

Evidence to Action: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions

Conference report



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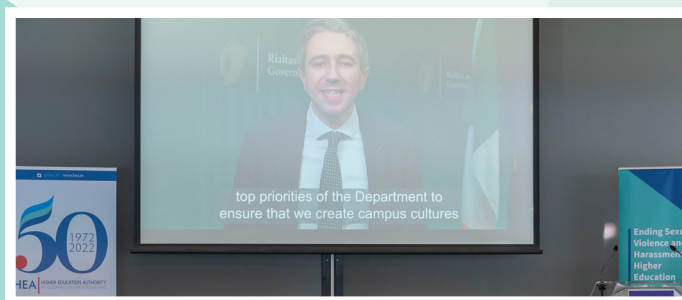
The Evidence to Action conference was hosted by the Higher Education Authority's Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion on 8 December 2022 in the Croke Park Conference Centre in Dublin.

The purpose of the conference was to showcase the latest evidence and good practice ongoing across the sector, to share learning and to discuss future priorities and approaches in the context of the findings of recent surveys and the launch of the [Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions Implementation Plan, 2022-2024](#) (ESVH Implementation Plan).

While there is still much work to be done, the event was an important opportunity to take stock and to acknowledge and celebrate the significant progress that has been made in recent years to tackle this issue in Ireland, including many innovative initiatives ongoing and the dedication and commitment of so many staff, students, advisors and other stakeholders that have contributed their time and energy to driving this agenda forward.

The conference was well attended by staff and student representatives from higher education institutions and their representative bodies, in addition to representatives from relevant government agencies and departments, and experts and advocates in the field of addressing sexual violence and harassment.

The latest research and several innovative initiatives were presented, and there were two engaging and informative panel discussions. This report aims to capture some of the main discussion points, themes and learnings that emerged on the day.



Opening address

The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, provided the opening address via video link. This can be viewed [here](#) on the HEA website.

Active*Consent performance

Dr Charlotte McIvor introduced an adapted performance of the play, *The Kinds of Sex You Might Have at College*, developed by the [Active*Consent](#) team of the University of Galway. This impressive and powerful performance responds to the issues and the data through art and is the result of a long-term collaboration involving academic staff from Drama and Theatre Studies and Psychology.





HEA National Surveys of Staff and Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEIs

Dr Pádraig MacNeela, lead of the Active*Consent programme at the University of Galway and member of the HEA Advisory Group on Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment (ESVH) in HEIs, presented and discussed the key findings that emerged from the national surveys, in addition to introducing the actions in the ESVH Implementation Plan that was developed

to address the recommendations in the survey reports. Dr MacNeela's presentation can be viewed [here](#).

The findings presented encompassed student and staff attitudes, levels of trust in institutions, knowledge of supports and reporting mechanisms, involvement in relevant programmes and experiences of sexual violence and harassment since starting at their institutions.

The positive attitudes and intentions of the majority of respondents.

A high willingness among staff to engage in training.

The low levels of awareness on how to make a report or how to get help.

Alarmingly high levels of sexual violence reported by students.

SOME OF THE FINDINGS HIGHLIGHTED INCLUDED:

Low levels of confidence among staff to appropriately respond to a disclosure.

Higher rates of harassment and violence reported by females, gender and sexual minorities, younger staff, and students with a disability.

A relatively high proportion of 'no', 'neutral' and 'don't know' responses to questions related to knowledge of supports and procedures, indicating the need for awareness-raising.

The high correlation between sexual violence occurring when students were incapacitated, and the importance of addressing this, while taking care not to victim blame.

Dr MacNeela noted the potential provided by the data to monitor progress over time against critical indicators. He highlighted that quite simple actions that can be taken to make significant progress in certain areas, such as improved awareness of services and procedures. He also explained the need to drill down and unpack the data further so that we gain a deeper understanding, the need for more consistency in response across the sector, and the key priority of working together to develop a shared curriculum in this area.

“We need to work together and develop a shared curriculum in this area, this would be a key priority” – Dr MacNeela, University of Galway



“They honestly believe they are doing nothing wrong and that is the biggest problem”

Student survey respondent



“3 of the 4 sexual encounters I had during my time at University were non-consensual. It has totally upended my comfort with intimacy and caused me a lot of hurt and frustration.”

