



From Grassroots to Institutional Leadership: A Staff-Student Partnership Approach to Consent at Trinity College Dublin

Trish Murphy, Rachel Skelly, and Aoife Grimes

The consent workshops have been a huge part of student life over the past three years and they have helped a lot of students, and it's brought consent into the vernacular of the college community. (Synott, 2019)

Special thanks to Ruth McMahon and Reagan Degeare, TCD Consent team.

T. Murphy (✉) · R. Skelly
Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland
e-mail: trish.murphy@tcd.ie

R. Skelly
e-mail: raskelly@tcd.ie

A. Grimes
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, Dublin, Ireland
e-mail: aoifegrimes24@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is the oldest university in Ireland, established in 1592 and located in the centre of Dublin City. Its student population is just over 21,000 students, a third of whom are postgraduates while approximately a quarter are International (from outside the EU). Due to its location, historical buildings and beautiful squares, TCD is a huge tourist attraction, and thus students and tourists mingle on campus throughout the year. In addition, TCD has 1300 spaces for on-campus accommodation and 1000 beds in a residence hall in the Dublin suburbs, and this is where the Consent Workshops are located during Freshers week, the first week of the academic year. TCD now has a female Provost for the first time in its history and is very proud of its proactive stance on consent.

In September 2016, a small group of students and staff gathered at the historic Oldham House in Trinity Halls of Residence: these were to be the first participants in a pilot programme on sexual consent, which came about as a result of collaboration spanning the Trinity College Dublin Students Union (TCDSU), the Senior Tutor's Office, the Counselling Service, and other services across campus. On that first day, 93 people turned up for one session alone, going way beyond the capacity of the space that had been booked. With 40 people already in one room, the team had to call in extra facilitators to accommodate the queue of students outside. One participant noted that 'It was fabulous that people were... so happy and comfortable asking questions' (McNamee, 2017). Nine sessions ran each day across that first Freshers weekend, and this catalysed the roll-out of our now year-long programme.

At the core of these workshops is partnership, and workshops continued to be rolled out until the TCD Together Consent Programme was developed. The Programme has reached 25% of all TCD students in its first few years (4356 freshers to date). The TCD Association and Trust¹ funds the website and, from 2016 to 2023, a dedicated Consent Intern was recruited from the graduating student body on an annual basis, in the last year, this post is no longer needed as there is now a dedicated team in line with national strategy. As the success of the programme led to an increase in informal reports and disclosures of sexual harassment

¹ TCD Trust provides grant support for a wide variety of College projects where funding is not available from mainstream resources: <https://www.tcd.ie/alumni/>.

and violence, we responded by establishing training to support those responding to disclosure. The core principle of universal access is inherent to our work, and all the materials and programmes (materials and training manuals) are licenced for everyone to use.

It is now a long way from the first heady days of the 2016 consent workshops. What was initially a pilot was subsequently mainstreamed, with a dedicated team leading the Together Consent Programme. In 2023, the university established a Dignity, Respect, and Consent unit, which has now taken on a leadership role with regard to the delivery of consent training. However, the original elements still hold true with a staff-student partnership at the core of the programme and universal access in terms of accessing and sharing materials and training. The impetus for the workshops and subsequent Together Consent programme was the Say Something study by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) (2013) finding in which ‘16 per cent of students reported having experienced some form of unwanted sexual experience while in their current educational institution’ (USI, 2013, p. 6). Momentum had been building for some time around change and action in this area, but this was the spark that set the movement and programme alight.

TCD TOGETHER CONSENT PROCESS AND PRACTICE

It is scary, to wake up the morning after and not know what happened.
(Student feedback, 2017)

