

**Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science**  
Submission from the Active\* Consent Programme, University of Galway

The Active\* Consent programme based at the University of Galway has pioneered sexual consent education and research with young people throughout Ireland since 2013. It brings together expertise from areas like psychology, health promotion, theatre and drama, psychotherapy, and social media. Our programme ethos is that consent is ongoing, mutual, and freely given – that consent is for everyone, in all relationships, across genders and sexual orientations, and for each type of intimacy whether or not someone ever chooses to engage in it.

Active\* Consent has grown into a national programme over this time – using strategies such as surveys, campaigns, resources, workshops, theatre and training to prompt institutional innovations, with the aim of young people achieving ‘consent literacy’:

- **Knowledge:** Accurate information on consent attitudes and behaviours, how alcohol and drugs affect consent, digital intimacy, laws on consent and sexual assault.
- **Communication skills:** Verbal and nonverbal behaviour, what helps or hinders consent, how to talk to peers or partners about consent.
- **Confidence:** Seeking assistance or support for themselves or their peers should they need it from their school, college or a professional service.
- **Challenge:** Being part of the change in our culture that recognises and responds to non-consenting attitudes or actions, including sexual harassment and sexual assault.

One of the most important learnings in the past decade is that consent education for young people becomes sustainable when part of a programme of culture change. This ‘socio-ecological model’ states that successful outreach and support on a large scale requires us to focus not only on engagement with young people, but also on capacity building, institutional ownership, and policy that drives consistent implementation.

Working together with partners such as Galway Rape Crisis Centre, our initiatives can take a learning community through a tiered, spiral model of increasing complexity, from brief social media messaging, to workshops and arts-based interventions, and on to specialised training for staff members and community leaders. We have learned what works to engage young people on consent, and, just as importantly how to implement and scale up consent education and research in the educational settings and systems that shape young people.

Since 2019, the Active\* Consent programme has been supported by Lifes2good Foundation, a Galway-based philanthropic foundation, to implement research-informed education and outreach systems. Other supporters of the programme include: The Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science; the Department of Justice; Rethink Ireland; the Irish Research Council; the University of Galway; the Higher Education Authority; and Community Foundation Ireland.

In this paper we urge the Committee to recommend the adoption of a developmental and ecological approach for young people on the topic of consent, which will offer a seamless pathway from entry to post-primary school across both Junior and Senior Cycle, and on to Further and Higher Education. Given the progress that has been made in recent years in both policy and practice, there is now a clear line of sight to achieve this transformative goal. The following case studies carried out by Active\* Consent and colleagues illustrate progress toward this goal:

**Active\* Consent for School Communities**

Our schools project has trained more than 800 teachers as consent workshop facilitators, while almost 1,000 parents have participated in online and in-person information seminars. In academic year 2021-2022, over 4,000 secondary school students engaged with consent workshops delivered by teachers. Our impact research demonstrated significant knowledge and attitude improvement following the workshop. Our approach was informed by partnership with the Irish Secondary Schools Students Union. The project offers multiple resources to teachers and schools, including the 'Sex on Our Screens' eLearning resource to engage students on sexual media, and an original live drama 'How I Learned About Consent' for schools piloted in 2022.

We collaborate closely with the 'Consent Ed' programme, which championed by the Rape Crisis Centres nationally and by Tusla. The Active\* Consent team have evaluated the Consent Ed programme, which includes a resource for Year 2 Junior Cycle students. Consent Ed responds in an age-appropriate way to developmental needs as they unfold over the course of the post-primary school experience. Like Active\* Consent, Consent Ed supports adoption of whole school strategies, and seeks to build a community of practice whereby teacher networks are continually strengthened and provide mutual support.

**Further Education & Training Sector**

Active\* Consent began a national collaboration with ETBI in 2022 to develop a consent programme for Further Education and Youthreach. Engagement has progressed with all 16 ETB areas. Campaigns such as #FETisStartingHere are becoming established as an annual awareness campaign. There has been excellent uptake by Youthreach Centres, moving now into other areas including FET colleges, community training centres, adult education and apprenticeships. Over 70 online and in-person training sessions have been held since 2022, comprising over 1,400 staff participants. We have worked closely to integrate this topic for the first time by working with stakeholders such as Directors and Senior Management Teams, Professional & Learning Development Support, Youthreach Coordinators, Learning Support and Inclusion Officers, Psychological Services and Guidance Counsellors. Our research with staff and students has resulted in the resources being revised and adapted to meet the needs of learners in this sector.

**Higher Education**

The adoption of the 'Consent Framework' in 2019, national surveys of staff and students in 2021, and the HEA-led implementation plan launched in 2022 have propelled education and training for Higher Education on consent. Ireland is now seen as leading out on this area among European countries. The Active\* Consent programme has been an important part of that development. Supported by DFHERIS, we partner with 22 higher education institutions (HEIs) across the island of Ireland to bring consent education and training to campuses. Thousands of staff members have engaged with our brief Staff Awareness Video, while over 1,500 HE staff and students have trained as consent workshop facilitators since 2016. Over 22,000 First Year students participated in consent workshops in academic year 2022-23. 90% of workshop participants would recommend it to a friend, while 91% learned something useful. Significant pre/post workshop levels of agreement that participants: Have skills to deal with consent, feel well informed, that peers consider consent important, and confidence talking with peers.

