

Durham's 'conspiracy of silence over rape'

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Students at Durham say that assaults have been hushed up to protect the alleged attackers
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It is one of the country's most esteemed universities, attracting undergraduates hopeful of high-flying careers in the City and the professions.

Yet beneath the prestige of Durham lurks a sex culture which some students claim goes beyond typical revelry.

Last week, the third Durham student to be cleared of rape within a year made the headlines when his barrister, Cathy McCulloch, called for an end to casual sex on campus and denounced a "f*** buddy culture".

In the wake of the verdict, students interviewed by *The Times* claimed that a cocktail of privilege and alcohol has created a conspiracy of silence at the university, with assaults on female students hushed up to protect the alleged attackers' reputations. The students, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the majority of alleged incidents had been fuelled by drinking.

"I know two girls who were raped while at university and one who was sexually assaulted while at a ball," said one doctoral student, who also studied there at undergraduate level. "One of the girls who was raped said that her friends told her, 'You can't report it, it will ruin his life'."

"At Durham we all have such good, bright futures ahead of us and you're supposed to be respectable and civilised. They are destined for great things and people think [reporting incidents] will ruin their life and think, 'Oh, it's just a boy being a boy.'"

One second-year student said that once a man had failed to show up to university, citing "family issues". Yet the student said those who knew the man from home claimed that he was involved in an alleged incident, locking himself in the bedroom of a girl who "has a boyfriend and doesn't want [the alleged incident] to come out".

The campus, he said, has a culture of "general cockiness, [a sense] that you can get away with everything" because of its affluent population.

In November, police figures showed that 463 sex attacks had been reported by female university students at 70 leading institutions in the past two years. Rape crisis groups say that the true number will have been far higher as many cases go unreported.

Two of the country's most well regarded universities — Durham and Oxford — had the largest number of recorded rape and sex assault allegations, with 36 incidents at each.

Ms McCulloch, 56, a defence barrister who specialises in rape trials, said that in recent years she had become aware of more and more cases involving alcohol and was concerned that young people did not know their limits. "If you have to get into a car, there's a legal limit," she said. "But think on this: someone who is about to do one of the most private and intimate actions with another human being has no benefit of saying, 'I have had two drinks therefore I must not go there', because there's no limit."

Ms McCulloch said that universities should set up an evening, perhaps during freshers' week, during which students are encouraged to test these limits. They would fill in a form assessing what they had eaten before drinking as much as they could. They would then be breathalysed and safely escorted to their lodgings to discover their own boundaries of alcohol consumption.

Durham insists it takes the issue of sex attacks very seriously. Professor Graham Towl, the former chairman of its sexual violence task force, said that the university had made headlines because "we have been very active with our work in this area". He added: "I think there's a problem in society and I know from my former role there's significant under-reporting and that's the general problem."

Like most universities, Durham has student counsellors on site, and has two part-time rape crisis counsellors. Professor Towl said the university has been "heartened by praise" of its prevention strategies and would "continue our work in this area and not be complacent". He urged students to come forward if they have further suggestions.

Despite the university's efforts, some students remain unconvinced. One master's student said that she was "touched up in my sleep" by a male friend. Petrified, she pretended not to be awake.

"If I was sexually assaulted, I would always think twice about reporting it," she said. "Everyone knows everyone in Durham and you can't get away from people . . . You brush it off like, 'that's life.'"

• *This article has been amended to clarify that Cathy McCulloch is not a QC*

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