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University students' feedback regarding effective measures to prevent bullying

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ABSTRACT

This study explored university students' perceptions of the usefulness of some antibullying measures in ensuring a bullying-free learning environment. The results in this paper are part of a larger comparative study that investigated the prevalence of bullying in Norway and Ghana, albeit limiting this paper to students' recommendations of preventive measures. Students from Norway ($n = 438$) and Ghana ($n = 751$) were recruited. The comparative study highlights the sociocultural tendencies underlying some recommendations to provide holistic knowledge. The analyses revealed significant differences in students' recommendations from both countries. Generally, the responses suggest the need for the impartial application of disciplinary measures to students and lecturers; independent contact persons for reporting; students' and authorities' collaboration for bullying prevention; antibullying employment contracts; counselling services; and awareness creation. With unique national cultures and changing societal trends, we suggest that national policies that aim at cultural consciousness regarding bullying would be ideal for its prevention.

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Introduction

Bullying research and media attention focus mostly on children and youths in schools and adults at workplaces, with relatively limited attention and research on peer bullying at colleges and universities (Coleyshaw, 2010; Harrison et al., 2022; Lund & Ross, 2017), particularly on the academic effects of peer bullying at universities (Young-Jones et al., 2015). Olweus (1993) defined bullying as a situation when a student repeatedly experiences exposure to hostile actions at the hands of one or more students over time. The actions include name-calling, teasing, threatening, taunting, kicking, hitting, pushing, pinching, blocking someone's path, shoving, exclusion from groups, rude gestures, being noncompliant with the wishes of others, and making faces. Part of the definition is that these negative actions inflict injury or discomfort (p. 9). Olweus' original definition points to harmful behaviours that occur more than a single time by a stronger perpetrator, making it difficult for victims to defend themselves. Typically, this definition pertains to children in schools, making some researchers (e.g. Vveinhardt et al., 2019) justify the larger volume of research concerning children and adolescents. However, bullying is not limited to children; it transcends every facet of life, including universities, which is why the focus of this study is to find ways to prevent university bullying.

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A review of recent evidence of university bullying

Studies in higher education have varied topical and methodological orientations and are few. However, they reveal that various bullying behaviours are prevalent at universities (Sinkkonen et al., 2014). Gómez-Galán et al. (2021) uncovered verbal and relational bullying at ten Spanish universities but found no evidence of physical bullying. Muluk et al. (2021) discovered social, physical, verbal, and racial bullying among students at three Indonesian universities. Physical acts included spitting, poking, slapping, and kicking, which the perpetrators considered “jokes”. Verbal acts included laughing at others, and social bullying occurred through exclusion from groups, such as “cliques” and “gangs”. Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) found negative and “under-the-breath” comments, the spreading of rumours, and the intentional misinterpretation of instructions to be acts of bullying. A study concerning lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgender people and students with gender expressions outside traditional norms (LGBT+) in decision-making with regard to enrolling at universities in Nigeria (Formby, 2017) found that applicants were worried about discrimination and prejudice, such as acts of bullying. Pörhölä et al. (2020) also studied the bullying of undergraduate students in 47 universities in 4 countries (Argentina, Estonia, Finland, and the United States of America) and found that verbal bullying was dominant and that the perpetrators were mainly colleagues or faculty members. In their study, bullying mainly occurred through unjust criticism and mocking concerning personal qualities, humiliating students concerning their academic performance or belittling them, social discrimination, and damage to peer relationships.

Concerning research results in Norway and Ghana, bullying studies among university students are generally scarce, particularly in Ghana. Recent studies in Norway that investigated the prevalence of bullying include Sivertsen et al. (2019) and Lund (2017). Sivertsen et al. (2019) reported a national survey of 50,000 participants and found that 17% reported incidents of sexual harassment that happened the previous year, and 24% experienced sexual harassment within their lifetime. Lund (2017) found that 9% of the 3254 university students in Norway experienced exclusion-related acts like being ignored or left out of group activities on purpose.

In Ghana, the few studies we identified in higher education were on cyberbullying and stalking. Sam et al. (2019) studied cyberbullying among university and high school students and found that out of the 476 university participants, 83% of them engaged in bullying-related behaviours in the form of “nasty text messages” at least once in the past six months. Another study we found in higher education in Ghana is Chan et al. (2020), who studied stalking among university students and found that 50% of their participants experienced bullying-related behaviours like verbal abuse, vandalism to property and criminal damage, death threats, and unwanted communication.

The effects of bullying

Every bullying incident has physical, psychological, social, economic, and organisational costs (Boudrias et al., 2021; Hoel et al., 2020). Bullying creates unhealthy atmospheres in organisations, which leads to absenteeism, resignations, slacking off, and a bad organisational image (Hoel et al., 2020). Of paramount concern is that bullying affects the well-being of the victims or those who might also witness it occurring. A recent systematic review by Boudrias et al. (2021) shows that bullying is associated with various unpleasant and distressing short-term and long-term outcomes that can affect the victim’s mental health and academic career. Cowie and Myers (2016) classified the effects of bullying as psychological, emotional, and social (i.e. upset or sadness, anger, aggression, lowered self-esteem, isolation and loneliness, embarrassment, social apprehension, and difficulties with concentration or learning). Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) and Nielsen and Einarsen (2012) also identified physical and psychosomatic disorders, including panic attacks and shaking, back pain, sweating, headaches, eating disorders, and stomach disorders. There has also been evidence of burnout symptoms like lethargy. These effects can lead to academic difficulties (e.g. Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), absenteeism, and withdrawal (Cornell et al., 2013). The effects of bullying

necessitate the need to prevent it, but the nature of the prevention depends on the forms that the behaviours take and the context, whether it is the learning environment or the workplace.

Ways of preventing bullying

Generally, bullying prevention takes various forms, including primary interventions targeting entire populations to prevent bullying. Secondary measures provide remedies that aim to discourage the recurrence of bullying (focusing on students with risk factors) or reverse the process, and tertiary processes reduce the adverse effects of the events to restore the victims' health or decrease the duration of the problem. Intervention at the organisational level aims to influence organisations' predisposition towards uncivil behaviours and create a culture that does not tolerate bullying (Elinoff et al., 2004; Vartia & Leka, 2011).

Whatever the form, bullying prevention is essentially about eradicating factors that lead to its occurrence, reversing the possibility of reoccurrence, caring for the victims, or rehabilitating the perpetrators. These measures are intended to ensure safe workplace or learning environments through attitudinal changes, organisational cultures, and policy frameworks that decisively and ethically prevent bullying and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the preventive measures over time (Vartia & Leka, 2011).

