**Higher Education students and management jointly launch the #UnmuteConsent Campaign to drive a positive conversation on consent, and to end sexual violence and harassment.**

**Embargo 03.10.22:** Sexual Violence and Harassment is a problem on higher education campuses and is under-reported. All higher education institutions are currently implementing a wide range of measures within the National Consent Framework (*Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions)*. To help drive awareness and encourage conversation on consent, the Higher Education Institutions, their Representative Bodies IUA and THEA, the Higher Education Authority, and USI are today launching the #unmuteconsent campaign 2022. The campaign seeks to mobilise the student community to make a difference, by speaking out, by enhancing their own knowledge about consent, and ultimately, by challenging and changing behaviours.

The campaign was informed by findings from the National Survey of Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEIs (2021), and the Active\* Consent Sexual Experiences Survey (2020), and the experience of HEIs in researching and implementing action plans to educate and raise awareness about consent, and to combat sexual violence and harassment.

Welcoming the campaign **Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris TD** said: *“I have been very clear that the third level sector must lead the way in changing cultures, behaviours and practices across society to ensure that bullying and sexual harassment are not tolerated.  There is a particular responsibility on those charged with educating the next generation in ensuring that their students and learners are equipped to lead the change more widely across society.*

*Everyone is entitled to a safe environment to study and work free from violence and harassment, and that informs the policy approaches and interventions that have been adopted across the sector. The #unmuteconsent campaign is a key pillar of our consent architecture which supports our goal of zero tolerance and ensuring that we change the culture on every single campus. I am pleased that students and management are working in tandem to create that change.”*

#UnmuteConsent will roll out across all Higher Education Institute campuses and the website [www.unmuteconsent.ie](http://www.unmuteconsent.ie) will highlight the support, resources and training available in each higher education institution in the country.

As the new academic year has commenced on campuses around Ireland consent is forming part of the student induction process in addition to the tools and supports this campaign seeks to highlight.

By engaging with the support and training available in every institution, the campaign seeks to encourage students in:

1. Speaking out/reporting unacceptable behaviour and accessing support.
2. Being active and challenging perceived norms of unacceptable behaviour
3. Talking about consent and relationships in a positive and confident way
4. Practicing consent in their relationships and interactions

 **Beth O’Reilly, President of the Union of Students in Ireland** said: *“We must all continue to work towards having zero-tolerance for sexual violence and harassment on all campuses, and among our student population. This involves empowering students to increase their knowledge of consent, to change behaviours as needed, to speak out about consent and to report experiences of sexual violence and harassment. This is what the #UnmuteConsent campaign is about, and USI is pleased to be part of it, along with college and university management, and Government. Consent awareness is increasing in our communities, and we need to keep building on the work that has already been done*.”

Speaking on the launch of #unmuteconsent campaign **Professor Colin Scott, Chair of the IUA Vice Presidents of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group**, said: *“Sexual Violence and Harassment is a problem on third level campuses and across all strands of society in Ireland. The evidence indicates that incidents are under-reported. We know that the findings from our surveys in 2020 and 2021 are comparable to findings in universities in Australia, the US, and the UK. We want a safe and respectful third level experience for staff and students and know that a culture of speaking about consent can help transform how we as a society respond to unacceptable behaviour. We are encouraged by the survey evidence of increased awareness and understanding of consent among students, and we are determined to continue our efforts to end SVH on campus. ”*

**HEA CEO Dr Alan Wall** said, “*We are delighted to support the second iteration of the #unmuteconsent campaign, which is an important element of the work ongoing across the higher education sector to address sexual violence and harassment. The campaign will make a significant contribution towards a campus culture in which every member of the HEI community feels safe, respected and supported, and in which sexual misconduct will not be tolerated. It also plays a vital role in signposting the crucial support services available to those who may need them*”.

**Joseph Ryan, CEO of the Technological Higher Education Association** said:“*THEA is delighted to support this campaign as it runs for a second time.  Our member institutions have done much to support an open conversation about consent, raising awareness of it among staff and students and embedding a safe, respectful, and supportive culture on their campuses.  Through this campaign, institutions have the opportunity to continue the conversation about consent, to normalise it, and to encourage our campus communities actively to increase their knowledge about consent*.”

More information on the campaign can be found at <http://www.unmuteconsent.ie>

**Ends**

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**Notes for editors:**

Links to the supports available in each of the participating HEIs can be found on [**www.unmuteconsent.ie**](http://www.unmuteconsent.ie)

**Sexual Consent** is described as the freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity. This description entails an ongoing, mutual and preferably verbal communication, and is consistent with the definition of consent in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, as where the individual “freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act”.

Statistics from the [National Survey of Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEI in 2021](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/Summary-report-Students-Jan-2022.pdf) on underlying attitudes, knowledge, perceptions of safety regarding sexual consent and sexual violence are set out below. 7,900 students completed a survey as part of the research to provide a large national sample across gender, sexual orientation, and year in college.

* A majority of students agreed that they discussed sexual consent issues with their partner (61%) while 20% disagreed that they had done this.
* Half of the respondents (53%) agreed that they had heard other students discuss consent issues on campus while 30% disagreed with this statement.
* About one fifth of students felt shy or lacked confidence in engaging in active, verbal consent.
* A majority of students agreed that they felt safe from SVH at their accommodation and around the campus, but at the same time approximately four in ten of the students agreed that sexual violence and harassment were a problem at their higher education institution
* 72% of female students had experienced offensive sexist remarks, and 62% of students experienced unwanted attempts to establish a sexual relationship

**This campaign is supported by:** The Higher Education Authority, The Irish Universities Association, the Technological Higher Education Association and the Union of Students in Ireland.

**Background:**

In April 2019, the Framework for Consent in HEIs; *'Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive: Ending Sexual Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions'* was published by the then Department of Education and Skills. The Framework aims to ensure the creation of an institutional campus culture which is safe, respectful and supportive.

In April 2021, at the request of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, TD, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) conducted national surveys to monitor the experiences of students and staff in relation to sexual violence and harassment, in order to create a robust evidence base for further policy and funding decisions in relation to tackling sexual violence and harassment in higher education institutions (HEIs).

The HEA established an expert [Advisory Group on Ending Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in HEIs](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/HEA-Advisory-Group-on-Ending-Sexual-Violence-and-Harassment-in-Irish-HEIs.pdf) in January 2021 to support this work. In collaboration with this advisory group, the HEA Centre of Excellence for Equality Diversity and Inclusion developed and ran national surveys of staff and students to monitor their experiences in April 2021. The findings of the surveys were published in January 2022 and can be found [here](https://hea.ie/policy/gender/national-survey-of-the-experiences-of-students-in-relation-to-sexual-violence-and-harassment/).