

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHIONANNAS INSCNE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON GENDER EQUALITY

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*Déardaoin, 12 Bealtaine 2022*

*Thursday, 12 May 2022*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Regina Doherty,
Sorca Clarke,	Alice-Mary Higgins,
Neasa Hourigan,	Pauline O'Reilly,
Brid Smith.	Fintan Warfield.

Seanadóir / Senator Ivana Bacik; Teachta / Deputy Ivana Bacik sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

*The joint committee met in private session until 9.44 a.m.*

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

**Chairman:** 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. If joining on Teams, I ask members to mute their microphones when not speaking and use the raise-hand function to indicate. 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 when they are in close proximity to one another, and to adhere to public health advice. I welcome our witnesses, Ms Emer Neville, president, and Ms Saoirse Exton, equality officer, Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, who are here with us in person. I also welcome Mr. David Byrne, Technological University, TU, Dublin, who is joining us via Teams.

Before we begin, I will read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants in the committee meeting who are in locations outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating from within the parliamentary precincts do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether or the extent to which participation is covered by the absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

We are delighted to have the Irish Second-Level Students Union and Mr. Byrne from TU Dublin with us. We are dealing today with the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality related to norms and stereotypes and education. Those are recommendations 26 to 31. We have already engaged with the Minister, Deputy Harris, and other stakeholders from the third level sector, including the Union of Students in Ireland. We are delighted to have the opportunity to speak about norms and stereotypes in education at primary and second level, especially to speak about secondary level with the ISSU.

We in the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality have taken the view that the 45 recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly are a blueprint for achieving greater gender equality in Ireland. Our mission is to create a mechanism for the implementation of those recommendations and our focus is on how to practically implement them. We will propose, at the end of our term this December, to present a report or essentially an action plan to Government on how to implement the recommendations. That is the background to our work. We are very grateful to the witnesses for engaging with us and providing us with opening submissions and for coming in with us today. I call on Ms Neville to make her opening statement.

**Ms Emer Neville:** I thank the Cathaoirleach and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak today. As the national representative body for school students of Ireland,

one of the core elements of our work is ensuring that students remain core stakeholders in the decisions that affect them. We strive to represent, uplift and defend the voices of students in second-level education. When given the opportunity to present on an issue, we are always willing to work to find the solution and it is in this spirit that I speak before the committee.

The ISSU welcomes the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality with regard to norms, stereotypes and education. Recommendation 26 highlights the importance of a broad subject range that counters gender stereotyping. School is often one of the very first places students see gender stereotypes, with expectations placed on young girls to study subjects such as home economics and, similarly, on young boys to study subjects such as woodwork or technology. These stereotypes are exemplified by a lack of resourcing for schools. It is rare that one would ever see a woodworking room in an all-girls school or a home economics kitchen in an all-boys school. It is of the utmost importance that schools are given the resources they need to build these classrooms, source teachers and offer these subjects to their students to counter gender stereotypes.

Equally, as stated in recommendation 26(b) and recommendation 30, it is important that we resource schools to, "provide gender-neutral career information and advice from early second level education". We need to think logically. If a young woman is attending school and that school does not offer woodwork, technology or engineering, she is significantly less likely to explore those career paths. They are not available to her now. Why could they be available to her in the future? We need to broaden our own mindsets, curriculum and teaching to show students that their opportunities are endless and that they do not need to be confined to what society deems a traditionally masculine or feminine career. We need to show them that a young man can be a nurse, a young woman can be an engineer and a young non-binary student can be a teacher. The issues of gender stereotyping in subject choice and career information go hand in hand and the solution for them both begins with education. It begins in the classroom.

The ISSU especially welcomes recommendation 27, which encourages curriculum review with an emphasis on "gender equality and diversity". I am sure it is no surprise when I say that our relationships and sexuality education, RSE, curriculum is outdated. It simply does not reflect the world in which we live. It does not support, educate or protect our students. It focuses more on biology than consent - a subject from which we cannot shy away. In a recent survey conducted by the ISSU, one in three students stated that he or she had not received any form of RSE at senior cycle. The survey also showed that regardless of whether students received partial or complete RSE, students attending all-boys schools generally felt that their RSE was more comprehensive than those attending all-girls schools. Our education system has a responsibility to educate young women, men and non-binary people about gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

It has a responsibility to inform our students about the reality of being an Irish person. Stark statistics from Women's Aid and the Rape Crisis Network show us what that reality is. One in five young women in Ireland has been subjected to intimate relationship abuse and some 51% of young women affected experienced this abuse under the age of 18. When surveyed over a one-year period, 80% of adolescents disclosed being subjected to some form of sexual harassment. Some 47% of adolescents did not know how to report sexual harassment within their school and 247 women have died violently in Ireland between 1996 and 2022. Initiatives such as the bystander intervention programme at University College Cork and active consent at NUI Galway are doing tremendous work; they are taking the lead in educating young people at third level and even creating pilots at second level. There is still a long way to go, however. There

is nothing mainstream, and there needs to be. We must embed gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, both online and offline, in our curriculum. Every day, women are abused, whether it is emotionally, physically or sexually, LGBTQ+ students are harassed and young men are forced to suppress themselves, resulting in outrageously high suicide rates. Why? Because of their gender.

The ISSU believes that while these cannot be the final destination, they are a fantastic starting point to tackling these issues. Gender inequality is systemic: to truly address it we need an approach that involves the entire sector, that is intersectional and that devotes itself to not just raising awareness or making promises, but taking real, tangible action.

I again thank the committee for this opportunity. I am more than happy to elaborate on any of the points I have made. I look forward to answering any questions alongside my colleague from the ISSU, Ms Saoirse Exton.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Neville very much. That was very helpful and clear. I now invite Mr. David Byrne, research scholar at the TU Dublin to make his opening statement. We will then move to questions and answers.

**Mr. David Byrne:** I bid the committee members and my colleagues from the ISSU a good morning. I thank the committee for the opportunity to participate in today's meeting and to be involved in the discourse regarding the Citizens Assembly's recommendations regarding gender equality in Ireland. I would also like to offer the apologies of my colleague, Dr Aiden Carthy, who is unable to attend today due to prior commitments.

By way of a brief introduction, I believe it would be helpful to start by outlining the context that informed our thoughts and reflections regarding the Assembly's recommendations. My colleague, Dr. Carthy, is a psychology lecturer with more than 20 years' experience at TU Dublin-Blanchardstown Campus, formerly the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown. He is also pursuing a research agenda focusing on applied education and is currently leading a number of research projects examining the implications of emotional intelligence, EI, in an educational setting.

I am a research scholar conducting doctoral research at TU Dublin under the supervision of Dr. Carthy. The aim of my research is to examine the attitudes and opinions of post-primary educators regarding the promotion of students' social and emotional well-being. I am also currently involved in research being conducted at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, where I am examining psychometric models of depression. Our reflections regarding the assembly's recommendations arose predominantly out of my doctoral research and are informed by considerations for student, and indeed, educator well-being. It should be noted that this research was conducted at post-primary level and so our reflections should be considered in this particular context.

