



Union of Students in Ireland

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

A written submission to the Committee on Justice and Equality on the issues of online harassment, harmful communications and related offences

About USI

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 374,000 students in over thirty member colleges across Ireland, North and South. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

Introduction

USI welcome this opportunity to write a submission on this topic. We are happy to see the committee examining the nature and extent of the problems online, as this has become an emerging issue in recent years, and we believe action is necessary to tackle instances of bullying and harassment online, as well as the many forms they can take .

For this submission, we will be drawing on the USI Cyber bullying policy 2017-2020, which was passed at our National Congress in 2017 and can be found [here](#).

Students and young people are a disproportionately affected group when it comes to online harassment . According to the USI National report on student mental health in third level education, the vast majority students (99.3%) had at least one social media account. Students found that social media had both positive and negative effects on their mental health and results show a normal distribution for both (USI National Report on Student Mental Health in Third Level Education, 2019). The full published report can be found [here](#).

USI work very closely with external organisations such as the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) and the Rape Crisis Centre (RCC) on initiatives to tackle gender based violence and harassment in third level education, inclusive of online harassment. USI proudly supported and were key stakeholders in the IT STOPS NOW project.

Recommendations to the committee

Specific legislation needed on revenge porn and cyber bullying

With the lack of specific legislation around revenge porn and online harassment, it is important to seek effective legislation to deal with issues that arise from online issues such as harassment, cyber bullying and revenge porn.

As it stands it currently falls under the heading of harassment, which is legislated for in Section 10 of the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act (1997).

Section 10 states:

(1) Any person who, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, by any means including by use of the telephone, harasses another by persistently following, watching, pestering, besetting or communicating with him or her, shall be guilty of an offence.

Education and training

USI believe there should be substantial training and education delivered at a young age all but not limited to, children, parents, guardians and the wider society on how to use social media safely and the responsibility that comes with it.

Information should be sent out to primary, secondary schools and third level colleges about social media and the internet that educates students to think before they type, or share illicit content without consent and to intervene if they see a peer being victimised on the internet.

Local policy or framework

There should be policy in every HEI *on online harassment, harmful communications and related offences among students and staff*. This policy should be passed at all governing authorities in every HEI

Minority groups

Minority groups such as the LGBT+ community, those with disabilities, from ethnic minority backgrounds etc. can be specific targets for online harassment and bullying. Without the existence of hate crime legislation in this country, these targeted acts based off discrimination cannot be treated as such. It would be our recommendation that the Government move to enact such legislation in a timely manner, to fall in line with our European counterparts.

Concluding recommendations

1. Specific legislation needed on revenge porn and cyber bullying

2. Education and training
3. Local policy or framework
4. Hate crime legislation

Closing remarks

USI would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to submit a written recommendations on this important issue that affects many of our student members.

If you have any questions about this submission you can contact the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship, Megan Reilly (equality@usi.ie / - 0864149758) or Roisin O'Donovan, Vice President for Welfare(welfare@usi.ie / 087 2809 703)