

**ACTIVE\***  
**CONSENT**



Union of Students in Ireland  
*Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn*

# ***SEXUAL EXPERIENCES SURVEY 2020***

*SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT EXPERIENCES IN A NATIONAL  
SURVEY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.*

## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***



NUI Galway  
OÉ Gaillimh

## ***Executive Summary***

*Between February-April 2020, 6,026 students across Ireland completed the online Sexual Experiences Survey (66% female, 33% male, 1% non-binary students). The SES is a campus climate survey designed to assess experiences of sexual violence and harassment alongside awareness of college services and supports.*

## Why We Did the Survey

Active\* Consent and the Union of Students in Ireland collaborated to meet the need for baseline information on college students' sexual health and their support needs. We wanted to document their experiences and devise recommendations for college action plans.

## How We Carried Out the Survey

The ARC3 survey, a U.S. campus climate survey tool, was adapted for third level students in Ireland after consultation with students, Galway Rape Crisis Centre, Students' Unions and USI officers.

The survey asked about whether students had experienced specific behaviours since starting college – non-consensual sexual touching, oral, vaginal, or anal penetration – and exposure to specific perpetrator tactics – coercion, incapacitation, and force (or threat of force). Questions were asked on four forms of sexual harassment – with a sexist or sexual basis, attempts to form unwanted relationships, and harassment via electronic communication.

All USI affiliated higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland were asked to support the survey by emailing SES invitations to all students on our behalf.

Following disruption to the survey process by the Covid-19 pandemic, 14 HEIs sent out invitations to students (10 Institutes of Technology, four universities). Some students on other campuses took part after hearing about the survey through their Students' Unions.

4.3% of the students in the 14 HEIs completed the survey – 52% were university students and 48% were students at an Institute of Technology or Institute of Further Education and Training. The sample consisted of 6,026 students aged 18+.

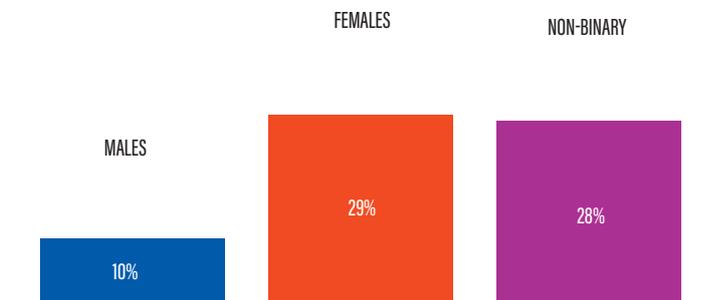
## What We Found

### Student Experiences of Sexual Misconduct

44% of all students reported experiencing non-consensual behavior – sexual touching, attempted or completed oral, vaginal, or anal penetration (52% of females, 49% of non-binary students, 27% of males). The table below shows the percentage of all students who described experiences that approximate the definition of rape (completed non-consensual penetration while incapacitated or through force or the threat of force).

**Figure 1.** Experience of Non-consensual Penetration Through Force, Threat of Force or While Incapacitated

**Figure 1.**



Considered by year of study, 23% of Year 1 undergraduates said they had experienced completed non-consensual penetration, rising to 33% of students in Year 3 or higher. 22% of Postgraduate Research students and

16% of Postgraduate Taught students had this experience. Looking at sexual orientation, bisexual students (30%) experienced the highest rate of non-consensual completed penetration.

Experience of sexual misconduct (by any perpetrator tactic)		%
Unwanted sexual touching, completed or attempted penetration		43.6
Completed or attempted oral, vaginal, or anal penetration		36.3
Completed oral, vaginal, or anal penetration		27.7
Experience of sexual misconduct, through incapacitation or force (or threat of force)		
Unwanted sexual touching, penetration, or attempted penetration		38.7
Completed or attempted oral, vaginal, or anal penetration		29.3
Completed oral, vaginal, or anal penetration		22.8
Exposure to each perpetrator tactic		
Acts of coercion		32.4
Incapacitation		33.5
Force or threat of force		19.5

**Table 1.** Percentage of all students who described the following experiences since starting college: (a) Any sexual misconduct, (b) Sexual misconduct through incapacitation or force, and (c) Exposure to different perpetrator tactics.

