

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHIONANNAS INSCNE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON GENDER EQUALITY

---

*Déardaoin, 5 Bealtaine 2022*

*Thursday, 5 May 2022*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

---

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Ciarán Cannon,	Lisa Chambers,
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Regina Doherty,
Sorca Clarke,	Alice-Mary Higgins,
Paul McAuliffe.	Fintan Warfield.

Deputy Ivana Bacik sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

*The joint committee met in private session at 9 a.m., suspended at 9.20 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.33 a.m.*

## **Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Chairman:** I welcome the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris. Before we begin, members now have the option of being physically present or may join via Microsoft Teams from their Leinster House offices but may not participate in the meeting from outside the parliamentary precincts. We know the protocol for Teams. To limit the risk of spreading Covid-19, all members, visitors and witnesses are encouraged to continue to wear face masks when moving around the campus and to be mindful of public health advice.

Today's public meeting will comprise two sessions. We are dealing with the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality on the matters of norms, stereotypes and education. For the first session we welcome the Minister, Deputy Harris. I thank him for engaging with us. I welcome also his officials, Mr. Enda Hughes and Mr. Aongus McGrane from the equality, diversity and inclusion unit of the Department. Our second session is with representatives of the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, the Irish Universities Association, IUA, and the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, to hear their views on the same topic.

I will read the note on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee but if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence that is connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person or entity in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I call on the Minister to make his opening statement. I advise him our remit as a committee is to investigate how to implement the 45 recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. Those recommendations are important as they are essentially a blueprint for gender equality in our society. We have concluded our hearings on the first two sets of recommendations on constitutional change and gender-based violence and we are now dealing with this module on norms, stereotypes and education and on gender equality principles in law and policy. We are conscious, as I know the Minister is, of the significant overlap between the different series of recommendations. I thank the Minister because I know from his opening statement he is going to address other recommendations beyond recommendations 26 to 31, inclusive, where his Department has the remit. I invite the Minister to make his opening statement.

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I thank the Chair for the invitation. It is good the committee will be hearing from me and then directly afterwards from the USI, IUA and THEA because my experience of working on these issues around gender equality has very much been one of partnership right across the sector. I hope we can begin to knit together a full picture and range of views on these important issues. Before I begin I take the opportunity to commend formally the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality that culminated in the publication of a report containing 45 recommendations across eight themes. It was a significant moment in a long history of

advocacy and public discourse around how we treat and value women and girls in this country and how we make real progress when it comes to the issue of gender equality.

I was especially heartened to see the inclusive parameters the assembly adopted for its work, for example by recognising violence against women as a gender justice issue. As members know, I have direct experience from my time as Minister for Health of the impact a citizens' assembly report can have and what follows when a report leaves the assembly and comes to the Oireachtas, which I think is exactly what the Chair is alluding to. It is a process that has served us very well in trying to make cross-party societal, social change on important issues. Particularly around the issue of reproductive rights and healthcare, it showed we can be very respectful in how we work to make progress. I am therefore excited another citizens' assembly has reported on an area of work of major importance and an all-party Oireachtas committee is now examining how to turn those recommendations into tangible action. Usually when one comes before a committee as a Minister, one is accounting for everything one is doing and that is right and proper. I very much see this engagement as a two-way flow where I and my Department outline to the committee what we are doing but we very much look forward to hearing members' views, seeing its report and seeing what more we can do. I look forward to working with the committee on that.

I wish to be clear at the outset that gender inequality is pervasive across society and we cannot silo or reduce our aims to achieve gender justice to one category or a range of narrow perspectives. We need a holistic, whole-of-government, whole-population approach if we are serious about making progress. While the assembly's recommendations cut across many policy areas and very much highlight the need for a collective Government response, I am here to share with members the role my Department must play in advancing gender equality. I understand the committee has requested that this session primarily focus on recommendations 26 to 31, inclusive, regarding norms, stereotypes and education and I welcome that. However, as they are interrelated I will also address recommendations 28 to 30, inclusive, as my Department is also progressing work in these areas.

While my Department has policy responsibility for third level, we need to have an honest conversation here about how gender stereotypes and issues of equality roll through the entire education system. We need to link in across the three systems, namely, the primary, secondary and third levels. I feel very strongly about this. It would be dishonest of me to not be clear about how strongly I feel about the issue. There is really good work being done in the third-level sector around consent but it is just too late. It needs to happen much earlier. I know the committee will be engaging with my colleague, the Minister for Education. There is little point in talking about consent at third level, for example, if we do not have a comprehensive sexual education curriculum at primary and secondary level in an age-appropriate manner. It is with regret I say this is one of the key recommendations of the Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution that has not been substantially progressed yet. If we wait until our young people are aged 18 years and entering third level to educate them on consent, in many ways the damage can be done; certainly it can be more difficult to undo perceived norms at that stage. In any event, I understand a separate invitation has issued to my colleague, the Minister for Education. I very much look forward to working with her and her Department on any shared recommendations that arise from this committee's report.

A long-held aim of the education policy has been to ensure that everybody is afforded the opportunity to develop to their full potential in this country. Traditional gender norms and stereotypes can lead to adverse outcomes in terms of gender inequality, which can inhibit people

from reaching their full potential and lead to less than desired outcomes. In the education sector this can manifest itself in subject choices in the school system which, in turn, can influence course choices at third level which can, in turn, determine future career paths.

The higher and further education sector can be an engine for economic growth, and an instrument to promote diversity and enhance social cohesion. I want to ensure that we create opportunities and support people to engage in education and training at every stage of their lives to learn, upskill, reskill and grow.

I propose to go through each of the relevant recommendations and update the committee on my Department's initiatives and work.

Recommendation 28 states:

All levels of the education system from pre-school to third level, led by the relevant Government Department, should:

- (a) Ensure that initial education and continuing professional development for staff includes modules promoting gender awareness and gender-sensitive teaching methods.
- (b) Monitor policies and practices - including school inspection and whole school evaluation through the lens of gender equality and report regularly on trends and outcomes by gender.

I would like to share with the committee some of our activities concerns gender awareness, and the monitoring of practices and policies in third level education.

On 15 March, I announced the second national review of gender equality. The review is being carried out by an expert group, on behalf of the Higher Education Authority, HEA. The review will assess the progress since the first review of its kind in 2016 and make recommendations to ensure that gender equality is amplified in higher education institutions. The expert group is expected to make five to ten high-level recommendations on how higher education institutions might enhance their equality policies, and their implementation of those policies, to support gender equality. I expect to be in a position to publish this report towards the end of this year.

Progress is continuing on the range of indicators included in the gender action plan for higher education and I will outline some examples. All higher education institutions have institutional gender action plans and now submit annual progress updates to the HEA. The HEA continues to publish the higher education institutional staff profiles by gender on an annual basis. New and additional gender-specific posts under the senior academic leadership initiative, SALI, was launched in 2019, and I am sure that colleagues will not mind me acknowledging the work on SALI done by the former Minister of State with responsibility for higher education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor. The initiative is very sensible but it was also a brave initiative at the time and I think that it was the right thing to do. I am delighted to say that to date 20 posts at senior academic level have been awarded to Irish HEIs under the first cycle of the initiative. During my time as Minister I am delighted to have been in a position to award a further ten posts so far under the second cycle of the initiative.

Higher education institutions that currently hold Athena SWAN Ireland awards are guided in their applications to provide information on training that is related to equality and diversity, management, leadership, and-or other opportunities linked to career progression. I am pleased

to say that 15 additional awards were announced on March 31, which means: there has been a total number of 98 awards; 20 HEIs have achieved a bronze award; and 78 departmental awards have been made to date.

The attainment of Athena SWAN awards is now linked to eligibility for research funding. This is an important moment and we are leading in this area. When I tell European colleagues and the European Commission about the progressive initiative that we have taken as a country. I refer to the fact that we have linked the eligibility to apply for research funding from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Health Research Board, the Irish Research Council, and Science Foundation Ireland to attaining an Athena SWAN award. That means we have directly linked gender equality to the ability to draw down research funding. I think that is a good move and I hope it is one other countries will follow. Our senior research academic posts have increased by 50% in the course of a year from 2019 to 2020. In addition, in the research sector the female research applicant success rate has grown from 26% in 2019 to 31% in 2020.

To be clear about accountability, in addition to the submission of progress updates the governing authority of each higher education institution must submit a statement to the HEA confirming that the institution has an action plan in place, and that it is being implemented as part of its annual governance statements. All HEIs are required to submit an annual governance statement and a statement of internal control to the HEA, which covers a comprehensive list of governance requirements. That is how we ensure accountability in terms of progress.

The HEA has awarded funding of over €0.5 million under the gender equality enhancement fund in 2020-21 to advance gender equality initiatives in Irish higher education. Awards were made across three areas - research on or advancing gender quality initiatives in Ireland; training programmes that specifically address gender equality; and Athena SWAN capacity building activities. Projects were funded across several areas. They include the promotion of female role models in the physical sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics; the development and implementation of gender identity, expression and diversity training for staff in Irish HEIs; the establishment of networks to support female participation in computer science; resources to support the academic advancement of mid-career female staff; the provision of gender equality-based leadership training to future leaders and so on.

Recommendations 29 and 16 refer to how we reform financial supports. Recommendation 29 states: “In view of the gendered impact on women, reform the Third Level Grants Scheme to ensure that those accessing part-time courses are eligible to apply for a grant.” Recommendation 16 states: “Address the specific needs of lone parents to incentivise and support them in accessing work or education, including provision of child and after-school care.” When I took up this role one of the first things that I did was commission a review of the student grant scheme. It is timely that I am here because I was delighted to bring the final report to Government this week and we launched it yesterday morning.

Already, as a result of the review, we have made some early progress in addressing some of the review’s recommendations around the cost of living. However, we cannot hide away from the fact that the cost of living for students has increased as it has for us all. As women comprise the majority of lone parents we must ensure that there is access to the supports they need if they wish to enter or re-enter education.

For the first time in a decade there will be significant changes to the rates and eligibility when it comes to student grants. As colleagues will be aware, the rate of the grant will increase. There will be an increase in the income threshold that goes into a house while still qualifying.

Plus the number of students who can qualify for a larger grant will increase due to changes in the adjacency rules from September. All that in of itself is not enough. We need to make bigger changes to the structure of the SUSI grant. The review that I published yesterday is very clear about this matter. To be blunt, that means considering ways to provide student supports and grants to people who undertake part-time education. There is the idea that every student is 18, just out of school and looking forward to going to college for four years. That is great for them but that is not all of our students. There will be an increasing number of students, and it is hard to put ages on these things, who will be in their 40s, there will be women with dependants with a mortgage and a full-time job trying to, and needing to, access the education system. I admit, as the Minister, that there is an inconsistency in the policy approach. We tell people to take up part-time education and study in flexible ways but do not provide a SUSI grant. Yesterday's review was very clear that there is a need to make changes in that regard and I support the need for those changes. I have been working my way through that in the budgetary processes and would welcome cross-party political support for this.

As part of the overall funding package that we announced yesterday, there is an implementation group that will be chaired by Professor Anne Looney and Professor Tom Collins, which may be of interest to the committee in terms of its work to make sure that there is a focus on gender equality and gender proofing the work of the implementation group.

Very shortly I will bring to Government the new national plan for equity of access to higher education. I am genuinely very excited about the plan. It is going to make an impact where we need it the most. Not only will students be supported to enter third level, we will start to measure things a bit better and not just measure getting somebody in the door, which is important. We will measure when people get in the door of a college and what happens when they leave college.

Objectively, through successive Ministers and Governments of different hues, we have made a lot of progress when it comes to access. However, we do not measure everything when it comes to access. We can say that we are doing great, and in some areas we have, but the bigger story is the things in the access plan that we do not measure. Perhaps this committee has some ideas on how we can look at some groups that are currently under-represented in higher education. Of course that can involve people from socioeconomic groups that have low participation. For example, Irish Travellers, students with disabilities, first-time mature student entrants, part-time and-or flexible learners; and further education award holders.

Lone parents and ethnic minorities are included in this grouping as a subgroup. Following a review of the supports and barriers for lone parents in accessing higher education in 2017, a number of additional supports were put in place to support lone parents. In the interests of time I will take the detail of that as read as I am conscious that my statement is a bit long.

Recommendation 30 refers to the STEM programmes and analysing how to encourage more women into what have been male-dominated careers, which includes STEM programmes and apprenticeships, and, equally, how do we develop initiatives that encourage men into female-dominated careers because, traditionally, the caring professions have been dominated overwhelmingly by women rather than men. One of the most impressive groups that I have ever encountered since I took up this role is the group called Women Technology and Stem, WITS. They have informed me about the various barriers that face young women entering STEM careers, and the steps that we need to take to fix what they call the leaky pipeline of women working in STEM industries. We are very good at diagnosing what the leaky pipeline is and diagnosing the problems and challenges but it is harder to diagnose what we need to do next.