I will begin with recommendation 28. We strongly support the recommendation to provide appropriate initial education and continuing professional development, CPD, including specific gender-related modules, to educators at all levels. As many as one third of post-primary teachers delivering the social, personal and health education, SPHE, curriculum, within which relationships and sexuality education, RSE, resides, have received no training in this curriculum or related pedagogies. Worryingly, it is also apparent that SPHE may sometimes be assigned to a teacher based on their balance of available teaching hours, as opposed to their expertise in the subject. Although it is arguably the keystone subject in the well-being curriculum, SPHE

currently does not appear to be recognised on the Teaching Council's registration for curriculum subject requirements, which outlines the requisite skills and accreditation to deliver each subject of the post-primary curriculum. We propose, therefore, that appropriate subject requirements be established for SPHE, which prospective teachers would be required to meet in order to register with the Teaching Council to deliver this subject. This would oblige all consecutive and concurrent teacher-education programmes to offer a learning pathway that would lead to an accredited qualification to teach SPHE. Appropriate CPD should also be developed in order to afford accreditation to current teachers. The introduction of an accredited SPHE learning pathway would potentially reduce the propensity for untrained teachers to deliver lessons in sensitive topics such as sex and sexuality, consent and sexual or gender-based violence. Emphasising pre-service training would also help to circumvent documented barriers to teacher uptake of CPD, such as work-related time constraints.

More broadly, we suggest that the implementation of recommendation 28, which determines that a base-level gender knowledge and gender-sensitive teaching methods skill set be mandatory for all educators in order to register with the Teaching Council, regardless of their chosen subject. Again, we would emphasise pre-service training, with equivalent CPD developed for current teachers. This training could take the form of a mandatory gender in teaching module, which could be offered on all consecutive and concurrent teacher-education programmes and could encompass indicated areas of concern, such as theories of gender, gendered student-teacher relationship styles and gender-sensitive teaching methods. Mandating a requisite base-level knowledge and skill set for all teachers would be advantageous in addressing known concerns among teachers that may implicitly reinforce undesirable gender norms or stereotypes and achieving a reality whereby all educators would be confident, capable and comfortable in addressing the day-to-day needs of their students.

There is evidence which that recommendations 26, 27 and 28 and many of the issues discussed in chapter 8 might be best addressed in a co-educational setting. For example, recommendation 26a would arguably be best actioned in a co-educational setting, where gender-typing of curriculum subjects can be less likely to occur. With regard to recommendation 27b, again it is arguable that these important issues would be best addressed in gender-inclusive environments, including LGBTQI and non-binary identities, where students can learn of and from one another. In the context of recommendation 28a, the cessation of single-sex schooling would allow for these gender-sensitive teaching methods and pedagogies to be developed specifically for a classroom environment that encompasses all gender identities. Perhaps more pertinently, the societal implications of these recommendations can be highlighted when considering the assertion of educationalist, John Dewey, who proposed that school is a microcosm of the society in which it exists and which it serves. With this assertion, it stands to reason that these recommendations should be considered in light of an examination of how well our schools reflect our society. While Ireland has unusually high numbers of students in single-sex schools when compared with the international community - at 17% and 30% at primary and post-primary level, respectively - sex-segregation ends at post-primary level. There are no single-sex third level institutes and no single-sex places of work. There appears to be no analogue in our society that replicates the single-sex context that can be found at primary and post-primary level. Therefore, in line with the Bill put forward by Deputy Ó Ríordáin of the Labour Party, we recommend that the committee consider promoting what we argue is the most appropriate context within which to address gender norms and stereotypes by moving to end single-sex schooling.

The recommendations being considered by the committee have the potential to be highly

conducive to the pursuit of sex and gender equality in Ireland. Actioning and monitoring the outcome of some of these measures would precipitate a significant expenditure of effort and resources and would most likely lead to an increase in teacher workload. Teachers have an extraordinarily difficult, and I would argue, underappreciated, role in our society. It is imminently clear that they have a very full workload in terms of delivering the curriculum, let alone the accompanying administrative duties. While the importance of monitoring and reporting on progress as we move towards gender equality is arguably self-evident, we would caution against over-burdening teachers with excessive administrative work and urge that any additional tasks rendered unto teachers as a result of the implementation of any of these recommendations be carefully considered and weighed against their already busy work day.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Byrne very much for that very clear overview and very useful and valuable observations. I invite members to ask questions of the ISSU and Mr. Byrne.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank Ms Neville and Ms Exton for attending. It is a pleasure to have them here, and it is very important that they are here. I have a couple of questions for them. Many submissions are sent to various committees. I do not tend to rank the ones that are most impressive, but that presented by Ms Neville and Ms Exton is up there. What some groups take 14 pages to say, they have captured in fewer. There is a real skill to that. I thank them for the submission.

The bystander intervention programme was mentioned, as was the good work that is being done. I agree that good work is being done at UCC. From the perspective of the witnesses, in terms of how we embed the necessary changes, what do they see as being the most critical next steps for the students they represent? The ISSU representatives spoke of raising awareness, making promises and taking real and tangible action. What does that actually look like to them and those they represent? What do they want to see as a tangible outcome over the next year or six or 18 months, whatever the case may be? I congratulate them on the work they do. I will take this opportunity to wish them the very best as they continue to do it and continue to strive forward in this area. It is not an easy one. I have huge admiration for their group.

I will ask Mr. Byrne a couple of questions. Since he published the report in December 2020 containing the argument against sex segregation in post-primary schools, what engagement has he had with the Department of Education and the Teaching Council on that report? The dominant approach around relationships and sexuality education, RSE, is very focused on the risks and dangers in relationships as opposed to the more positive aspects of relationships and, more important, relationship building and how people manage the challenges within that. How does he see that being delivered in a school setting? I will come back to the ISSU witnesses very briefly. Have any of their members expressed an opinion on the changes they have seen over the past number of years in how RSE is currently being delivered? I will leave it at that for the moment.

**Ms Emer Neville:** To answer the Deputy's first question on what we would like to see regarding the future of RSE, in our report on senior cycle reform, one in three students stated they did not receive RSE and some students did not receive it fully and comprehensively. The ultimate goal is to get to a number where all students have received RSE and there is never a case where a student is not receiving a fully comprehensive RSE curriculum. By "fully comprehensive", I mean an RSE curriculum where students are learning about consent, all forms of gender-based violence and sex education, not just heterosexuality but all the diversities in that, such as different identities and so on. At present, from what we see, students are not receiving any RSE. They are getting free classes in school or they are getting study classes and it is just

being ignored at present.

**Chairman:** It is about quality, quantity and consistency.

**Ms Emer Neville:** Absolutely, yes.

**Chairman:** That is very clear.

**Mr. David Byrne:** On the question regarding engagement, initially that paper was, in essence, theoretical. There are other outcomes from my PhD research that I hope will lead to engagement. The purpose of that first paper was, hopefully, to open a discourse regarding the question of single sex versus co-education. I am very much open to engagement with the Department of Education, the Teaching Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, or anybody that is in any way involved in the decision-making process in that regard.