This quote from a first-year student relates to the issue of sex, consent and alcohol, and reinforces the message of consent workshops that consent cannot be given when one of the parties is under the influence of alcohol. From 2016 to 23, staff and student volunteer facilitators were recruited annually by the Together Consent team. TCDSU conducted interviews with interested students, to ensure that they were both able and safe to facilitate a workshop covering consent (experience of/history of group work facilitation was desired). A training day was organised to bring together a staff member and student to form a team that subsequently worked together delivering workshops for incoming first years. Those who volunteered reported their joy in seeing the consent ‘penny’ drop for participants alongside the pleasure and connection that comes from working across staff-student boundaries. The grass-roots nature of

the Together Consent programme was remarkably effective: annually, we saw some 20 students volunteer to work alongside staff who brought knowledge and expertise on consent and disclosure back to their schools and departments, spreading and embedding the message of consent. Each successive Student's Union has committed to supporting the ending of sexual violence, participating in the university's Consent Framework Implementation Oversight Group, and ensuring that the array of consent workshops led with a sex-positive message that provided an easy sell to the student body. As Together Consent grew to include bystander training and Consent + training (an amalgamation of consent, bystander and responder training), the next topic for development was obvious—pornography (Lehmiller, 2020). In 2024/5, a 'Porn and Bias' module will be delivered on the student Blackboard platform as a result of new evidence on the increased use of porn during COVID-19 (Döring, 2020). This module will be aimed at students and sit under the umbrella of the Healthy Trinity Programme.

However, during the COVID-19 period, pivoting to online delivery of the workshops made it more difficult to gain as much traction as had previously been offered in face-to-face workshops. This was a setback, but the staff-student partnership rose to the challenge. Train the trainer sessions were held for facilitation teams that hosted live online workshops using interactive elements, including the range of tools offered by online conferencing programmes like Zoom and Teams (e.g. shared whiteboards and scope for sharing documents). There is, of course, no substitution for a workshop held in person, but COVID-19 challenges uncovered the advantages of accessibility and comfort for attendees for certain groups online (see Chapter 17). The feedback from the training was also indicative that they achieved their purpose in changing perspectives and beginning conversations in the student body. Of the 106 students who responded to a 2021 survey on the workshops, only three participants disagreed with the statement;

I feel more confident to discuss consent now than I did before this workshop. (Together Consent Feedback, 2021)

The learning from the online workshops fed forward into subsequent delivery of the Together Consent programme, and between July 2021 and June 2022, 995 staff and students completed Together Consent training.

CONSENT WORKSHOPS IN ACTION—LESSONS LEARNED

Many young students have experienced poor sex education in second-level education in Ireland (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2019) and the possibility of actually talking about sex was a novel and new learning experience for our students. This lack of ability to speak about sex can lead to lots of misunderstandings and breaches of consent that can have serious consequences for students, particularly those who have just arrived on campus. Together Consent emphasised how to seek consent, and the importance of each party involved being enthusiastic in their consent, not just complicit. The recognition that sexual violence can be accidental, and is preventable, has been core to Together Consent's ethos. The onus is placed on each individual to *seek* consent, not on those who are not consenting to learn to *speak up* and say no. We know, in reality, that this is often not possible, and that consent and no consent are communicated in a variety of ways. Time is spent in each workshop on recognising verbal and nonverbal non-consent, and perhaps most importantly, how to recognise that someone is not, or is no longer, consenting. Using the acronym 'FRIES²', (we remind students that consent has to be freely given, retractable, informed, enthusiastic, and specific), we set out to help to actively prevent sexual violence, as well as recognise what sexual behaviour they do, and do not, wish to engage in (Everymum, 2022).

The combination of staff and student co-facilitation facilitated the building of a sense of trust in the capacity for the college to respond to disclosures of sexual misconduct from a range of positions (e.g. student/student disclosures and student/staff disclosures), something that we have since built on, with the launch of our Dignity, Respect and Consent Unit³ in 2024.

The commitment of TCDSU, supplying sabbatical and part-time officers to the programme over several years, provided feasibility and longevity to the Together Consent programme in TCD.

The Student Union Welfare officers, and associated residence officers in locations such as TCD Trinity Hall received disclosures of sexual violence regularly, and this informed the development of a new Sexual Misconduct

² Let's Talk about How We Talk About Consent: FRIES and Together Consent [movie] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2uXPPnK7TA&t=83s>.

³ <https://www.tcd.ie/hr/dignity-and-respect/>.

Policy, approved by the College's Board in 2023. This is characteristic of how activism and policymaking can go hand-in-hand. TCDSU published and annually updated a guide to navigating the previously limited system for reporting that was in place and published documents for people who receive disclosures of sexual violence including a document that set out to support disclosure of sexual violence and harassment in the Trinity community (TCDSU, n.d.). Further, *'What do I do now?'* and *'What do we do now?'* guides, written by the then Gender Equality Officer of the Union, were distributed via posters with QR codes all over the college campus.⁴

In 2019, the TCDSU voted to support a motion to fund a full-time intern whose role would be to centre the voice of sexual consent education in higher education. This was the first such full-time position created in Ireland.