I have met some of the most impressive people I have ever come across in this area and even in discussions with them, I am not sure we are clear on the five or ten tangible actions we must take. That feeds into the work of the committee. The problem has been clearly identified. It is a fact that there are many women in Ireland with qualifications in STEM not working in STEM. There are also women in Ireland with qualifications in STEM not in the workforce. That is the leaky pipeline. The question is how we fix it. I have had some very good discussions with those people on that.

We are funding a number of initiatives to ensure more women enter male-dominated careers. Existing programmes to encourage women into male-dominated careers include Springboard+ and the human capital initiative pillar 1. Springboard+ complements the core State-funded education and training system and provides free and subsidised upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need. Since early 2017, Springboard courses have been made available for free to returners, that is, people looking to get back into the workforce. Employed people participating in courses at levels 7 and above contribute 10% of the course cost, with the remainder being funded by the Government. Almost 64% of course places are in STEM-related areas, including new and emerging technologies around cybersecurity and virtual reality.

When it comes to apprenticeships, there needs to be a relentless focus on female participation. We have an action plan for apprenticeships. We want to get 10,000 new apprenticeships registered every year by 2025. I believe we are going to hit that target. It is possible we could even exceed it. We are already at over 8,000 as of last year. Some good news, albeit coming from a very low base, is that the number of female apprentices is growing. It was 665 at the end of 2019 and was 1,482 in March 2022. There is an increase there, which we very much welcome. One of the five unambiguous objectives in this plan is Apprenticeship for All, meaning that the profile of the apprenticeship population will more closely reflect the profile of the general population. We are matching the rhetoric with actions. We have also put in place a new bursary scheme. I recently announced a gender equity bursary, which provides a bursary for employers of apprentices from a minority gender in apprenticeships where there is over 80% representation of a single gender. This applies overwhelmingly to apprenticeships where employers need to take on women to bring about gender equality, but there is one apprenticeship in hairdressing where they need to take on more men. Under the action plan, we are also establishing an equity of access committee and will develop additional targeted actions to support the diversification of the apprentice population so that it more strongly reflects the general population. Options such as increased flexibility in the delivery of apprenticeships to facilitate part-time employment or periods of leave will be considered in the delivery of this new inclusive apprenticeship delivery structure. These actions align with the national strategy for women and girls which includes an action to increase female participation in apprenticeships.

Regarding recommendation 38, which is about eliminating tolerance in our society of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, the framework for consent in higher education institutions was launched in April 2019. It aims to ensure the creation of an institutional campus culture that is safe, respectful and supportive for students and staff. The framework outlines a number of aims for higher education institutions, HEIs, students and staff. The HEA and my Department will ensure relevant supporting structures and processes are in place to address the issues of sexual harassment and violence on campuses. There are 15 framework outcomes, which are grouped thematically under headings and look at areas such as institutional culture, institutional processes for the recording of incidents, lines of responsibility and targeted initiatives.

The first letter I wrote to university presidents on taking up this role was not about funding or any of those important issues; it was specifically about adopting a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, sexual and gender-based violence. As a result of that, every higher education institution in Ireland has now published its own individual action plan. National frameworks are great but institutions cannot hide behind them. They cannot stay too high-level. The presidents have to tell us what they are going to do on their campuses to make sure the culture is safe, and how they are going to report on that. I thank them all for their work on that.

As part of the monitoring requirements, HEIs are required to report annually to the HEA on progress in implementing the framework for consent. We are also providing funding for this. Over €400,000 has been allocated to a number of initiatives. In addition, the HEA has allocated funding of over €500,000 towards consent workshops, the development of an anonymous report and support tool, and UCC's bystander intervention programme. I thank Professor Louise Crowley for her leadership on that. My Department is also partnering with the Department of Justice and the NUIG Active\* Consent programme on the roll-out of an integrated, publicly available, online learning and resource hub on sexual consent awareness and learning. I thank Dr. Pádraig MacNeela for his leadership there. I launched the online consent hub on sexual consent in January. This is the first time we have a national online resource relating to consent. It is a publicly available, free educational resource on sexual consent for young people, their families, and the educators who work with them. This hub will play an important role and will be a very important resource for both students and wider society.

I could not come here today without commenting on the launch of the report on the student and staff surveys on sexual violence and harassment in higher education. It was a genuinely harrowing read. I take this opportunity to thank students and staff across the country who took the time to engage with this survey and share their experiences. Some people were too focused on identifying how many people filled out the survey and so on rather than listening to what the survey was telling us. A total of 11,417 responses were analysed from 7,901 students and 3,516 staff. The survey points to some positive developments. There has been a significant increase in awareness around the training programmes and a significant increase in the willingness of both staff and students to access training programmes. More students want consent classes and more staff want to be trained in this area. More people say they would intervene in a scenario they did not believe to be appropriate.

Those are the encouraging signs but there are also some deeply troubling findings, such as the levels of sexual harassment experienced by staff and students. This is not necessarily on campus harassment because we asked students and staff for all their experiences. It is an insight into a broader societal challenge. An expert advisory group on ending sexual violence and harassment, chaired by the HEA, has reviewed the survey reports and has proposed a number of actions, for example, around consent classes and the availability of investigators. I have fed the recommendations of my Department and that expert group into the Department of Justice for inclusion in the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I will continue to speak up and speak out about the importance of institutional change, championing the changes required to achieve a cultural norm where bullying and sexual harassment are not tolerated.

I want to mention an important piece of data-gathering within the higher education sector. On 8 March 2021, I launched the national gender equality dashboard for higher education institutions. This is based on the higher education institution staff profiles by gender. This dashboard was developed by Maynooth University and provides, for the first time, an interactive

and comparative visualisation of key staff data and gender profiles from Irish higher education institutions. It will be updated annually and offers a valuable baseline from which progress on gender equality can be visualised and measured across all grades of staff in universities, colleges, and institutes of technology. It is important that we continue to improve data collection so we can have the evidence to inform policies and measure progress or highlight challenges. The centre of excellence in the HEA monitors HEI performance through the strategic dialogue process. The centre is responsible for analysing and publishing annual higher education institution staff profiles by gender and setting ambitious targets in this regard.

This was my attempt at a brief synopsis of what my Department and sector are advancing to achieve the goal of gender equality. There is a massive body of work to be done in third level. In many ways, the third level sector holds a mirror up to the broader issues in society. We, the sector, students and staff are determined to lead the way in bringing about cultural change. If we cannot bring about a safe culture in academia, a place that is meant to be full of enlightened progressives, where can we? Education has the ability to change culture. We should let our young people and staff in colleges experience zero tolerance for sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Let them have the tools and resources they need to live in a gender-equal society and let them take that knowledge out into broader society, back to their homes, communities and workplaces.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. I gave him some leeway with the time as there was a lot in his opening statement. I thank him for engaging so comprehensively and specifically with the recommendations. I call Deputy Cannon, followed by Deputy Clarke.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive opening statement. An area I have been fascinated by for the last number of years is that of women in STEM. There has been a lot of excellent research done in this country on how to encourage greater female participation in STEM subjects and, ultimately, in STEM careers. CoderDojo has done some wonderful research and Accenture did an excellent piece of research about five years ago in collaboration with DCU. There are many exciting things happening regarding how we encourage women to make the initial decision to participate in STEM subjects at third level; however, much more collaboration and co-operation are needed right across the education system, from junior infants right through the various other levels. Much of the research has concluded that while a focus on role models for women and girls in STEM subjects is incredibly important, it is even more important to have role models in one's immediate peer group. A nine-year-old girl in a primary school in Roscommon with a fascination with all things technical will be most inspired by another nine-year-old girl sitting beside her sharing that fascination. Therefore, we need to consider what research is available internationally. We need to consider the global exemplars regarding how this is done well. Ultimately, more in-depth collaboration between primary, post-primary and third levels is required. I encourage the Minister, Deputy Harris, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and others to consider this area to ensure that we can completely normalise the decision-making process for young girls who want to immerse themselves in STEM subjects very early in life and get involved in STEM careers. That is ultimately what we are trying to do. If we can seek to normalise the choice of a STEM career and make it seem just like any other career choice, we will have done a great body of work.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I fully agree with Deputy Cannon. I realise he knows about this matter from his time in what was the Department of Education and Skills, his work on CoderDojo and his interest in this whole area. I could list out all we are doing at third level, as I did in my opening statement, but the Deputy is entirely correct that these decisions are made by young

girls long before they get to third level. I must highlight the question of access and availability to subjects in all schools. It is a fact that in some all-girls schools, there has not been sufficient subject diversity. People are working to improve this.

We are aware that because we have narrowed the conversation so much, students, whether men or women, were not hearing much at all about apprenticeships. This feeds into some of the work we are doing on CAO reform. I have met some female apprentices and will be meeting more after this committee meeting. I ask them whether they entered apprenticeships directly from school. Sometimes they laugh at me and say they did not know anything about apprenticeships at school. It is as if they got there accidentally. Maybe they took the traditional college route, found it was not for them and heard about an apprenticeship later. They say they wish they had known about apprenticeships earlier. Therefore, I hope some of the work we are doing on apprenticeships, further education options and the trades through the CAO discussion and reform and the changes to the website helps, but it is very much about getting role models into schools as well as having the relevant conversation. We are now trying to build a panel of female apprentices to visit schools in order that students will believe they can be one when they see one.

Subject choice is an important aspect. Professor Anne Looney in DCU has spoken to me about how subjects are taught. I do not have the research in front of me and I am going on memory but if one asks a class whether anybody is interested in science, one is likely to see more male hands than female hands going up in many primary schools. I am led to believe, however, that if the pupils are asked whether they are interested in whether we can come up with a cure for a health condition, more female hands begin to go up. There is research, rather than just anecdote, behind the understanding of what the concept of science is and how it applies to the different genders.

**Chairman:** That is very helpful. I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The Minister was absolutely correct in his last statement. It is a matter of how we frame, not advertise, what the careers are going to look like for our younger students.

I have some questions but I want to start on a point that is very close to my heart but that also gives me a bit of a nervous twitch. I am not going to lie to the Minister in that regard. We have come phenomenal distances since I was a teenage lone parent who re-entered education. The barriers at the time were such that without really good support, you were simply not going to get there. I am talking about the late 1990s. We have made real progress in that regard, which has to be acknowledged, but there are still barriers. Unless we can get to grips with them, we will continue to see women failing to meet their own career objectives. Also, we will not benefit from them being in the workplace. That is what is really key here.

One of the issues that repeatedly comes across my desk is the back-to-education scheme. The Minister spoke about emerging technologies and he was correct to do so because technology is emerging and changing constantly. He needs to consider the idea of someone accessing back-to-education supports more than once. If we are serious about asking people to work in particular areas, we need to start removing the barriers that exist.

On STEM subjects, I am proud that my child who was born in the late 1990s is now a woman in STEM herself and absolutely loving it. Again, however, she is one of those who made her career choice not by way of any direct path but by a meandering road. That is acceptable

and there is nothing wrong with that; a meandering path sometimes gives us the opportunity to learn life skills along the way.

What gives me the nervous twitch is the non-adjacent rate. I say this as somebody whose constituency is quite rural. I recognise that we need to have a limit and a reduction, which I welcome. In my home town, Mullingar, there are people who access public transport to get to Tús in Athlone. Some might live 29 km away while others might live 31 km away, which is over the threshold of 30 km, but those in each category receive a different rate of support. They all get on the same bus in the morning. That is one of the small barriers. It is not major but small, yet it has an impact.

My colleague is correct in speaking about these issues. A saying that came to the fore in recent years is one that I truly believe in: you cannot be what you cannot see. We all remember it. It popped out around when Chris Hadfield had a better Internet connection on the International Space Station than some of us did at home, but it is true. This falls very nicely back under recommendation No. 31, on how we promote gender equality and avoid gender discrimination. Women who do jobs that may not have been traditionally associated with their gender - the same applies to men - are the ones we need to see on our screens and hear on our radios. These are the ones who can have a genuine impact on younger children such that the latter will say there is something in what is being said and that they might join CoderDojo, the Midlands Science club or another such group as a consequence. That is critical.

One of the keys to encouraging more women into apprenticeships is providing wider options. Plenty of careers already have a hybrid model involving learning and earning, otherwise known as an apprenticeship, although the title is not attached. This is something we should be considering also.

