

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality

Introductory Comments

1. The IUA is the representative body of Ireland's research-intensive universities. Our members include DCU, Maynooth University, NUI Galway, Trinity College Dublin, TU Dublin, UCC, UCD, and University of Limerick. Our member universities are committed to equality, diversity and inclusion for all staff and students as we believe that a diverse and inclusive organisational environment creates a more innovative, rewarding, and productive higher education environment. This commitment requires continued evaluation of our organisational policies, procedures and culture and also how these relate to the student experience, and professional fulfilment of our university staff.
2. As Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has grown as an important agenda item across the university system, so too IUA structures have evolved to support this critical activity. In 2019 the IUA set up a high-level group for Vice Presidents for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion which coordinates the work of universities in this priority area.
3. Addressing gender inequality has been at the forefront of our universities EDI agenda in recent years. Efforts to address gender inequality grew organically in our universities, but over the last seven years, with the advent of the Athena SWAN Charter (since 2015), and the HEA Review of Gender Equality (2016), we have seen a collective effort across the entire sector to accelerate the necessary change.
4. There has been significant progress in advancing gender equality at a senior level in our universities. 3 of the 8 Presidents of our member universities are female. The senior management teams in all of our universities are gender balanced. 7 of the 8 Chairs of the Governing Authorities of our members universities are women.
5. Our data shows us that there is still plenty of work to do, but the achievement of Athena SWAN awards across an ever-growing number of academic schools, departments and institutions, as well as our commitment to the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI), demonstrates the resolve that we all share to end gender inequality in our universities. In this context, we broadly support the work and the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. However, we are of the view also that a number of recommendations are not well founded, and we provide more detailed comment in this regard in the following section.

Comments on Recommendations

Care

6. We see the gendered nature of unpaid caring work as being a particular factor militating against the advancement of women. In this context, we are supportive of any initiatives which have the effect of reducing the care burden (e.g. on working parents through the provision of adequate and accessible childcare services), or which challenge traditional assumptions about the allocation of caring work between men and women. On that basis, we strongly endorse recommendations 8 and 9.
7. Persons with disability make up a significant percentage of the student body in higher education. The Fund for Students with Disabilities supported over 13,000 students in higher education in 2018/19/. <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/> . In the context of recommendation 10, and the independence of persons with disability, we believe that students with disability must be fully supported to participate in education, and to develop to their full potential.

Leadership in Politics, Public Life & the Workplace

8. Ensuring visible female leadership and role models is a key strand of the work of universities in promoting gender equality and addressing gender inequality. This spans across all dimensions, including the student experience, universities as workplaces, and universities as catalysts for change in our society. In this context, we fully support and are actively implementing many of the measures proposed in recommendations 21, 22, 23, and 25 , including gender balance in governance and decision-making structures, gender action plans and monitoring by governing bodies, and progressive employment policies that support work-life balance and female attainment.

Norms & Stereotypes and Education

9. We support the incorporation of sex and gender issues in both teaching and research, and this is an emerging focus area that embeds gender equality in the core mission of universities. In this regard, we specifically endorse recommendations 28, and 30.
10. We have no objection to recommendation 29, and in principle we support any actions which address barriers to participation in education of any group. However, in respect of recommendation 29, this is predicated on the assumption that government will deliver as promised on the long awaited, sustainable funding model for higher education and that model will provide for significant additional investment in core funding for HEI's to ensure the quality and long-term sustainability of our HE system. The funding of student supports is a key component of the State's overall investment in the HE system.

Pay and Workplace Conditions

11. We also support recommendation 33 in relation to enactment of The Gender Pay Gap Information Bill, and it should be noted that as part of the gender action plan processes alluded to above, a number of universities have already undertaken gender pay audits of their own.
12. We wouldn't support recommendation 32 in relation to legislation to reduce the hourly gender pay gap. We would have concerns that this isn't technically feasible, nor is it conceptually well-grounded, and we feel that the current Bill, focussing on pay transparency, combined with current equal pay legislation is sufficient.
13. Similarly, we do not support Recommendation 35 regarding legal rights to collective bargaining, which appears to be grounded in concerns attributable to workplace relations in one particular sector. We believe fundamentally in the voluntarism principle in industrial relations, and we promote progressive employee relations policies and practices in cooperation with our recognised trade unions.
14. As regards access to flexible working, our universities are extremely progressive in this area, noting the importance of flexible working as a staff recruitment and engagement measure. We note the government policy to legislate for the right to request remote working, and we believe that Recommendation 35 is inappropriate in this context.

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

15. We are very encouraged to note that Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence has been considered as a discrete theme by the Citizen's Assembly, and we are strongly supportive of these recommendations.
16. In 2019, the Department of Education & Skills published a Consent Framework for higher education institutions entitled *Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive - Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. This Consent Framework provides a roadmap for all institutions to develop a coherent, co-ordinated, and substantive approach towards addressing sexual violence and sexual harassment. In this context, we strongly endorse recommendations 37 – 39 and feel that universities can play a key role in design and delivery of a national strategy. In many respects, we feel that this is already in progress through the work of Minister McEntee and her Department on the next National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Strategy.
17. It should be noted also that policies to support victims of domestic violence have been introduced across a number of universities as part of their action plans to combat gender-based violence.

18. We also support the trauma-informed principles underpinning recommendation 39. We are fully aware that instances of sexual violence are under-reported, and we believe that significant change is required in terms of complaint pathways, as well as offering alternative report and support options.

Gender Equality Principle in Law and Policy

19. In Higher Education, Minister Simon Harris has strongly advocated for gender equality and change across the sector. In this context, we feel that having the responsible line Minister adopt Gender Equality as a key priority may be a better option than that proposed in recommendation 42. In addition, universities are also mindful of our public sector duty in relation to Equality and Human Rights and feel that the IHREC is an effective agency in this space.

20. We strongly support the principles as set out in Recommendations 43- 45. In relation to recommendation 43, the collective universities' experience of gender action plan implementation has taught us the importance of robust data, that identifies our specific gender equality issues, that is used to monitor progress, and that is published as part of an overall accountability framework.

21. As part of our gender equality and general EDI work, we consistently strive to benchmark our practice, assess, and review, so we are fully supportive of the thrust of Recommendations 44 and 45.

Concluding Comments

22. The Irish Universities Association welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the examination by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality of the recommendations made by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

23. As stated at the outset, gender equality is a significant strand of a broader strategic commitment by universities to equality, diversity, and inclusion, so we welcome the Report of the Citizen's Assembly.

24. We have indicated in the preceding paragraphs those areas where we feel that the measures proposed are either not the preferred option to address the issue in question, or in some cases, (mainly within the Pay and Workplace Conditions thematic area), not justified as gender equality measures.

25. In the majority of cases, we are very supportive of the recommendations and, based on our experience of implementing gender equality plans, and striving to achieve the systemic and cultural change needed to sustain progress on gender equality, we would counsel that ultimate decisions and strategies will need to be evidence based, tailored to key areas of need, and appropriately resourced in order to achieve the required change.