On the question regarding the delivery of RSE, quite a bit of research indicates the best method to deliver RSE is to be active and proactive. Some of the recommendations that come from teachers, specifically, are the likes of role playing, music video assignments, video assignments, re-enactments and those kind of things. Importantly, the structure of our classrooms needs to be considered. A round table is the predominant structure that seems to be proposed as most conducive but, again, the point made by Ms Neville about free classes is a pertinent one. It is very consistent in the literature that RSE is being avoided. There is a major issue with teachers in respect of comfort in delivering RSE. Again, it needs to begin with training. Teachers need to be trained in how to deliver RSE in a practical and proactive manner.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank Saoirse and Emer. It is good to see both of them again in a different context. I thank them for their work in all the things they do in representing the ISSU as well as their climate justice work. I also thank David.

A couple of things occurred to me. One is that we recently had a report from the NCCA around leaving certificate reform, but much of that is ongoing work. I would love to see how its representatives see the ISSU fitting in to that. As David said, I very much see the education system as a microcosm of society. It clearly is not at present. For one thing, there is segregation based on gender in addition to the issue of the representation of different religions or those who do not practise religion. It is probably based on fear. Even if we look at the percentage for primary school versus secondary school, there is a narrowing at secondary school in some ways in that we are segregating people even more at that stage, as if there is some kind of fear around sex and putting people together at this crucial time in their lives. However, that is where we learn about how to treat each other with respect and understand what consent really is. It is the critical time to be together and understand each other.

I hope the witnesses do not mind I am using first names to put everybody on a level playing field. They are more than welcome to do the same with me. I very much take on board the point that we do not want to overload teachers with more and more. I certainly heard a lot about that kind of pressure as the spokesperson for the Green Party on education. We are talking about this, but also the need for mindfulness and the need for education around climate and so on, which is just adding more and more, but much of this is about culture. I would love to understand the witnesses' thoughts around continuing professional development, CPD, courses as a way to build a relationship between the different generations, how we treat each other in schools and how that flows on to life outside school.

Senator Warfield and I discussed previously how we have not heard very much coming from the Minister for Education around RSE. I assure the witnesses we will have the Minister before the committee at some point, and officials and the NCCA. Anything our guests have that they would like to share with us for us to pass on, we will certainly do that.

**Chairman:** I should have said Senator O'Reilly is the Vice Chair of the committee. I ask Emer to come back in.

**Ms Emer Neville:** On where the ISSU fits in with the work of the NCCA, we were recently appointed to a seat on the NCCA. We are meeting with it today. We hope to be heavily involved in the new design of the curriculum and to get some members onto the different boards and subcommittees of the NCCA so students are in the room when these curricula are being designed and the thought process is there.

In addition to that, we will be doing our own report on senior cycle that will cover RSE. We have the statistics from students and will use them to lobby the Minister for Education, the NCCA and other relevant bodies to ensure the student voice is there and included throughout the entire process.

**Chairman:** That is good to hear.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** The biggest thing many students are feeling is that education is not currently designed for students. Part of that is because students have pretty much never been involved in the designing process. The Senator talked about culture change. One of the things we tend to forget, when there is so much emphasis on all of these things we need to add to the curriculum, is these should form the basis of the curriculum and everything else, all the other subjects and the exams, should be based around things such as welfare, consent and climate change. It is an integral part of the education system and the fact we have neglected it perhaps shows this microcosm of society is quite reflective of reality.

**Chairman:** That is an unfortunate one but it is probably true.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** Yes.

**Mr. David Byrne:** The point the Senator made about culture is very important. We can consciously focus on teaching RSE in terms of consent and raising awareness of gender- or sex-based violence, but many lessons will come within what is called the hidden curriculum. It is all the things that are implicitly or tacitly learned in the school place. That comes down to the culture of the school. We should also be conscious of a proposed school culture or ethos, which may be very altruistic and aim to be inclusive and open, compared to culture as performed.

As much as we may want to have inclusive culture where we are diverse and open to steering boys towards caring professions or steering girls towards STEM professions, the reality may be that, subconsciously and unbeknownst to some teachers, they may inadvertently steer them towards their gender-type subjects. It is very important to incorporate that into CPD and initial education to raise awareness of those implicit things.

The big thing from my perspective is also to involve students. This is highlighted in the report by the NCCA on its review of the RSE curriculum. Students seem to be unaware of what exactly they are supposed to be learning in RSE. This is for them and their feedback on the RSE curriculum would be very much valued.



**Chairman:** That is a very good point. I anticipate Senator Warfield would like to come in on that. Does that finish Senator O'Reilly's contribution?

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** Can I come back in on that point?

**Chairman:** Absolutely. We will have time for a second round.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I thank Ms Neville, Ms Exton and Mr. Byrne. It is quite refreshing to have the ISSU statement in here. That is the language I am more used to in everyday life. It is good to see it on the record in the Houses of the Oireachtas. They are very welcome. I was probably most expert about the curriculum and school when I was there. When a student leaves school and as the years progress, the student gradually forgets. It has been very powerful to observe the role of the ISSU during Covid and the pandemic and now on these issues and, as Senator O'Reilly said, on climate action. The future is bright.

Mr. Byrne has just touched on what I always come back to, which is the NCCA review and the responses of students. I always read their responses into the record because they are the most important for me. Students were unanimous about the importance of RSE. They were conscious that while friends and the Internet are sources of information, piecing information together from these sources has shortcomings. Students also showed real allyship with LGBT kids and their peers in schools in respect of the shortcomings of the curriculum in that regard.

The Minister, Deputy Harris, was here last week and I look forward to the Minister, Deputy Foley, coming in as well. The Minister, Deputy Harris, talked about the parent as the primary educator. That is fine but LGBT young people can be very good at hiding their identities and sexual orientations and passing as straight at times out of necessity rather than desire. A parent can be the best primary educator in the world and not realise there is an LGBT kid in the house. It is very important that the ISSU is fighting for LGBT kids and young people, including non-binary young people. Has the ISSU had any engagement with the Minister for Education on these issues?

I then have a question for Mr. Byrne. What are the blockages to an accredited social, personal and health education, SPHE, learning pathway for teachers?

**Ms Emer Neville:** We have not engaged directly with the Minister for Education on the RSE curriculum. She is aware of our report. I believe departmental officials were at its launch. The report was written by a former officer and I was not there myself. I believe they were invited and were there, but I do not believe there has been any engagement with the Minister on RSE.

**Mr. David Byrne:** In terms of blockages to an accredited pathway to SPHE, I cannot identify anything as to why it has not been accredited. The biggest issue going forward will likely be resources. It would be quite an undertaking for an institute that is offering teacher training to develop a curriculum and resource lecturers. It would take a little bit of research because one would want to it right and get students', teachers' and parents' perceptions of what needs to be taught, especially with RSE, because there are issues. As has been pointed out by Ms Neville, there are significant issues, which are well-documented. Resourcing the development of the curriculum at third level would be the big roadblock to trying to achieve an accreditation in SPHE.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Does Mr. Byrne anticipate the programme for Government allowing for legislative change if necessary?