The Minister spoke about the linkages between primary, secondary and third levels and further education. He was correct to do that. It is a matter of having cross-sector engagement when it comes to the changes we need to make. A whole-of-government approach is required.

Before this committee reports, can the Minister outline his experience with cross-departmental engagement on the issue of gender equality? He spoke of silos. We do not want people working in silos; we very much want a team push towards where we need to go. We would like to know what the Minister's experience has been.

Consider the consent framework across third level, which is doing a reasonably good job. We have a zero-tolerance approach, action plans, resources, workshops, committee frameworks and the whole shebang but it appears to me that there is no real mechanism by which progress can be measured. I raised this with the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Justice, last week. It is very important. If we simply measure the reduction in reported assaults or measure progress as the return of a form to be sent in, we are not using an appropriate parameter. There is better work that we could do on that.

With regard to the professional development of academic staff, is diversity and gender training part of the professional development programme? If not, why not? This is one of the areas that the citizens really focused on in their recommendation. We speak of very young children we want to bring forward. While we know about the progress made regarding students and staff, is diversity and gender training included in professional development courses?

**Chairman:** I am conscious that there was a lot in that.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** We could be here all day. I apologise to the Chairman.

**Chairman:** That is fine. I gave the Deputy leeway on time.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Clarke. I will get her Twitch in a minute. I find myself in agreement with much of what she has said. On the issue of lone parents, while I do not need to mansplain this in any way to the Deputy, she is right that we have made progress. That is a statement of fact. In truth, there are now more people from diverse and different backgrounds entering higher education. The Deputy is also right that a lot more needs to be done.

I will briefly identify three things. Reform of the student grant is a big piece. Second, based on an experience I had in Wexford the other day, I know that the opening of the technological universities, bringing education into the regions, is a game changer. I was talking to lone parents in Wexford who are involved in lifelong learning and they told me that, if they did not have the Wexford campus and had to go to Waterford, that would not have been possible. That is what they basically said. Ensuring that not all roads lead to the big city and bringing higher education into the regions is important. It will provide opportunities for people from a whole variety of backgrounds, including lone parents, who may not be there otherwise and it is already doing so. That is the feedback I got this week.

The third thing I will identify is online learning. We saw this during the Covid pandemic. During that time, we saw a lot of things we would never want to see again but we also saw an education system that was less rigid and more flexible and responsive. Obviously, outside of the pandemic, that will have to be done in a more organised and planned way. I met with Longford Women's Link, which is an incredible organisation. All those I met were women learners who were, at a later stage in life, accessing degree programmes at Maynooth University and South East Technological University Carlow from rural Longford. They told me that the availability of online education, which was, to be honest, a Covid measure, enabled them to do a degree. They were not able to pack their bags and head to Maynooth and Carlow.

If I was to pick three things, and there are way more, they would be: the reform of financial supports, particularly the student grant; bringing education into the regions; and bringing education online. Those three things are potential building blocks.

The Deputy is right to highlight the poverty traps and the disconnect that sometimes arises between the initiatives of one Department and another Department's schemes. We are trying to work our way through those. The Department of Social Protection was involved in the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, review. The Deputy is right; we need to improve how the back-to-education allowance interacts with other areas.

On the adjacent and non-adjacent rates of grant, I was determined to make progress on this issue in the budget. The Deputy has acknowledged that we did although she also believes we need to do a lot more. It was the case that you had to live 45 km away for the non-adjacent rate. That has been reduced to 30 km. This means that many students will see their grant go up by 25%, 30% or 35% this September. That is great but the Deputy is right in that, if you live 29 km away, you are out. That is always the issue when you set thresholds. However, if the Deputy were to ask me whether I am finished my journey with regard to reducing those rates, I would say that I am not. I hope to make more progress on that. The SUSI review, which was published yesterday, feeds into that.

Deputy Clarke makes an interesting point on apprenticeships. Again, I believe she is cor-

rect. It drives me crazy when people ask me, whether their sons and daughters should do third level or an apprenticeship because an apprenticeship is third level education. It is just a different way of doing it. It is the same piece of paper. You can do a science degree in this country as an apprentice. More and more, I am asking the universities and colleges - they are autonomous but it would be interesting to get their views when they are here later - how they can provide more of their degree programmes through the apprenticeship route. In Ireland, you can do a master's degree as an apprentice, although there is only one such programme available. You can even do a PhD as an apprentice in one area. Can that become the norm to a greater degree? The gender impact of that could be quite significant.

With regard to my experience of how Government, by which I mean the State rather than Government in the political sense, operates on gender equality, there is good and bad. A good example is the work we are doing on the third strategy, which is being led by my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee. It is a very collaborative, joined-up process and it is going well. All of our Departments are feeding in their actions. In my opening statement, I outlined what my Department is doing. The Minister will bring that strategy to Cabinet. Her Department is clearly the lead Department in that area. Everyone gets how that works, which is good.

I do not think back on my leaky pipeline as a good example. Again, I am not talking about Departments or Ministers but about the State, but I do not think we are as co-ordinated on the enterprise side. If Women in Technology and Science Ireland, WITS, was here today, it could outline ten or 12 reasons women with science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, qualifications are not working in that field. Those ten or 12 reasons would span four, five, six or seven Departments. We are not joined up in that regard. If I was to ask who is responsible for fixing that leaky pipeline, the answer would be a very long list of people. Usually, when a long list of people are responsible for something, nobody is. There is a good example and a bad example of co-ordination.

I will reflect on the question of how to measure progress. It is a fair one. How do we measure progress in terms of tackling sexual harassment, sexual violence and gender-based violence in third level education every year? My initial answer would be that we do it in two ways. We have an annual survey, which gives us a baseline. Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin convinced me that you need annual surveys so that you can get and measure the data. That is one way. The second way is that we now have annual reporting of institutions' action plans. The Deputy asked a very interesting question as regards what progress looks like and what we are measuring. I will reflect on that.

On professional development, to be truthful, I do not know the answer. It is a question for the institutions. We will find out or the witnesses in the afternoon session may be able to provide that information.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister very much for what was another very comprehensive response.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I welcome the Minister and our other guests to the committee meeting. I have a lot of notes so I hope the Minister will excuse me if I am not looking up at him. I will first touch on relationships and sexuality education, RSE, and how the challenges become more acute at third level. I may also touch on the precarious nature of employment contracts at third level.

In terms of RSE, the Minister, Deputy Foley, has said that the National Council for Cur-

riculum and Assessment, NCCA, is in the process of developing a revised RSE syllabus. We know from responses from the NCCA that the development of that syllabus has not yet begun. Responses to the review, and responses from students in particular, are unanimous with regard to the importance of relationships and sexuality education. They reference the fact that they are conscious that, while friends and the Internet are sources of information, piecing information together from these sources has shortcomings. I am particularly thinking about LGBT kids piecing together information they find online or get from friends, which may be a necessity where RSE is not inclusive. This is probably a good moment to cite the programme for Government, which states the Government will “Develop inclusive and age-appropriate RSE and SPHE curricula across primary and post-primary levels, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships and making appropriate legislative changes, if necessary.” I will come back to the Minister’s view as to whether such changes will be necessary.

The Minister touched on this himself so I do not need to say to him, although I will because we do not always get opportunities to discuss RSE so this is the time to do it, but if commitments on change are not delivered, the problems will become much more acute at third level. He has mentioned the Higher Education Authority study on sexual harassment. Some 8,000 students and 3,500 staff responded and a third of female respondents said they had experienced non-consensual sex. I think back to October 2020. I remember speaking in the Seanad about an article written by Una Mullally, who had spoken to a student union officer in a Dublin university who had received 350 disclosures of harassment and assault in one calendar year. Consent, positive and healthy relationships, safe Internet use and healthy attitudes towards sexual minorities are important. Does the Minister think it will be necessary to make appropriate legislative changes as mentioned in the programme for Government or can we deliver on this without such changes? As the Minister said, this was also the subject of a commitment in the report on the eighth amendment. Sex education has been in place since 1995. There is not much of an age gap between the Minister and I and we remember that this education was completely insufficient. The Minister’s views on that would be most welcome. Perhaps I will allow him to respond at this point.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Senator Warfield. I am in clear agreement on the need to have fact and evidence-based impartial information delivered in an age-appropriate manner in primary and secondary schools in Ireland. What you learn or do not learn about these issues cannot be the luck of the draw or down to the ethos of the school or where you live. That causes great societal difficulties. I remember launching the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre’s annual report a couple of years ago when I was in the Department of Health. There are clear correlations between where young people get their information in respect of sex and their attitudes to sex as they grow up. The Senator referenced social media. I am an avid user of social media, as are many of us in this room. I think it is great. I imagine it is also a frightening time to be parent of a teenage or even pre-teenage child. I worry that in the absence of proper and factual information being provided in a school setting, young people would end up developing their attitudes to and expectations of sex from social media. We must call this out and get real on it. We must get on with it. There is a clear programme for Government commitment and my colleague, the Minister for Education, will be before the committee next week, or this month anyway. That Minister is tasked with driving forward this programme for Government commitment and I know she will do that. It is vital we do so.

In truth, I do not know if we require legislative change. I will await the Minister’s view in this regard. I would not necessarily have thought that to be the case. I would defend to the death the right of a parents to decide what ethos of school they want and I believe fundamen-

tally that parents are the primary educators of their kids. It is a separate and distinct issue, however, in having every child in Ireland being able to access age-appropriate, fact-based, impartial information about sex and consent.

There is a little good news in this respect. My Department, through the Irish Research Council, has provided funding to the Bystander programme in University College Cork, and Professor Louise Crowley is an incredible individual and leader in the area. That funding is to bring the programme into schools. I will provide a note to the committee on this but there is an overwhelming demand for it. It may be a strawman argument that there is much resistance to introducing such a programme to schools and it is not necessarily my experience but there is a need for a decision to get on with it. I hope we can get there shortly. This cannot be optional and it must be available to everybody in schools, regardless of what school a student attends. I feel very strongly about that.

All of us in this room knocked on doors and asked people to repeal the eighth amendment to the Constitution. It was a very important moment. We told those people we would do other things. We told them we would provide free contraception and proper sex education and education on consent in schools. We need to fulfil all the promises we made to the people of Ireland. I also feel very strongly about that.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I thank the Minister for his response. What I am hearing is that the Department is co-ordinating with the Department of Education, led by the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, around these matters.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Yes. My Department is getting on with it. My Department is rolling out and ramping out consent classes, training and funding. We have a national advisory group, chaired by the National Women's Council of Ireland, that advises me. We are getting on with it. I am also saying, because it would be disingenuous to say anything else to this committee, that the process must start much earlier than third level.

**Chairman:** That note on the Bystander programme would be very welcome.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** A number of women presidents have been appointed in universities. I am also conscious of the Higher Education Authority Bill. I must raise the increasingly precarious nature of employment contracts across higher and further education, which disproportionately affects women. HEA research from 2019 found that more than six from every ten academic staff working in temporary and part-time roles are women and 45% of those lecturing in universities work on a non-permanent basis. Of all permanent full-time academic positions, 41% are held by women. There is, I suppose, systemic precariousness of employment for women across higher and further education system. I wanted to put that on record and I would welcome the Minister responding to the point.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will be brief in the interests of time. Precarious employment is a real challenge in the third level sector. To address it we must fund the sector properly and look at the employment control framework. We have student-staff ratios in this country of approximately 20:1 and the European norm is 14:1 or 15:1. We announced €307 million in funding yesterday to plug the gap in core funding, and that has been welcomed by the sector. They want to see the delivery but the figure has been welcomed and it will get us to the levels we need of 15:1. That is how we will address precarious employment. Representatives of the sector will be here later and they will make the point that the employment control framework is a piece of this issue and we will work our way through that with them.

The Senator mentioned female presidents. We have five technological universities in Ireland as of this week and three of them - a majority - have female presidents. I was just looking at the traditional universities. When I started in this role, there were no female presidents of universities, so it just shows the pace of change in the sector. There is now a female president at both the University of Limerick and Maynooth and there is a female provost at Trinity. She is the first and it only took more than 400 years but she is doing a super job. I hope when Ministers come before this committee in future they will not have to remark how great it is to see that progress and it will just be the norm. It is significant progress and change has come fast in the end.

**Chairman:** There are two colleagues indicating to speak. We can take Deputy Carroll MacNeill first and then Senator Higgins. We are using eight-minute slots if that is okay.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank the Minister for coming in with his officials. I agree with his comments about females in senior positions in universities and I compliment former Deputy, Mary Mitchell O'Connor, on the pioneering work she did in that regard. She came up against much criticism for that but it was the right action. Fair play to her for doing it.

