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House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into Freedom of Expression Online

This submission of written evidence covers the following questions;

- **How should good digital citizenship be promoted? How can education help?**

- **How can content moderation systems be improved?**

1.   Background

1.1   The focus of this submission is **online abuse and harassment within Higher Education Institutions (HEI's).** It's overarching argument is that online abuse and digital citizenship must be viewed as *lived experiences* – grounded in social, political and material realities. This is not to say the Online Harms White Paper (8 April 2019) treats the online and offline realms as mutually exclusive; it outlines a Media Strategy for school-aged children and older adults. Yet, it leaves young adults – like university students - out of the framework. There must be greater emphasis on online abuse that occurs *within* institutions.

1.2   This may present a challenge for both the government and universities. Rightly so, universities have a legal duty to ensure the Freedom of Expression and intellectual inquiry of students; the internet provides limitless possibilities for the academic imagination. Furthermore, the White Paper underwent criticism from the Index on Censorship for restricting Freedom of Speech with 'criteria broader than current law'.[2] Therefore, a balance must be struck – universities must promote a Freedom of Expression onliine *alongside* adequate safeguarding practices that ensure **safe environment to live, work and study[3]** – whether on campus or working remotely.

1.3   This safeguarding has been called into question by countless media reports highlighting online abuse within student populations. This has ranged from misogynistic, racist and sexually abusive group-chats, to anti-Semitic photos and 'zoombombing'.[4] The invasion of Zoom lectures

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[2]   Index on Censorship, *Index on Censorship submission to Online Harms White Paper consultation,* (London, 2019), p.2.
[3]   Universities UK, *Tackling Online Harassment and Promoting Online Welfare: Case Studies,* (London, 2019), p.27.
[4]   See 'Plymouth University Tory group suspended over T-shirts', *BBC News*, 3 October 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-45735591[accessed 17 January 2021]; Dulcie Lee and Larissa Kenelly, 'Inside the Warwick University rape chat scandal', *BBC News*, 28 May 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48366835 [accessed 19 January 2021]; David Batty, 'University of Derby suspends students over offensive group chat', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/19/university-of-derby-suspends-students-over-offensive-group-chat [accessed 19 January 2021].

by uninvited participants - exclaiming racial and homophobic slurs and sharing illegal video content - spiked under the context of online learning. As a witness of zoom-bombing within student meetings, this submission argues **now is a more vital time than ever to demand national guidance for HEI's, tackling the online abuse of their students.**

2.0   Summary

2.1   Within this context, this submission responds to four interlinked questions that the Digital and Communications Committee may wish to consider;

2.2   ***Digital literacy*** – How can educational initiatives promote *students*' digital citizenship?

2.3   ***Disciplinary mechanisms*** – How can *HEI's* implement disciplinary and reporting mechanisms that effectively tackle and deter online abuse?

2.4   How can existing initiatives - such as the ***University of Liverpool's (UoL) #SpeakOut Project*** - help to cultivate these approaches?

2.5   ***Collaboration*** – How can a coalition between *online platforms* and *HEI's* produce content moderation systems that protect young adults?

3.0   Digital Literacy

3.1   Students - many away from home for the first time, cultivating new social circles and identities – are at a key transitional stage. This is a vital time to harness life-long digital citizenship skills.

3.2   The National Union of Students (NUS) found UK students often considered online abuse and harassment the 'norm' within their daily use of social media.[5] Similarly, Cowie and Myers found the *public nature* of online abuse enables it to be deemed "acceptable".[6] It becomes clear there is a climate in which the boundaries of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' online behaviour are blurred. Educational initiatives, therefore, must outline what *constitutes* online abuse and its differential impacts. **Digital literacy schemes within HEI's must *de-normalise* online abuse**.

3.3   Despite the necessity for nation-wide enforcement, educational initiatives should be designed in **collaboration with the *specific* student cohorts**. Online abuse and harassment impacts individuals in distinct ways, experienced by *under-represen*ted students at a higher rate. For instance, online abuse often occurs in a gendered context; women are more likely to experience a 'digital extension of sexual violence' - unwanted sexualisation, image-based sexual abuse, exploitation and coercion.[7] Furthermore, End Violence Against Women found 46% of

5   The National Union of Students, *#AntisocialMedia: students taking back the internet: A briefing for Students' Unions,* (2016, Macclesfield), p.1.