**Mr. David Byrne:** Will the Senator repeat that?

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** The programme for Government leaves open the possibility for legislative change, if necessary, in terms of inclusive and age-appropriate RSE, including an inclusive programme for LGBTI relationships. Will we get to that point or can we do this without legislation?

**Mr. David Byrne:** I am not able to answer the question of whether we would be able to do it with legislation. What I can say is that half the battle is won, because it is widely recognised among students, teachers and parents that SPHE is a very important subject. I can imagine there would be very little resistance to trying to achieve accreditation. The only significant issue would be on the part of the third level institutes and their willingness to develop and expand their curriculum to give lecturing hours to the new subject.

**Chairman:** That is very interesting.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** Senator Warfield touched a little bit on the point of what education is going on outside school. I have a frustration. I am a former chair of the Home Education Network and I home educated my kids for much of their lives. I have a different perspective on education and I am a proponent of unschooling. We tend to segregate. People are experts in education within a system that exists but an awful lot of the education, education that we also receive as adults, is happening outside of the classroom. There is a fear attached to that because people are getting their information from sources that are uncontrolled. It is also important that we look at our place as a society and a State in how we inform the education and learning environments outside of school. Maybe this is too broad a question, but do they have anything that they could add to these recommendations that would be about education outside of school and how that could support young people and support us as adults in terms of getting to that same place around culture, consent and how we respect each other? I suppose that is my main question. It is broad but I wanted it to be on the record of any recommendations that we look at education outside of the school system as well.

**Chairman:** That is really important, is it not? Does Ms Neville want to come back on that?

**Ms Emer Neville:** Yes. What happens in many classrooms is teachers will recommend websites and such like. That is definitely something that could be used to assist education outside the classroom because it mitigates the fears of it being non-controlled if there are government-developed websites. We recently did work with the HSE crisis pregnancy programme. They are developing a website on RSE, etc. We input into that work. Such a website will be beneficial for students because if they are not getting their education in the classroom they can go home - it is a HSE-certified website - and get backed-up information about the various topics that are on it.

There is also Active Consent. They have a website. I am not entirely sure what it is called. It is another website that students can use, which is certified. It has real and good information that would be beneficial to them. It is something that teachers can point their students in the direction of. If it is a topic they are not comfortable teaching, if they do not have the knowledge to teach that topic and they feel it would be better coming from that website, they allow students. It is also something parents can point their children towards if they themselves do not know either.

**Chairman:** It is good to know.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** As Ms Neville was saying, a multitude of resources are available that have been created by experts. Many of the resources have been created because there is this inaccessibility in terms of changing the curriculum. There is already so much out there. There are all of these experiences and there are programmes, such as Active Consent or Any Time of the Month, which is about periods. It is really important, in addition to government resources, to compile some form of database that has these resources. Many of them are free as well, which is brilliant.

The key is getting them into schools. Many government resources are not used in school, in my experience, because they might be inaccessible in terms of language. It can be quite difficult for a student to go out and do his or her own research unless that student is someone like us who is heavily involved. There is a need for accessible websites in terms of language, that the Government makes, tied in with the existing amazing amount of resources that are out there.

**Mr. David Byrne:** My colleagues at the ISSU made the argument for the provision of information, digital websites, etc., as well as could be made. I will go back to the point about the parent being the primary teacher or carer. That is an important point. I agree with it, but there seems to be a shift as we are putting ever more responsibility onto teachers to educate young people about everything. We seem to be forgetting that responsibility and that relationship between the teacher and the parent. There is an ecology of learning in that regard. The parent is at the centre of it and the school is the next ring out. In the school linking up with parents and raising awareness of these kind of issues with parents and helping parents to understand some of these difficult issues, some parents will obviously struggle to have conversations around sex, sexuality and gender with their children. Raising awareness and helping out as much as we can would be a positive step forward because the burden cannot be on teachers alone. We need to spread it as widely as we can.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank Mr. Byrne. I could probably talk about this all day but I will not.

**Chairman:** By the way, I did not realise Senator O'Reilly was a home educator.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** They have just gone into school in the past year and a half but, as you can see, I am passionate about it.

There were excellent points raised there. I like the phrase "ecology of learning."

The other point, which was brought up at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, was the responsibility of the media when it comes to leaving certificate around the mental health of young people and maybe to have a moratorium on discussion of a topic for a period before the exams so as not to exacerbate that mental health problem. Is there something in the media around responsibility, around norms as well, and gender norms and health, because that is where many parents get their information?

**Chairman:** I do not know who would like to respond on that. I am conscious recommendation 31 of the assembly relates to gender stereotyping in media under this heading.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** Media has a massive role to play, especially in our age of information, because that is where many young people like me go. Instagram is where I get much of my information from on issues such as consent and period products. Social media is a tool. Obviously, it can be harmful. It is intensely powerful and we must recognise that, "With this power," to quote Spiderman, "comes great responsibility."

I am not sure about a moratorium purely because, as someone who is quite passionate about a variety of issues, regardless of whether I engage with media, it is still something that is constantly in my mind and I am sure that is the same for many young people. In terms of media such as television shows, movies and providers such as Netflix that young people engage with so much, but also in terms of the actual media, it is important that there are messages of body positivity and that there are messages destigmatising issues such as sex education and periods, thereby using these words that should be normalised and destigmatising everything. Media has this incredible power and potential. At present perhaps that potential is not being used in the best way. Unfortunately, it can be destructive to mental health.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Exton. I have other colleagues indicating. I might go to those and then Mr. Byrne might pick up, or, if she wishes, Ms Neville, on some points that Senator Pauline O'Reilly has raised. Deputy Clarke wanted to come back in, and then Senator Regina Doherty, who is joining us on Teams.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I will be brief because there are others who have not yet contributed.

I want to touch briefly on recommendations 26 and 30 and the importance of that gender neutral career information, but also the impact that having a lack of variety of options to study at second level is having an impact on third level. We heard from the third level sector. This is something that it has recognised as a serious issue, particularly around gender stereotyping. From the work that they do and from their perspective, how many students are taking additional classes outside of the school setting because where they go to school does not have the resources or does not provide the courses or the subject that they want to do to pursue in third level? Would they give us an idea of the prevalence of this in their experience? For example, how many females want to engineering or woodwork, or *vice versa* in a traditionally female dominated area? Are there young men or non-binary students similarly affected? From their perspective, and seeing learners continue on through the education spectrum, what impact is this having on people positively engaging with lifelong learning?

**Ms Emer Neville:** We do not have statistics on that but I would say at least maybe one in three or one in four of students are studying subjects outside. It is an incredibly high number - far too high a number - because they are not getting those options in school. Speaking from my own experience, out of my class of approximately 20, at least ten were studying other subjects, such as music, elsewhere because the school did not have the resources to offer them. Particularly when progressing to third level, if a student cannot access a subject in their school but they decide to study it at third level, they are at a massive disadvantage. For example, engineering is a subject offered in most boys' schools, but if a student from a girls' school decides to study it, they are at a disadvantage compared to the boys who have progressed on from the boys' school. The girls are missing out on the foundation course. We see high dropout rates and things like that because of issues such as this. Again, in the single-sex schools, if the only subjects they are offering in a boys' school, for example, are woodwork, engineering, technology and stuff like that, they will not progress towards options such as caring, music or anything like that because they are not seeing it.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** They are being pigeonholed.