In learning environments, bullying prevention focuses on the institutions and students. The approach could be a schoolwide intervention (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007) or a targeted intervention (e.g. counselling support) (Elinoff et al., 2004; Marraccini et al., 2018). Schoolwide intervention sees "bullying as a systemic social problem needing collective responsibility" (Juvonen & Graham, 2014, p. 172). It emphasises monitoring and amplified awareness and demands the transformation of the entire school culture, focusing on individuals or groups, families, and the community (Olweus, 1993). Depending on the nature of bullying, programmes may emphasise prosocial skill-building or rely on varying degrees of zero tolerance and punishment (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Schoolwide measures mostly pertain to children and youths and may focus on developing bystanders' empathy and assistance for the victims (Kärnä et al., 2011), whilst others teach social capabilities to handle interpersonal fairness (Leadbeater & Sukhawathanakul, 2011). Bystander intervention is also prioritised, given that about 85% of bystanders perform roles during bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1998) by acting as accomplices or "reinforcers", posing as passive onlookers, or intervening in various ways (Gini et al., 2008; Kyriacou et al., 2016).

Targeted interventions are for people who are at high risk of committing aggressive behaviours or are at higher risk of being targets, believing that they have personal challenges or deficits that must be addressed to reduce the possibility that they engage in or are at the receiving end of such aggressive behaviours (Cross et al., 2021; Orpinas et al., 2003). Targeted interventions are not divorced from schoolwide interventions but are rather integral aspects of them. An example of a targeted intervention is social skill training aimed at bullies and victims (Farrington, 1993).

Bullying in all contexts usually derives from dyadic interpersonal friction, which may also involve groups that are part of an organisation. It demands that school intervention programmes include individuals, student cliques, working staff, and administrators. Einarsen et al. (2011a) point to the need to create awareness, suggesting that bullying remains an organisational problem and that prevention measures are ineffective when authorities are unaware of its occurrence. Vartia and Leka (2011) also made a case for awareness creation and the engagement of all stakeholders, particularly among faculty members who interact with students on a daily basis.

Awareness is about communicating policies, so antibullying policies are a part of bullying prevention. Policies embody the values an organisation adopts and chooses to protect with specific actions, which help resolve tensions between individual rights and collective interests (Faucher et al., 2015).

Policies inform students about definitions, actions, support, and resource persons, indicating universities' stances on bullying and harassment. They communicate authorities' intolerance for bullying and help to ensure a bullying-free culture (Vaill et al., 2021). Policy measures specify national or stakeholder-level best practices and need to be formulated by administrators and student representatives (Vartia & Leka, 2011). Policy beneficiaries' (e.g. students') involvement in the policy-making process makes a policy acceptable and feasible and makes sure it addresses their needs (Camp et al., 2018). An effective means to prevent bullying is when professionals assist students in creating awareness and in understanding the injustices involved to ensure the tolerance of all people. This requires recognising the right to dignity and equitable education (Polanin & Vera, 2013).

Some policies communicate zero tolerance, which is also a policy orientation. Zero-tolerance policies prescribe preset punishments for behavioural offences, meaning students who commit offences are punished (Holloway, 2002). Zero tolerance relates much more to visible or overt acts than the covert and subtle behaviours and issues of cyberbullying (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013). Under a zero-tolerance policy, punishments can include the suspension and expulsion of bullies or notification of the police (Daniel & Bondy, 2008). The assumption is that authorities will address all forms of bullying when they are aware of them, enhancing deterrence because students know they will not escape punishment.

However, Vaill et al. (2020) found that about 95% of universities do not communicate punishments by making people aware of the fact that an offence occurred for which they have punished the offender in a specific way, which undermines the trust and efficiency of the policies. Bradshaw (2013) also argued that zero-tolerance policies do not help in preventing bullying because students consider them a harsh measure, making people unwilling to report bullying. Reports about the relative effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies by Holloway (2002) also indicate counterproductive outcomes. Nonetheless, zero-tolerance policies have become the single most common antibullying measure usually offered in bullying literature (Twale, 2018).

Linked to the issue of antibullying policies, Twale and De Luca (2008) identified redress, which may include counselling to support victims, particularly in the case of sexual harassment (Camp et al., 2018). Counselling helps victims address the effects of bullying by providing them with someone to talk to and an opportunity to explore alternative solutions to support them in regaining their self-confidence or understanding why the incident occurred. Counselling helps the counsellor identify organisational flaws that allow the behaviours to occur (Tehrani, 2011). Redress draws attention to fairness and demands that policies define what constitutes bullying. When complaints are made, the complainants, their witnesses, and the harassers must be interviewed open-mindedly. There must also be an agreement on who will see the investigator's report when there is an internal disciplinary hearing, where the investigator(s) also answers questions (Einarsen et al., 2003).

Einarsen et al. (2003) note that how victims perceive their ordeals and react to them depends on institutional factors and the support they receive when they experience bullying. When people perceive that they will not receive support from the authorities, they are less likely to report such events (Cowie & Myers, 2016). A lack of support also makes victims fear reprisals because they do not foresee any security, so they do not report bullying (Twale & De Luca, 2008), making the role of an independent contact person indispensable in bullying prevention. The need to ensure fairness and that attention is paid to the intense emotions of those involved in bullying justifies the position of having an independent contact person to whom bullying can be reported (Hubert, 2003). Shame and guilt are common emotions experienced as a result of bullying, and having trusted people available ensures professionalism, adequate care, and confidentiality without assigning blame (Vartia & Leka, 2011).

The requirement of ensuring fairness also faces challenges due to the value workplace management or universities place on their senior managers or faculty members and the need to retain them (Rayner et al., 2002). Citing the UNISON study, Rayner et al. (2002) cautioned against the high cost of it being unfair when management retains culpable personnel; it makes others complacent. Linked to the need to ensure fairness at universities, Sinkkonen et al. (2014) called for consciousness regarding the work of professors, lecturers, and other academic staff to avoid excessive autonomy, which undermines interventions in the advent of bullying.

Employment contracts on entry into institutions have been considered helpful in preventing bullying (Davidson & Harrington, 2012; Yamada, 2011). It can be argued that their use can help create a first impression and raise awareness of bullying. A contract's ability to prevent bullying derives from the fundamental function of enjoining responsibility and the accountability necessary to prevent bullying and guarantee against rights abuse (Rayner et al., 2002).

