting reporting and reported students separately can be challenging with a limited number of SVLOs.	Achieving an appropriate balance between the SVLO role and the SVLO's substantive role where there are competing priorities – clarity is needed to determine what takes precedence.
	Risk of a single point of failure.	The ability of the SVLO manager/co-ordinator to co-ordinate SVLO support while not necessarily line managing SVLOs relies on goodwill and positive working relationships with multiple line managers.



PART 3:

CONCLUSION

LOOKING FORWARD

- 95** The Higher Education sector has, in recent years, seen increased expectations from students, staff, regulators and government for them to respond to sexual violence, and many institutions have stepped up to lead the way. We have seen the emergence and growth of a distinct, specialist and trauma-informed workforce that is now starting to mature, enabling institutions to better support those affected by sexual violence. Alongside this, there is a welcome and growing recognition of the expertise and specialism of these qualified professionals and their role in creating a safe and inclusive culture within HEIs.
- 96** LimeCulture has supported the design, development and implementation of the SVLO model across more than 80 institutions in each of the four UK nations. Our work with HEIs has shown that to embed an effective response to sexual violence, each HEI must ensure their SVLO service:
- is part of the whole-institution approach to tackling sexual violence;
 - is supported at a strategic level by senior stakeholders, with a designated senior champion;
 - has robust escalation and oversight arrangements in place, and is embedded in university risk governance structures;
 - has a clearly defined scope and is able to deliver equitable support, with policies and procedure to support safe operational practices;
 - is managed effectively – with individuals holding clear responsibilities to oversee the work of the cadre of SVLOs;
 - has effective training and supervision (both management and clinical/wellbeing) in place for all SVLOs and SVLO managers/co-ordinators;
 - understands the individual and collective support needs of students/staff members, and can identify and address barriers to engagement;
 - develops resilient partnerships and robust support pathways with external specialists and community-based support services;
 - is routinely monitored for effectiveness, including through feedback from those who have accessed support;
 - has an effective communications plan in place, with involvement from the central communications team, to raise and maintain awareness of the SVLO service; and
 - is sufficiently resourced.

“Prevention work and cultural changes will eventually mean there is less of this happening.”

“If the whole process (including internal disciplinary procedures) hasn’t caught up in where we are going as SVLOs, then the whole process falls down.”

- 97** There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ when it comes to how HEIs respond to sexual violence, and there is of course much more to do. However, LimeCulture believes embedding specialist SVLO support is an essential lynchpin in the whole-institution approach to sexual violence within HEIs, enabling them to deliver accessible, equitable and trauma-informed support for those affected.
- 98** Our ambition is that this guidance, and the insights within it, will encourage more institutions to commit the time, effort, and resources needed to put the best possible SVLO support in place for those affected by sexual violence and, as a result, improve outcomes for their whole community.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Universities UK, Pinsent Masons (2016), Guidance for Higher Education Institutions: How to Handle Alleged Student Misconduct Which May Also Constitute A Criminal Offence
- ² Office for Students (2023), Consultation on a new approach to regulating harassment and sexual misconduct in English higher education
- ³ For example, Bull and Shannon (2023)
- ⁴ Ministry of Justice and National Police Chiefs' Council (2022, updated 2023), Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings
- ⁵ Including Universities UK, Pinsent Masons (2016), Guidance for Higher Education Institutions: How to Handle Alleged Student Misconduct Which May Also Constitute A Criminal Offence; Attorney General's Guidelines on Disclosure (2022); Crown Prosecution Service (2018), Code for Crown Prosecutors; Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, Code of Practice: Disclosure of Evidence; Sexual Offences Act 2003; Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009; Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008
- ⁶ HM Government (2018), Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers
- ⁷ See Universities UK, Pinsent Masons (2016), Guidance for Higher Education Institutions: How to Handle Alleged Student Misconduct Which May Also Constitute A Criminal Offence, page 6
- ⁸ Universities UK (2016), Changing the Culture



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