

The Timeliness and Effectiveness of Consent Workshops at Third Level

The conversation around education on consent and relationships at third level did not begin just this year. This was a conversation initiated by Students' Unions and Student Support Services many years ago. The vital and urgent need for more education on all issues relating to boundaries, consent, and sexual relationships was identified in numerous surveys and reports; The 2013 Say Something survey by the Union of Students in Ireland found that 16% of respondents had experienced an unwanted sexual experience at their current institution. In 2015 TCDSU conducted a survey which revealed that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 20 men at Trinity had had a non-consensual sexual experience. The survey also highlighted issues around harassment and stalking. A shift in culture, attitude, and behaviour was necessary.

It was clear then that more needed to be done to tackle the crisis directly. The first step in achieving this was to initiate the conversation around positive consent in relationships, through the development of consent workshops. The need for education on such a topic was further highlighted in surveys carried out on those who attended the first pilot in Trinity in 2016. At this point only 22.9% of attendees claimed to be 'well informed about sexual consent.' This rose sharply to 64.7% following the workshops.

In Trinity, in conjunction with the Student Counselling Service, we first employed the SMART Consent model in rolling out the classes. This pilot was rolled out in first year student accommodation on a voluntary basis during the orientation programme. The primary aim of these workshops was to get conversation and understanding going about what consent was and to have this as an ongoing topic during the year. It was, however, identified through participant feedback that there was a need to change the programme and develop one specifically for TCD.

The following decisions were made:

- There would be no PowerPoint presentation. The emphasis would move from didactic presentations to interactive discussions.
- The workshop would aim to become more inclusive and less heteronormative, through the content and the case examples.

In 2017 & 2018, almost 100% of the target population attended the workshops and there was very positive feedback garnered from all the participants. Although the workshops were not mandatory, they were promoted in such a way as to have them seen as a normal part of the orientation to college and the college residence welcome programme.

The success of the workshops in Trinity can, for the most part, be accredited to their inclusive nature, from both planning and administration to the content itself. The workshops were designed in partnership with both Students and Staff, and are facilitated by both also. This is vital to creating a cultural shift on the issue and in encouraging participant engagement with the workshops.

The effectiveness of the workshops is best evidenced by the feedback of those who partook in them. 99% stated the relevance of the workshops to college life and 87% agreed that they learned something useful. The model employed in Trinity has proven its value and effectiveness, and the necessity of the workshops cannot be understated.

The challenge now lies in broadening the accessibility of the workshops. We operate in an environment where support services are stretched to the limit and the resources necessary to make the workshops available to all students in Trinity are limited.

The workshops must also be supported by other initiatives within our institutions. In Trinity we have already embarked on developing First Responder training, to equip staff and student representatives who may be presented to by a victim of sexual assault with the necessary tools to assist. As well as By-Stander training those who witness an inappropriate situation unfold how to respond and best manage the situation.

The period of transition from Second Level to Third Level is a formative developmental period in any students' life. This gives us an opportunity to ingrain a positive attitude towards consent in all students, and embed it as a natural part of college life. It is, however, a conversation that should be started at a much earlier stage in the education of young people, and built upon as they progress through the system.

If this committee, the department of Education and Skills, and the Minister, genuinely want to see change and genuinely want to put an end to sexual violence at third level, we need tangible support in the form of resources. The methods and model is ready to go, we just need the means to do it.