Some bullying prevention efforts have explored leadership orientations, suggesting that a lack of constructive leadership and the presence of passive, destructive, and laissez-faire leadership are associated with bullying, whilst ethical leadership, based on being honest, trustworthy, morally upright, and principled in decision-making and one's personal life, tends to be more successful in preventing bullying (Hauge et al., 2007; Stouten et al., 2010). Twale and De Luca (2008) identified the need for leaders who listen and are empathic, and Gregory et al. (2010) suggested that authoritative leadership can reduce the occurrence of bullying. However, questions remain about the applicability of authoritative leadership in higher education, which leans towards a balanced authority structure.

Higher education bullying and the complexities of prevention

Universities are both workplaces and educational institutions where rules define codes of conduct and punishment for breaches. Some researchers argue that adults find subtler ways to harm their targets to avoid punishment (Cortina et al., 2013), making adult behaviours different from those that constitute children's bullying (Smith & Coel, 2018). Nonetheless, university bullying may fall within Olweus' original definition, despite the behaviours being qualitatively different.

Like the behaviours cited earlier from higher education studies, adult bullying involves disseminating nasty, spiteful, demeaning, and malicious rumours; social exclusion; humiliating a person; mocking; threatening a victim directly or indirectly online; unwelcome sexual advances; stalking; and exposing information that a person does not want to be shared (Cowie & Myers, 2016). Some behaviours harm people's reputations, intimidate their professional standings, disorient victims, and isolate them from others (see Leymann, 1996; Rayner & Hoel, 1997). Like bullying in school contexts, these behaviours are persistent and are intended to harm or achieve selfish desires over another weaker person based on factors such as disability, age, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health status, economic status, and nationality (Cowie & Myers, 2016; Khat, 2012).

Hodgins and McNamara (2017) note that the subtleness of adult bullying makes it fall outside of antibullying frameworks, which usually tackle obvious and verifiable behaviours. This may partly explain the limited attention, research, and preventive efforts in higher education. This further compounds universities' ability to holistically prevent bullying, considering that these behaviours may be difficult to identify across contexts and cultures. Gillen et al. (2017) argued that university administrators do not proactively act to prevent bullying; they only react to cases. The complexity of bullying antecedents and behaviours is further complicated by emerging trends, like cyberbullying (Einarsen et al., 2011b), which add to the uncertainty about which preventive measures to apply.

Vveinhardt et al. (2020) proposed the importance of considering students' recommendations of measures to prevent bullying, noting that the measures in use are mostly still under investigation or pertain to compulsory schools. Meriläinen et al. (2015) fulfilled the recommendation of Vveinhardt et al. (2020) by seeking students' recommendations on bullying prevention through an open-ended questionnaire, but they were not very successful because more than 60% of all the respondents did not suggest any solutions. Thus, alternative approaches to accessing students' recommendations, such as allowing students to select from a list of alternatives, could increase their willingness to provide opinions and insights. In addition, Lund and Ross (2017) suggestion of using multiple populations from international samples may allow researchers to assess differences and, more importantly, generality across different cultural and national contexts.

Why we chose Ghana and Norway

In response to the call from Lund and Ross (2017) to conduct cross-cultural and international research, we conducted comparative research involving Ghana and Norway to determine variations in bullying and students' suggestions of measures to prevent it, but limiting this paper to suggestions made by students in both countries and making inferences concerning possible reasons for any variations in their suggestions. We chose Ghana and Norway based on the perceived sociocultural and economic differences identified, which can influence the prevalence and attitude towards bullying.

A basic framework developed by Hofstede (1983) compares international organisations and societies based on the dominant values in people's lives. This framework explains Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) assertion that people's perceptions of aggressive behaviours partly depend on their national cultures. Concerning variations in the nature of bullying across cultures, Ahmad et al. (2021) identified (a) masculinity versus femininity, (b) power distance, and (c) individualism versus collectivism as underlying factors of bullying in the Hofstede (1983) framework.

"High power distance" cultures do not frown on the maltreatment of subordinates by superiors (Vogel et al., 2015). "Low power distance" cultures not only frown on superiors' maltreatment of subordinates but also disapprove of any form of inequality that could lead to power-related abuse of people (Ahmad et al., 2021). Concerning individualism versus collectivism, Samnani and Singh (2012) posit that individualism leads to a greater risk of bullying because it leads to unhealthy competition. On the contrary, collectivism is associated with in-group loyalty with minimal possibility of competition and bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Feminine values lead to caring and interpersonal cooperation with minimal possibility of bullying (Samnani & Singh, 2012), whilst masculine ones exercise dominance, which can lead to bullying (Ahmad et al., 2021). In effect, bullying will be most prevalent in societies that are individualistic, high in power distance, and have a high predisposition towards masculine tendencies (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Norway and Ghana fit into the above cultural categories differently, which makes them good pairs of interest for comparative research. Concerning Ghana, Adom et al. (2018), Anlesinya et al. (2019), and Marbell (2014) have referred to Ghana as a high-power distance, masculine, and collectivist society. Rayner et al. (2002) considered Norway an egalitarian society with minimal power distance and caring social values. Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) also referred to Norway as a low-power distance society with feminine values. Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) further consider Norway an individualistic society, which contradicts the notion that Norway is free of interpersonal competition and bullying. Nonetheless, the place of power distance in the bullying phenomenon, coupled with masculine and feminine values, makes Ghana and Norway socially different, with the expectation that Ghanaian society would be less conscious of bullying than Norway.

Our assumption is not only based on the above framework. Evidence shows that the consciousness of bullying differs in Norway compared to Ghana. Researchers like Rayner et al. (2002) posit that the tendency explains Norway's pioneering role in raising awareness about bullying, which also explains Norway's zero-tolerance policy towards bullying (Roland et al., 2010). On the contrary, Ghana has no anti-bullying policy (Arhin et al., 2019), and Leach (2003) found that gender inequality (mainly male dominance) influences bullying in Ghana and can be part of the broader cultural and socioeconomic differences that favour bullying. We believe these differences between Ghana and Norway would influence the prevalence and attitude towards bullying and people's suggestions for bullying prevention. So, in our quest to know the best ways to prevent bullying among university students, we paired these culturally different countries in order to gain greater insight. We postulate that cultures determine people's experiences and choices in varied ways, a view that Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems model of development explains.