I will follow up on the relationship and sex education issue. I am glad my colleague raised this and I know he has done that a number of times in the Seanad. I have raised the matter consistently in the Dáil. I do not want to criticise somebody who is not here and I have said this in the Dáil as well. My concern is that the junior cycle programme is being advanced and we will see content rolled out next year. The senior cycle and primary content is not being developed, as far as I am aware, and I have been told that after the junior cycle work is done, that work will begin. I do not understand why it needs to be done consecutively and not at the same time, as it is a similar body of work, albeit adapted for age-appropriate content. I am taking this additional opportunity to speak to the Minister as a member of Cabinet and try to understand this better. I know he cannot answer this directly but I want to know why such a body of work, which has such a similar read across age groups, cannot be done contemporaneously. As he said, this needs to start at the age of five in primary school. I also agree with his position on the overall parental choice, perhaps except on this matter, where every child is entitled to the same fact-based education as every other child, which is a societal imperative.

His Department also has a role in this with regard to higher education and teacher training, including teacher training colleges and curriculums within them. In anticipation of this being delivered to children from the age of five, it will have to form part of the education programme for new teachers. What engagement, if any, has begun in anticipation of that work, which will be completed at some time by the Department of Education?

We spoke before about mandatory consent classes following the sexual harassment survey that was published. I reiterate the extraordinary responses from that, with 34.2% of female students reporting experiencing non-consensual vaginal penetration. It is an extraordinary statistic but I can think of all the experiences of women in college, and then I wonder if it is that surprising. It is certainly not surprising to me or my female friends or colleagues. What has been the engagement since with universities on mandatory consent classes, if there are any? I will allow the Minister to respond, although it would be great if I had time for another question.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I do not want to use the Deputy's time but I acknowledge her own consistent advocacy of fact-based and evidence-based sex education in schools. I agree entirely on that point. I will take back the view to the wider government on how this work might be done contemporaneously rather than sequentially. There is a logic in what she says. The Min-

ister for Education will be able to articulate more accurately her Department's position on this. The programme for Government commitment is clear, and that is what we are all charged with delivering.

I will get the Deputy and the committee a note on the teacher training piece, which resides with the Department of Education. The mandatory consent classes work is going very well. Again, I will get a note for the committee but from what I can see, all our colleges are now providing consent classes as a core component of the general induction. I use the phrase "mandatory consent" but what I mean by that is that it is not something that happens somewhere on a Wednesday night but it becomes part of a student's induction in college. The uptake levels have been extraordinarily high.

The Deputy's comments about the survey are right. Politicians come out saying the findings are shocking or horrific but I am not sure that is the right reaction; the findings are stark and harrowing but give an insight into what people were experiencing. The positive from the survey was that staff and students demonstrate a willingness and desire to access training. Dr. Pádraig MacNeela of the Active\* Consent programme in NUI Galway speaks very well about this, indicating the very different approach to training by somebody who has been through sexual harassment. It takes in what it is, what is consent and the attitudes, and it is quite transformational as well. It might be useful for me to give the committee a breakdown, college by college, of the uptake levels and the progress. We have that information.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** That would be very helpful.

**Chairman:** That would be great. I was not aware that level of information was available.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** It would give us a good national picture. My colleague, Deputy Clarke, already asked about lone parents. I reiterate her comments about the SUSI grant and access. I know the Minister does a lot of work on the access to education. Lone parents are of particular concern to the Citizens' Assembly. We want to be able to provide routes back to education, particularly for female lone parents.

Another group I want to highlight is Beyond Exploitation, led by Ruhama Women's Project and the Immigrant Council of Ireland. The group is trying to support people who have been in prostitution to get out of prostitution. Those people are extremely marginalised and vulnerable. In situations where people try to leave a situation of domestic violence, it is reported that it takes six, seven or eight tries to successfully leave because of how difficult it is. People trying to leave prostitution, coercion and exploitation are having similar experiences. One of the challenges Beyond Exploitation is facing is similar to that which the Housing First model of the Peter McVerry Trust tries to address. In that case, the intention is to provide the most immediate need and wraparound services around it. That situation is not a million miles away from that faced by women in prostitution when one considers the wraparound services that are needed. Those services include housing, access to work and education. The lack of those things might draw somebody back into a coercive arrangement. Many of those challenges are similar to those that Housing First tries to address. Access to work, education, support and training are particularly important. I put that Beyond Exploitation campaign on the Minister's agenda and register. There are models across Europe whereby people who were exploited in the sex trade have been supported out of that situation in a constructive and structured way with wraparound supports. I put that on the Minister's radar.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I fully agree with Deputy Carroll MacNeill about the need to do

more for lone parents. As I said to Deputy Clarke, we have objectively made progress but that is not to suggest the journey is complete because it is not. I believe in the reforms we intend to introduce around SUSI, the student grant system, including the removal of poverty traps - that may or not be the right phrase - whereby people are trying to get into education and feel they are being met with hurdles here and there. We will focus on that as part of the overhaul of the student support grant scheme. That will help.

The new national access plan will be published in June. Improving access for lone parents is a target of that plan. I would be happy to engage further in that regard.

I thank the Deputy for putting Beyond Exploitation on my radar. I would be happy to take a meeting with the Deputy and representatives of that group. I am not overly familiar with the details of the group and will not profess to be. However, I am eager to hear more. I believe that education is an empowering tool for people and I am happy to see how my Department can help to support that group.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister for that engagement. I also commend Beyond Exploitation. I am familiar with its important work. I would be happy to engage separately on that issue.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I might work backwards and pick up on a couple of the issues that have been raised and move further on them. The Minister has heard that the issue of lone parents is a significant one. While there have been small improvements, that group, which makes up a large proportion the population, tends to have particular obstacles in its way. I know that reform of SUSI will have a part to play in that regard. I am not asking the Minister to tell us everything that will be in the national plan when it is published in June but what other measures will be included? I am thinking in particular of access programmes. Many access programmes focus on the important idea of the bridge from school to third level, who crosses that bridge and so forth. I am also thinking of people who may be moving away from social protection payments and other supports. I know there has been a lot of concern around, for example, those who may have parenting responsibilities and are only available part time. Such people are often forced into short-term courses rather than encouraged or supported. It can be a matter of timing. A person might be told in March to undertake a six-month course rather than facilitated to enter college in September. Some gaps are arising in that regard. I would like a sense of how the Minister is engaging with the Minister for Social Protection, with whom we will also be meeting, on the topic of those gaps and route accesses. I do not only ask with regard to the SUSI grant but also with respect to situations where people are being pressed into courses that might not be suitable. I worked with young unemployed people for a period of time. At that time, young unemployed people and parents whose children had reached a certain age and who were being encouraged into employment were being routed into a certain kind of education and employment.

I will also take up the issue of precarious employment, which is a specific issue. I appreciate what the Minister said about the ratios but there are a few other issues. I recently launched the new respect strategy in the National University of Ireland, Galway. The university is developing a respect charter, which is a welcome initiative. I spoke to many academics on that occasion, and I have spoken to other academics around the country, about the Athena SWAN initiative, which is very good. The Government has given it teeth by linking access to research funding to attainment of certain levels of Athena SWAN. It is notable that certain strands within universities, let us say well-resourced departments, are progressing further. The sciences and business schools are able to progress further. Part of Athena SWAN sensibly relates not simply to codes of conduct and everything else but to actual, secure employment. That is one of the

key issues in terms of women's progress. We need a change in institutions to allow for secure contracts and genuine progression pathways. That is happening less in the arts, partly because the arts are less resourced. That is one factor. There is a cultural issue but there is also a resourcing issue. How might that be addressed? Secure employment, which is a key plank of Athena SWAN, is recognised as a gender equality issue.

The Minister has talked about the research money that has gone into gender equality and research. I have written to the Minister's Department about public-public research on a number of occasions. Research that may not have a high financial aspect attached to it but has a high public good quotient is not always ranked highly for progression.

I know the Minister has engaged positively with the proposals of my colleague, Senator Ruane, for non-disclosure agreements and their. There has been a signal that they should not be used further. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that because it is a core issue whereby patterns of gender inequality within higher education institutions are not being identified.

Another issue which has come up again and again is the importance of separate pathways for reporting. That would mean that one is not necessarily reporting to the same person whose job is to recruit the superstar academic and who has financial imperatives but that there would instead be multiple ways to report. Some people could be designated to focus solely on addressing the issues of abuse within institutions.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Senator and fully agree with what she has said about lone parents. The SUSI grant is a part of the equation but I would hate anyone to think it is the totality of how we improve access because it is not. I base my comments on what lone parents and students have told me about their experiences. There are related issues that are well outside the remit of my Department. I am thinking of childcare and the likes. That is definitely an issue for a lone parent who is trying to get back into education. If someone has young kids, the cost of childcare is an obvious and real issue.

The Senator dwelt on the issue of the flexibility of how education is provided. That is very important. I am thinking of a woman I met the other day. She told me that she is going on to do a master's degree. When she started, she was planning on doing a short course to dip her toe back in the waters but managed, bite by bite, to get there. She was fortunate to come across people who would help her on that journey. All too often when people look at a prospectus and think they have to sign up for a four-year programme or something else, it can create an immediate barrier for their next step. How we provide programmes, whether that is moving it online or whether it is actually allowing people do things over a longer period of time, is a key plank. The group chaired by myself and professors Looney and Collins has five themes it intends to deliver as part of the €307 million of core funding that we announced yesterday to plug the gap. One of the themes is on how one creates a much more flexible education system. That is not just because we believe it would be nice to have a more flexible education system. We believe that without it one can never have a situation where all people can reach their full potential. That obviously has a direct impact on the gender pay gap if all of a sudden one has to do the short course rather than being able to do the degree programme.

I really want to make progress on precarious employment. The reason I am using the ratios is that if we fund the colleges to all of a sudden be able to start taking people on, on proper permanent contracts, that will take people out of precarious employment. Colleges will tell the committee at great length if they are asked that it involves work around the employment control framework. My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Re-

form on that. Let me have a look into the point that the Chair is making around Athena SWAN. There is a validity in that. Let me see if I can support it.

Non-disclosure agreements have no place whatsoever when it comes to sexual harassment, violence, bullying or intimidation. The only time a non-disclosure agreement should be used is perhaps in a commercial issue where one is trying to protect some commercial information. The idea that a non-disclosure agreement would be used for anything to do with sexual harassment is utterly repulsive. There is no other phrase for it. It is utterly repulsive.

I wrote to Senator Ruane who has done superb work on this. I wrote to all the institutions. I got the letters back to assure me it was not the case. I believe Senator Ruane and the women to whom she has spoken. We have more work to do to tease through and to make sure none of the letters are in any way Jesuitical. I am happy to engage further with the Chair and with Senator Ruane on that.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister for his extensive engagement with us. He will have seen the very strong commitment the members of the committee have to furthering the work of the Citizens' Assembly. From the array of issues raised, he will see just how closely we are watching these particular recommendations and seek to ensure their implementation. I thank him for referring to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution which followed from the Citizens' Assembly because that is the committee we are taking as our model. We are not re-opening the substantive policy issues but rather looking at implementation of the 45 recommendations that make up that blueprint for gender equality.

I want to pick up on recommendation 30 in particular. We have spoken about this in our engagement today in terms of strengthening existing programmes to encourage women into STEM and apprenticeships. Colleagues have raised a number of issues on that. I am conscious, as the Minister has said, that some progress has been made but there are still far too few women in apprenticeships. The Minister gave us a figure of 1,482 women now in apprenticeships. The proportion is still very low-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Very low.

**Chairman:** -----and the percentage might be helpful. The Minister might want to give us a note on that.

I also want to refer to some practical ways to address this. There is a wonderful new book out by Mr. Owen O'Doherty, who was inspired to write about role models for women in STEM, called *Bright Sparks*. It is for children and is about women in Ireland in science. That is the sort of great initiative that can help address the low levels of girls choosing to do subjects that would lead into STEM careers. Does the Minister's Department have much engagement with careers advisors in schools at secondary level? As he said, that is really where the issues arise. Is there anything we can do, such as the milk round at third level, where the big solicitors' firms and corporates come in to attract graduates and students into their offices? Could we see some way to doing that sort of milk round? Maybe it is already being done with Science Foundation Ireland or others. It is just a practical point.

Recommendation 30(b) of the Citizens' Assembly also called for the development of, "initiatives to encourage men into female-dominated careers". I know the Minister said there is one particular apprenticeship where that is an issue. I think it is a hairdressing apprenticeship. Is there any other measure the Minister can take to specifically target young men and boys? The

corollary is whether boys are choosing subjects that might lead into careers in the caring professions which tend to be more dominated by women.

