Setting up an online reporting form

A brief and imperfect how-to guide

Managing expectations

It's important that form users understand the likely outcomes of making a report – for example what action your institution might take in response to a report. It's also important to point out that in urgent situations it's better to dial 999 or call campus security to ensure a quick response.

In Strathclyde's form we invite users to indicate the response they expect (eg are they simply reporting to raise awareness, for action to be taken, would they like to speak to someone or do they need support). We also say on the form page that we will decide on a response taking into account the user's wishes but this means we reserve the option to respond in a different way (eg follow up for more information, take immediate action etc).

People in particularly vulnerable situations – for example where domestic abuse may be involved – may need particular encouragement to use the form. Our form is still in its infancy so we are considering how best to approach these issues going forward.

The form itself

Be clear about the purpose of your form, and check that your form will gather all the appropriate information for your institution to respond to a report. Issues to consider:

- Will your form allow users to make anonymous reports? Although giving your name can deter some people from using the form, there is a limit to the responses that can be made to an anonymous report. For example, a report of an incident of harassment on campus, without a very specific location and time, is very hard to follow up. CCTV can sometimes help, but not if hundreds of hours of footage need to be reviewed. Anonymous reporting can, however, help gather statistics and build a picture of issues.
- How will you ensure the data integrity of information submitted? Do you need a data protection statement on the form? Will non-staff members have access to the information (for example representatives from the Students' Union?)
- Will you ask users to specify their status (eg student, staff, member of the public)? Will this make a difference to your response, or is this for data gathering purposes?
- Will you require them to provide contact details? It's hard to follow up without them.

At Strathclyde we facilitate anonymous reporting because we decided on balance that it was better to encourage reporting, but we have found that this can limit our response.

Technical stuff

Designing a simple online form that generates an email report should be relatively straightforward for a web developer, but it's worth engaging with them at an early stage to ensure you get a product

you can use. It's also worth discussing whether stats can be collected – both page analytics and stats gleaned from submitted reports. Page analytics may give you an indication of how many people visit the page compared to how many actually submit a report.

Receiving reports

Give some thought to how reports will be communicated to staff, and to whom

At Strathclyde, our online form generates an automatic email to a response group. In determining who is in the response group, consider:

- Services who can offer follow up support
- Staff concerned with investigation of complaints/campus discipline
- Security staff and/or others who can respond to immediate issues and also to campus safety concerns

Ensure that communication on this group is quick and efficient so that reports can be responded to quickly and that there is a clear protocol for establishing who will respond and how, especially if a situation is urgent. It is advisable that a senior member of staff has overall ownership of this process. Where there is an easily identified response, this can be agreed electronically. Where a more complex response is required this group can be quickly convened to agree actions.

What will you do if someone uses the form to report a serious incident in progress or that requires an immediate response?

We include the Security Control room (which is staffed 24/7) in our response group. We have had incidents of students reporting situations in which we were able to offer immediate reassurance and assistance, for example, phoning a student to make sure they were safe or despatching a security patrol.

Consider how to respond and how to engage with staff

Consider some worst-case scenarios. In more serious cases you are likely to need to follow up with the person making the report to gather more information, especially if disciplinary action or police involvement is a possibility. Likewise if someone is likely to need support.

Front-facing staff need to be briefed in how to use the form so they can assist students in filling out a report.

If there are a number of reports of similar incidents, is there a policy/operations approach that is possible? For example, changing patterns of security control, issuing notices to the student body, or raising an issue with a department/service area.

Off-the page work

Consider how you will promote the form and also encourage appropriate use. If there are numerous anonymised reports of a particular problem, is it necessary to engage with a student group or society or academic department to encourage some users to provide contact details so that problems can be followed up.

Finally, will you make a report to your institution's Equality and Diversity Committee, or Safety Committee? If so, who will do it and how often.

Be aware that as reports are generated it may be necessary for the institution to consider policy-level responses as well as individual ones.