The theory of ecological systems

Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised the macrosystem, which refers to the broader cultural blueprint (the entire social structure: hazards, cultural beliefs, and opportunity structures) that

invariably defines everything in the microlevels of society, including political and socioeconomic ideologies that shape institutions and other social trends that affect the individual (see Cross et al., 2015).

Political ideologies and laws reflect a people's culture, and laws reinforce culturally unconscious and concealed behaviours. This implies that people's behaviour and experiences are the outcomes of their culture. For example, state laws allowing for the bullying of people who are categorised as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) or other sexually diverse students reflect people's cultures. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that when society alters the blueprint, the structure of settings can shift significantly to produce changes in behaviour.

Objective

The current study explored bullying prevention measures favoured by students at universities in Ghana and Norway. The study is also part of a larger study that investigated the prevalence of bullying in the two populations, but we limit this paper to only students' suggestions of measures that can prevent bullying. By comparing the results, we seek to highlight the sociocultural tendencies that might align with the different recommendations (Bryman, 2012) and also gain holistic knowledge (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). Nonetheless, the study seeks to draw attention to the best bullying prevention measures through reflections on the measures identified as most consistent with most bullying prevention programmes. The following research questions provide a guide for this endeavour:

1. What measures do students suggest for the prevention of bullying in university settings?
2. Is there a significant difference in students' ratings of favoured measures in Ghana and Norway, and are there differences in their recommendations?
3. What measures do students who reported being bullied prioritise for preventing bullying in university settings?

Methods

Participants

The respondents were final year bachelor's students, master's students, and PhD fellows from two universities in Ghana ($n = 751$) and two universities in Norway ($n = 438$), who completed the same questionnaire. In Norway, most participants were female ($n = 271$, 61.9%), whereas there were more male students in the Ghanaian sample ($n = 391$, 52.1%). Most of the participants from both Norway ($n = 200$, 45.7%) and Ghana ($n = 406$, 54.1%) belonged to the 23–27-year-old age group. In Norway and Ghana, the students had attended their universities for an average of 3 years ($n = 134$, 30.6%) and 4 years ($n = 431$, 57.4%), respectively. Most of the Norwegian respondents ($n = 211$, 48.2%) were master's students, whereas most of the Ghanaian participants ($n = 708$, 94.3%) were bachelor's students. In both Norway ($n = 248$, 56.6%) and Ghana ($n = 702$, 93.5%), most of the respondents were unmarried. The opinions of a subset of participants in Norway ($n = 88$) and Ghana ($n = 285$ – 294) who reported having been bullied on presenting them with a working definition of bullying were examined separately.

The participants were purposely sampled to guarantee that they had sufficient experience as university students to be able to provide informed responses (Mason, 2002). We chose two universities from Ghana and two from Norway. The participating universities typify the attributes of universities in their respective countries concerning antibullying structures and policies. We selected one university with a relatively larger population and a second with a relatively smaller population to ensure reasonably balanced contexts and the possibility of comparing across contexts.

Instrumentation

The bullying prevention questionnaire contained 10 literature-source self-developed items and was part of the more extensive questionnaire investigating the prevalence of negative behaviours and bullying in learning environments. A Norwegian and English version was used to represent the respondents' principal languages, with an informed consent section that participants could tick to participate or decline.

Sources of the bullying prevention measures

There is no standardised bullying prevention questionnaire that could investigate bullying dynamics in higher education. As such, we developed a questionnaire based on research findings and outcomes in higher education contexts. For example, noting that Meriläinen et al. (2015) found that 60% of students offered no recommendations, we picked the most salient recommendations from Meriläinen et al. (2015) and those typical of most bullying prevention measures in the extant literature for students to rate. Broadly speaking, the items exploring the best prevention strategies represent Vartia and Leka (2011, p. 360) categorisation of strategies to prevent bullying, representing the domains of awareness creation (Camp et al., 2018), the just application of disciplinary measures (Einarsen et al., 2011a), a protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy (Meriläinen et al., 2015; Twale, 2018), bystander intervention (Twale, 2018), social support systems (Elinoff et al., 2004; Meriläinen et al., 2015), an independent contact person for reporting (Twale, 2018), bully courts (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009) and a good conduct employment contract (Davidson & Harrington, 2012; Yamada, 2011).

The participants indicated their level of agreement with the ten statements concerning measures to prevent bullying using a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e. 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). We calculated Cronbach's alpha, which indicates internal consistency, or the extent to which each item assesses a single measure dimension (Hair et al., 2019; Willits et al., 2016), and the Cronbach's alpha showed strong internal consistency, as shown in Table 1 below.

Data collection

The Norwegian participants filled out an online questionnaire using the application Survey Xact between October 2020 and March 2021. Students were emailed a link to the online survey directly. Privacy was guaranteed by receiving students' email addresses in encrypted form, which allowed direct uploading of the email addresses in bulk from an Excel spreadsheet without copying them individually. We adequately informed the respondents that the research was for academic purposes and that there was no foreseeable risk of participation. Nonetheless, they were informed that they could withdraw voluntarily at any time. The Ghanaian students filled out a paper version of the survey between January and March 2021, which teaching assistants from the various departments distributed on campus and received in drop-in boxes. The drop-in box provided privacy and safety by safeguarding against identifying participants with their responses if they had handed the filled-out questionnaires directly to the researchers. The different procedures were due to the university administration's concerns about providing student email addresses in Ghana.

Table 1. Reliability statistics.

Country	Cronbach's Alpha	Alpha based on standardised items	
Norway	.829	.827	10
Ghana	.863	.894	10

Ethical approval

The study has been registered at the Norwegian Data Protection Agency (NSD) with reference code 737855 and followed the recommended ethical standards. The research institution in Norway sent a notice of ethical review approval to the two collaborating universities in Ghana to obtain their approval for the data collection and processing. As part of the ethical certification process, we were forbidden from collecting the exact ages of the respondents because the ethical committee thinks that doing so would disclose students' identities and tell a reader whenever a minor, for example, has been sexually abused. The process also partly determined our decision to provide measures for students to choose from as an alternative to providing them with open boxes to write in their suggestions because the ethical board thinks they could use the process to write in the names of perpetrators of bullying.

Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 was used to analyse the data. The normality test results show significant skewness; nonetheless, the descriptive statistics (i.e. averages and percentages) were better at showing the students' recommendations to answer research questions 1 and 3. We used a Mann–Whitney U nonparametric test to determine differences in the recommendations across the two countries to answer research question 2.