**Ms Emer Neville:** Yes. It comes back to representation again. If you are not seeing yourself in that position and cannot picture it, then it is not accessible to you. If careers teachers in boys' schools do not have modules on caring, nursing, music and so on, the boys will not even think of doing that. They will think, for example, that they are decent at maths so they might

go on and get a maths degree and become a teacher or they will perhaps think that since they made it through the first year of engineering in senior cycle, they will just study engineering. The only career options they are getting are what is being presented to them by their schools. Unfortunately, as the Deputy said, they are being pigeonholed into those careers.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Those are academic opportunities. In terms of those who take additional courses outside of school to then progress onto third level, do our guests have any feedback as to what that actually looks like in terms of their lived day? If there are individuals who are non-binary or their gender is very under-represented in the third level institute that they are going to, how comfortable are they to be there?

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** It is difficult to know unless you are in those shoes, if the Deputy knows what I mean. However, I know that it can be very difficult for non-binary students, specifically in mixed schools, but in single-sex schools as well, because there is such a gender divide. We have things such as uniforms, bathrooms and changing facilities that are cut along the gender divide. Even newer buildings often do not have gender-neutral facilities. This can be very undermining for non-binary young people because they are forced to choose. It is the sort of, “Which bathroom do I go to?” debate. That is an integral part of people’s identities. It sounds small but it is vitally important. Although I can only speak from the experiences of my colleagues and friends, I think it is very difficult to be someone who does not fit a gender binary in every Irish school because of the lack of education and lack of representation of genderqueer people and queer people in general, but also because the school building itself seems to fight against the existence of gender nonconforming people. That is incredibly unfair.

On additional subjects, I am in fifth year and I do an extra subject outside of school. I am in a mixed school, so it is not due to gender.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** What does Ms Exton study?

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** I do classical studies. It is a long day. I come home from school and I have an hour of extra class two days a week. If you are doing a more mathematical subject such as engineering, that will be much more work. There will be the project work and more work. At the moment, we know there is a huge amount of pressure on second level students. It is increasing every year, not just because of, as I mentioned before, this age of information where we have this constant barrage of crises being thrown in our faces, but also because I genuinely believe a lot of the exams and coursework we are doing do not have some of the key skills that you need when entering the world of work or the adult world. I refer to skills such as communication skills, presentation skills, teamwork, team building and conflict resolution. We are not getting these integral skills. My mother is a teacher and she said that in her experience and from others she talked to, she is just not seeing these very important skills as people enter into third level because they are not taught. I hope that answers the Deputy’s question.

**Chairman:** I am conscious we have other colleagues wanting to come in, so I might move on. Again, I will come back to Mr. Byrne in the next round, if that is okay. I call Senator Doherty, who will be followed by Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

**Senator Regina Doherty:** Sometimes when we give compliments, it comes out as being patronising, but I compliment Ms Exton, Ms Neville and Mr. Byrne, who are so impressive. I thank them very much for taking their time this morning to come and present to us. They describe, with such passion, the difficulties that we experienced in our secondary school system and, probably to a lesser extent but it still relevant, in our primary school system, that have

been going on for years. We can talk about these issues and we recognise them. We know the outputs and outcomes of those difficulties and yet, as legislators and Departments, it is only this year that we have finally put the ISSU on the NCCA. I want to wish them every success in their placement there. They should make their voices heard as loud and clear as they possibly can.

When it comes to choice, if I had a magic wand, I would change it so that every school would have both sexes and would be a gender-empowering environment, which we seem to have really struggled with the past number of years and that is a real pity. However, it will come down to choice. As Ms Exton said, if you go to a mixed school, you have the accessibility to the non-traditional female or male subjects. In our school at home, a tiny number of girls are doing metalwork or woodwork. However, the culture and environment in the class still has, according to my girls, toxic masculinity. It is not conducive to learning for them to stay in that environment. My two young ones at home who are doing junior certificate this year will not do woodwork or metalwork for the leaving certificate because they are both the only girls in their class. It is not much fun or a nice environment. Even though we need to recognise that we need to make classes available to all students, whether it is predominantly traditional female classes to males or *vice versa*, what will we do about the culture and environment that exists when we do make them available?

Also, I have a real concern that when we add new subjects, we will have to drop some, but which ones? I heard teaching talking in the media only this morning about how they do not want to be overloaded by things constantly being added to their workload. What traditional subject would the guests drop to try to empower and to make new and more subjects available?

On RSE, I do not even need to just take the guests' word for it, because I have four young adults at home. They come from a school that I think is quite progressive. Yet, their accessibility to RSE has been hit-and-miss, depending on the year that they had it. RSE should be embellished. It is probably singularly the most important class and skill set that we need to teach our children for them to be able to navigate, as Ms Exton noted, this constant barrage of crises that the world of social media and information has opened them up to over the past five or ten years. It is not being taken as treated as seriously or as comprehensively as it absolutely should be. What directions should be given to the Department and the Minister for Education to show it is not just essential but is absolutely fundamental that we empower our young students with those tools that they should be getting but are not in RSE? We absolutely must make it fundamental and mandatory and make sure that it is not just two classes that are substituted with study classes. It should absolutely be far bigger than two classes. The skills that we need and all of the negatives that arrive in society because of the lack of those teachings are evident in all of our women's and men's aid organisations. In addition, it is evident in all the statistics Ms Neville mentioned earlier that our young people are reporting regarding sexual abuse, sexual harassments and all the negatives and nastiness in society.

**Chairman:** I will go to Mr. Byrne first because I am conscious he missed out on the last round. The proposed gender in education module might be relevant to Senator Doherty's question too.

**Mr. David Byrne:** Mandatory training would be a very positive step forward. Going back to the Senator's first point on the toxic masculinity that is still evident in the classroom for, say, male-dominated subjects, it will be a very long road. Hopefully, however, through appropriate education with a societal component - because as the Senator said, it is cultural too - beginning in primary or even before, we need to teach boys to not be that way. Addressing it in education would be a good start. We need to teach them that there is another way of behaving. It really

is that simple and yet it is also extraordinarily complex. It would be very difficult to break that mould because it is such an ingrained habit.

As regards training, making the training mandatory would be beneficial in two ways, as I mentioned. First, we could ensure that people delivering the SPHE and RSE curriculums would be, at least, more comfortable delivering and speaking about sensitive topics because they would have had training. At the moment, we find that many teachers have had no training or preparation; they just have free hours and are being slotted in to SPHE. That is part of the trend of people attending to other matters or doing paperwork while students are doing their homework. Training would be of significant benefit in terms of comfort. It should be mandatory to be certified to deliver SPHE. That should ensure that people who are not trained will not be allowed to deliver SPHE and only people who are able to deliver RSE will do so. It is a significant issue. I could not agree more. That is one way we could gather around that problem.