The most common perpetrator tactics experienced were assault while incapable of giving consent (e.g., through alcohol) and the use of coercion tactics such as verbal pressure or criticism. 41% of females experienced some form of assault while incapacitated, 39% through acts of coercion, and 25% through force or the threat of force.

## Follow Up Questions

Students who experienced sexual misconduct were asked follow up questions on the incident that most affected them and their own reactions later. The report focuses on answers to follow up questions from students who experienced non-consensual penetration.

29% of students said the perpetrator was a student at their college (11% did not know). Approximately 8% said the assault had taken place on campus. Nearly all (98%) female students and three quarters of non-binary students said the perpetrator was a man, compared with 31% of male students.

One quarter of students said the perpetrator was a stranger – for most students it was an acquaintance or friend, a romantic or former romantic partner. Gay / lesbian students were more likely than others to have been assaulted by a stranger or acquaintance. Asexual students were most likely to say they had been assaulted by a romantic partner.

Two thirds of the students said the perpetrator was using alcohol and / or drugs just prior to the incident. Three quarters had been

using alcohol and / or drugs themselves. Heterosexual and queer / other students were most likely to say the perpetrator was using alcohol and / or drugs, with heterosexual students describing particularly high rates of perpetrator alcohol use.

Prior to the SES, one half of the male participants, one third of the females, and one quarter of the non-binary students had not disclosed to anyone the incident that they described in the survey. The most common reasons for non-disclosure were the belief that it was not serious enough, that they handled it themselves, did not want anyone to know, or felt shame and embarrassment. 41% of Year 1 students said they had not disclosed the incident to anyone prior to the survey.

For students who had talked about it before, the most common choices for disclosure were by far their close friends, partners, or other peers. Relatively small numbers of students said they had disclosed to a professional, particularly among Year 1 students. Less than 5% had disclosed to the Garda Síochána.

## Student Experiences of Sexual Harassment

Students responded to 12 items that described different forms of harassment experiences. We grouped them into four categories – sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual relationships, and harassment using electronic communication.

**Table II.** Percentage of all students describing at least one experience of each type of sexual harassment since beginning college.

Experience of different forms of sexual harassment	%
Sexist hostility	67.2
Sexual hostility	57.9
Unwanted sexual relationship	37.3
Electronic communication	29.9

Students in Year 3 or higher of undergraduate study were most likely to say they had experienced harassment during their time in college – 75% had at least one experience of sexist hostility (62% of Year 1 students), 66% had experienced sexual hostility (51% of Year 1 students). Of the different forms of sexual orientation, bisexual and queer students were more likely to say they had experienced sexist and sexual hostility.

The survey recorded the frequency of specific harassment behaviour experiences. For example, 46% of females had experienced offensive remarks about their appearance, body, or sexual activities ‘once or twice’ or ‘sometimes’. 11% had this experience ‘often’ or ‘many times’.

Compared with males, harassment was more commonly experienced by females, but one half of male students described experiencing sexual hostility. Non-binary students had the highest rate of all of experiencing harassment – over three quarters had experienced sexual hostility, over 80% described sexist hostility.

### Follow Up Questions

Students who described harassment responded to follow up questions on one situation that had the greatest effect. Nearly all (97%) of female students who responded to these questions said the perpetrator was a man, alongside 82% of non-binary students, and 41% of males.

Compared with the incidents of sexual violence described in follow up questions, it was more likely that the harassment incident took place on the college campus. Non-binary students were the most likely to say it happened on campus (42%), along with 29% of females and 24% of males. Nearly half the students said the harassment perpetrator was a student at their college (17% did not know).

Less than 5% had reported the incident officially. Among males, the most common personal response to deal with the harassment was to treat the incident as a joke (35%). Females’ most common response was to tell the person to stop (46%).

### Perceptions of Campus Climate, HEI Responses and Peers

The SES questions asked how well prepared and empowered the students currently felt accessing college-based and community supports. Given the sexual violence and harassment experiences that they described, it was critical to understand the students’ knowledge of relevant supports and services available in their colleges.