We answered the general question: *“What is your level of agreement with the following measures that can prevent or address bullying at your university?”* For our first analysis (not shown), we calculated averages for each of the ten measures based on the five-point Likert-type scale (i.e. 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). We also calculated country-specific overall averages, i.e. 3.69 (Norway) and 3.80 (Ghana), to find a threshold for the most popular measures in each country. This gave us a working threshold of six topmost preferred measures in the respective countries, which we subsequently made bold in [Tables 2–4](#). A desire for the true affirmation of the positively worded measures necessitated further analysis for the response categories of 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. Based on a benchmark of the six top measures identified, we boldly highlight the six top priorities regarding the results.

Table 2. Ranking of respondents' ratings of preferred preventive measures with 4–5 scores on a 5-point Likert scale (general students population) in Ghana and Norway.

Preventive measures	Norway (n = 438)		Ghana (n = 751)		Mann–Whitney (4-5 score)	
	% (n)	Rank	% (n)	Rank	U	P-value
1. Disciplinary measures must be applied fairly to students and lecturers (FDM).	91.7% (402)	1	74.4% (556)	1	102356.0	0.010
2. Both students and staff must solve problems in the university (CPS).	87.7% (384)	2	69.4% (517)	8	85957.5	0.001
3. A protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy must be established and communicated to students and staff (ZT).	85.8% (376)	3	71.1% (530)	5	85683.0	0.001
4. There is a need for an independent contact person to report bullying incidents to, e.g. a student ombudsman (ICP).	73.5% (322)	4	69.3% (516)	9	70369.0	0.001
5. There is a need for medical/counselling centres(s) to help bullying victims (MC).	60.2% (264)	5	70.3% (512)	6	62748.0	0.054
6. Contracts with good conduct or dismissal clauses must be signed at matriculation or the start of employment to ensure accountability (CGC).	58.4% (256)	6	73.6% (549)	2	68109.0	0.408
7. There is a need to enhance bystander/onlooker responses (BR).	51.4% (225)	7	71.3% (531)	4	55359.0	0.042
8. There is a need for curriculum-laden antibullying lessons to encourage caring values (CLAL).	42.3% (185)	8	71.5% (533)	3	46651.5	0.185
9. There must be awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours (AEB).	34.5% (151)	9	69.5% (518)	7	35265.5	0.030
10. Bully courts and tribunals are needed to deal with student bullying issues (BC).	24.2% (106)	10	68.9% (514)	10	26970.0	0.842

Table 3. Rating of respondents' preferred preventive measures with 4–5 scores on a 5-point Likert scale (for students who did not experience bullying based on a definition) in Ghana and Norway.

Preventive measures	NORWAY non-bullied (n = 350)		GHANA non-bullied (n = 455)		Mann–Whitney (4–5 score)	
	% (n)	Rank	% (n)	Rank	U	P-value
1. Disciplinary measures must be applied fairly to students and lecturers (FDM).	92.3% (323)	1	79.3% (361)	1	53048.0	0.018
2. Both students and staff must solve problems in the university (CPS).	88.6% (310)	2	75.1% (341)	8	46763.5	0.003
3. A protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy must be established and communicated to students and staff (ZT).	86.3% (302)	3	78.5% (357)	2*	46788.5	0.001
4. There is a need for an independent contact person to report bullying incidents to, e.g. a student ombudsman (ICP).	71.5% (250)	4	74.5% (339)	10	36005.5	0.001
5. There is a need for medical/counselling centres(s) to help bullying victims (MC).	57.2% (200)	5	77.2% (342)	4	32283.0	0.199
6. Contracts with good conduct or dismissal clauses must be signed at matriculation or at the start of employment to ensure accountability (CGC).	57.4% (201)	6	78.5% (357)	2*	34876.5	0.519
7. There is a need to enhance bystander/onlooker responses (BR).	51.2% (179)	7	75.4% (343)	7	27288.5	0.007
8. There is a need for curriculum-laden antibullying lessons to encourage caring values (CLAL).	40% (140)	8	75.7% (344)	6	22802.0	0.261
9. There must be awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours (AEB).	30.3% (106)	9	76.7% (349)	5	16374.0	0.035
10. Bully courts and tribunals are needed to deal with student bullying issues (BC).	22% (77)	10	74.9% (341)	9	13117.5	0.989

* = Repeated ranks.

We also desired to know whether the victims of bullying revealed any differences in their ratings of the measures, so we tested the students' approval of the measures using the 4–5 scale but separated the responses into those of the students who said they were victims and those who were not victims

Table 4. Rating of respondents' preferred preventive measures with 4–5 scores on a 5-point Likert scale (for students who said they experienced bullying based on a definition) in Ghana and Norway.

Preventive measures	NORWAY Bullied (n = 88)		GHANA Bullied (n = 294)		Mann–Whitney (4–5 score)	
	% (n)	Rank	% (n)	Rank	U	P-value
1. Disciplinary measures must be applied fairly to students and lecturers (FDM).	89.7% (79)	1	66.7% (195)	1	7294.5	0.423
2. Both students and staff must solve problems in the university (CPS).	84.1% (74)	2*	60.5% (176)	6	5407.0	0.010
3. A protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy must be established and communicated to students and staff (ZT).	84.1% (74)	2*	59.7% (173)	7	5395.0	0.023
4. There is a need for an independent contact person to report bullying incidents to, e.g. a student ombudsman (ICP).	81.8% (72)	4	61.3% (177)	5	5337.0	0.011
5. There is a need for medical/counselling centres(s) to help bullying victims (MC).	72.7% (64)	5	59.6% (170)	8	4804.0	0.104
6. Contracts with good conduct or dismissal clauses must be signed at matriculation or at the start of employment to ensure accountability (CGC).	62.5% (55)	6	66% (192)	2	5025.0	0.523
7. There is a need to enhance bystander/onlooker responses (BR).	52.3% (46)	7	64.9% (188)	4	4085.0	0.466
8. There is a need for curriculum-laden antibullying lessons to encourage caring values (CLAL).	51.1% (45)	8*	64.9% (189)	3	4072.5	0.597
9. There must be awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours (AEB).	51.1% (45)	8*	58.1% (169)	10	3562.5	0.440
10. Bully courts and tribunals are needed to deal with student bullying issues (BC).	32.9% (29)	10	59.5% (173)	9	2431.5	0.747

* = Repeated ranks.

based on a working definition we provided. The results for those who said they were not victims are presented in Table 3, and that of those who said they were victims are in Table 4. There is an add-on to find the degree of significance of the differences in the ratings between and within the countries, between the victims and non-victims, and between male and female students.

