

## **Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Education and Skills**

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**Department of Education and Skills**

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I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to their committee meeting today to discuss the issue of consent in the third-level institutions.

As the Committee will be aware, all of our publically funded third level institutions provide a range of student-support services, including counselling and health services to their students.

In conjunction with these services, the third level institutions support the student unions in their campaigns and initiatives on sexual health for the students.

In recent years a number of the third level institutions have established sexual consent programmes and workshops for their students. These programmes and workshops have a significant positive impact on the students.

Examples of these programmes include -

- National University of Ireland, Galway's Smart Consent Workshops – these were developed from a recognition of positive health promotion, as well as an awareness of

sexual violence. NUIG has assisted in the rolling out of these workshops in a number of other higher education institutions.

- University College Cork's Bystander Intervention is a six-workshop module on bystander intervention for first year students in its law, nursing and applied psychology classes

The student unions are an integral element to the provision of such information to the student population in the higher education institutions. Every year the USI holds its Sexual Health and Guidance week in the higher education institutions throughout the country. The issue of consent has been a significant feature of their recent campaigns.

I would also like to acknowledge the significant work being done by the National Women's Council in Ireland under their Ending Sexual Harassment and Violence in Third Level Education (ESHTE) Project. This project aims to tackle sexual violence and harassment in Third Level Institutions, and their *'It Stops Now'* website is an invaluable resource in this area.

Minister Mitchell O' Connor has stated that providing excellence in education depends on providing a safe learning environment, free from sexual harassment, assault and the fear or threat of it.

In August 2018 the Minister launched the latest report of NUIG's SMART Consent team, on sexual consent among third level students.

And on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2018 the Minister brought together representatives from the higher education institutions, students unions and other stakeholders for a meeting on consent and tackling sexual violence in third level education.

The Minister is currently examining the issues that were discussed at the meeting, and will shortly be establishing a working group to devise a toolkit of appropriate initiatives / interventions that would be made available to the Higher Education Institutions to deploy within their institutions.

I hope I have been of assistance to the work of the Committee, and I am happy to answer questions and provide the Committee with additional information it may require.