We have already seen that RSE and SPHE are very much valued. Teachers consider them to be important but when it comes to the crunch, they are very much devalued in comparison with the core curriculum. When there are time constraints and there is a choice in respect of emphasising one or the other, teachers will usually emphasise the core curriculum. Making it mandatory and having people who are dedicated to this curriculum will help to improve the value of the well-being curriculum, let us say, as compared with the core curriculum.

**Ms Emer Neville:** Mr. Byrne put it really well. Toxic masculinity needs to be taught out of students. It is a societal issue. It is not just happening in schools. It does make girls very uncomfortable. I did woodwork for my junior certificate but I did not do it for the leaving certificate for the very reason that it was an uncomfortable environment. That is only amplified for non-binary students and students who do not fit into certain boxes. It is definitely something that even an RSE curriculum could possibly cover. It is something that should be taught at home and at every level, from primary to third level.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** There is a saying that people should not teach their daughters to put up with it; they should teach their sons to change. That is evident from what everyone here is saying. The fundamental way to combat harmful culture is education. Education is the key to changing society. It is really important that in every subject across every curriculum these ideas of intersectionality are reinforced and the ideas of toxic masculinity are destroyed. As Senator Pauline O'Reilly stated, the school environment is crucial to the adults we eventually become. Education is crucial to what society will be in future. When we are at school, we are young voters and we are preparing to enter into the adult world. All the education we receive will go towards creating active citizens and valuable members of society. The fact that so much is neglected in the education system, including these things about toxic masculinity, is counterproductive to the development of our society. It is really important that this is not just about making better and healthier young people; it is about making a better and more healthy environment and future education.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Exton. It is great to get insights that are directly from the classroom from her and Ms Neville.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I am so done with toxic masculinity. I am sorry for being late. I was at a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts so I missed some of what our guests have said but I have a list of the issues they have covered. They referred to toxic masculinity. There are probably a lot of people who do not know exactly what that means in terms of examples. I do not wish to ask our guests about their personal experience but I ask

them to give examples that other people could understand of what toxic masculinity might be.

**Ms Emer Neville:** It is young girls walking to a classroom and comments being made about their appearance. It is the little sexist jokes that women belong in the kitchen or asking what you are doing in the classroom for a men's subject. It is little things like that. They are all typically attached to societal stigma, such as women typically being carers or nurses and things like that. It is not just in a classroom setting. It is things like men do not cry - they need to be hard men and act and look a certain way to be a man in Irish society. If you are not playing Gaelic games, what are you? You are nothing. It is that idea that has been ingrained in young men that they should act and behave these ways in school. Obviously, that makes everyone uncomfortable. Teachers do not want to stop it because it is what they know but it also makes them uncomfortable to hear it. There is a fine line. Sometimes they might agree with the remarks, while at other times they do not know how to stop them. As Ms Exton stated, it is education that will fix it. In a classroom setting, it is typically jokes or comments, and sometimes even shoving people. At times, it can get physical. That is definitely a worst-case scenario but I have seen it happen. Ms Exton may have a different view.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** The key issue in the context of toxic masculinity is that once it begins in the classroom, it can develop into much more serious things in adulthood. The thing with toxic masculinity is that because we live in a patriarchal society, it is widely acceptable. Young men often learn from a young age that it is acceptable and they can get away with certain things. That can be really harmful in every setting. At the moment, the message is being sent out that this sort of behaviour is basically all right. As I mentioned, that means it perpetuates over time. It is important that the Government, but also teachers, parents, peers and everyone else, reinforce that there is certain behaviour that is just not acceptable. Teachers need to be trained to recognise that behaviour from an early stage - before it gets violent or to the comments stage. One of the ways to do that is to have gender-inclusive education, such as talking about menstruation in a class where there are people who do not have a womb. I do not understand why a class would be split up based on gender. It could be talking about consent in an intersectional way or talking about pleasure. We never talk about pleasure in the RSE classroom. I genuinely think that if we break down these sexual barriers, we will also break down gender barriers. They are tied into one another.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** It is about raising boys in all the richness of life rather than in the traditional way, or not ascribing value to being at the top of the class in football and all those different things. I completely agree with our guests in respect of the teaching of consent. It is not just to what one is not consenting, but also to what one is consenting. I do not understand how consent can be taught without having a positive conversation about that and explaining what it is that one is consenting to so that it can be understood to what one is not consenting. I remember meeting a group about two years ago that was trying to bring that into the curriculum in different ways. It was really different and advanced. I had not seen anything like it before that. When we get to that stage in the context of RSE I will be very pleased.

I note that the ISSU had an interaction with the Department in respect of the junior cycle RSE programme. The Department is developing a new programme for the junior cycle. As far as I can see, it has not begun work on the primary or senior cycles. Did the ISSU get to contribute to the extensive consultation on the junior cycle RSE changes?

**Ms Emer Neville:** That may well have been the case. It may have taken place before Ms Exton and I were in office. To my understanding, we have not been involved in work in respect of the senior cycle. It is possible that the ISSU contributed to the work on the junior cycle. I



am not entirely sure whether it did.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** That is fine. I am not aware from my questioning of the Minister that the work has begun yet. I would very much hope you would be involved in this and also that you would have a perspective on what would be taught in the primary cycle as well.

In relation to what Ms Neville said about menstruation, I spoke to a teacher of young girls who will become aware of menstruation in a few short years. She is not allowed to teach them about tampons. I just do not understand it. She said this is because of the religious ethos in the school. I do not understand that. That is a matter of functionality.

Are there any other examples? As late as last year, we highlighted examples of problems in the RSE curriculum in relation to homophobic material having been included and having been available. Are there other specific examples like that, of which Ms Neville is aware, that she would like to highlight here today?

**Ms Emer Neville:** There was the example of homophobic materials being included. There is also the example, which is happening in all Irish schools, that same-sex material is not being included at all. It is either not there or it is homophobic. There is no in-between, unless your teacher is making the active decision to teach it themselves and going against it.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** Correct.

**Ms Emer Neville:** A really good example was the report that was released yesterday by the joint committee on education. A recommendation is that you separate the school's ethos from the RSE curriculum.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I agree with that, just to just to be clear. Ms Neville talked about toxic masculinity spilling over into outside the school. Does this happen in different forms? Does she that, whether this is on social media or in person?

**Ms Emer Neville:** It is often on social media. For example, very often the boys in somebody's class will comment on the girl's Instagram post and will make jokes. You have the option to share posts now. This is a big problem because they are sending them to each other. We also saw the issues of image-based sexual assault, where intimate pictures of women were shared into a Discord chat of thousands of men. That is happening in Irish schools-----

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** In Irish schools.

**Ms Emer Neville:** It is happening everywhere. I personally know girls who have had images shared among the boys in that classroom. It is a big problem because the girls do not know how to report issues like that. There are statistics from the Rape Crisis Network of Ireland that show that 47% of adolescents did not know how to report sexual harassment. Therefore, they just do not do it. That is why so many women were not surprised when the Discord servers came out, because it was happening in schools. It is happening everywhere.