Results

Students' recommendations for measures to prevent bullying in Ghana and Norway

Table 2 shows the response of all categories of students, and students rated most of the measures differently across both countries, as shown by the p -values. However, we were interested in the top-ranked ratings in the respective countries and have highlighted the top six measures in bold. Bully court and a need for awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours were not considered priorities across the two countries. Nonetheless, "disciplinary measures applying fairly to students and lecturers" was considered topmost, as in Table 2 below.

Again, based on the students' recommendations for measures using only affirmative responses (i.e. 4–5 scores), we calculated the ratings for those who did not experience bullying. In Norway, as shown in Table 3, all six topmost measures in Table 2 were retained in their respective positions. In Ghana, almost all six measures were maintained but with interchanged positions. However, bystander response dropped out of the priority list and was replaced by a need for awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours, which was not prioritised in Table 2. Nonetheless, the bully court remains the least-prioritised measure across both countries, as shown in Table 3.

Recommendations of students who experienced bullying

In Table 4, we present the results regarding the priorities of students who reported being victims of bullying in Ghana ($n = 285$ – 294) and Norway ($n = 88$). For Norway, all the six topmost measures reoccurred with regard to the country-specific ratings except that the need for a protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy gained parity in second position with a need for both students and lecturers to solve problems at the university. In Ghana, the results show changes, with the victims less favouring zero-tolerance policies and medical and counselling centres but favouring the need for an independent contact person to report bullying and a need for both students and lecturers to solve problems in the university. The results show that bully courts and a need for awareness of the extent of harassment in the universities with videos that show negative behaviours were less prioritised across both countries, just as in Table 2.

Differences in ratings for Ghana and Norway

For results not shown here, the Mann–Whitney U test revealed significant differences in the ratings comparing the countries for all ten measures ($p < 0.001$) when using response categories 1–5 on the five-point Likert scale. However, using response categories 4–5, the Mann–Whitney U test did not show any significant differences in the students' ratings of some measures, as seen in Table 2. So also, there is no significant difference between male and female students' ratings in both countries (i.e. $p > 0.05$) when one uses response categories 4–5. However, using response categories 1–5, the Norwegian students show gender differences for a protective zero-tolerance antibullying policy ($p = 0.002$), curriculum-laden antibullying lessons ($p = 0.001$), bully courts ($p = 0.004$), a need for an independent contact person to report bullying ($p = 0.001$), and a need for medical or counselling centres ($p = 0.002$), with female students favouring all measures most. On the contrary, using response categories 1–5, there are still no significant differences in the rating between female and male students in Ghana for all the measures (i.e. $p > 0.05$).

When using response categories 1–5, there is a significant difference in the rating of the bullied and the non-bullied in Ghana for all the measures. In Norway, there are no significant differences in the rating between the bullied and non-bullied (for 1–5 response categories) except for a need for medical or counselling centres ($p = 0.039$), curriculum-laden antibullying lessons ($p = 0.043$), and a need for awareness of the extent of bullying at the universities ($p = 0.004$). However, when comparing the responses of the bullied and the non-bullied using response categories 4–5, the Norwegian and Ghanaian results show no significant differences in the students' ratings of the measures for the respective countries, except for a need to enhance bystander responses in Norway (i.e. $p = 0.45$). Other country comparisons of students' ratings of the measures using response categories 4–5 show differences between the countries, as shown further in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#).

Summary of the results

The Norwegian results show a consistent rating and indicate that bystander/onlooker responses, curriculum-laden antibullying lessons, and awareness of the extent of harassment in the university with videos that show negative behaviours and bully courts and tribunals are less-favoured measures in Norway. This could also be seen in the sharp drop in their percentage ratings in [Tables 1–3](#). On the contrary, in Ghana, the results show that the different groups of respondents found all the measures useful except bully court, which none of the groups favoured. This also shows in the relatively high percentage rating of all the measures by Ghanaian students, except that the ratings of the measures by victims in Ghana show relatively reduced percentages. Victims of bullying in Ghana also shifted away from a zero-tolerance anti-bullying policy and a need for medical or counselling centres while embracing the need for students and staff to solve problems in the university and an independent contact person to whom to report bullying incidents.

Discussion

This study explored students' ratings of measures to prevent bullying in Ghana and Norway. Generally, the results indicate some similarities between the two countries, but we also identified differences. In Norway, the results revealed 6 top-rated measures (see [Table 2](#)), which were consistently prioritised, even though the list can be extended to include 9 measures based on a 50% threshold (see [Table 4](#)). In Ghana's case, the students identified 9 measures as being the most effective (see [Tables 2](#) through [4](#)). However, the need for disciplinary measures to apply fairly to students and lecturers and contracts with good conduct or dismissal clauses at matriculation or the start of employment were consistently found to occupy the top two positions. The need for curriculum-laden antibullying lessons has also been consistently preferred among the six top-rated measures, regardless of the groupings. Having observed the importance of all the measures, we will discuss them further.

First, students in both countries consistently rated the need for disciplinary measures to be applied fairly to students and lecturers as the topmost priority. As noted by Twale (2018) regarding Australia's Fair Work Act, this recommendation is reasonable because it will make students more proactive in responding to bullying by lecturers or administrators. Furthermore, this is consistent with recommendations from the European Framework Agreement on Violence and Harassment at Work, as cited by Einarsen et al. (2011a, p. 347): "All parties involved should get an impartial hearing and fair treatment". Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica (2019) argued that faculty members with higher economic value for the universities usually escape punishment or are treated differently when misconduct charges emerge. It is possible that this finding may reveal a longstanding practice of treating culpable faculty members differently. Even though this may not be the case in Norway due to their egalitarian values, the emergence of the measure as the top-ranked one in Ghana affirms a need for equality in countries like Ghana, which may downplay its significance in ensuring fairness and the rights of people due to reverence for power in interpersonal interactions. This draws

our attention to Rayner et al. (2002) caution concerning the cost of complacency or Sinkkonen et al. (2014) warning regarding the excessive autonomy of faculty, which can undermine bullying prevention.