I acknowledge Ms Mary Mitchell O'Connor's work in advancing Senior Academic Leadership Initiative, SALI, at university level. That has been a very important positive-action initiative. It is the kind of initiative that we can learn from as a constructive method of tackling gender stereotypes in education. I thank the Minister again for his engagement.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I very much enjoyed the engagement and I am genuinely enthused by the cross-party, non-partisan nature of trying to make progress on this. I look forward to the committee's recommendations on how we can make progress. The Chair is right that the total number of female apprentices is rising but the total population of apprentices is rising too. I do not have the percentage. I will get it for the Chair but I do not think we are making significant inroads at present. That is why we have announced the female bursary. That is why we have tried to change the CAO website to change the conversation. It is why we are identifying role models and looking at specific initiatives. We will set up an advisory group on this as part of our apprenticeship action plan in order that we can learn from best practice.

I think there are five craft apprenticeship programmes in Ireland without a female apprentice and 11 programmes with five or fewer. That is from my memory but it gives the Chair an indication. We do not have time to get into it today but I want to flag the issue of league tables in schools because this is a real challenge. If we decide as a society that we will measure the success or otherwise of a school based on how it features in a league table that only looks at universities, how will we make progress on apprenticeships culturally? How will we make progress on further education pathways?

It is an issue that comes up with guidance counsellors all the time. I talk to guidance counsellors regularly. Work needs to be done in terms of a joined-up national guidance counselling policy that transcends a number of Departments. I am advocating for and working on that at present. It is not that the league tables are published by the State but that is what is published in newspapers. It is not a criticism of newspapers. They will say they cannot get data for other things. It is a legitimate issue to look at.

We have a new national apprenticeship office. We are very much looking at getting into schools. I am going in but it is much more important to get female role models into schools. We did not talk enough today about the reverse that the Chair rightly brought up in terms of the professions where we are looking to get more men in, especially the caring professions. Trying to bring role models in through the national apprenticeship office will be a new departure. I am very happy to get the Chair any data on this as well.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive and enthusiastic engagement with us. We very much appreciate that and we look forward to working with him further as we go through our work over the coming months. I thank him and his officials.

*Sitting suspended at 10.48 a.m. and resumed at 11 a.m.*

**Chairman:** As it is 11 a.m., we will resume with the second session. In this session we will engage with representatives from the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, the Irish Universities Association, IUA and the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA. I very much welcome our witnesses, starting with Ms Bukky Adebawale, vice president for equality and citizenship, USI, who is joining us via MS Teams. We are joined from the IUA by Mr. Tony

McMahon, associate director for human resources and equality, diversity and inclusion; and by Professor Colin Scott, vice president for equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, at University College Dublin and chair of IUA vice presidents for the EDI group. We are joined from the THEA by Dr. Jennifer Brennan, director of research, innovation and engagement and equality, diversity and inclusion lead, and by Dr. Allison Kenneally, vice president for equality, diversity and inclusion of the South East Technological University. We are very grateful for your engagement with this committee. As our guests will know, we are a special Oireachtas committee with a time-limited remit to review and make progress on the implementation of the 45 recommendations of the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality. Those recommendations, essentially, form a blueprint for the achievement of a more equal society. We have been conducting public hearings since March and we will be concluding in early December. We have already looked at public hearings on the recommendations of the assembly relating to constitutional change and gender-based violence. In this module, we are looking at the recommendations specifically on norms, stereotypes and education, which are recommendations 26 to 31. We are very grateful to you for your engagement.

Before we begin, I will read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee but if directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to particular matter, and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of the evidence. They are directed that only evidence that is connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make them identifiable.

Participants at the committee from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within parliamentary precincts do not extend and nor can clear guidance be given on whether or the extent to which the participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature. Having given that warning, I invite each witness to make an opening statement and then we will open the discussion to members and colleagues, some of whom are participating from within the parliamentary precincts via MS Teams. We have asked witnesses to limit their opening statements to five minutes and we will also apply a time limit of eight minutes to each individual engagement with the committee members but we can have a second round of questions if time permits before we draw the meeting to a close at 12.30 p.m. I thank you all for being with us today.

I will first call Ms Adebowale to make her opening statement on behalf of the USI.

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** I thank the Chairperson and members of the joint committee for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. I am the vice president for equality and citizenship at USI. As many of the members will know, a key element of the USI's core mission is to ensure equal opportunities for all in the pursuit of a third level education. To an extent, we welcome the recommendations of the citizens' assembly regarding norms, stereotypes and education.

The 2014 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, report on Gender Stereotypes and Stereotyping and Women's Rights states that stereotyping of a woman's role as being within the family leads to a division of labour within households that often results in poverty and lower levels of education for many women. Recommendation 26 of the citizens' assembly to promote gender equality highlights the need for subject choice in schools to counteract these stereotypes. The emphasis must not be that a woman is the caretaker of the home

but that it is every person's responsibility to maintain a home and family and care for those within it. Career information and education must always be gender-neutral and never maintain its focus on what men and women should or should not do.

Recommendation 27 encourages school curricula review with a focus on gender power dynamics and gender-based violence. This recommendation is important to the USI and is backed up by the 2020 USI & Active\* Consent Sexual Experiences Survey carried out in higher education institutes, HEIs, in Ireland. The survey results noted that 29% of females, 10% of males and 28% of non-binary students reported non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force. These findings are, sadly, very much reflective of the wider society we live in today.

We welcome recommendation 28, which advises the need for staff professional development in gender awareness. All gender awareness training must address the fact that there are many people who do not identify with gender binaries. Research from LGBTI Ireland Report 2016 found that transgender, non-binary and intersex people face additional significant challenges in their day-to-day lives, including being referred to as the gender and use of the incorrect pronouns, which can have an immensely negative impact on a person's mental health. It can be further assumed that these challenges are shared by those who do not identify with the gender identities of the aforementioned research.

The recommendation also focuses on the encouragement of women taking up roles that are male dominated and *vice versa*. However, a question we should ask ourselves is why a profession or role is regarded as dominated by a particular gender in the first place. In the past there was an emphasis on women occupying roles that were deemed typically unimportant. Those roles that typically fell into the category were caring roles. While roles that were deemed important and highly regarded were things like Government and political positions, which are usually occupied by men. According to the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report, approximately 25% of those in parliamentary positions are women. That means in the average parliament 75% are not women but are making decisions on behalf of women. This is extremely stark. We must begin to uproot patriarchal norms in the places we constantly ask women and non-binary people to occupy. We must also make sure these spaces are safe environments for women and gender non-conforming people to thrive in.

Recommendation 31 is well received but we must make sure there is an intersectional approach to portraying all types of people within the media such as disabled people and people of colour. There should never be a focus on the visibility of men to perform caring roles but an emphasis that caring roles are valued and important in society.

In all, the USI supports the vital work being done to address gender inequality. These recommendations are a starting point for actions that can be taken to improve the lives of many. Gender norms and stereotypes damage the way in which our society operates. This is directly because of the value we have continually placed on specific genders roles and the lack of value on others.

I thank the committee for this opportunity to contribute. I am happy to elaborate on any of the points I have made and I look forward to answering any questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Adebowale for that opening statement. We are conscious that in Ireland we are below that figure of 25%. Only 23% of our Deputies are female. It is very much an issue for us in this committee.

I invite Mr. Tony McMahon and Professor Colin Scott from IUA to make their opening statement.

**Mr. Tony McMahon:** I thank the Chairman and committee for inviting us to today's hearing. Our universities are deeply committed to equality, diversity and inclusion for all staff and students, and we see a part of our role as taking a leadership role in civil society. The universities have contributed significantly to the establishment and workings of both the citizens' assemblies, and the predecessor constitutional convention, as an important model for democratic deliberation on key societal challenges. On that basis we are very pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this very important discussion with the committee.

By way of context, it should be noted the universities have statutory responsibilities both "to promote gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees of the university", as per the Universities Act 1997, and "to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and persons to whom it provides services" under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

We share the view of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality that gender equality must be mainstreamed in all societal interactions, and addressing the many inequalities that exist by reference to gender requires ambitious, not just incremental, change. Across our sector, addressing gender equality has been at the forefront of our agenda in recent years. Major focal points have included the introduction of the Athena SWAN Charter, which is a gender equality self-assessment accreditation scheme introduced in 2015 and the HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions of 2016, resulting in a concerted collective effort across the entire sector to accelerate the necessary change. Engagement with Athena SWAN has been significant, with all universities holding institutional and multiple departmental awards. In addition, a large number of people across the universities have become involved in gender equality work through Athena SWAN. Bronze Athena SWAN accreditation signifies that an institution, department or school has carried out a rigorous and evidence-based self-assessment, has a good understanding of its challenges and has a credible gender equality action plan.

Gender equality action plans are in place across all universities as a standard management practice, thus supporting conversion of policy into practice, and are subject to internal monitoring and reporting. Vice-presidents for equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, roles, or their equivalent, have been established across the sector to lead this important work. The Athena SWAN programme is increasingly addressing related challenges as well, such as gender identity and the intersectionality of gender with other protected groups, notably with respect to race.

Addressing gender inequality is complex and challenging. The report of the citizens' assembly reflects some of these complexities, including bias and stereotyping, provision of care and the need for committed leadership. The universities have an important role to play across many of the detailed recommendations and, through our programmes of work on gender equality at both institutional and school level, are well placed to contribute, for example: by working with primary and post-primary sectors to advance EDI on the curriculum and in teaching methods, through initial teacher education and curriculum reform; through emphasising role models in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, and engaging with primary and post-primary students about STEM learning and career opportunities to promote female participation in STEM; and through the development and implementation of consent education and bystander intervention training, modelled and evaluated in ways so that it can be adapted to needs of schools.

Some of the recommendations targeted at Government are ones that the universities have long supported, for example, extending the higher educational grants system more fully to part-time students but in the context of a properly resourced higher education system overall.

With respect to role models, measures in the universities to increase the number of women in senior academic and leadership roles have seen the proportion of women in the most senior professor grade increase from 19%, a rolling average figure from 2013 to 2015, to 27% by December 2020. This is an increase of 42% or of eight percentage points. However, further progress is needed to bring us to the minimum target of 40% women professors. Government and the Higher Education Authority, HEA, have initiated the senior academic leadership initiative, which represents a significant investment. This has been implemented through all stages successfully and has attracted very high-quality candidates and recruitment for posts approved under the second cycle of this scheme is currently under way.

It should be noted that before 2020 there had never been a female university president in Ireland. We now have female presidents in three of eight IUA member universities. The gender composition of the governing bodies, academic councils and executive management teams are increasingly aligned to the norm that there should be a minimum representation of 40% male and female members. Some seven of the eight chairs of the governing authorities of our member universities are now held by women and all top management teams in our universities are gender-balanced.

To conclude, I once again thank the committee for the invitation to join the discussion today and confirm that in broad terms we are very supportive of the recommendations of the citizens' assembly. While the higher education sector has made significant progress on gender equality, through self-assessment and the development and implementation of action plans and new leadership structures, there is much still to do to achieve and embed sustained cultural change. Based on our experience of implementing gender equality plans and striving to achieve the systemic and cultural change needed to sustain progress in gender equality, we would emphasise that 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. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. McMahon very much and I also thank him for referring to the specific examples which the universities are doing. As the committee will have heard in the earlier session, we engaged with the Minister, Deputy Harris, who gave us the picture at national level in respect of the initiatives being rolled out.

I invite Dr. Brennan and Dr. Kenneally from the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, to make their opening statement.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** On behalf of THEA, we very much appreciate this opportunity to speak with the committee today about recommendations 26 to 31, which were made by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

Efforts to significantly improve gender equality in Irish higher education institutions, HEIs, have accelerated since 2016. This was catalysed by the opening of the UK-based Athena SWAN Charter and award process to Irish higher education, supported by funding from the Higher Education Authority. From 2015, Irish HEIs began to apply for Athena SWAN awards. At the time of writing, the majority of our members hold a bronze institutional award.

Since 2016, our members have been implementing the recommendations of two major national reports on gender equality in higher education. After the 2016 report, HEIs were required to implement gender action plans and report on these regularly to the HEA.

The HEA also began to publish annual reports of gender-disaggregated staff data from Irish higher education institutions. Following the 2018 report, all HEIs have adopted changes aimed at ensuring that “the proportion of men and women to be recruited or promoted to a certain level is based on the proportion of each at the career level directly below”. The 2018 report also established a centre of excellence for gender equality within the HEA which is now the centre of excellence for equality, diversity and inclusion, and a women-only professorship scheme, the senior academic leadership initiative. A further national equality review in higher education is currently taking place and we look forward to seeing the recommendations arising from that review.