For example, teen discos are the worst things that ever happened to Irish society. Young women and men are being assaulted at those. Again, nobody knows how to report this. I do not believe there is a set system, like there would be at third level education. UCD recently launched one and so did UCC, but that does not exist at second level. When things like this happen, bouncers are not trained to stop it. They are not bystanders but they do not stop it.

This again brings it back to the importance of the UCC bystander intervention, because it is not there. Adults do not even know how to stop situations like that. I personally know tens of women who have been assaulted at teen discos on the same night.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** What?

**Ms Emer Neville:** This has happened on the same night. The same happens to young men. It is a systemic issue. Harassment is normalised in second level education. It all comes back to toxic masculinity, like Ms Exton said. You need to stop it before it gets physical, because it is creating situations like this.

**Chairman:** It is a huge concern for us. We dealt with the module on sexual- and gender-based violence already. Clearly, this cuts into that. I am conscious Senator Higgins wants to come in.

I thank Ms Exton and Ms Neville for sharing those insights with us. As the mother of teen daughters, it is chilling to hear about and to know what is going on at school level. There is a great deal, as Ms Neville said, of incidents of harassment and sharing of images without consent. These are under the surface and not publicly visible. It is a real worry.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I would begin by saying I am so sad to hear that last piece. Ms Exton spoke about pleasure. Dancing is one of the great pleasures in life that gives people a sense of their body and enjoying it. For me, it was a really empowering thing to go dancing and raving when I was young, from when I about 15 or 16 years old. It was really important to me because I got a sense of owning and enjoying my body. It is really sad to hear the idea of that space not being managed properly and not being made a space that is enjoyable and empowering for young women.

We have talked about that culture, but I want to raise two issues. The first of these is the co-educational piece and where the stereotypes that emerge. This question is for Ms Neville, Ms Exton and Mr. Byrne. What is the extent to which stereotypes build up when you do not have that kind of contact and you do not have that exposure? I talked to somebody who, when they were young, remembered that there was a high wall that was oiled between the boys' school and the girl's school. There was a message that that sent to girls about boys and to boys about themselves. It was extremely negative. There is that idea of stereotypes that builds up and that overflows into a college environment in the messages that boys and girls are getting about each other. One of the arguments that is often used against co-education is the argument that girls will not be heard in the classroom and that they will be silenced there. It is an interesting issue, because I see that argument being used in the workplace, too. There is the idea that girls need to be more confident and that they will not be confident enough. Much research, as I understand it, shows that the issue is really the teachers. Teachers give boys more attention and more opportunities to answer questions. In fact, addressing that issue is not about separating people by gender. It is about the way teachers make a point of ensuring there is that equal voice in the classroom. Could the witnesses comment on how that issue could be addressed as part of this? The excuse is often used that we need separate schools, because boys would be so distracted, and girls would lack confidence. In fact, that can be addressed through a better classroom culture.

Excellent things have been said already in relation to the RSE curriculum. The witnesses might comment on it. This is an issue that Deputy Carroll MacNeill also highlighted. We note that they are starting with the junior cycle and then they will do the senior cycle. It strikes us

that they really should be addressing the curriculum at every level now. This is so that they start improving things at each level now, rather than beginning with junior cycle and then in a few years' time starting to look at the senior cycle. Do the witnesses have thoughts on that?

Within that issue, there is the importance of not just how we treat the biology and then the consent. Within consent, there is that issue of respect. It is not just a matter of how we treat each other. It is not a kind of mechanical thing, but how we think about each other. Is that a space where the witnesses feel that absorbed stereotypes, clichés and secret assumptions could be addressed?

There is also the point of the wider curriculum. While the RSE and gender sensitive education are important, often in the wider curriculum it can get dropped. I am interested in this. There is much work at the moment around the decolonisation of the curriculum at university level. That is beginning to happen.

There are also women who are Travellers. The witnesses will be aware that my colleagues and I sponsored the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill. Clichés and stereotypes come through about gender in the mainstream subjects. Sometimes this happens in an intersectional way, for example, with clichés about women in African countries, women of a particular religion and women who are Travellers. We must address those layers of stereotypes in a mainstream curriculum. Do the witnesses have thoughts on whether that is improving? Are there areas where it strikes them that students are saying that it does not feel right?

My last point is on the wider culture in schools, moving outside the classroom. I spoke at one of the ISSU annual conferences. I was struck by the motions the students were putting forward. Even in religious schools, they wanted to have LGBT support spaces or support groups. How important is it to empower students in their voice within schools so that all of those issues can get flagged? We often have a very hierarchical version of that.

I also want to raise the issue of cycling. We know that incredibly low levels of girls cycle, and one of the reasons for that is school uniforms. Another issue is how cycling gets treated and framed in relation to girls. These are examples of the wider school environment, as the witnesses put it so well earlier, and how we can make that an empowering environment that gives people skills and confidence in their wider engagement with the world.

**Chairman:** There is a lot there. We will go first to Mr. Byrne. Those first questions were around the research on co-educational schools. That was a question I was going to ask, so I am delighted Senator Higgins raised it. I have discussed it with Deputy Ó Ríordáin many times in the context of his Bill to phase out single-sex schools. The low number of what we strangely call “mixed schools” in Ireland is extraordinary, and Mr. Byrne has given the figures on this. It is such an odd phrase that no other country uses. I would be delighted to hear a response to that. We will give Ms Neville and Ms Exton the last word if they wish to respond to Senator Higgins’s broader comments about culture, decolonisation and other matters.

**Mr. David Byrne:** One of the prominent tools we could have in defeating stereotypes is familiarity, and I do not see boys and girls achieving that familiarity with each other when they are put into separate schools. The point has already been made very well by my colleagues from the ISSU in that regard, including the available curricula and that kind of thing.

There is the question of the delivery of relationships and sexuality education, RSE, which must be connected across all levels of education. It is a little slipshod currently and it would be

very beneficial to have primary inform post-primary and that could in turn inform third level. There was a very good point as well about the content of the training available. An aspect that arose in my research was the kind of overlap between subjects such as social, personal and health education, SPHE, RSE and science. The biology of reproduction, puberty and things like that would have been covered in those subjects. The responses indicate students were kind of clocking out of RSE when it came to the biological stuff. I agree there should be more of an emphasis on the softer, more tacit and difficult to address areas such as the stereotypes and that kind of thing.

Many of the points made about reviewing the wider curriculum are reflective of the hidden curriculum again. Opening a textbook in English, a student is met with a kind of stereotypical representation of women, African people or the other examples that have been mentioned. Again, that should precipitate a review. There seems to have been a bit of progress in that regard but we are not quite there yet.

On the content of SPHE, students must be involved with developing the curriculum and identifying the areas that need to be addressed and that kind of thing. One of the ways we could address that is to incorporate research into the curriculum and have students involved in what is called participatory action research. Students can do the research themselves. They can do a survey of how they are feeling about RSE at the beginning and end of the year to see if RSE has any impact on how they feel, including about the curriculum. They can conduct research projects on what issues may arise from them inside and outside the school. There are a host of different things we can do in that regard, but again it is about teaching teachers how to do this and supporting students in identifying these matters.