6   Carrie-Anne Myers and Helen Cowie, 'Cyberbullying across the Lifespan of Education: Issues and Interventions from School to University', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16.7 (2019), p.3.

7   UUK, *Tackling Online Harassment,* p.19.

respondents experienced online abuse since COVID-19.[8] This increased to 50% for Black and minoritised women and non-binary people.[9] Hence, there cannot be a simple blanket-approach to digital literacy. **Educational initiatives must represent various identities through engagement with student experience.**

3.4   The **University of Liverpool's #SpeakOut Project** provides a starting point. University researchers examined online abuse on campus, using the data to develop locally specific initiatives. Three key implementations include;

    a. *A centralised information hub* – a section of the university website detailing types of abuse, its impacts and institutional policies and available reporting mechanisms.

    b. *Active Bystander Intervention Programme* – equipping students with the skills to *intervene* in online harassment.

    c. *Developing a positive online presence module* – here, students foster the skills of a responsible digital citizen and deal with risks in online spaces.

4.0   Disciplinary and reporting mechanisms

4.1   The value of educational initiatives flows into the second point; **on ensuring students *recognise* online abuse, universities must provide effective disciplinary mechanisms to *tackle* it.** So far, universities' response to online abuse has been inadequate. Research by Phippen found HEI's were "unprepared to address concerns'" surrounding it, "lacking an understanding of rights, legislation and social behaviours that place students at risk of harassment'".[10] Whilst most universities' have overarching harassment and bullying policies, these lack coverage on online abuse; only one institution had an online strand within their sexual misconduct policy.[11] Online abuse causes both mental stress and material consequences – such as financial loss and difficulty securing housing and employment.[12] Therefore, **efficient disciplinary and reporting mechanisms must be enforced to prevent its escalation.**

4.2   Research found victims of online gender-based and transphobic harassment did not think it was 'worth reporting', due to 'lack of visibility of disciplinary consequences of harassment.[13] Within UoL's initiative, they include a 'report and support' section, allowing students to report anonymously *or* with contact details. Whilst anonymous reporting

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8   Glitch UK & End Violence Against Women, *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse*, (London, 2020)*,* p.7.

9   *Ibid.*

10   Professor Andy Phippen and Professor Emma Bond, University of Suffolk, *Online Harassment and Hate Crime in HEIs – report from FOI*, (Suffolk, 2020), p.2.

11   UUK, *Tackling Online Harassment,* p. 36.

12   Professor Sonia Livingstone and Professor Julia Davidson, *Adult Online Hate, Harassment and Abuse: A Rapid Evidence Assessment*, (London, 2019*),* p.3.

13   UUK, *Tackling Online Harassment*, p.38.

prevents formal disciplinary consequences, it allows the University to cater their preventative measures to trends in online abuse, should the individual not wish to report it formally. Evaluating their campaign, they recorded a 'positive shift in respondents' willingness to report online harassment'.[14]

4.3   Universities' nation-wide should develop similar initiatives catered to their student cohort. This progress should be monitored through **annual transparency reports**.

5.0   Collaboration with online platforms

5.1   The onus of preventing online harm cannot rely *solely* on universities and students. This leads on to the final point; **university academics (specialising in digital rights) and tech companies should collaborate - producing content moderation systems that safeguard young adults.** The local research initiatives of university academics would incorporate lived experience of online abuse into social media policy – identifying what forms of abuse are most prevalent and the platforms on which they manifest.

5.2   For instance, 'zoombombing' has often entailed cross-platform organisation; meeting codes have been shared in group chats via Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and Discord, attacks carried out on Zoom and of the abuse videos shared on Youtube. A coalition would also allow tech companies to collectively **undermine *organised* activities of online abuse against;** identifying cross-platform trends.

5.3   Similar initiatives such as **Project Protect** have been implemented by **Technology Coalition** – the collaboration of digital experts and tech companies in prevention of Child Abuse and Sexual Exploitation online.[15] Therefore, **an organised body facilitating the collaboration of HEI's and tech companies** can help to produce a moderation system for catered to **contemporary forms of online abuse.**

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14   UUK, *Tackling Online Harassment,* p.15.
15   'The Technology Coalition Announces Project Protect', Technology Coalition, (10 June 2020), https://www.technologycoalition.org/2020/05/28/a-plan-to-combat-online-child-sexual-abuse/ [accessed 23 January 2021].