In recent years, the focus has shifted from solely gender equality to a broader equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, agenda, based on the nine grounds of discrimination outlined in our equality legislation. The commitment of THEA’s members to the broad EDI agenda was enshrined in the THEA gender and diversity statement which we published in 2018. Gender equality plans in HEIs have been broadened to include other aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion, taking into account these EDI areas both separately and as they intersect with gender equality.

A major development related to gender-based violence has been the implementation of the framework for consent in higher education institutions. In March 2021, THEA published the report, THEA’s: Promoting Consent and Preventing Sexual Violence project. The report made a series of recommendations, including a number of resources which should be established within HEIs to support the implementation of the framework. Work is ongoing to put these resources in place, including through seeking a budget line through the Estimates process for the Minister, Deputy Harris.

Overall, much progress has been made in supporting gender equality and the broader EDI agenda in higher education over a relatively short time since 2015 or so. Between September 2015 and December 2020, the percentage of female senior lecturers, the highest academic grade in the technological universities, TU, and institutes of technology, IOT, sector increased from 31% to 36%, while the percentage of female professional, managerial and support staff at the highest grades increased from 14% to 25%. It is worth noting that the institutes of technology have a track record of appointing female presidents and it is very positive to see that three of the five technological universities are led by women.

Participation in Athena SWAN has been a strong driver of recent progress, as have the recommendations within the two national gender reports. However, much remains to be done to accelerate progress, embed improvements and spread the lessons learned across the wider public service.

Turning specifically to recommendations 26 to 31 of the citizen’s assembly report, we would like to make the following points. With recommendation 27, higher education will need to put significant efforts into co-creating with our students an inclusive learning environment, celebrating diversity and ensuring that the curriculum and the teaching strategies are inclusive. THEA’s members are working on a project to embed gender equality and intersectionality into the curriculum, supported by the HEA’s gender equality enhancement fund. All THEA members are rolling out dedicated training on sexual violence and harassment to students and staff,

and while this is positive, it is clear that age-appropriate training on consent should be offered as early as possible in the education system.

On recommendation 28, we are rolling out an online equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education training programme developed by our colleagues from the Irish Universities Association. We have also started to revise our policies and procedures through the lens of gender equality and EDI. On recommendation 29, we strongly agree that the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant system should be reformed to provide support for part-time students. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 25% of students enrolled in our member organisations were part-time and more than half of those part-time students were female. On recommendation 30, we acknowledge that more work to encourage men into female-dominated careers is required and the work to encourage women into male-dominated careers should be complemented by reforming the curriculum from primary school level onwards to address underlying factors that discourage women from being interested in STEM.

I thank the committee for its time and look forward to the discussion today.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Brennan. Again, many of the issues she raised touched on the themes we discussed earlier with the Minister, Deputy Harris. It is very useful and valuable to us to hear what initiatives are being taken at third level, both in the technological university and university sectors, to advance gender equality and equality more broadly. I invite committee members to put questions to our witnesses. I will then come back to the witnesses after each contribution. Deputy Clarke is first.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank each and every one of the witnesses for their time, experience and expertise and for being with us. It is really important we hear from people working in the field when we come to look at this. I was very disobedient in terms of time with my previous round of questions so I will condense these questions slightly if I can.

I will focus first on something Dr. Brennan mentioned. She said 52.5% of part-time students are female. That is a considerable number. I will just touch on an issue I have raised with the Minister here before. Accessing third level is the first step, but retaining people in third level is the next step, and then there is progression to a career. From the witnesses' perspective, how important are financial supports for part-time learners, particularly women? Is that highlighted to the witnesses as a barrier to their staying in a learning environment? Often we find there are very specific barriers to getting there. Once people get there, however, there is a whole other range of barriers that pop up in front of them.

I will ask a general question. The consent framework is grouped thematically. Mr. McMahon touched on this and the need for the framework to be evidence-based. I absolutely agree with him. I could not agree with him more. What barometers does he believe need to be implemented to deliver the change we need to see? We heard from the Minister about action plans, hubs, resources and committees, which absolutely have a role to play, but if we are not gauging the data being provided, how do we map a pathway to where we want to go? What barometers does Mr. McMahon see as being important in that regard?

For staff in higher education, is there diversity and gender training as part of professional development? If not, why? That was recommended by the citizens. Their focus was clearly on it. I would be interested to hear the witnesses' perspective on that.

As for lecturers and other staff who teach and educate, have the witnesses seen any progress

made in recent years that needs to be focused on more, particularly where there is a gender imbalance? I am speaking not only about women working in heavily male-dominated areas but also about men working in female-dominated areas. The reason I ask that is that I absolutely agree with what Ms Adebowale said earlier: career information and education must be gender-neutral. What impact has the fact that it has not been gender-neutral to date had on those on whom we now rely to provide education at third level?

**Chairman:** I will go first to Dr. Brennan, if that is okay, and then to the IUA for responses.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** The Government yesterday published the review of the SUSI grant system, which I had a quick look at this morning on the train in. One of the things I noticed was that quite a lot of the full-time postgraduate students and older students who participated in the survey done as part of the review said that if they had had the chance to do their degree or course part-time, they would have taken it, and that some of the barriers in that regard are financial barriers. We also see that a significant number of students work up to 20 hours a week, sometimes more, in addition to the grant they get and trying to do their college work, so there is definitely a financial barrier in that area. I will ask Dr. Kenneally if she has any additional comments on that.

**Dr. Allison Kenneally:** In the technological higher education sector we have a long history of supporting students in accessing education. Across the sector we have more female students than male students studying part-time. That differs from the full-time cohort. I have worked a great deal with part-time students. The financial aspect and the extension of the grants to part-time students would be transformative in our sector. Studying part-time is critical for many people, especially those with caring responsibilities or other commitments during the day, so that would absolutely be a significant step forward for our sector.

**Chairman:** That is very helpful. Thank you, Dr. Kenneally.

**Mr. Tony McMahon:** I will take the question about the barometers. It is one of those questions that is brilliant and very simple but the answer then comes back-----

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** It is rather complex

**Mr. Tony McMahon:** Yes. First, rewinding to the work on sexual violence and harassment, as a HR director, if I looked at the number of complaints and there were very few, I could assume we do not have a problem, but we know from our surveys that there is a problem. We need to look at where we will get information on the type of culture in our organisations that tells us where there is a problem and where there is not. The Minister may have mentioned the matter this morning, but that is why investment has been put into a report and support tool called Speak Out. In the past, the only gateway to raising concerns or complaints was through formal complaints processes, which we know are adversarial, and we know that incidences are under-reported. We now have a report and support tool that will give us information on the types of issues arising in our organisations. As for a barometer on that, because this is new, it is difficult to say what kind of number represents progress or otherwise, but at least we will get a benchmark. That is being piloted. It was introduced only in September or October across our institutions. That will give us an insight into the types of issues arising.

The second type of metrics we might look at is in the area of training. Dr. Brennan's submission mentions this. We put in an application through the HEA for funding to support the work on consent. The IUA's estimate was that to fully embed this work would involve an

investment of between €350,000 and €400,000 per annum. That is a lot in terms of people to work on training, counselling services, investigations across the whole remit from report, support and prevent to dealing with issues when they arise in terms of counselling and the actual investigative process to deal with issues. There is a huge range of issues there. Training is significant and will be one of the issues.

The third barometer will be the culture surveys and the types of data we have taken already through the national surveys, repeating those to see what the picture is and to see what sort of improvements we will make. It is very firmly on our agenda. We have a very specific framework. Every institution has an implementation plan to deliver the framework. That is where we are at today.

**Professor Colin Scott:** If I may come in on the third and fourth questions about professional development and training first, EDI training has been developed across the universities sector as part of professional development. There are a number of different focal points: first, unconscious bias training as a key part of processes for recruitment for both academic and professional administrative staff; and, second, more generalised online EDI and race training have been developed across the IUA's sector and implemented over the past 12 months. Is it mandatory for every member of staff? Not yet, but it is available and there is very strong take-up of that training.

In response to the final question the Deputy asked about whether we see any progress with respect to the understanding within the sector of the progress of women into what were traditionally regarded as male areas and men into professions dominated by women, in the gender equality action plans developed by our schools and departments as part of Athena SWAN, we see a very strong commitment both to understanding the data and understanding where the challenges lie and to addressing them through a wide range of measures. We have a lot of outreach measures and other measures to understand this and to bring more female students into engagement with STEM. Science Foundation Ireland has funded a number of programmes of research, engagement and outreach across the universities over recent years, so most of the universities are strongly engaged with that work. We have also seen targets set to increase the number of women in educational programmes where they have been under-represented. For example, computer science and engineering would be central to that. With respect to bringing men into professions dominated by women, again, the gender equality action plans show a very strong understanding of the data and the measures to be taken to role-model men in, for example, the caring professions and to bring larger numbers of men into those professions. Both of those are important factors in reshaping the culture of our society towards greater gender equality.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** That reshaping of the culture will not happen overnight. It will take a significant amount of time, energy and effort on the part of everybody. I am curious as to whether we are seeing any results of that yet or whether that piece of work will need to continue for another period before we start seeing actual change on the ground. Does Professor Scott have an opinion on that?

**Professor Colin Scott:** The answer is both. We are seeing results. I cannot speak for every university, but in University College Dublin, which I know well, we are seeing significant increases in the proportion of women coming into undergraduate engineering, for example, through a concerted programme to engage with more women and to bring them into engineering. However, much more work will be needed to embed cultural change and the view of both male and female students, and those who are non-binary, that they can do anything and they should engage with the things they want to engage with and have a formation during their edu-

cational years which enables them to see that opportunity.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** What I am hearing is that where these courses are made available, and are almost marketed - for the want of a better term - in a more appropriate way, those who have been under-represented are willing and able to engage with them. Does that come back to highlighting an issue at secondary-school level around the provision of courses or options for subjects? I presume one would need a set level of subjects to be able to access an engineering course, for example, or many other courses. Does that reinforce the idea that if there is not a wider option at secondary level that we are then almost shoehorning or pigeonholing people into certain careers?

**Professor Colin Scott:** There is an issue at post-primary level, in particular associated with gender segregation of schooling, that the fuller range of subjects traditionally associated with men tends to be more available in male schools than in female schools, but that is changing. I am not expert on that to a further degree, but it is an important issue and one the committee should certainly pay attention to.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank Professor Scott.

**Chairman:** That exchange was very relevant to what we have been discussing earlier. Does Dr. Brennan want to come back in on that? Before we move on, I also invite Ms Adebowale if she wants to say a few words in response to Deputy Clarke.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** I will make just a brief comment. We need to take this back to primary school level as well. We touched on that in our more comprehensive written submission in March. Certain things happen in primary school that discourage women in particular from looking at STEM areas. For example, there is a well-known disparity that can occur in children around spatial ability and ability to see things in space, which can be corrected quite easily. There are some nice educational programmes developed by researchers from within our own higher education sector on this. We should probably see those kinds of things happening in primary school and correct them before they become a problem.

Professor Scott is quite correct that at secondary school level there is an issue with access to certain subjects that would put people on a particular career path. I also think we could do a little bit more ourselves in the higher education system around outreach towards men in the kind of careers they do not tend to go for, such as in the caring professions. We have a lot of support from people like those in the Discover Programme in Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, to get women into STEM but we do not necessarily see the same kind of support. I do not know where that would come from to target and have activities that would be designed to encourage men to look at other or more female-dominated professions.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Brennan. That is a very important point. Would Ms Adebowale like to respond to Deputy Clarke before I move on?

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** The Deputy referred to one of my opening remarks about gender neutrality being present in all types of education and subjects. Something that is really important is having that gender neutrality and looking outside the scope of the current binaries we have when it comes to gender, especially when we are looking at trying to place emphasis on putting females into more male-dominated areas and males into more female-dominated areas. We look at the piece on caring roles and how that is not necessarily occupied by a lot of men. The issue is not necessarily that men do not occupy those spaces but that the value and impor-

tance of those types of roles are not stressed enough. We touched on those points in terms of supporting, for example, part-time students in their education through funding with the SUSI grant and other supports. The emphasis on those roles is not as strong as it needs to be. Many part-time students are coming along who are in caring positions, who are at home taking care of others and having responsibility for others, which ultimately means that they need more flexibility and the part-time funding to support their studies should they wish to continue with education. There needs to be more of an emphasis on roles like that being deemed important in society. Culture changes by providing resources for those people who are carrying out those tasks.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Adebowale very much.

**Senator Regina Doherty:** I thank the witnesses for their very comprehensive opening statements which touch on everything we are trying to achieve. It is lovely to see everybody moving in the same direction and all having a commitment to the recommendations without objection.