Students responded to questions about institutional trustworthiness, peer support for students affected by sexual violence, and experiences of preventative programmes offered by their colleges.

“I have definitely been in situations where the guy probably thought it was consensual, but it 100% wasn’t.”

	%
<b>Students who said it was 'likely' or 'very likely' that their college would...</b>	
Maintain the privacy of the person making the report	85.6
Take the report seriously	78.0
Support the person making the report	76.7
Handle the report fairly	71.6
Take action to address factors that may have led to the sexual misconduct	63.6
Make accommodations to support the person (e.g., academic, safety)	63.0
<b>Received written or verbal information regarding sexual misconduct</b>	
The definitions of types of sexual misconduct	20.0
How to report an incident of sexual misconduct	10.6
Where to go to get help if someone you know experiences sexual misconduct	15.8
<b>Agreed / strongly agreed that they have knowledge of college support services</b>	
If a friend or I experienced sexual misconduct, I know where to go to get help on campus	35.3
I would know where to go to make a report of sexual misconduct	15.8
I understand what happens when a student reports a claim of sexual misconduct at my college	27.5
<b>Friends or peers would frequently / always respond in the following ways to a disclosure of sexual misconduct.</b>	
Reassure you that you are a good person	73.5
Comfort you by telling you it would be all right or by holding you	62.9
Help you get information of any kind about coping with the experience	51.3

**Table III.** Percentage of students who reported (a) High levels of institutional trust, (b) Exposure to written or verbal information on sexual misconduct since beginning college, (c) Knowledge of college support services, and (d) Perceptions of friends' or peers' support if they were to disclose experience of sexual misconduct,

Over 70% of students said they thought that the college would respond to a report of sexual misconduct fairly and respectfully. More than 60% of students said that accommodations would be made to support the student involved or that action would be taken on the underlying issues. Positive views on these issues were not shared as frequently by students who were affected by sexual misconduct – typically their responses on institutional trust questions were 10% lower than students who had not experienced sexual misconduct.

20% or less of all students had received verbal or written information on definitions of sexual misconduct, where to report an incident, or how responses are dealt with. 35% or less of all students said they knew where to seek support or make a report. There was greater awareness of College Counselling Services, Student Services, Health Unit, and Students' Union Welfare Officer could play – over 40% of students said they were aware these services played a role in responses to sexual misconduct.

Turning to perceptions of peer support, a large majority of students thought their friends or peers would be supportive of them if they were to disclose that they had experienced sexual misconduct. However students affected directly by sexual misconduct were again less positive on this issue than students who were not affected.

The SES Report provides an insight for the first time on the development and implementation of preventative programming intended to inform and support students on issues concerning consent and sexual misconduct.

College orientation talks on sexual misconduct and consent workshops appear to be establishing increased presence on campuses. One quarter of Year 1 students in the survey said they had taken part in a consent workshop, attended a consent drama, or attended a bystander intervention event. More than half of the students who responded to the survey had engaged with posters or publications related to sexual misconduct, discussed the matter with friends, or attended a Students' Union campaign event.

**Table IV.** Percentage of all students who reported experiencing preventative programming since beginning college.

	Engagement with Preventative Programme
Posters and publications	65.8
Discussed with friends	52.9
Students' Union campaign	39.1
College orientation / induction	24.0
Consent / bystander workshops, drama and events	19.5
Visited college website	4.9
<b>No engagement with any initiative</b>	<b>17.7</b>

The SES survey responses provide evidence for the first time that such initiatives and events have an impact informing students about sexual misconduct. For example, 48% of students who attended a consent workshop or related activity said they knew where to go to get help on campus in the case of sexual misconduct, compared with 20% of students who did not attend any event or initiative.

Socialising at night was the key area where students felt vulnerable about their safety. Four out of ten students said they felt safe socialising at night. Only one quarter of females felt safe while socialising – and only 13% of females who had experienced sexual misconduct felt safe in this situation.

**“I believe that many students don’t even think or want to believe that they were in fact sexually assaulted.”**

While it is complex to attribute causality, there was an association between students’ experiences of sexual misconduct and their personal well-being:

- 37% of students who had experienced non-consensual attempted or completed penetration said they had above average or excellent health, compared with 48% of other students.
- 35% of these students reported feeling depressed more than half the days or nearly every day over the previous week, compared with 22% of other students.
- 47% of students who had experienced non-consensual attempted or completed penetration said they felt anxious over half the days or nearly every day in the previous two weeks, compared with 33% of other students who completed the survey.

Both male and female students who had experienced sexual misconduct during Year 1 of college reported high levels of non-attendance of class. These students were also less likely to report they had no intention of leaving college.

## Recommendations

There is a need to respond proactively and constructively to the challenge of sexual violence and harassment. The key recommendations of the SES Report are made to support the continuation of cultural change in HEIs that has begun over recent years, and given recent impetus by the Department of Education and Skills (2019)

Consent Framework. The core proposal is that all HEIs should devise an institutional action plan and work together where appropriate on issues of shared interest. While the college is the focal point for implementation efforts, all parts of the third level sector have a role to achieve success nationally.

**Recommendation 1:**

- To implement the Consent Framework guidelines as they apply to all stakeholders, including the Department of Education and Skills, the HEA, HEIs, staff, students, and community partners. At the level of individual HEIs this will entail having an agreed institutional action plan, meaning that:
  - All students have the opportunity to engage in sexual violence and harassment prevention and support programming, as a mainstreamed part of their college experience;
  - All staff have a basic understanding of the issues involved and the supports that can be signposted; and that some staff and student leaders are trained to provide additional support.
  - Senior management should highlight consent as integral to the quality of the college experience, supporting resource allocation for dedicated campus coordinators to support the actions envisaged in the Consent Framework.
  - Given the current context in relation to funding and Covid-19, there is a greater requirement on the Department of Education and Skills to take the lead in ensuring that resources are available.

**Recommendation 2:**

- For individual HEIs to engage with the survey findings as part of their action plan, in a manner that helps identify which responsive strategies can be prioritised in a particular institution.

**Recommendation 3:**

- While related, sexual violence and harassment require specific responses. The HEI action plan should take account of sexual violence and harassment separately where appropriate, for instance in relation to the greater likelihood for harassment to take place on campus and for it to be perpetrated by students from the same institution.

**Recommendation 4:**

- For each HEI to recognise in their planning that, as organisations with permeable boundaries and reciprocal interaction with surrounding communities, they have a duty of care over students while they are enrolled at college, and therefore engage with their local community stakeholders, including Rape Crisis Centres.

**Recommendation 5:**

- There should be involvement of students and Students' Unions in designing action plans at each HEI; this is in recognition of the need for an inclusive approach that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and issues identified in the SES Report.

**Recommendation 6:**

- HEI action plans should be sensitive to inclusion of different parts of the student community. Messaging and initiatives should be developed to be inclusive of females, males, non-binary students, and all sexual orientations. All members of the college community should be regarded as integral to the success of efforts at change. There should be a positive tone to prevention and engagement, given the multiple associations that exist with sexual health – from the pursuit of a rewarding, enriching sexual identity to the avoidance of harm.

**Recommendation 7:**

- Recognition in action plans that risk of exposure to sexual violence and harassment extends across all groups of students in HEIs, but that vulnerable groups and high risk issues should be given particular attention. For example, the experience of Year 1 students should be addressed, as should the issue of sexual violence being perpetrated in the context of alcohol / drug use.

**Recommendation 8:**

- For the sector to establish a recognised process for measurement and ongoing monitoring. Agreeing recognised indicators for sexual violence and harassment is critical, as is the need to have agreed indicators of engagement with programming and education. Measurement should take account of the emerging systems of anonymous reporting, revised complaints processes, staff training, survey and qualitative methodologies.

**Recommendation 9:**

- A sectoral commitment to continuation of the campus climate survey methodology to assess progress over time.

**Recommendation 10:**

- The SES findings on preventative initiatives show considerable variation in practice across HEIs, yet suggest that engagement with initiatives is growing and appears to have a demonstrable positive impact. HEIs should not act alone in engaging with the Consent Framework; there should be sharing of best practice between HEIs to ensure the cultivation of well developed, mutually supportive community of practice in this area.