I agree the answer is not separation. If there are boys and girls in the same class and the boys are dominating, we need to expect teachers to stay on top of it but we must also support them. It can be exceptionally difficult and boys will be boys in that sense, I guess. They will try to dominate the class and while we are still trying to educate them out of that trend, we must support teachers so they can manage the classroom in that regard. That could be subsumed into training before service and through continuing professional development, I guess.

**Chairman:** The Senator has another minor point.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** Mr. Byrne came to it at the end and it is the question of teacher training. There is an emphasis around managing the classroom sometimes. I was in a school that had just become co-educational and I was one of six or seven girls in a class of 35. I am very pushy though. There is the question of not just simply managing the classroom but having the responsibility to elicit and support all the voices in the classroom. It is a very important message because the single argument I am told all the time is that girls will not be heard in a mixed classroom. That is why it is a fundamental matter.

I do not believe this to be automatically true and this is not about a skill that must be managed. It is the same for the workplace and we are told that women need to be more confident. Instead, workplaces must value everybody's input in a very thoughtful way.

**Chairman:** Perhaps we should all be more pushy. I am joking and that is in itself a gendered word of course as well.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** Exactly.

**Chairman:** Perhaps Mr. Byrne can comment on that briefly.

**Mr. David Byrne:** It is an exceptionally good point and it contributes to an idea of being called silly boys and sensible girls. It is almost, by definition, we accept that boys will behave this way and girls will behave differently. In a sense, boys are rewarded for dominating the classroom and girls are rewarded for being submissive. There was an example earlier from Ms Neville of attending a woodwork class for junior cycle but not going back at senior cycle. That is an absolutely awful lesson to learn and it is reinforced by the dynamic in the classroom. There was no fault from the student in question but there is something really wrong with how the classroom is being managed when a student does not want to pursue a subject because of it. It is a very serious matter that must be addressed.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Byrne. We will give Ms Neville and Ms Exton the last word before we conclude.

**Ms Emer Neville:** The decolonisation of education is very important. Looking at our history curriculum, for example, it is all men. There are approximately two women, and they are Rosa Parks and Countess Markievicz. They were two amazing women but they were not the only two women in history across the world. There are others, including Bernadette Devlin. There are many really inspiring people about whom we should be learning but we are not. It is a completely male-centred curriculum and it is the same across the board. It is important we recognise it in the review of all these curricula. There is a recommendation on encouraging curriculum review with an emphasis on gender equality and diversity, learning about more people of colour and LGBTQ Irish history. We have such a wide history and we learn nothing about it. It is really important this is all incorporated. That will play a part in countering toxic masculinity because we will open to different views and diverse histories etc. Not only would it stop toxic masculinity but it will help nurture a more diverse classroom and education, which is very important.

The curriculum and the school system is currently built against women. We cannot even cycle to school because the board of management has control over what we wear. No matter how much we appeal against that, the board can just turn around and just say “No”. It is not just a matter for women; it is also relevant for non-binary and trans students. They are being forced into wearing these uniforms they either do not identify with or are just not comfortable wearing. That was particularly evident this year, when we saw windows in classrooms being opened. People were freezing and nothing could be done about it. There must be some sort of legislation to stop that.

Uniforms should not be confined by gender. If a young boy wants to wear a skirt to school, why should we stop that? If a young woman wants to wear pants, who are we to control what they wear? I understand the arguments for uniforms, but if we are going to keep the uniform system, we must ensure it is diverse and there are options. It will make for a better environment for students to be in. If I refer to the workplace again, one would not be forced to wear a skirt in a place of work and people have the option to wear pants. If we really want the school system to prepare students for the workplace, we need to have all aspects of that covered, including the way students present themselves in school as well.

**Ms Saoirse Exton:** It is very interesting because in every single other sector of society, discrimination is illegal, but it is not in school. Why is the legislation different and why is there an exception purely because of ethos? What does ethos have to do at all with what we wear? It is an absolute atrocity what is happening with the uniform policies. I spoke before about how uniforms are down two gendered lines. When I began wearing trousers, I got an amount of stares from teachers and peers alike, looking at my legs, because I was not wearing a skirt. In Lim-

erick, we have ankle-length skirts, which in my school are bright red and absolutely beautiful.

In terms of decolonisation, my background is in climate activism so, obviously, that is everything for me. The sole reason the climate crisis is a thing is because of this colonialist attitude where the white, cisgender, heterosexual male is the norm, is the default, and everything else is the other. That is reinforced by the curriculum, as Ms Neville said. In my junior certificate history book, there were three women pictured, and one of them was simply associated with Michael Collins, so there was nothing in the curriculum about her and it was just her image. It is very frustrating to be a young woman and to see this, and to be an activist and to see there are so many narratives that are just taken away from us.

My mother is from Australia. As a white Australian, obviously, the history of the people with my colour of skin is, unfortunately, one of intense violence and erasure. I remember that in primary school we were told that indigenous Australians did not fight back, which is entirely incorrect. It is incredibly frustrating to have these narratives that we are told and that are reinforced in every single subject.

It is really frustrating because in a country like Ireland, we have such a diverse history in recent years, but we also have such a rich culture in terms of language and mythology. I have a big interest in mythology and I have been reading books on how, linguistically, we are connected to Europe and all of these places, which is really interesting, but we do not learn about any of this. We learn about the European narrative, which is very unusual and strange to me considering we were colonised. Why have we taken on this colonial attitude? Why have we erased our own past in ignorance just to fit a narrative which has damaged our own culture? It is incredibly detrimental because, in terms of climate change, people do not tend to have empathy for anyone else. We see this incredible attitude towards Ukraine but it is not given towards other countries such as Palestine, for instance, that are undergoing an onslaught right now.

Everything comes back to the education system. If we have an intersectional education system that takes everyone and everything into account, we will have an intersectional society that takes everyone and everything into account.

**Chairman:** Thank you. I think we all feel like giving Ms Exton a round of applause. That was very powerful.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Ms Neville has answered the question I was going to ask.

**Chairman:** The witnesses can probably see that we could sit and talk about this all day. We are all passionate about gender equality and about the Citizens' Assembly recommendation but, in particular, about tackling discrimination and tackling stereotypes in education. We are very grateful to them for coming in today and also for giving us the benefit of the submissions and the opening statements, and sharing with us their experiences, their insights and their expertise. It is particularly powerful for all of us to hear from those who are currently in school and in education because, as Senator Warfield said, we can all forget, especially those of us who have been some time out of full-time education. We are very grateful to Ms Exton and Ms Neville for coming here as representatives of the Irish Second-Level Students Union to share their insights with us. We are also very grateful to Mr. Byrne and he can pass on our thanks to Dr. Aiden Carthy as well for sharing the insights from their research, which is very useful and will inform our deliberations as we proceed to finalise our action plan on how we implement these important recommendations. The witnesses have given us some really good, creative and clear ideas and thoughts on that, which we greatly appreciate.

12 May 2022

I will adjourn the meeting until 9.30 a.m. next Thursday, 19 May, when we will begin directly in public session and Senator Pauline O'Reilly will be in the Chair.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.14 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 19 May 2022.