I think I already know the answer to my questions. The funding element is an enormous barrier, in particular for women whose children have gone to school, to allow them to access what we generically call lifelong learning. That is before we even get to the stereotypical courses women attend compared with those attended by men. We must address that or at least acknowledge that it is an enormous barrier. We all acknowledge that the investment involved is significant. As a former Minister for Social Protection, I know the contradictions between the SUSI grant and social welfare payments that exist. However, we must acknowledge that at least if we had a roadmap for the next ten to 15 years to address it, we would all know that at least we accept it is real and that we are willing to change it. I want to put that on record.

We focus a lot on the fact that subject choices are based on the gendered nature of schools. While that is true, it is missing the obvious elephant in the room. My kids have always gone to a mixed school where they have access to woodwork, mechanical drawing and metalwork. I mean no disrespect to Deputy McAuliffe, but the problem is that the culture or environment that exists in those classes that are male-dominated is not one where young women want to be, enjoy or are comfortable in. It is not the case that they do not have access to mechanical drawing, metalwork or woodwork, it is just not a nice environment for young ladies to be in, so therefore they do not stay in it. My daughter does woodwork and her best friend is the best student in mechanical drawing. Her friend is the only girl in her class, and she is leaving it after junior certificate because it is not a nice environment. We need to stretch this argument to make sure that we recognise that culture is equally as important as making subjects available. There is no point in ticking a box and saying a young one can do any subject she wants if the environment is not comfortable and nurturing for her to be in.

I want to touch on the Speak Out campaign and congratulate the colleges in that regard. We have a real culture problem with reporting in this country, for all of the reasons that the journey from being assaulted to getting justice is not a safe place or welcoming environment. It is a very victimising environment. The non-evidence base of the Speak Out project is fundamental to empowering women to be able to say they cannot specifically prove that something happened - because we know how difficult the bar is - but this is the culture that exists and it allows organisations and us as a society to say that we are not surprised that 340 women reported rape in 2020 or 2021 but let us be really surprised that probably 3,400 women were raped that year and 90% of them did not report it. Let us acknowledge through programmes like Speak Out that we are going to make a change in the culture, shake up society and wake people up to say

this issue is far more prevalent and serious than we believe.

One of the witnesses spoke this morning about the prevalence of people reporting. That is not the issue; that is the red herring. What we need to do is create a culture where women and men feel empowered to be able to talk more freely, report and to make the environment safe and not victimising. I congratulate those involved on starting the initiative. I hope it filters out into the wider world of work, education and society. I say well done to those involved.

**Professor Colin Scott:** I am very grateful to the Senator for those comments that are supportive of the work we have been doing in the sector. I will comment on the Speak Out campaign and the wider implementation of the national consent framework. It is right that there needs to be a move from a victimising culture for complainants to a supportive culture. Having the data around incidents through reporting systems is part of that, but there is a huge architecture to be put in place in particular around trauma-informed support for disclosures, separated from complaints mechanisms.

In UCD, we have a new dignity and respect support service with three staff who are trained to receive disclosures on breach of dignity and respect rules around not only sexual harassment and sexual violence but also bullying and harassment. It is an important innovation, but I also wish to point to the issue about resourcing. To resource a new team on that scale is very challenging. It has been mentioned already that we have submissions into the Minister around resourcing of a wide range of measures that are needed in this area in higher education in a sector that, as we know, is under-resourced. The committee will have heard the Minister's acknowledgement around that.

As a final part, I want to pay tribute to the very wide-ranging commitment and work in the sector in both the Irish Universities Association, IUA, universities and Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, universities and institutes. The quality of staff working within the areas to support and develop these programmes has been an immense contribution to the cultural change that is in train and which we are committed to continuing and developing.

**Chairman:** I thank the Professor very much. That is a very positive assessment. It is great. I call Dr. Kenneally.

**Dr. Allison Kenneally:** I thank the Chairman very much. I will comment first on the provision of supports to part-time students. As well as obviously making fees or student grants available, one of the big things that will change women's access to higher education will be online learning. That is something we have seen that has emerged with Covid-19 and has made third-level education much more accessible for people who have caring responsibilities. That is to be welcomed.

In terms of the societal issues around why women are not coming into the more male-dominated professions, we have seen this time and time again. This has come through our Athena SWAN evidence and action plans. We asked female students in male-dominated areas why they are so few. What they say is that they do not want to be the only girl in the class. That is exactly linked to issues around culture and how they are treated sometimes by their colleagues in their class. Again, that is tied into the consent framework. It is tied into education around gender stereotypes, dignity and respect and how we treat people.

The Speak Out data will be hugely beneficial for our sector. We are only into it since we launched it in October across the sector. What we are going to see from that will allow us

to tailor our approach to education to our students and to the development of policies in this area. That will be hugely beneficial. When we were launching Speak Out, I remember reading a piece of research that talked about the culture of reporting and when women would feel they could come forward and report or make a complaint. There was evidence that linked the willingness of women to come forward to the numbers of women on senior management teams and the visibility of women within the university. That is really important. It brings us right back to the Higher Education Authority's, HEA, recommendations and to Athena SWAN and the importance of having gender balance. It encourages and supports women across all levels of the university, and our students, to come forward when there are cultural issues.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Kenneally very much. Does Ms Adebowale wish to make a brief comment or does she want to hold and I will come back to her at the next contribution?

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** The Chairman can come back to me. I am okay with that.

**Chairman:** That is great. Senator Higgins will be followed by Senator Warfield.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I thank the guests very much. They made some really interesting contributions. Some good strong conversations are happening in universities pressed from the higher level in terms of things like Athena SWAN and, of course, the really important crucial point of funding being linked to Athena SWAN, but also pushed from individuals within individual departments, including staff members but also students and student movements, who have really pressed for change in this area. I want to acknowledge that.

I would appreciate a bit more follow-up on a few areas, one of which is that issue of situations of abuse. Again, I was glad to hear, for example, that in University College Dublin, UCD, there are now designated staff in terms of dignity and support staff to whom people can go. The witnesses will be aware that my colleague, Senator Ruane, brought forward legislation around non-disclosure agreements and their usage. One thing I am looking to is that as well as learning, we need to have better reporting mechanisms in order that students and staff have people to whom they can report, as Senator Doherty said, not just with individual complaints but in terms of concerns around raising flags.

I would like to know a bit more about how universities feel they are doing better at identifying those patterns. What are the mechanisms not simply for providing support, redress or justice for individuals but for identifying patterns? Of course, things like non-disclosure agreements in the past were the exact opposite of that where different people would have experiences. Each person would have to experience that individually and would not even know this had been an issue that may have arisen before. How do we get better at identifying patterns?

Building on that, we had much discussion around recommendation 28(a) and the idea of promoting gender awareness and gender-sensitive teaching methods. Part B is around school evaluation through the lens of gender equality. This is what I am trying to get to. Again, it is not just the issue of whether there are more women in each different area or whether there is more diversity in terms of who is entering areas. It is about the system changes that are arising as part of that. It is not simply that we are hitting 30% or 40% of people going in but about some of the issues highlighted by Senator Doherty such as retention and changes in work practices to reflect, encourage and maintain diversity or participation. The fact is that when we have people involved, we have different needs that evolve and different changes are required.

The witnesses might comment on one of the points I was interested in from the Irish Univer-

sities Association's presentation around THEA in terms of curriculum reform. In NUI Galway, for example, conversations are beginning to happen around the decolonisation of the culture. Similarly, in terms of a real examination of curriculums and those ideas of norms and stereotypes, sometimes, norms and stereotypes have a racial layer or relate to people who are non-binary or intersex. There can be layers to the gender stereotypes that come through. I am wondering about curriculum reform, system reform, the retention of people who are entering areas, specifically, and that issue of key performance indicators, KPI, generally.

Lastly, and this comes back to recommendation 28(b), when we talk about it, policies and practices, including evaluations, are viewed through the lens of gender equality as well. In the key performance indicators, to what extent are equality policies really being reflected? Then, crucially, something really struck me with regard to the criteria and weighting around promotion. I was speaking to a female academic who had gone for promotion and done extraordinary work but used the word "We". She said things like, "We did this" and "I worked with people together". She was informed or advised that she needed to use the word "I". Again, that is an example of whether collaborative work gets valued or gets a weighting.

On this point again, Ms Adebowale mentioned what gets valued in terms of work. She made a really good point whereby we know with Athena SWAN that certain well-resourced departments are progressing faster and further whereas even areas within academic institutions that seem to have fewer resources, which also often happen to have more women participating in areas such as the arts and humanities, are often hitting barriers in terms of progressing in Athena SWAN despite having a large number of women students and early-level staff members. Is that around resources to achieve the Athena SWAN goals in terms of secure contracts?

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Higgins. There is a lot there. I am conscious that I said I would go back to Ms Adebowale first. I will then go to the other witnesses.

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** My comment is only brief really. I am summarily commenting around the environment and culture within education. I would absolutely agree that it is not necessarily that we do not have women or non-binary people wanting to take up these spaces. I would have addressed this in my opening remarks, however, in terms of creating safe environments for those people to remain and stay in those spaces. I myself was a student in secondary school and one of the only black women studying there within my agriculture science classes, which is typically a very white male dominated place. It was something I loved but not it was not necessarily an environment that allowed for me to stay. I am speaking in particular about recommendation 28(a), although I know that we will discuss recommendation 28(b) a little more. Recommendation 28(a) will push that forward in respect of talking about professional development for staff members. As well as this, there could be an area where we could talk about gender awareness for the students in respect of the environment and culture that we create within these subject spaces. That is important to note. The USI would definitely support that area. That was my initial comment on the previous statement.

**Chairman:** That is an important point about recommendation 28 and I thank Ms Adebowale for that.

Would Dr. Brennan or Dr. Kenneally like to respond? Then I will go to the IUA.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** I will comment a little on the policies and procedures side of Athena SWAN. I will then ask Dr. Kenneally to talk about the curriculum review that we mentioned in our opening statement. We have clearly seen initial progress in Athena SWAN in the STEM

areas. However, that is mainly because when Athena SWAN was launched, it was entirely focused on STEM and on academic career structures. It has only recently been expanded in Ireland into arts, humanities and social sciences, AHSS, areas and into looking into our professional, managerial and support staff. There is a lag there, but we will see that catching up as the more expanded broader charter becomes more embedded in Ireland.

We mentioned in our opening statement that we were putting a gender lens on our policies and procedures. I want to give the committee a sense of three actions that have been taken within one of our members as a result of that. In one case, for example, in recruitment, all of the shortlisting now has to be done by at least one female and one male. All interview panels must have a minimum of 40% female members. They have also reviewed all of their marketing materials and prospectuses to ensure that they are inclusive. They have removed a previous requirement that you had to have one year of service before you could avail of parental leave. This had been identified by new employees through their Athena SWAN surveys as a barrier to work-life balance. That is just a flavour.

On the KPIs, we are required to have our gender equality action plans. These are reported on every year to the HEA. They keep a close eye on us to ensure that we are implementing and doing what we said we were going to do. Within the system performance framework, which governs our institutions as well, there are targets around gender equality. We are being monitored.

**Chairman:** And monitoring yourselves as well.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** To make a quick clarification, although I do not want to take too much time, on the KPIs, I was not thinking about each institution as much as I was thinking about departments, managers and schools within institutions. This again addresses the issue of uneven levels of performance on culture shift within different departments or schools within a university. I do not need a further answer in this regard.

**Chairman:** Did Dr. Kenneally want to come in?

**Dr. Allison Kenneally:** I will make a brief comment on reforming the curriculum, which is key if we are to embed gender equality in a sustainable way in our universities and for our future workforce.

One area we have begun to look at in the technological higher education sector is working collaboratively to review gender equality and our curriculum teaching methods. We have a sectoral project under way at the moment. We have to look to other jurisdictions. This is important because there is much good practice out there. In other countries, notably in the UK, some universities have made excellent progress on this. We are working with partners in the UK on this to try to develop a charter for the sector, in order that universities in our sector can sign up to that. It is possible that there will be a cross-sectoral aspect down the line. This will demonstrate our commitment to embedding gender equality through our teaching. That will necessitate all academics reviewing their own curricula. This will include looking at their teaching methods, at their reading lists, at who they fight during classes, at the types of examples they give and at the type of stereotyping that might be present in examination questions. This work therefore includes many aspects. There is amazing work out there. We can learn much from other jurisdictions on that. It is important that we scale up work in that area of the sector.

