

RCNI Oral Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills



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To the Committee on Education and Skills

Regarding the Committee's examination of **the effectiveness and timeliness of consent classes provided in third-level institutions.**

October 23rd 2018

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1. Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today. This is a timely intervention. Sexual violence has been much discussed recently and the question now is what actions can we take to move beyond awareness into creating the change needed to build safety and freedom from sexual violence.

RCNI believes HEIs have a significant role to play in prevention.

The 3rd level sector is an engine for the production and reproduction of our culture and as such we would welcome these institutions fully, consciously and critically engaging in transformation towards prevention.

The task this committees has set itself benefits from the industry of a range of academics, welfare professionals and student leaders who have invested their expertise, resources and passion into devising and testing a range of curriculum interventions such as consent classes, bystander training, workshops, online resources and interactive and performance models of exploration on these issues. Some of these specialists are here before you today and can speak more expertly than I on those aspects.

With the right climate these pockets of excellence can be nurtured and sustained into the future to continue the essential work of evolving and developing engagement with our ever changing culture in order to create tools towards safety from sexual violence.

RCNI would like to make a key point to you about consent classes in 3rd level. They are not standalone solutions to the challenge of addressing sexual violence and the work is not complete if/once the best practice and proven classes are embedded across HEIs. Indeed, we would consider it a failure if we limited ourselves to consent classes. Consent classes need to form one part of a whole-of-system approach in order to have sustainable and positive impact.

A whole-of-system approach would involve a critical engagement of the institution, accountability and pro-activeness in creating safety. This might include:

- Consent/bystander programmes integrated into induction programmes for all new entrants (as has been achieved in IT Tralee).
- Consistent, visible year round zero tolerance promotion across campus, on and offline
- A protocol on responding to all sexual crime incidents
- Policy on supporting an individual who has reported an incident, including establishing a tailored support plan for the duration of their education
- Policy on responding to individuals against whom allegations have been made

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- HR and CPD strategy, which is gender proofed, to ensure a professional and consistent support infrastructure is provided by the HEI in line with the above policies and protocols, which is visible to students, accessible and valued as a professional part of a staff member's role
- Staffing awareness, CPD and gender proofing and equality measures to reflect an institution-wide engagement with embedded inequalities that facilitate rape-culture.

Other jurisdictions have examined this matter in detail meaning much of the research and evidence is now available to us.

For RCNI a key barrier to sustainable success in preventing sexual violence is that expertise keeps falling away due to lack of infrastructure and investment in specialisation. I would draw the attention of the Committee to the fact that no Institute, dedicated funding stream or academic topic specialises in sexual violence. We would contend that identifying and valuing multi-disciplinary engagement and **sustaining academic specialisation in sexual violence is a critical part of the effectiveness of any 3rd level approach to the prevention of sexual violence. This committee, in reflecting on these issues, might ask what government can do to foster the sustainability of this expertise.**

In conclusion:

1 Consent and other workshops on preventing sexual violence should be evidence informed, evolving and embedded.

2 There is no shortcut to a whole-of-institute response and consent classes should be parallel to ensuring the appropriate structural responses to sexual violence and primary prevention across the whole institution are in place.

3 The standing this focus and subject has in our HEIs, the space provided for reflection and intervention and the value placed on this work is critical. Engaging new entrants to all HEIs in their culture to create a safe place to learn and freedom from the fear of sexual harassment and violence is a key part of that transformation; supporting institution-wide engagement, is the rest of the work.

Thank you.

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