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Evaluation of Equally Safe At School (ESAS); a whole-school approach to tackling gender-based violence in secondary school

Submission date 22/08/2023	**Recruitment status** No longer recruiting	[X] Prospectively registered [X] Protocol
Registration date 15/09/2023	**Overall study status** Ongoing	[_] Statistical analysis plan [_] Results
Last Edited 22/10/2026	**Condition category** Other	[_] Individual participant data [X] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

Secondary school environments should be safe and positive, but many students unfortunately experience sexual harassment—a form of gender-based violence (GBV). Attitudes that enable sexual harassment or excuse GBV are underpinned by harmful beliefs about gender. Sexual harassment and GBV in adolescence can lead to men's violence against women later in life. Teachers, students and policymakers want to address this major problem and recognise the importance of improving the whole school environment. However, there is little evidence on the best ways to do so.

To reduce sexual harassment and GBV in secondary schools, an intervention called Equally Safe at School (ESAS) may be effective. This intervention takes a 'whole-school approach,' which means working across every aspect of school life to continually build and reinforce messages that challenge gender-based violence and promote gender equality. This includes the school curriculum, everyday interactions between staff and students, school policies and procedures, and the culture and ethos of the school community. The aim of this study is to find out whether the ESAS intervention is effective.

Who can participate?

State-funded Scottish secondary schools can be included in this study. Students in S2, S4 or S6 at these schools can participate.

What does the study involve?

In the ESAS intervention, schools conduct a self-assessment, establish a student-led action group to tackle core issues within the school, undertake staff training, embed gender equality in their curriculum and review policies on GBV.

The study team will assess whether the ESAS intervention is effective in reducing sexual harassment within secondary schools alongside other benefits. The study will recruit 36 secondary (high) schools in Scotland, half of which will start ESAS immediately, and half will join a 'waitlist' and start ESAS one year later. The level of sexual harassment in schools that have implemented ESAS (Group 1) will be compared to those that have not yet started it (Group 2), by

surveying students at the beginning of the trial and after 12 months. These schools in Group 1 and Group 2 will be compared again at 24 months. The team will assess whether ESAS makes it more likely for students to report incidents of sexual harassment to teachers and for teachers to feel more confident in intervening. They will also evaluate whether the ESAS intervention represents value for money and whether it is delivered well. The study will focus on how closely schools follow the intervention guidance, the degree of involvement and acceptance of the school community, and any barriers or aids to successful implementation. Additionally, any unforeseen impacts will be investigated with the aim of understanding how ESAS causes change to happen.

Case studies will be conducted in six schools over two years to see how well the ESAS approach works in practice and if it helps establish changes in school culture over time. Detailed information will be collected from staff, students, and parents to produce scientific evidence on the effectiveness, costs and delivery process of ESAS.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
This evidence will help policymakers decide how to address GBV in schools. If ESAS is successful, it could be implemented in more schools throughout the UK. At the student level, there is a risk of experiencing discomfort when asked to recount experiences associated with sexual harassment or other forms of GBV.

Where is the study run from?
The University of Glasgow (UK)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
June 2023 to September 2027

Who is funding the study?
ESAS was developed by Rape Crisis Scotland in partnership with the University of Glasgow and with involvement from school staff and students, and funding from the Scottish Government. ESAS is now funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR 154376 Whole-school approach to addressing Gender-Based violence in secondary school (Equally Safe at School): A pragmatic cluster-randomised trial and mixed-methods evaluation).

Who is the main contact?
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Contact information

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National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)
154376

Study information

Scientific Title
Whole-school approach to addressing gender-based violence in secondary school (Equally Safe at School): a pragmatic cluster-randomised trial and mixed-methods evaluation

Acronym
ESAS

Study objectives
Research aim. To undertake a pragmatic cluster-randomised trial and mixed-methods evaluation to evaluate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the ESAS intervention.

RQ1: After 1 year, what is the effect of ESAS on student experiences of sexual harassment (primary outcome) and a priori secondary outcomes?
RQ2: After 1 year, what is the effect of ESAS on school prevention of, and response to, GBV?
RQ3: Does ESAS have a differential impact depending on student age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or by school-level academic attainment or area deprivation?
RQ4: Is ESAS delivered with good fidelity, reach and acceptability and how does this vary between schools, and between students/staff within schools?
RQ5: What GBV-relevant activities and initiatives take place in delayed start (control) schools?
RQ6: To what extent does ESAS enable schools to leverage other assets and resources in the short and medium term?
RQ7: What does ESAS cost (and what activities does it displace) compared with the outcomes, and what might be the long-term societal cost-effectiveness of this intervention?
RQ8: After two years, what is the prevalence of sexual harassment and how well do schools prevent and respond to it?
RQ9: What do study findings overall suggest about intervention theory of change and the potential for ESAS to be delivered and be effective/cost-effective elsewhere (particularly in other parts of the UK)?