Student survey respondent



“It is in the seemingly maller and internalised misogynistic remarks that is the root issue ... There has to be a way to address the ‘locker room’ talk, promote mutual respect and training for how to shut down misogynistic remarks effectively”

Staff survey respondent



“I was ignored and victim blamed when I attempted to report sexual harassment to my line manager. Culture change is more than ticking a box exercise”

Staff survey respondent





UniSAFE survey on gender-based violence in academia

Dr Fredrik Bondestam, Director of the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research at the University of Gothenburg, provided a virtual input on the recently released UniSAFE survey findings.

UniSAFE is an EU-funded project that aims to produce better knowledge on gender-based violence and sexual harassment (GBV) in research performing organisations (RPOs), and to translate this knowledge into operational tools for higher education, research organisations and policymakers.

The UniSAFE survey, which is the largest conducted so far in the European Research Area on this topic, collected measurable evidence on the prevalence of GBV in academia and research from 46 participating universities in 15 countries in Europe (including TU Dublin and Maynooth University). 62% of survey respondents reported experiencing at least one form of GBV since they started working or studying at their institution.

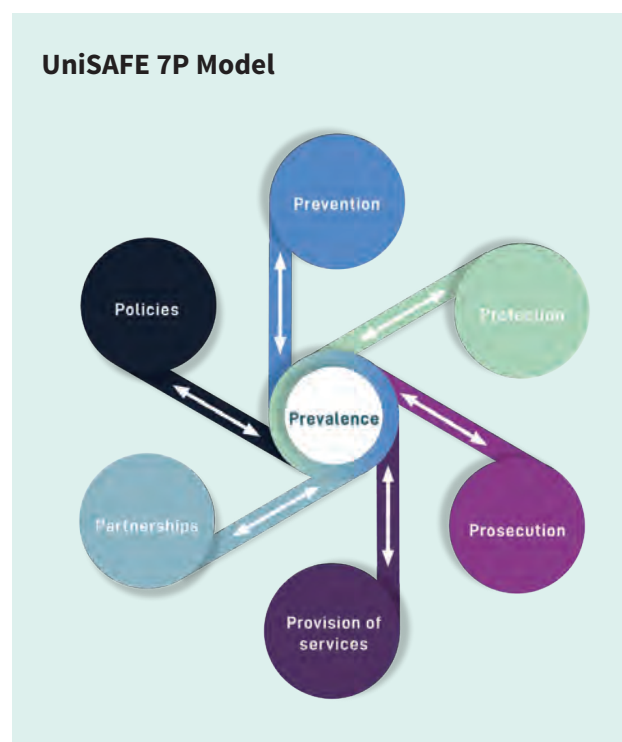
In addition to discussing some of the key survey findings, Dr Bondestam shared key lessons based on his 25 years of experience in this area. They included:

- > the crucial importance of academic leaders as change-makers and the need to resource them to act as problem-solvers
- > the effectiveness of bystander intervention programmes in reducing sexual violence in institutions
- > the need for an active, as opposed to reactive, support structure to be in place that is informed by the experiences of survivors

“We all are impressed by the work you are doing in Ireland, we have so much to learn from what you have done, on the surveys, and also stakeholder engagement”

Dr Fredrik Bondestam

A brief [video](#) was shown that explains the UniSAFE project’s conceptual framework, called the 7P model, referring to policy, prevention, protections, prosecution, prevalence, partnerships, and provision of services.



Panel discussion: Data and Evidence

PANEL CHAIR

PANEL MEMBERS



L-R **Claire McGing**, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Manager, IADT, **Dr. Siobán O’Brien Green**, Equality Officer, Trinity College Dublin, **Marcellina Fogarty**, Strategic Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Manager, University College Dublin, **Dr Clíona Saidléar**, Executive Director, Rape Crisis Network Ireland, **Dr Pádraig MacNeela**, School of Psychology and Active*Consent programme lead, University of Galway

This panel considered several questions related to the importance of data and evidence and how we are and should use the data available to us to strengthen our work to end sexual violence and harassment in higher education, including topics such as the significant progress made in recent years; the many benefits of this data to our work; the fears that exist around this type of sensitive data; the relationship between reporting data and prevalence; current challenges and gaps; how to measure change; the importance of collaboration; and the need for shared definitions, to name but a few.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- The progress that has been made in recent years in terms of the availability of data and evidence was broadly recognised and celebrated. Panellists noted the responsibility that institutions have to respond to the issues evidenced by the data, to use it to support planning and interventions and to provide adequate support to those affected.

