

**Joint Committee on Education and Skills,  
October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018**

**NUI Galway Opening Statement on the  
Effectiveness and Timeliness of Consent Classes  
Provided at Third Level Institutions**



Thank you for your interest in the work led by NUI Galway in supporting active consent among students at higher education institutions.

I am representing the SMART Consent research team, which includes Dr Siobhán O’Higgins, Dr Charlotte McIvor, and Kate Dawson. We support the definition of active consent as a freely given, verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity. We have developed a programme of consent education and awareness at NUI Galway and support other third level institutions to engage in this area too.

The SMART Consent initiative began in 2013 as a research project, supported by Rape Crisis Network Ireland, to study third level students’ understanding of sexual consent and how they applied this understanding to specific scenarios. We then developed the SMART Consent workshop in 2015. Research evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of this workshop was supported by the Irish Research Council and HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Since 2016, the workshop has been supported by NUI Galway, which has allowed us to develop a standardised workshop that lasts for 1-1.5 hours, supported by a manual and a facilitator training programme that has prepared over 200 staff and student facilitators at nine institutions around the country within the past two years. As many as 4,000 students have now taken part in a SMART Consent workshop. This experience involves a number of fast paced activities that provide opportunities for talking about consent with their peers, and allows us to share what we know about consent attitudes and practices from surveys and interviews that over 3,000 students have contributed to in recent years.

Since 2013 we have learned a lot about how to present effective consent education. We have also learned how a programme of this nature can work on a feasible and sustainable basis in a higher education context. Much of this learning has taken place through our collaborations with academics, student organisations, and student services. In turn we have circulated this learning and lessons as openly as possible among third level institutions, just as we have shared our workshop materials and training.

The first part of a comprehensive approach to consent education is to have trainable, high quality materials. Secondly, it is critical that this education has a home in the institution, for instance embedded in student orientation or the curriculum. Third, to achieve the goal of full awareness and culture change, consent programmes need to reach out to the full community of students, supported by sustained, engaging messaging throughout the year on positive sexual health promotion and knowledge about sexual assault. Finally, consent education should be made sustainable in the long term within institutional policy, and through regular updating through ongoing research with students as our partners.

Having established a high quality consent workshop and facilitator training programme, we are currently focusing on designing the campus community campaign that will reach out to all students on an ongoing basis. This entails strategies such as dissemination of short, interactive consent films (we have developed four of these in 2018), posters and badges based on a memorable tag line (Consent=OMFG – ongoing, mutual, and freely given). One key strategy within this approach is the use of creative arts which allows us to reach large audiences in person or online via media that have viewers engage actively in decisions and choices. As early as 2014 we developed a live theatre presentation ('100 Shades of Grey', co-written by Dr Mclvor and NUI Galway drama students). Live theatre presentation has the potential to reach out to large groups very efficiently, ensuring audience members have a shared experience of learning about active consent, sexual assault, and harassment. Last week we hosted a symposium with the InterACT campus theatre troupe, who present a similar piece at a number of U.S. campuses and offer a useful model based on research evidence.

Through this combination of efforts, NUI Galway is a case study for designing a comprehensive tool kit that can be made available to other institutions. This tool kit knits together a comprehensive and internationally unique combination of resources – live performance, workshops, and media resources – supported by a research ethos and conscious of the pragmatics of implementation.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that sexual health has different meanings. It encompasses sexual expression as a positive lifespan development motivation, all the way to the damaging and traumatising impact of sexual harassment and violence. We are concerned that young adults in Ireland still have limited opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills that they need to manage the challenges that they face. Third level institutions have a remarkable opportunity to design a standard setting level of best practice in these areas. In turn, with sufficiently bold thinking, this approach can be integrated with emerging second level initiatives. We hope that the Committee will now support practical progress that will promote the 4 Cs we have identified as crucial – the positive characteristics of (a) Personal Confidence, (b) Interpersonal Communication, (c) Positive Community Values, and (d) the Change in Culture that we now need to address the problems of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

18 October 2018.

#### **References:**

- MacNeela, P., O'Higgins, S., Mclvor, C., Seery, C., Dawson, K., & Delaney, N. (2018). Are consent workshops sustainable and feasible in third level institutions. Evidence from implementing and extending the SMART Consent workshop. NUI Galway, August 2018.
- MacNeela, P., Breen, J., Byrnes, E., O'Higgins, S., Seery, C., & Silke, C. (2017). Development, implementation, and evaluation of the SMART Consent workshop on sexual consent for third level students. NUI Galway, July 2017.

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/smartconsent/>

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/consent=omfg/>