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)

Approved 06/06/2023, MVLS University of Glasgow (College of Medical, Veterinary & Life Sciences, Wolfson Medical School Building, University Avenue University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, United Kingdom; +44 (0)141 330 5206; mvls-ethics-admin@glasgow.ac.uk), ref: 200220268

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Pragmatic cluster-randomized trial and mixed-methods evaluation

Study type(s)
Prevention

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Gender-based violence in secondary school

Interventions
The ESAS intervention is a web-based Intervention Hub with a log-in and dashboard for registered schools. The intervention is school-led, and schools use tools and guides on the dashboard to undertake five activities (procedures):
[A] Whole-school self-assessment: Schools undertake a self-assessment (via online surveys and focus groups) with management, staff and students to identify how gender inequality, adherence to stereotypes, and gendered bullying, harassment and abuse manifest in their schools. The results of the online surveys are presented via an auto-generated report on the school's online ESAS hub and provide a basis for plans by the Action Group (B) to address priority areas.
[B] Action group: Schools then establish a student-led Action group, with several supporting staff. The terms of reference state the group should include students from a range of year groups and should be diverse, inclusive and reasonably representative of the wider student body. The group meets regularly, first reviewing the self-assessment findings and developing ideas to address the key issues outlined in the report. These form the group's action plan. Schools can access a range of materials to support them to recruit, run and sustain an Action Group on their ESAS hub.
[C] Two-tier staff training: School staff undertake training to develop the capacity and capability to deal with issues relating to gender-based violence. All school staff complete an e-module hosted on the ESAS hub. The e-module provides foundational information about GBV and supports staff to identify ways in which they can embed principles into everyday practice. Staff in student support roles within the school additionally attend a 2-hour 'enhanced' in-person training session delivered by their local rape crisis centre to further equip them to respond to safeguarding issues in relation to gender-based violence.
[D] Curriculum enhancement: Staff can access a range of resources and lesson plans to support them to embed teaching about gender equality into the school curriculum to develop students' understanding of issues relating to gender-based violence and gender equality.
[E] Policy review: Schools review key policies and behavioural codes (such as Promoting Positive Behaviour, Equality and Diversity, and Safeguarding) to ensure explicit, consistent, and appropriate handling of issues relating to gender equality and GBV. Via the online ESAS hub, schools can access policy review templates and tools, including prompt questions to ensure inclusion of gender and GBV, example paragraphs and suggestions for ongoing student co-production.

TRIAL EVALUATION DESIGN
Study 1: Cluster randomised trial with repeated cross sections in 36 schools in Scotland, randomised (1:1) after collecting baseline data to either immediately start the ESAS intervention (intervention arm) or a 12-month delayed start (control arm); primary outcome (student experience of sexual harassment) and secondary outcome measures collected at baseline, 12 and 24 months.
Study 2: Systems-informed process evaluation to examine how the interaction of ESAS with the school system over time impacts on school-based GBV.
Study 2a will assess the first year of schools' implementation of ESAS (study year 1 for immediate start schools, study year 2 for delayed start schools), including: i) fidelity, reach and acceptability of ESAS implementation among staff, students and parents, including variation within and across schools; ii) mechanisms of action (as hypothesised in the Programme Theory) and early indications of school system response. There will also be brief measures to assess 'usual practice' in delayed start schools.
Study 2b (immediate start schools only) will assess how ESAS interacts with school systems over a longer timeframe, including if and how change is embedded, and if and how ESAS enables schools to leverage other assets and resources.
Study 3: Economic evaluation to compare the intervention outcomes (consequences) with costs of implementation and evaluate the likely long-term societal cost-effectiveness.

METHODS
1. Online surveys, self-complete surveys at baseline, 12 months and 24 months. All trial school; all students in S2 (age 13 years), S4 (age 15 years) and S6 (age 17 years)
2. Short online survey with key leadership/ management staff re implementation of ESAS (immediate and delayed start schools). Administered 6 months post-baseline survey (year one) and at the end of year two in the 18 immediate start schools; and 6 months post first f/up survey in 18 delayed start schools.
3. Brief online survey with school leadership staff to assess usual practice in the control arm (delayed start schools). Conducted at 12 months.
4. Interviews with ESAS lead staff in less engaged/non-active schools after 12 months (immediate start schools)
5. Interviews of Local Authority (LAs) education stakeholders (n = 6), between 12 and 24 months.
6. Analysis of school-led online self-assessment survey with staff (immediate start schools at baseline, 12 and 24 months; delayed start schools at 12, 24 months).
7. Analysis of school self-completed online intervention dashboard. At 12 months (immediate start schools); and 24 months (delayed start schools)