- While much rich data is now available on the issues of sexual violence and harassment in higher education in Ireland and in Europe, and many of the benefits of this data were mentioned in the course of the discussions, it was also acknowledged that we require a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences, in particular taking into consideration intersecting inequalities and groups that are considered to be more at-risk or ‘hard-to-reach’. The need for and value of qualitative data was mentioned by several speakers, in addition to the importance of partnerships and collaborations.
- It was also pointed out that it is not necessary to wait for large-scale studies to supply data, but that it is possible to gather data at the local level in simple and cost-effective ways such as integrating questions into staff and student surveys. This can provide institutions with useful data to inform the development of realistic targets and a baseline against which progress can be measured. Many speakers also referenced the need to be more creative and sophisticated in how we measure progress and in determining the indicators that we use to understanding change over time.
- Members of the first panel noted that there is a level of fear related to collating and releasing data related to incidents of SVH. Several speakers reinforced the point that an increase in incidents reported does not equate to higher prevalence and is in fact more likely to reflect enhanced awareness and trust in an institution and improved service provision. Contextualising data and ensuing a nuanced understanding is important to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation.
- The ethical imperative of supporting those that are providing us with this data and the need to minimise re-traumatising victims/survivors was also acknowledged. While data on formal and anonymously reported incidents is generally collated by institutions, it was noted that there is a gap in terms of collating data on informal disclosures.



Moving Parts animations:

Moving Parts is a student led animation project which draws attention to sexual consent, bystander intervention, and image-based sexual abuse from the perspective of third-level students. It is an active collaboration between students and staff at IADT, NUIG Active* Consent, and UCC Bystander Intervention.

Claire McGing, EDI Manager at IADT, introduced the project and three of the animations were shown. It was noted that the animations are available in a range of languages.



Speak Out anonymous reporting tool

- > Speak Out is an online, anonymous reporting tool for staff and students, which was launched in October 2021. Rachel Skelly, Speak Out project coordinator, provided a presentation on the pilot of the tool and the next steps in terms of its strategic development.
- > Ms Skelly highlighted how Speak Out responds directly to the aspirations and outcomes in the national policy framework, and how the tool forms one important element of a holistic and integrated response. She noted the complex and in-depth process of its development, indicating the wide consultation and consideration of intersectionality that informed its design, and noting also that it is survivor-centred and adopts a trauma informed lens.
- > The presentation (which can be viewed [here](#)) highlighted the important functions of Speak Out in addition to reporting, including its role in creating a campus culture in which staff and student feel safe to speak out, and its signposting function. Those who use the tool are provided with tailored information on relevant services, and Ms Skelly noted that recent anecdotal evidence indicates that some students have presented at counselling services as a result of using the Speak Out tool. Further analysis of the data generated has the potential to provide us with an improved understanding of the issue and how different groups are affected.
- > Some examples of good practice from various HEIs across the sector were highlighted, in particular in relation to innovative ways in which institutions are raising awareness among staff and students and ensuring the tool is easily accessible to all, which is crucial.
- > The next steps include publishing the first Speak Out annual report and conducting a review of the tool to incorporate learning and feedback to date to further refine and improve it.





Bystander Intervention programme

“It is about changing the culture across our campuses, not just a new normal, but a deserved normal for all our staff and students”.

Prof Louise Crowley, UCC

Prof Louise Crowley of the School of Law, UCC, gave an inspiring presentation (which can be viewed [here](#)) on the UCC Bystander Intervention programme, which aims to highlight the risk of normalising and accepting abusive behaviour and through education, to inform and empower programme participants to better understand their capacity to intervene as pro-social bystanders.

Prof Crowley emphasised that sexual violence and harassment are societal issues and that effectively addressing them necessitates cultural change. She outlined the ways in which the bystander intervention programme contributes towards the culture change required. She highlighted the danger of normalising these issues and maintained that recognising unacceptable behaviours is an important first step, noting the findings cited by Dr Bondestam earlier, that many do not report such behaviours as they are not deemed serious enough, a finding which was also reflected in the HEA national surveys.

