

Union of Students in Ireland

Opening Statement - 3 minutes allocated

Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

Tuesday 22 October 2018

[Check against Delivery]

I'm before you here today on behalf of over 374,000 students across the island of Ireland. I am here because this is a problem. I'm here before you today not because consent is some 'gritty issue' to talk about, or because we've got all the answers, but because the issues arising now are a problem that is growing and we're not going to stand by as a student movement, nor have we ever, and do nothing or be silent on the issue. It has to stop now, but we need everyone on board to make that a reality - including the Oireachtas.

The student experience is one highlighted to us by students and their SUs across the country, and the issue around sexual harassment at third level or within and for this age cohort didn't start today or yesterday. SU Welfare officers in unions deal with this coming into their office week after week. Sexual harassment has often and easily become normalised in a space dominated by 'being social' and sharing more of yourself across multiple platforms. Photos are screenshotted and saved. They're used to threaten, vilify, or hold over. Students and young people are being hurt by this behaviour, emotionally and physically. They're subject to assault, and more often than not during all of this, they tell no one.

That's why in 2014, the Union of Students in Ireland led the way in creating and issuing the first survey of its kind in Ireland. Some of the key findings included that 16% of students reported having experienced some form of unwanted sexual experience while in their current educational institution. Only 3% recorded that they had reported these incidents to an official within their institution or to the Gardaí. The two most frequent reasons for not reporting were:

- (i) that they did not believe the incident was serious enough to report; and
- (ii) that they did not think that what happened was a crime.

We are not being dramatic when we say this is a serious issue.

It is widely understood that students attending third level are in the process of handling a significant transition - one that affects all parts of their lives, from academic standards, a distancing from familial supports and parental guidance, new living/renting experiences, and new social and peer-group expectations in terms of socialising and relationships.

The Union of Students in Ireland has led the calls for improved RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) before students reach third level, as it is the daily experience of elected officers on the ground that students are ill-equipped and do not have a satisfactory level of knowledge around sexual health and wellbeing (including understandings around consent). **Sexual health awareness has been a key awareness and part of USI plan of work for over two decades.** We welcomed the joint-oireachtas committee report on the eighth amendment, which indicated that resources needed to be allocated to developing our systematic approach to sexual and reproductive rights in Ireland at all levels.

Looking at the DRCC National Helpline figures for 2016 the age group (18 to 24) and (24 to 29) makes up almost 30% of overall callers. For clients of the DRCC who came in for one-to-one counselling, the same age group (18 to 24) and (24 to 29) makes up almost 40%.

There are gaps within our third level systems in accessing safe ways to raise concerns and to get an effective remedy for issues arising.

There is significant consensus among sectoral stakeholders that consent education is required at third level. There is also broad consensus that consent needs to be mainstreamed into the education of young people and students.

- Consent education requires more than a poster/awareness campaign or social media content, though such campaigns are important
- Consent education needs to be directly facilitated and supported if at all possible through a 'workshop' or 'seminar' style information session, rather than through a presentation, to facilitate some level of group discussion and sharing of views;
- Funding should be made available so that every institution can mainstream consent workshops on campuses, through orientation or by modules offered through the curriculum;
- Funding needs to be made available for a second 'Say Something' data research project, as the last such research was carried out in 2012-2013 and urgently needs updating;
- A minimum standard of consent education at third level should be agreed upon;
- Consent education must have a sex-positive approach;
- Consent education must have an inclusive approach to suit the needs of the LGBTI+ community, and be rolled out taking into account differing cultural norms for international students;
- That any progression in development of such consent education takes a student centred approach which sees students as partners in the roll-out of such an initiative;
- Consent education can take many different forms, and may need different pedagogical approaches to reach different audiences and demographics. We recommend that HEIs implement online platforms, module inclusion, academic guest lectures and other forms of education to promote students engagement on the topic.
- We recommend for staff and students in positions of responsibility to receive 'first responder's style training;
- We recommend that a designated policy be developed to handle and make clear the reporting structures for handling non-consensual violence reports within the institution;
- We recommend that a designated staff member is appointed in each institution to ensure that consent education is rolled out, that reporting structures are developed, and is the main contact for initial reporting;

The stats are clear. There are people behind them. We can't pretend that it's not our responsibility.

The student movement wants to drive and lead this issue, but we need the support, leadership and expertise of our lecturers and our academics and senior management, not siloed to one well-meaning department or person.

We need the support of our elected representatives, in recognising this issue, recognising their role in changing the culture, resourcing the supports, and tackling this head on.