Second, students in both countries (particularly Norway) generally support a zero-tolerance anti-bullying policy. Evidence suggests that policies guide behaviour or decision-making with regard to bullying. This finding is consistent with that of Meriläinen et al. (2015), who observed that students emphasise both punishment and support. However, knowing that there are antibullying policies in both national contexts, it is possible to interpret students' preferences for zero-tolerance policies as an absence of awareness or a lack of communication, which may undermine trust in the policies themselves (Vaill et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the consistency in the rating of the measure in Norway affirms its significance in their national culture (see Roland et al., 2010). However, the measure did not receive a favourable rating from victims in Ghana. This might speak to a cultural tendency of how lightly people take the issue of bullying, their disapproval of punishments that could be stringent, or their fear that they might not receive public support when the culprit is punished.

Third, the need for student and staff collaboration in solving bullying problems ranked consistently within the top six measures in Norway but was only prioritised by Ghanaian victims. The rating of the measure among the Norwegian population is consistent with Faucher et al. (2015), whose preliminary analysis of the rating of 15 student recommendations showed that engaging the university community in developing antibullying policies is the preferred option. This also points to a study by Vaill et al. (2021) and the notion that student unions must collaborate on issues of bullying prevention to facilitate accessibility to and the understanding of information and means of reporting bullying. Such a measure helps to address students' needs and leads to greater acceptance of policies (Camp et al., 2018), ensuring the recognition of rights to dignity and equitable education (Polanin & Vera, 2013). Together, these factors contribute to the more successful prevention of bullying (Cismaru & Cismaru, 2018).

Fourth is the need for an independent person to whom to report bullying. This recommendation relates to the issues of impartiality and confidentiality for victims of bullying. Those who reported experiencing bullying (see Table 4) favoured the measure, even in Ghana, where the general population did not prioritise it. The sharp contrast between the ratings of this measure by victims and non-victims in Ghana is noteworthy. This finding is in line with Vaill et al. (2020), who found that standard practices of making students report bullying to vice-chancellors may be intimidating and prevent such reporting.

University research in Norway, Greece, and England showed that most students proposed help from a trusted adult (Kyriacou et al., 2016). Twale and De Luca (2008) suggested appointing harassment complaint staff with a confidential hotline to handle cases of harassment and provide some form of data gathering concerning bullying. This recommendation seems reasonable considering that during the data collection, we identified universities in Ghana with some teaching staff who also work as counsellors and complain that they find themselves in a dilemma concerning fulfilling both roles. Norwegian universities have an ombudsman's office, and the relatively high rating of this measure reaffirms its usefulness.

Fifth, our results (particularly in Ghana) support the recommendations of Davidson and Harrington (2012) and Yamada (2011) regarding the fact that employment contracts can help prevent bullying. Bullying occurs when one person ignores the responsibility to respect another person's dignity, mainly because institutional conditions allow it (Rhodes et al., 2010). Every employment or admission agreement comes with a contract, whether visible, tacit, or implied (Rayner et al., 2002). Students do not necessarily sign contracts regarding their conduct but implicitly agree to their universities' mission statements once they opt for admission. On a more proactive basis, requiring students to sign antibullying contracts after providing sufficient education on the topic may make students and faculty more conscious of their behaviours. In this way, consciousness and the fear of repercussions may prevent bullying.

Sixth, students in both populations (except victims in Ghana) recognised the need for counselling services. This is consistent with Meriläinen et al. (2015) finding concerning students' suggestions of support for victims. Our results indicate the approval of the already existing counselling services in all our study universities and a call for their effectiveness. However, the low rating by victims in Ghana might mean that medical counselling is not what victims need, making a stronger case for independent contact fellows or alluding to the concerns of counsellors that providing counselling services at the same time as serving as a lecturer undermines the ethics of their profession. More so, it can mean that the nature of bullying in this environment might not necessitate the position of medical or general counsellors when other means of redress can be sought.

Seventh, based on Beaman et al. (1978) findings, education in bystander dynamics awakens a sense of consciousness regarding a collective effort against bullying (Kyriacou et al., 2016). The need for bystander responses did not rank highly in Norway. However, all students and victims ranked it fourth in Ghana. Craig and Pepler (1998) wrote that about 85% of bystanders play roles in bullying. University bullying takes subtle forms, but we argue that it would not happen without the knowledge of those close to the victims, and this explains why students advocate bystander intervention. For the reasons that discourage reporting noted above, it is vital that bystanders take the initiative to rescue victims by reporting such incidents or taking responsibility for providing support. In the case of Norway, we can argue that their private-life cultural predisposition could underlie why they did not consider bystander intervention necessary for bullying prevention.

Eighth, researchers have proposed incorporating antibullying measures into a school's curriculum as an aspect of awareness creation. We observed that the students rated the need for curriculum-laden antibullying lessons and awareness of the extent of harassment in the university (i.e. AEB and CLAL) in a similar way, so our discussion includes opinions on the two measures. Myers and Cowie (2016) proposed heightened awareness about the effects of bullying, and Vaill et al. (2020) argued for the need to have adequate information about what students consider bullying to facilitate reporting. Bradshaw (2013) reiterated that one-time assemblies or information sessions are inadequate to change a climate that permits bullying. Continuous awareness creation and curriculum-laden antibullying lessons are recommended, particularly in the case of Ghana, where the measure consistently received a third-place rating from all the respondents and victims and has been rated consistently among the six top-ranked measures.

Lastly, with regard to bully courts, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) noted that the idea was introduced as part of a Sheffield antibullying programme, but none of the institutions involved went on to establish one. The measure consistently proved to be less popular among students in both study communities. Though bullied students in Ghana gave the measure a ninth-place rating, the overall result revealed that it is a less-preferred measure.

Similarities and differences

Adding to the similarities and differences identified earlier on, the students (particularly victims of bullying) in both populations did not recommend bully courts (BC) or awareness of the extent of harassment in the university (AEB) as potential measures against bullying. We have shared our thoughts on bully courts, but awareness of the extent of harassment might mean less to students who already know about the existence of bullying. Alternatively, students might have considered the measure to be similar to ensuring curriculum-laden awareness, hence the low rating in Norway. The seventh-place rating in Table 2 by all the students in Ghana might point to a need for societal consciousness, looking at our review of the national profile. The students' predisposition towards an independent contact person to report bullying to in Norway is noteworthy. This is consistent with the Norwegian private-life predisposition but more in line with an earlier finding by Kyriacou et al. (2016) on the need for trusted persons to report to, which explains why students who experienced bullying in Ghana also favoured the measure.