The presentation covered topics such as the importance of equipping individuals with the skills to respond appropriately to disclosures in addition to calling out unacceptable behaviours and intervening in situations; powerful feedback and testimonials from participants; thoughts on whether training should be mandatory for all staff and students; innovative initiatives such as training for rugby clubs; information on the national roll out; and insights from Prof Crowley’s personal experience in addressing this issue in UCC since 2015.

“Institutional reputation is enhanced by engaging with the issue of sexual harassment and violence, potential students and their parents are reassured by a university that accepts the fact of the problem and is proactive in addressing it through educational and supportive endeavours”. **Prof Louise Crowley, UCC**



Panel discussion: Targeted Interventions

PANEL CHAIR

PANEL MEMBERS



L-R **Dr Caroline Kelleher** School of Population Health, Royal College of Surgeons Ireland, **Sam Blanckensee** Equality Officer, Maynooth University, **Dr Carol Wrenn** Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Technological University of the Shannon, **Michelle Caulfield** Education and Training Manager, Galway Rape Crisis Centre, **Aoife Grimes** ESHTe (Ending Sexual Harassment in Third Level Education) Project Co-Ordinator, National Women's Council of Ireland

This panel focused on the broad theme of targeted interventions, in particular education, training and awareness-raising initiatives in higher education institutions. Drawing on their diverse experience and expertise, the panel shared a wealth of learning and insights on topics such as successful interventions; how to reach high risk and 'hard-to-reach' groups; how to bring people on board with this agenda; whether or not relevant training should be compulsory; and the importance of listening to survivors and qualitative evidence, among others.



DISCUSSION POINTS:

- > Listening to survivors, collaboration and working in partnership with external and specialist organisations were noted as elements of the most successful interventions. The importance of early intervention and preventative measures were also highlighted by several speakers. Additional points included the importance of including everyone in this conversation, not just those considered to be more vulnerable, and to also consider specifically targeting where perpetration of abuse is most likely to occur.
- > The broad theme of intersecting inequalities and the need for a better understanding of and provision of targeted support for more vulnerable and at-risk groups was a common thread throughout the conference, and it was unpacked further during this discussion on targeted initiatives. It was questioned whether our current interventions are adequately reaching those most at risk and noted that groups that are small in number may get lost in large data surveys.
- > In considering risk to sexual violence and harassment, an individual's function in an institution needs to be taken into consideration. It was highlighted by a number of speakers that early career researchers, including doctoral research students, are a particularly vulnerable group. It was also emphasised that it is important to consider those who may not receive surveys or information by the usual channels, such as security and housekeeping staff or visiting researchers, who may have specific risk factors or an important role to play in protecting and supporting individuals.
- > The question of whether relevant training, such as consent, bystander intervention and first responder training, should be mandatory for all staff and students was considered and unpacked. Several speakers expressed support for mandatory training, noting that feedback from students and staff training participants reflects support for this also. However, concerns were raised regarding the incompatibility of compulsory training and a trauma-informed response, and the importance of ensuring training is backed up by adequate policies, resources and services to support those affected. It was highlighted that making training mandatory may risk a dilution in the quality and effectiveness of the training offered.
- > It was questioned whether it is necessary to state whether training is mandatory or not, as this would not be the case for other training that staff or students may undertake as standard practice. It was proposed that the ideal scenario would be one in which the provision of training related to addressing sexual violence and harassment becomes part of the fabric of higher education institutions, a standard offering that reflects institutional priorities and values. It was also suggested that training could be made mandatory for particular roles, such as student support roles for example.
- > This led to an interesting discussion on what the minimum number to effect meaningful change may be, the importance of reaching a critical mass to achieve behavioural and cultural change, and the potential of just one or two courageous individuals to speak out against harmful norms.

Next steps

The HEA will continue to support and implement the actions in the ESVH Implementation Plan along with other stakeholders.

In the short-term, actions include further analysis of the national survey findings by demographic; the completion of a feasibility study into the formation of an external panel to investigate formal reports of sexual violence and harassment in HEIs; further research to understand a victim's/survivor's journey; and pilot initiatives specifically targeting high risk and hard-to-reach groups.

In addition, the national policy framework will be reviewed and updated to take account of new knowledge and learning acquired since its publication in 2019.