The Active\* Consent programme has an open approach to sharing our learning and resources, exemplified by the Consenthub.ie website. The following activities and resources demonstrate a commitment to culture change that assist members of learning communities become aware, engaged, or actively involved as a champion of change:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media campaigns and social media library (e.g., 'Start Here' on disclosure support, 'Consent is for Everyone' awareness raising)</li> <li>• Online and in-person consent workshops</li> <li>• Consenthub.ie national resource</li> <li>• eLearning resources – 'Sex on Our Screens', 'How to Support Yourself and Your Peers'</li> <li>• Drama productions such as 'How I Learned About Consent', 'The Kinds of Sex You <i>Might</i> Have at College'</li> <li>• Campus initiatives such as 'Consent Week', 'Green Flags' stall</li> <li>• Training for teachers, HE staff and community members in delivering consent education</li> <li>• Training in disclosure management ('First Point of Contact')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Champions' training with student leaders and advocates</li> <li>• Staff awareness raising videos, and all-staff briefings</li> <li>• Digital intimacy workshops for young people</li> <li>• Professional development module 'Consent, Sexual Violence and Harassment: Practitioner Skills &amp; Practice' (Level 9, 10 ECTS)</li> <li>• Online / in-person seminars for parents</li> <li>• Ongoing support, network building and sharing of resources</li> <li>• <a href="#">Extensive</a> dissemination using reports, research studies, and events</li> <li>• Campus climate surveys and consent / SVH surveys for both students and staff in HE</li> <li>• Engagement with other sectors such as An Garda Síochana and sports organisations</li> </ul>
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#### Integrating engagement with innovation in policy:

Having noted the progress being made with regard to practical initiatives, we urge that further supports are put in place to support scaling and sustainability within a Whole School approach. We identify post-primary and Further Education sectors as having a particular requirement to achieve consistency and systems:

- The inclusion of Relationships & Sexuality (Strand 3) in the **2023 SPHE Junior Cycle curriculum specification** recognises the importance of consent, sexual violence and harassment. Learning outcomes for this Strand situate consent in a wider context of sexual media, personal boundaries, healthy / unhealthy relationships, and help seeking.
- The 2022 **Joint Committee report on Leaving Certificate Reform** recommended SPHE to become a Leaving Certificate subject, incorporating a module on Consensual Behaviour. This would be supported by mandatory RSE hours following curricular guidelines. Such developments are essential in order to scale a national approach to education and training on consent, sexual violence and harassment.
- While mental health and wellbeing supports are under pressure in Higher Education, counselling services have nevertheless been at the forefront in institutional responses to consent, sexual violence and harassment. It is now important to identify how to develop this infrastructure in post-primary and Further Education settings. It was encouraging that the **2023 Joint Committee report on Mental Health Supports in Schools & Tertiary Education** recommended mainstreaming counselling services in schools. Capacity building and innovation would enable schools and FE centres to adopt a more systematic approach to supporting teacher/staff-delivered education on consent.

- The 2021 **Joint Committee report on Bullying and its Impact on Mental Health** highlighted the Whole School and community-based approach for addressing anti-social behaviour. This has a direct parallel to the response needed to address consent, sexual violence and harassment in post-primary schools. It acknowledges the critical importance of parents, pupils and teachers, working together to establish an action plan for their school community. The report also recognised the importance of resourcing and dedicated time for enabling school community responses to be successful. Crucially, the Department of Education Inspectorate was identified as being well placed to monitor school engagement on anti-bullying and wellbeing initiatives, a role that could be extended to supporting schools in monitoring roll out of consent programming.

#### **Key suggestions:**

Taken together, recent policy developments in Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle suggest a growing opportunity for concerted implementation of consent education in post-primary schools in particular. This submission has identified practical, evidence-based resources and training that can assist the achievement of these policy objectives. We request the Joint Committee to consider recommending the integration of recent developments in policy and practice so that consent programming becomes the norm in our schools. The emergence of innovative strategies on anti-bullying and mental health demonstrate the scope for this initiative to adopt a holistic, Whole School approach that meets the objectives of culture change on this topic that critically impacts youth wellbeing.

In time this can become as strong an example of action as we have seen in Higher Education – where further work on sustainability is also yet required. The four key pillars that are suggested to help progress the goal of mainstreaming and sustainability are:

1. Provide straight forward guidance and resources for school communities that enable them to (a) Benchmark themselves against the key components of a Whole School action on consent, and (b) Devise a local Action Plan – referring to policies, infrastructure, adoption of curriculum, support for teacher professional development, and so on.
2. Engage the principles that are driving innovative work on anti-bullying and mental health to introduce strategies whereby the Department of Education is able to assess the uptake of programming and quality standards.
3. Provide mechanisms for staff in post-primary schools, Further Education centres and Higher Education to access training and resources, setting an agreed standard of professional competency in this area.
4. Enable full integration to take place between post-primary, Further Education and Higher Education, so that we achieve the goal of having a seamless age-appropriate curriculum on consent, sexual violence and harassment that is developmentally coherent across these key settings. In this way we will support individuals and communities to learn about respect and mutual support right the way from early adolescence to adulthood.