There are noteworthy differences in the ratings. In Norway, curriculum-laden antibullying lessons, awareness of the extent of harassment, and bully courts received less than 50% of the ratings. This may indicate cultural differences in a society where the consciousness of bullying is already a major focus in public discussions in education, and so it alludes to the notion that cultural consciousness is needed to prevent bullying effectively. We found no specific rules or evidence regarding national discussions about bullying in Ghana, which might account for the relatively positive ratings for these measures compared to those in Norway.

Furthermore, in Ghana, a need for an independent contact person (ICP) received a fifth-place rating among victims, and sterner good conduct admission or employment contracts (i.e. CGC), more practical curriculum-laden antibullying laws (i.e. CLAL), and more visible bullying-related bystander response (i.e. BR) measures gained higher ratings in Ghana. This might indicate a proposal from victims of bullying to authorities to be more proactive in responding to bullying since there is no national or cultural consciousness. The need for bystander responses also indicates that visibly occurring bullying in Ghana requires bystander intervention. However, this observation is inconclusive since the endorsement of a zero-tolerance policy did not get a high rating from victims in Ghana, reflecting concerns about such policies, which we will discuss further. More so, although a Mann–Whitney U result for the difference between the rating of victims and non-victims in Ghana shows no difference with response categories 4–5, it is observed that aside from the changes in the ratings, the percentages were also smaller compared to the other ratings, which might be reflecting a predisposition of the bullied to be quiet about their experiences.

Recommendations of students who were victims of bullying

The recommendations of victims of bullying did not differ much from the general outlook in Norway and Ghana, but observing the ratings, students' preferences varied between victims and non-victims in Ghana. However, noteworthy for both countries is the recommendation that disciplinary measures should be applied fairly to students and lecturers and the need for independent contact persons to whom to report bullying. The latter is consistent with the findings of Kyriacou et al. (2016) and the recommendation of Hubert (2003), who found that trusted persons should tactfully handle bullying to avoid worsening the victim's plight through shame when several people get involved.

Similar to this notion is the finding that victims in Ghana did not favour a zero-tolerance policy compared to non-victims. As noted earlier, most researchers have frowned upon punishments involved in zero-tolerance policies (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Cho et al., 2017; Holloway, 2002). Bradshaw (2013) also argued that zero-tolerance policies do not help prevent bullying because students consider them a harsh measure, making people unwilling to report bullying. Considering these pieces of evidence, it might make sense why victims in Ghana did not favour the measure. Nevertheless, one can also attribute it to the cultural tendencies pointed out earlier, which influence consciousness and openness towards bullying in Ghana.

Practical implications

Rigby (2004) observed that antibullying programmes have generally been unsuccessful, and we argue that societal dispositions are partly accountable for this. Questions arise, particularly in the case of Ghana, when students demand the fair application of rules for students and staff. Are students willing to report lecturers for bullying offences? In contrast to Norway, which emphasises egalitarianism, there is reverence for authority in Ghana. It is likely to be challenging for students to report lecturers' uncivil behaviour. More so, would students be capable of staying on at the same university when they have had a member of faculty reprimanded? Are such institutions ready to reprove faculty members for non-criminal offences? If so, what kind of redress would be just and deterring? These questions are not limited to lecturers; similar concerns exist when students are found culpable.

The results support or highlight the significance of measures for preventing bullying in study institutions, yet, they indicate possible concerns about the practicability of some of these recommendations in all contexts. However, insights from Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems model of development indicate the usefulness of cultural change. On this basis, one sees state policies as capable of creating a culture of national consciousness about bullying. In Norway, where this consciousness exists, it would be expedient to verify if bullying trends indicate adverse behavioural changes. Nonetheless, employment and admission letters should contain information on mission statements and antibullying policies to give employees and students a sense of consciousness regarding bullying before entering universities. This measure would ensure that a minimal amount of bullying occurs in the first place.

Limitations and research implications

University staff have been implicated in this study because the students consistently demand that disciplinary measures are applied fairly to students and faculty. It would have been useful to include staff members in this research to gather information on their recommendations for bullying prevention. Future research should include the perspectives of lecturers and other faculty members. More so, the Ghanaian participants outnumbered those from Norway. The results might have been different if we had used a corresponding number of participants from Norway.

Nonetheless, the main limitation of this study is that it lacks the rigour that is typical of quantitative comparative research. We should have identified and confirmed the factor structures in both populations through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. We should have also tested for metric and scalar invariance to make mean comparison possible, as some researchers (e.g. Zakariya, 2021) have argued, referring to the usefulness of scalar invariance. The same would have been the case for gender differences in the ratings, where using a mimic model would have been ideal.

While we would suggest this for future research, it was impossible to implement this robust approach in the current study. We could not readily find any standardised bullying prevention model in higher education. The studies we identified are either systematic reviews or empirical studies that sought students' suggestions (e.g. Meriläinen et al., 2015) or, as indicated by Faucher et al. (2015) concerning their wider project, rated solutions based on students' preferences. Construct development and confirmation is a long process that is usually not feasible during students' research because the process can be daunting and could be unsuccessful. As such, for this research, we limited the approach to a purely descriptive and bivariate model to give insight into the effectiveness of the measures for bullying prevention.

Most of the measures are aspects of bullying prevention in the study institutions and are supported in the literature, so we did not provide measures out of context. More so, the approach is not a failure, seeing that measures like bully courts have consistently not been favoured, just as in the literature. This indicates that the study successfully points out practical measures to prevent bullying in higher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

Universities are unique institutions with different cultures and populations, and consequently, they require unique strategies to prevent bullying than those used in schools and workplaces. We responded to the call for universities to seek students' opinions to prevent bullying (Vaill et al., 2020). Students' recommendations centre around the impartial application of disciplinary measures, an independent person to contact when bullying occurs, collective problem-solving, a zero-tolerance policy, antibullying employment contracts, medical or counselling centres to help victims, curriculum-based awareness creation, and the need for bystander intervention. Variations were found in

how students in Norway and Ghana prioritised the measures. However, the measures point to what can practically prevent bullying in higher education.

From the results, we argue that proactive democratic principles, leading to students' involvement in creating rules, awareness, and impartiality, will ensure collective consciousness, which will supersede any other measure. Nonetheless, as helpful as these recommendations might be, they do not constitute an all-time approach to dealing with bullying in any study environment. We recommend that antibullying measures consider recommendations from beneficiary students of the study environment being considered at a specific time rather than using concrete models. More so, enacting national laws to transform national bullying cultures is ideal. Where this consciousness already exists, authorities must be conscious of changing trends.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in DataverseNo at <https://dataverse.no/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.18710/GX1VYI>.

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