CASE STUDY SCHOOLS ONLY (6 of 18 immediate start/intervention arm schools will serve as case studies)
8. In-person paired/group discussions with students. Four groups per school. Conducted 7-9 months after baseline survey
9. In-person paired/group discussions with staff. 2-4 pairs/groups per school. Conducted 7-9 months after baseline survey
10. Short online survey to all parents/carers. Conducted 7-9 months after baseline survey
11. 'Ripple effects mapping' workshops (with student and staff groups), four workshops per school (two groups meeting twice each). Conducted post 12 months. Conducted between 6-12 months.
12. Analysis of school policies updated as part of ESAS intervention. Conducted between 9-12 months.

Intervention Type

Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
School-based sexual harassment measured using a 5-item student self-report survey at baseline, 12 months and 24 months (main outcome-control comparison at 12 months). The 5-item measure is adapted from the AAUW Hostile Hallways measure.

Key secondary outcome(s)
All secondary outcome variables are brief multi-item instruments or validated measures, and are measured via student self-report surveys at baseline, 12 months and 24 months:
1. Students' sexual harassment perpetration will be measured using three items that assess engagement in unwelcome behaviours at or on the way to or from school in the last two months
2. Students' perceptions of feeling safe at school will be measured using two items that assess fear of sexual harassment or feeling unsafe at or on the way to or from school
3. Confidence to report problematic behaviours in schoolwill be measured using three items that assess students' confidence in reporting three types of sexual harassment. Original items tested in the pilot for this study
4. Students' endorsement of gender stereotypes will be measured using three items
5. Students' endorsement of gender-equal attitudes will be measured using three items
6. Students' attitudes toward teen dating violence will be measured using three items
7. Students' self-efficacy to make the school saferwill be measured using three items that assess students' perceived ability to help make their school a safer place. Original items tested in the pilot for this study.
8. Students' perceptions of staff and student response to sexual harassment at school will be measured using five items; three of these items are based on a vignette describing a hypothetical incident of sexual harassment involving fictional students at their school. Original items tested in the pilot for this study.
9. Students' attitudes toward sexual harassment will be measured using 3 items drawn from a range of attitudinal measures and adapted for this study
10. Students' perceived ease of talking about GBV in school will be measured using 2 items. Original items tested in the pilot for this study.
11. Students' perceived scope of sexual harassment as a problem at school will be measured using 3 items that assess whether students think three types of sexual harassment are an everyday part of life in their school. Original items tested in the pilot for this study.
12. Students' perceived quality of teacher-student relationships will be measured using 5 items. The other two are original items tested in the pilot for this study.

Completion date
30/09/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Secondary schools are eligible to take part if they meet the following criteria:
1. Based in Scotland
2. State-funded
3. 300 or more students on the school roll
4. Not already undertaken an ESAS activity

Within eligible schools, the following participants are eligible to take part in specific research activities:

1. All students in years 2, 4, 6 (age range 12-18 years)
2. All teaching/non-teaching staff in the school
3. All parents/carers in the study schools are eligible to participate in the parent survey

Participant type(s)
Carer, Employee, Learner/student

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
12 Years

Upper age limit
18 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
26072

Key exclusion criteria
1. Students and teachers who refuse their consent; students who are opted out of data collection by their parent/carer
2. Schools <300 pupils
3. Private schools
4. Schools who have already commenced one or more ESAS activity

Date of first enrolment
01/10/2023

Date of final enrolment
30/06/2024

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

Study participating centre
Study participating centres (schools) not yet confirmed
-
-
England
-

Sponsor information

Organisation
University of Glasgow

ROR
https://ror.org/00vtgdb53

Funder(s)

Funder type
Government

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)
National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
Research data and consent forms will be kept for a minimum of 10 years or for as long as the research data are archived, in line with the University of Glasgow policy. Personal contact data will be kept until the completion of the study.

The researchers are requesting participant consent to archive anonymised data so it can be shared with other researchers or organisations that carry out high-quality work in the area of GBV. The data will be offered to the UK data archive Re-Share for archiving (all safeguarded

access). If that is unsuccessful, they will be archived in the University of Glasgow Enlighten: Research Data repository. Regardless of where the data are archived, there will be an entry for the study in the University of Glasgow Enlighten: Research Data repository.

The data will be archived and available for sharing but will be embargoed until 2 years after the study is completed or the publication of the main study papers (whichever happens later). Until then, the study team will have exclusive use of the data. The principal investigator will endeavour to make the data available as soon as possible.

IPD sharing plan summary

Stored in publicly available repository

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Protocol article		16/02/2025	17/02/2025	Yes	No
Study website	Study website	11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes