

COSHARE

CONSENT,
SEXUAL VIOLENCE,
HARASSMENT AND
EQUALITY
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHÉ
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We embarked on our COSHARE journey during 2022, when issues of sexual violence and harassment had come to the fore not only for Higher Education, but for society as a whole.

Our goal was to tackle a shared problem with shared solutions, but this process can be difficult, fraught and fragmented without clear direction and partnership working to support a coordinated response.

We would firstly like to thank and acknowledge the Higher Education Authority for funding this work under the North-South Research Programme, which gave us the opportunity to work together on a significant issue for Higher Education across the Island of Ireland. We are also grateful to our own Higher Education Institutions, the University of Galway and Ulster University for their support and encouragement to progress with this important work. We are also grateful to our wider Higher Education colleagues who supported and facilitated dissemination and awareness raising of this research, ensuring that those who wished to contribute, had their say.

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This research was fostered under values of integrity and collaboration which can promote networks of excellence and partnerships of scale for research, innovation and development. We are sincerely grateful to our 'critical friends' and champions, Dr Anna Bull, University of York and Professor Bill Flack, Bucknell University, for their expert guidance, knowledge and feedback throughout this project.

Lastly, we would like to express our deepest appreciation for all of the Higher Education staff members North and South who took the time to engage with this research and share with us their insights and experiences. We hope this work and your invaluable contribution will support the continued efforts and culture shift towards a safe and supportive higher education system for all.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COSHARE project funded by the HEA North South Research Programme has consisted of two actions on Higher Education carried out between 2022 and 2024:

- Establishing an all-island North South HEI staff campus climate survey of consent, sexual violence and harassment.
- Creating a network of academics, researchers, practitioners, student advocates, professional support staff, policy makers, and NGOs for information sharing, training, and consultation.

This report describes the findings of COSHARE survey, conducted between October 2023 and February 2024. The goal of the survey was to describe staff experiences, knowledge, engagement, and perceptions in Higher Education institutions North and South. Sub-group analysis of responses by staff role, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability status are beyond the scope of the overview of survey findings presented in the report. Where distinctions are highlighted in the findings section, descriptive comparisons are made of staff working in NI and ROI Higher Education institutions.

Key Information About Survey Responses:

- A total of 521 staff members in Higher Education responded to the COSHARE campus climate survey of consent, sexual violence and harassment.
- 236 (45%) worked in an HEI in Northern Ireland (NI) while 285 (55%) worked in a HEI in the Republic of Ireland (ROI).
- Between 332 and 364 survey participants chose to provide responses on questions concerning sexual violence and harassment. One fifth of the participants left open-ended comments on the survey that were developed into a socio-ecological qualitative analysis.

Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents:

- Most of the survey respondents identified as women (75%), reflecting a profile often found in self-selected samples of surveys of consent, sexual violence and harassment.
- Most participants were heterosexual (81%), held a permanent or indefinite contract (71%), and were White in ethnicity (96%).
- 34% were aged 40 or younger, 31% were 41-50 years old, and 37% were aged 51 years or older.
- Almost half (49%) worked in an academic or research role, while 40% were in an administrative or student services role.
- There was a spread of participants working across faculty or HE subject areas, with the highest percentage in Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (22%) and Life & Health Sciences (13%)
- Participants had worked in HE for a varied length of time, with 39% working in the sector for less than five years.

Campus Culture and Climate: Perceptions, Attitudes, Knowledge

The COSHARE campus climate survey methodology provides useful findings on sexual violence and harassment experienced by staff members, and the whole-of-institution context of prevention, reports and investigations, and supports for victim-survivors. The survey findings highlight existing strengths and resources as described by staff, potential areas for enhanced institutional responses and staff engagement, and priorities for campus culture change.

Only 34% of survey respondents agreed that SVH among students was a problem at their HEI, while just 14% agreed that SVH among staff was a problem at their HEI. Many staff (40-51%) had a neutral opinion on these issues or said that they did not know whether SVH was a problem.

Three main perspectives on institutional responses to SVH were highlighted in the qualitative responses made by staff:

- Some staff said that significant progress had been made in the HE sector, citing examples of policies, training, and student engagement
- Others saw progress as more mixed and having happened in the context of a low baseline in the past, when SVH was relatively acceptable.
- The final group of responses indicated that things had not changed – powerful men were still protected by the institution, neither students nor staff had access to meaningful redress for SVH, and concerns were voiced about the career impact of bringing a complaint. These participants also wrote about the continuing nature of casual, everyday sexist harassment, which extended to LGBT+ staff members.

Policy on Consent, Sexual Violence and Harassment

Fewer than half (46%) of the participants agreed their HEI proactively addressed issues of SVH, while one third (36%) saw their HEI senior management as visible on this issue. A clear majority of survey participants agreed that they were aware of staff policies, but agreement rates dropped when staff considered whether policies and procedures were clear and effective:

- 76% of staff members agreed that they were aware of staff-related policies on SVH
- 60% that staff policies and procedures were clear and explicit
- 35% that staff policies and procedures were effective

Compared with staff policies, there was lower awareness of student policies and agreement that student policies and procedures were clear or effective:

- 67% of staff members agreed that they were aware of student-related policies on SVH
- 55% that students policies and procedures were clear and explicit
- 31% that students policies and procedures were effective

The qualitative comments contained critical commentary on issues such as a policy-practice gap, the selective implementation of policies on SVH, and expressed dissatisfaction at lack of clarity on the consequences or outcomes of the complaints and investigation process at their HEI.

Reporting of SVH

Less than half of the survey participants agreed that they were equipped to engage with the SVH reporting process:

- 48% agreed that they would know how to report SVH to their HEI
- 46% that they would know how to report it if someone they knew was subjected to SVH
- 42% that they would know what supports are available to them at their HEI if they reported a case of SVH

Levels of agreement were lower again when considering whether the system for reporting SVH was easy to use or that clear lines of institutional responsibility were in place:

- 37% agreed that there were clear lines of responsibility for dealing with reporting of SVH
- 33% that there was an easy-to-use system for staff to report student SVH
- 29% that their HEI had an easy-to-use system for staff to report incidents of staff SVH

When appraising the institution's response to reports of SVH, a large majority (70%) thought it likely that counselling supports would be provided. Fewer participants (from 48-60%) agreed that it was likely that their HEI would make other active responses:

- 60% indicated it was likely that their HEI would create an environment where this type of experience was recognised as a problem
- 57% that the HEI would actively support the person agreed and accommodate their needs
- 56% agreed that the HEI would create an environment where this type of experience was safe to discuss
- 48% that the person would be allowed to play an active role in how their report was handled

Participants also rated the likelihood that their HEI would respond negatively to a SVH report. Between one quarter and a third considered it likely that the HEI would respond in this way:

- 34% indicated it was likely that their HEI would suggest that the person's experience(s) might affect the reputation of the institution
- 25% that the HEI would actively create an environment where staying at the HEI was difficult for the person
- 23% that the HEI would create an environment where the person no longer felt like a valued member of the institution

Findings on negative responses by HEIs to those who make a report of SVH were extended by qualitative responses from some participants. These descriptions described how institutions put up resistance to those who report, block fair processes, and discredit complaints.

Turning to perceptions of how fellow staff members would react to a complaint of SVH being made, some qualitative responses suggested concerns over retaliation and being unsupported when making a complaint. This was reflected in the quantitative survey responses. Between 13% and 22% of participants agreed that negative responses would be made to someone who made a complaint of SVH:

- 22% agreed that it would be hard for other staff to support the person who made the report
- 20% that the person making the report would be subjected to retaliation, retribution or negative responses from the alleged offender(s)
- 13% that other staff would see the person making the report as a troublemaker

Experiences of Awareness Raising, Education and Training

Participant comments on awareness raising, education and training were an exception to the negative or critical tone of most other contributions to the open-ended section of the survey.

Comments requested more education and training to occur, with the aim of reaching all students and staff, with reference made to consent, bystander intervention, disclosure skills, awareness of policies and procedures for reporting and the complaints process.

A minority of staff (30-40%) said that they had received information from their HEI relevant to consent, sexual violence and harassment, on topics including:

- Definitions of the types of SVH, the student or staff code of conduct on consent / SVH, how to help prevent SVH, how to report an incident or staff or student SVH, or where to go to get help if they or someone they knew experienced SVH

A comparable percentage (32-49%) of staff had engaged with information and training themselves or encountered it during institutional training, in areas including:

- Discussing consent / SVH in staff training, with colleagues, attending a bystander intervention event, seeing or hearing campus administrators address SVH, or visiting their HEI website for information about consent / SVH

The rate of engagement was notably higher for seeing posters on consent / SVH (78%), and lower for reading reports on SVH rates at their institution (22%)

Staff Capacity and Future Engagement

Two thirds (65%) of respondents agreed that they felt a responsibility to engage with SVH at their HEI. Although they had reported having limited exposure to training, most participants (61-67%) nevertheless agreed that they were currently able to assist students and fellow staff by intervening as bystanders or in responding to disclosures of SVH.

The vast majority (81-84%) of the participants indicated a willingness to take part in training on bystander intervention, disclosure skills, and consent. Similarly, 80% agreed that they would support staff or student initiatives on consent / SVH, while 65% agreed that they would take an active role in delivering such training.

The qualitative responses raised a further point in describing training and preparation within the institution. Unit and departmental leaders were identified in these comments as having typically received limited education or training on SVH. Further critical comments were made about the availability of specialist, trained staff in HR who had the preparation to manage a trauma-informed complaints and investigation process.

'Neutral' and 'I Don't Know' Responses

Staff members used the 'neutral' or 'I don't know' options on survey questions to indicate where they lacked information or a strong opinion. The choice of these options reflected the uncertainty of staff members on a number of topics related to policy and awareness in particular. These patterns highlight the need for HEIs to reduce this uncertainty.

For example, 58% of staff selected the neutral or 'don't know' options in response to whether student policies on SVH were effective, 48% selected these options as to whether their HEI had an easy-to-use system for reporting staff SVH, and 21% were neutral or did not know about the process for reporting SVH. Neutral and 'don't know' responses indicate that information on policies has not been implemented consistently or connections made to tangible institutional commitment such as training, outreach, and awareness raising.

COSHARE Findings: Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

While it should be noted that there were no differences between participants North and South on indicators such as awareness of policies, a number of statistically significant differences between ROI and NI participants were identified on other indicators of campus culture and climate. These were largely related to survey questions concerning training and engagement, and may well reflect the impact of strategic developments in the Republic of Ireland over the past five years (Department of Education, 2019; Higher Education Authority, 2022). For example:

- 44% in ROI saw SVH among students as a problem at their HEI (22% in NI)
- 49% of ROI participants agreed that they would know what supports were available to them if they reported a case of SVH (33% of NI participants)
- 52% in ROI agreed that there was availability of training on responding to SVH involving students (33% in NI)
- 75% of ROI participants would be willing to take an active role delivering consent, bystander intervention, or disclosure initiatives (53% of NI participants)
- More ROI than NI staff had received written or verbal information on SVH-related issues (e.g., definitions of SVH, how to report an incident of student SVH, how to help prevent SVH), and more ROI staff had actively engaged with information or training (e.g., discussed consent or SVH in staff training, visited the HEI website for information)

Personal Safety

The most positive findings on personal safety in HEI-related environments were that 90% of respondents felt safe when alone in work buildings during normal hours and 86% felt safe when using online platforms linked to their HEI. Ratings of personal safety were less positive in relation to working out of normal hours (61%), being alone outside in a campus setting such as a car park (61%), or when travelling for work (61%).

Qualitative comments left by staff members highlighted the experience of staff members who did not feel safe in their HE workplace or in the surrounding community. Women in particular remarked on feeling exposed to risk, particularly in an academic conference environment.

Sexual Violence and Harassment

Survey respondents were presented with survey items that described several sexual violence and harassment (SVH) experiences. The questions were not restricted to the Higher Education environment where they worked, and asked about the person's experiences in both professional and personal lives.

A total of 364 participants opted to answer questions in this section of the survey. The reference period was whether the experience occurred in the past 12 months, the past five years, or more than five years ago. Two thirds of the participants who responded to SVH questions on the survey had experienced SVH in the past five years, in their professional or personal lives, or in both domains.

Sexual Harassment

Almost two thirds of participants (64%) had experienced sexual harassment in the past five years. This included 57% who had experienced sexist hostility, 23% with an experience of electronic or visual sexual harassment, 34% who experienced sexualised comments, 31% who had experienced unwanted sexual attention, and 5% with an experience of sexual coercion. For example:

- 32% had experienced offensive sexist remarks
- 29% had been exposed to repeated sexual stories or jokes
- 11% had been exposed to offensive sexist or suggestive materials (e.g., pornography)
- 24% experienced sexualised comments referencing their gender identity
- 19% had been exposed to unwelcome attempts to draw them into a discussion of sexual matters
- 26% had been stared or leered at
- 15% had unwanted attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship with them

The innovative approach of asking participants to indicate whether these incidents occurred in their personal or professional lives, or in both domains, enabled a clearer understanding of the overlap and distinctions between these settings. A striking finding was that, for most participants who were affected, harassment was experienced in both personal and professional contexts.

Some participants provided follow up information on the most distressing incident of SH that they had experienced:

- Nearly three quarters of these respondents said the offender was a man
- The most common emotional reactions to the most distressing experience were annoyance, anger, shock, disgust, sadness, fear, and shame
- Nearly three quarters had disclosed what had happened to at least one other person, most frequently another staff member, friend, partner, or family member
- Participants who had not disclosed the incident indicated that this was because they believed it was not serious enough to report, wanting to put it behind them, they had handled it themselves, discomfort talking about it, or worry about potential career impact
- Just five per cent had contacted the staff wellbeing service at their institution for support

Sexual Violence

One quarter of participants (26%) experienced some form of sexual violence in the past five years, in their personal or professional lives:

- Almost a quarter of staff participants had been touched in a way that made them feel uncomfortable
- 16% indicated unwanted attempts of stroking or kissing
- 10% had been made to touch, stroke or kiss someone when they did not want to do so
- 6% had someone try to have sex with them
- 5% experienced someone trying to make them receive oral, anal or vaginal sex
- 5% had oral, anal or vaginal sex without their consent
- 4% indicated that someone made them have oral, anal or vaginal sex

For just over half of respondents who experienced sexual violence, these experiences took place solely in their personal lives. For the others, these incidents occurred in their professional lives, or across both personal and professional domains. When describing the emotional reactions that they had to what had happened to them, the most frequently cited emotions were disgust, annoyance, shock, embarrassment, anger, fear and shame.

For those participants who described the most distressing incident of sexual violence that they had experienced, the type cited most frequently was being touched in a way that made the person uncomfortable. The follow up information included that:

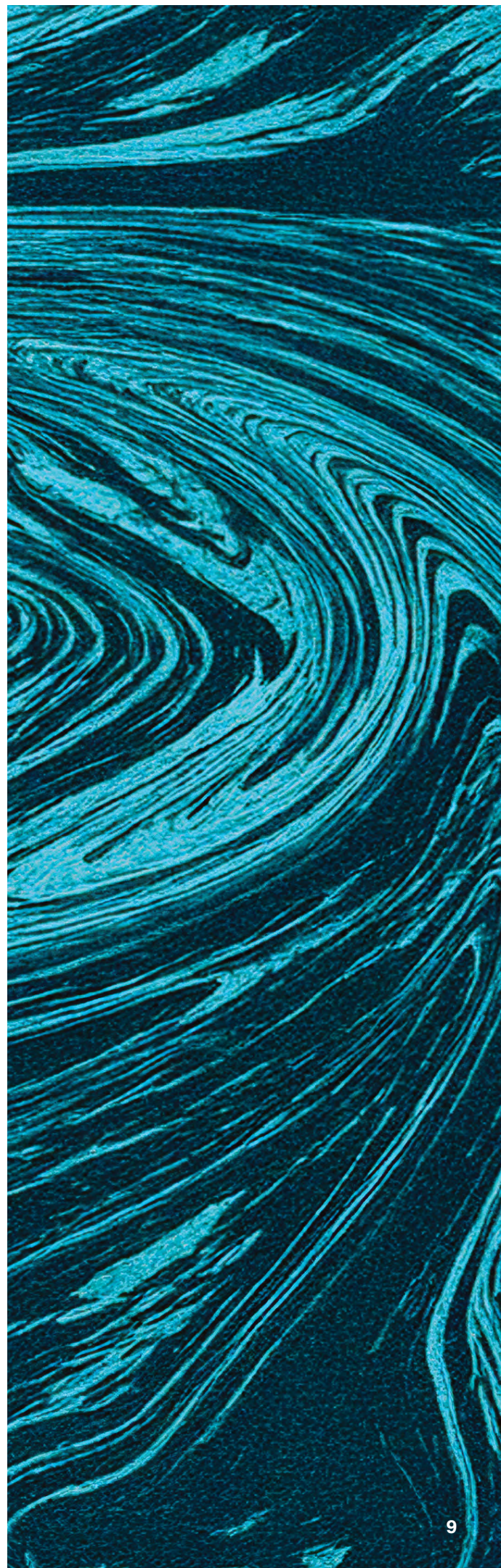
- Three quarters of these participants knew the perpetrator (one fifth of this group said that that person was a HE colleague)
- Nearly two thirds of the participants who completed the follow up items had disclosed what had happened, typically to a friend, current or previous romantic partner, family member, or another staff member
- Only 3% of these respondents used the HEI staff wellbeing services following their experience of SV
- The most common reasons for not reporting the incident were worry about how their HEI would react, not wanting the person to find out that they had reported, and concern that the perpetrator would retaliate, or that their HEI would not be able to help because the incident happened in their personal life

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The COSHARE survey asked about mental health and wellbeing using psychometric measures of psychological distress (Kessler-6, Kessler et al., 2002), depression and anxiety (Patient Health Questionnaire-4, Kroenke et al., 2009), and the effect that SVH had on participants' lives (Anyadike-Danes, 2023).

Each of these sources provided evidence that SVH had a measurable association with the mental health and wellbeing of staff members:

- Over half (53%) of the staff who completed this section of the survey and had an experience of SVH in the past five years experienced a negative change in their relationships with other people, while 45% had the ability to socialise impacted, 38% said their ability to carry out everyday activities was impaired, and 45% had their work negatively affected
- Responses to the Kessler-6 measure demonstrated that psychological distress was commonly experienced by survey participants as a whole in the immediate period leading up to the survey. However, staff who had experienced SVH had a significantly higher level of psychological distress compared with other staff members
- The PHQ-4 measure of anxiety and depression demonstrated widespread mental health burden among the participant group as a whole. Those with previous experience of SVH had significantly higher scores than other survey respondents
- The final section on wellbeing invited all survey participants to indicate whether their feelings or state of mind were having an impact on their work experience and intentions at the moment. Overall, relatively high work dissatisfaction levels were identified – but again participants with a history of SVH had even higher scores



RECOMMENDATIONS

National Policy in Northern Ireland

To develop a sectoral strategy on consent, sexual violence and harassment for Higher Education in Northern Ireland.

- This should address the needs of both students and staff members, and include a government-backed commitment for each Higher Education institution to develop a policy and action plan aligned with the sectoral strategy.

National Policy in the Republic of Ireland

To incorporate the COSHARE findings in the planned updating of the 'Safe, Respectful, and Positive: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions' sectoral framework by the Higher Education Authority and DFHERIS.

- Based on the findings, the updated framework should include a greater focus on institutional responses to the needs of HEI staff members themselves, along with further delineating, and supporting, the role that staff can play in prevention and response.

Shared Policy Priorities

The development of sectoral and institutional policy on consent, sexual violence and harassment should be guided by a campus culture change approach, such as the GenderSAFE 7P framework that comprises policy, prevalence, prevention, protection, prosecution and internal disciplinary measures, provision of services, and partnerships. Policies and procedures should be reviewed with respect to the degree to which they:

- Are trauma-informed, evidence-based, and accountable.
- Adopt a values-based ethos of respect that incorporates prevention and consent promotion.
- Achieve attitude and behaviour change, building institutional capacity through awareness raising, education, and skills training.
- Implement transparent reporting and disciplinary processes.
- Offer specialised supports to victim-survivors, including staff members as well as students.

Priorities for Action

Attention is drawn to priorities for initiatives and actions that arise from the survey findings. These relate to enhanced knowledge and dissemination of consent / SVH policies and procedures, enhanced staff training and capacity building, trauma-informed supports, and the mental health and wellbeing implications of SVH:

- Awareness raising on consent, sexual violence and harassment that meets the needs of different audiences, including staff who have not experienced SVH.
- Communication and dissemination to enhance staff knowledge and understanding of policies and procedures.
- Training geared towards the SVH-related competencies and responsibilities of particular job roles in Higher Education, from signposting to involvement in investigation processes.
- Promotion of specialist support staff roles on consent / SVH within universities, which can work outwardly with statutory and voluntary services as well as inwardly to meet the needs of the HEI community.
- Given the association between SVH and mental health distress, alongside low rates of take up of wellbeing support, there should be a focus on reviewing how to provide impactful mental health supports for staff members.

A North South Approach to Networking and Partnership on Consent, Sexual Violence and Harassment

The survey findings demonstrate common issues, resources, and development needs across Higher Education institutions both North and South. promote collaborations, and the opportunity to share learning.

- Networking arrangements should be supported as a means to share good practice in HE and, at governmental, institutional, and community levels, achieve enhanced engagement and collaboration.
- All-island survey implementation should be used to support the identification of key priorities, challenges, and opportunities across both jurisdictions.

All-Island Surveys and Data Collection

Continue to develop the feasibility of deploying a shared survey instrument across North and South, with closely linked processes of survey design, analysis, and reporting. Particular priorities include:

- Adopting feedback offered by participants on the COSHARE survey content to enhance an all-island approach to surveys and data collection.
- With input from stakeholders, develop a shorter institutional survey format that can be inform monitoring and evaluation.
- Build on the all-island staff survey to conduct a similar survey of students in Higher Education.