**Professor Colin Scott:** If I may, I will comment on the first two questions. The Senator

asked how we identify patterns in respect of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct, for example, within institutions. Part of that is the reporting support tools which we have mentioned already, such as ShoutOut, which is across the sector. That provides significant data in identifying patterns and challenges.

The second dimension and innovation is the introduction of environmental investigations. We have known for a significant period that there may be issues in a particular part of an institution that are not resulting in people being willing to come forward with complaints. The trend is towards introducing a power to have an environmental investigation of a particular area of a university, with respect to, for example, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. This would enable a review to be undertaken and engagement with staff and students in a particular area to learn more about where the cultural challenge is, where the behavioural challenges may be, what their character is and what kind of solutions might be adopted to address those challenges. It is an alternative; it is a supplement to a complaints-based approach. The HEA's equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, centre of excellence has recently funded some new work around setting up these environmental assessments. That will supplement a complaints-based approach to understanding and addressing patterns of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and sexual violence.

On the questions about more diverse classrooms, the sector is very strongly committed to continuing to diversify who comes to learn in higher education. That has strong implications for who is teaching and how they are teaching within the classroom. As Dr. Kenneally has already mentioned, there is a strong commitment in all parts of the sector towards enhancing the support we provide through teaching and learning units and through access-widening participation units to both understand and address the challenges. One approach is implementation of the universal design for learning as a key ethos for the way that we teach and support learning in higher education. To link that to data, it is to have the data on retention and progression that enable us to identify and highlight the success that different types of students have in progressing to higher education and to pick up where there may be challenges that need to be addressed through further developments and support for the teaching and learning modes that are offered within the classrooms.

**Chairman:** That is good to hear about the environmental assessment method, rather than the individual complaints-based approach to harassment.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I thank the Chair and I welcome all of our guests. I wanted to use the session primarily to get a better understanding from the witnesses, including the USI, about the consent framework. As it has been ten years since I graduated from Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, there is probably a different picture now in terms of how consent is addressed. From what I hear, it is doing a reasonably good job. Is there a mechanism for the success of implementation and outcomes to be measured? Barring a reduction in assaults, is there any way that we can measure the success of the consent framework? I do not think that the reduction in the number of assaults is a helpful or an appropriate barometer.

Ms Adebawale will probably touch on the sexual experiences survey from the USI in 2020, which 6,000 students completed. For student unions that are involved in designing the action plans, does the messaging include sexual minorities, trans folk and non-binary folk? Is there recognition in the action plans about sexual harassment, assault and violence in the context of drugs and alcohol use? My next question is geared towards our other guests in the room. Is there a sharing of best practices across the universities and the higher education institutions? Ms Adebawale might respond on whether the USI is satisfied with where the consent frame-

work is at the moment.

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** I thank the Senator for that contribution. There were a couple of questions in there. I will begin by addressing the piece on measuring the impact. At the moment I do not have statistics on the impact of the work that is being done on the measures to what happens after sexual violence or assault has occurred on campus. A key element that has been important from the perspective of the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, is one of the recommendations on implementing prevention and support programming, which looks more at the preventative measures rather than what happens afterwards. That is a key element to measure. Many institutions and unions would be in partnership on the consent framework. For example, the students union of the National University Ireland, Galway, NUIG, is a named students union that would often work closely with its institution in presenting the consent framework on its campus. I cannot speak for every students union because I not on the ground while they are doing work. That is something they have been doing but the work is slow and in progress. It is definitely something we are proud of up to now and we will continue to work on it in the future.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Adebowale for that. I will go next to Mr. McMahon.

**Mr. Tony McMahon:** I will start by dealing with the Senator's question on measuring progress. The actions in the implementation plans for our consent framework were grouped under various themes. Many of those in terms of training and policy are probably lead indicators that will result in the implementing of actions that we believe will lead to better outcomes. We monitor all that and report it to the Higher Education Authority. We have worked closely with the USI. Last year we had a very successful campaign called UnmuteConsent. It was a play on the words "you are on mute", a Covid type of language. That was a really successful social media campaign primarily. We would love to run that again this year. That was an effective way of collaborating with students to get key messages out to the whole student body on appropriate standards of behaviour and how they engage.

"Yes" is the answer to the question around looking at issues. We have a bit of work to do on the data on this in terms of the nature of the complaints *vis-à-vis* particular groups, not only with respect to all students, female students or male students but on the whole aspect of it.

That brings me to the question the Senator asked about sharing. The Speak Out tool, which is currently being piloted, has been in place for just over six months. A collective group of representatives from all the institutions have implemented Speak Out. That group collectively will look at the data and try to understand the patterns. We will examine first if the tool is doing what it was intended to do, which is to gather information and be a basis to allow people to report. That work is happening collaboratively and it is ongoing. The final point I would make on sharing is that it is not only a collaboration of student bodies but every university has also collaborated with NGOs in its area, for example, the local rape crisis network support centres. Much of our expertise was drawn from those NGOs and also the way we monitor and progress our implementation work. We work with those bodies as well to quality assure ourselves of the work we do.

**Chairman:** That is also an important point. I will bring in Dr. Brennan.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** To follow up on that, I referenced our promoting consent and preventing sexual violence, PROPEL, project in the opening statement, which we did last year. As part of that we had a steering committee of people from all across higher education, we had a representative from the USI, Clare Austick, who is now its president, and a representative from

the National Women's Council of Ireland. Therefore, it was quite inclusive.

In terms of sharing, this is a very collaborative space. We work very closely with our colleagues in the IUA on this. In addition to the Speak Out working group, there is a Higher Education Authority, HEA-led, led advisory group on ending sexual violence and harassment, on which we are all represented. It is very much a collaborative effort. We are all keen to share our best practice in working with each other to improve our understanding. It is a new area for us. We are trying to understand what works and does not work and making sure we share those lessons across the whole higher education sector. Although there has been a very strong focus on this consent framework within higher education, it is clear this is a wider societal issue. It is not just about what happens within higher education. Education and consent must happen at the very earliest stage in a child's development and we should not wait until a young person reaches the age of 18, goes to college and suddenly learns about this thing called consent.

**Chairman:** We are hearing that from everyone involved.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** We had a conversation earlier about commitments delivered at second level. The challenges become more acute at third level. I appreciate that. I thank our guests for painting a better picture for me and the other members.

**Chairman:** As no other colleagues have further questions, I will ask a few concluding questions before we let our guests go. I am conscious we have been in session since 9 a.m. and we do not want to take up too much more of their time. I thank them very much for their engagement. They will have noted from the range of questions asked and the comments from colleagues on the committee how strongly focused we are on ensuring implementation of these recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly. They cover quite a wide range even on this section on gender, stereotypes and education. They have assisted us greatly in providing us with such insights into what is happening across higher education. As we spoke about outside earlier, I am conscious initiatives at third level to enhance greater equality for women have had a better impact than in the Oireachtas where we still see a serious gender imbalance. Ms Adebawale mentioned that figure at the start and, as I said, only 23% of our TDs are women. A report I did in 2009 for the justice committee identified five Cs, the barriers to women's progression in politics, namely, lack of cash, lack of confidence, an old boys' culture, lack of childcare and candidate selection procedures. Those first four are common across different sectors and certainly in third level. We have tried to tackle the candidate selection procedures through gender quota legislation, which has had some positive impact. However, I am conscious at third level, where I also know the situation well, real progresses have been made on tackling those other four Cs. Certainly, my own work with Athena SWAN in the law school in Trinity was a real eye-opener as to the sorts of ways in which an unconscious bias persists even where we think we have a fairly progressive workplace.

I wish to ask about a few issues that came up from my work with Athena SWAN and that arose also out of the Micheline Sheehy Skeffington case, which were highlighted with Mary Mitchell O'Connor's initiative on the women-only professorships, as they are known, the senior academic leadership initiative, SALI. These issues around lack of supports for women in academia come to the fore at a crucial point in careers, the mid-way point in women's 30s when they are much more likely than men to take time to go on maternity leave or parental leave to carry out essential childbearing and child-rearing and then they see careers impacted as a result, particularly because of a lack of capacity to carry out the necessary research, which Senator Higgins touched on, vital in order to get promotions. Some of what myself and Athena SWAN heard were issues around a lack of supports for returners, those returning to work after

maternity or parental leave. I would love to hear our guests' comments on that and on what initiatives specifically can be taken to support very much gendered initiatives to assist women returning from maternity or parental leave or a career break. What supports can be offered in the universities and in the technological universities and how can we lead on this? This arose as such a crucial issue, along with all the others around curriculum and culture that we spoke about. I would love to hear a little more on that before we close. I might hear first from Dr. Kenneally, Dr. Brennan and Professor Scott.

**Dr. Allison Kenneally:** It is a key point when we ask women and we note all the evidence we have seen from Athena SWAN in our sector. When we ask people why they do not go forward for promotion they say that they think the workload would be incompatible with their caring responsibilities. It is a big problem. Also, what we value in terms of promotions is research, which was touched on earlier. Research is not something within our sector that is contracted for; it is mainly focused on teaching. The people who will be able to engage in research will be those without additional responsibilities outside the home. It is a big problem. We must consider what is valued. Some good initiatives are starting to come from the sector in terms of looking at different types of promotional avenues. Certainly research is valued but it is important that teaching, engagement and other activities are valued equally. Many in the sector are implementing return to work policies. For people who have been on maternity leave, parental leave, carer's leave or sick leave, their return to work should be staggered and they should have additional support from their manager. In the university sector there has been protected time. We speak of this in order that people might be given time to engage in research. We have slightly different limitations and boundary conditions in our sector that make that a little bit more difficult to put into policy but the willingness is there. It is a two-pronged approach. It is about getting people to apply for the posts in the first instance. As we know, a lot of women do not apply. We need to know why that is the case. It is also about looking at what in the advertising of these senior posts and promotional posts we are valuing. If we are using the same criteria and valuing the same things, we are going to get the same type of people in the posts. That is the reality.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Kenneally for her comments. Would Professor Scott like to comment?

**Professor Colin Scott:** In the IUA sector, this is one of the areas in which we do compare and contrast and learn from each other. The question about supporting people who return not only from maternity but other forms of leave is very important. Across the sector, key examples include providing a 50% reduction in teaching load in the first year of return, to be negotiated with what would fit with the needs of the person returning. For example, it could leave a half year of no teaching on return in order that the person can build research back-up. Another element of support is grant support to rebuild research activities. One of the things we are concerned about in the sector is how to mirror the supports provided to academic staff to our professional and administrative staff as well. We recognise that the challenge of return from leave of various types is not limited to academics. Professional and administrative staff would also benefit from, for example, a career development grant that would enable them to address some area that they need to enhance on return in order to support their continuing career development.

**Chairman:** I invite Dr. Brennan to respond, followed by Mr. McMahon.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** Another issue that we need to consider in the area of research, which is my main area of expertise, is how our funding agencies can support this as well, in particular

in terms of how they assess research and whether or not they give any credence to the fact that someone has taken a break during his or her research career. For example, in the Covid phase, as women predominantly did the home-schooling this meant they were less able than their male counterparts to publish. That has to be taken into account.

One of the opportunities at the moment is the agenda around the area of open research. Part of that is reforming our entire research assessment system in line with objectives that have been set globally. That is about our hiring and promotions within our academic institutions, but it is also about how funders do their assessment of people. There are opportunities there to put a gender lens on that research assessment to ensure that women who take breaks in their career, for whatever reason, are not disadvantaged when it comes to competing for research funding.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Brennan.

**Mr. Tony McMahon:** On the issue of post return, when the woman is in the workplace with caring responsibilities, and how we cater for that, there are plenty of initiatives happening there in terms of core hours policy so that in regard to key meetings and events that people need to be part of they do not miss out because they have other responsibilities. In terms of our workload allocation models, we make sure there are no gender issues in how we allocate workload and the types of roles assigned.

To return to one of Senator Higgins's questions around promotions, it is about taking account of special circumstances, namely, absences for caring reasons which, again, can disadvantage women disproportionately and making sure promotions policies allow for that. The possible impacts on women are being catered for at various stages, not just post-maternity when there is obviously a lot of work to be done but throughout their career when children are dependant.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. McMahon. It is really useful to hear that. Would Ms Adebowale like to make a final comment?

**Ms Bukky Adebowale:** I have no further comments. Thank you.

**Chairman:** I thank our witnesses and colleagues from the Irish Universities Association, the Technological Higher Education Association and the Union of Students in Ireland for joining us today. We really value and appreciate their engagement with us, both in terms of the written submissions provided in advance of this meeting and them coming before us today. Their insights, experiences and expertise will be of great value to the committee in preparing its final report and action plan to ensure implementation of the Citizens' Assembly recommendations.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.15 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 12 May 2022.