In 2023, 17 Higher Education Institutions in Ireland received HEA funding for a Sexual Violence Prevention Response Manager, with many already in post. TCD hired our Dignity, Respect, and Consent Response Manager in September 2023 alongside two additional full-time equivalent staff to support the Unit's work. The foundations for these positions can be traced back to this post.

TOGETHER CONSENT AND INNOVATIONS IN CONSENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION EDUCATION

Disclosure Training

As students developed the language from the consent workshops to describe and understand their experiences, more disclosures of sexual misconduct began to emerge. A duty of care to these students led the team to research and develop disclosure training to equip those who might hear of disclosures to be able to respond confidently. This was trialled with integrated groups of staff and students and then quickly shared with HEI colleagues. This contributed to a rising sense of awareness across the sector of the need for policy development and in-depth training for those in receipt of disclosures. Consent workshops were mainly aimed at students, but disclosure training brought staff into

⁴ And see <https://www.tcdu.org/sexual-health#:~:text=If%20you've%20had%20a,ic%2Fcollegehealth>.

the conversation about sexual misconduct and encouraged a whole-of-university response. Rather than being an issue for individuals, we moved towards a shared responsibility to change culture, to prevent sexual violence.

Speak Out

In 2019, the TCD Together Consent programme and the Psychological Counsellors for Higher Education in Ireland (PCHEI) received HEA funding to develop an online anonymous reporting tool. Initially, nine HEIs participated in the pilot of the Speak Out tool, now rolled out across the sector. The Speak Out tool aimed to gather data on bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual violence but with recognition of the intersectionality of experiences and the potential for collaboration with the wider HEI sector, and later broadened to include bullying, cyber-bullying, harassment, discrimination, hate crime, coercive behaviour/control, stalking, assault, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape.⁵ For the first time, HEIs were collecting real-time data on the lived experience to inform policy, practice and training. Prior to this data collection, there was no central collection or reporting on sexual violence data in HEIs in Ireland.

Following the launch of Speak Out in 2021, TCD has used the experiences reported through the tool to guide localised education, policy and practice. In 2024, TCD was awarded the contract to host the National Speak Out Office.

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARDS

The knowledge gained from running Together Consent workshops, developing training, working with colleagues in other HEIs, using data from the Speak Out tool and conducting research within the College's communities has led to clear directions for the elimination of sexual misconduct and violence within higher education. Within TCD, we moved to establish a dedicated Dignity, Respect and Consent Advisory Service that holds the remit for both prevention and response in 2024. This team focuses on making the service available and accessible to all by

⁵ <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/ending-sexual-violence-and-harassment-in-irish-higher-education-institutions/speak-out/>.

aiming to embed dignity, respect and positive sexual norms within the culture of the whole College.

The staff-student partnership approach that underpinned the Together Consent programme has seen benefits that have far outreached our original targets. Beyond the participation rates outlined in Table 16.1, Together Consent facilitated the forging of friendships between previously segregated groups; connections across professional and academic boundaries; and opened up opportunities for students and staff to find support in each other that have nothing to do with titles or courses. Funding for initiatives like the development of animated materials to support the programme was secured from Trinity Trust, part of Trinity Development & Alumni (e.g. see Everymum, 2022), and principles underpinning our consent work have been shared, mainstreamed, and fostered policies. Some of the early interns have turned their passion into careers in the area, and all kinds of people have become champions of consent. Together Consent proves that staff-student partnerships can be a blueprint for implementing cultural change, urgently needed in an increasingly complex and integrated society. We know that policies are only as good or as useful as the people who enact them, and this methodology ensures that the people engaging with the policies are also those who are delivering the training, reviewing and developing further changes and who are directly affected by the outcomes. We leave the final word to an early student facilitator:

When I volunteered to become a consent facilitator, I thought it would look good on my CV, but I had no idea it would change me so much. ... I used what I learned in my own life and improved my own intimate relationship, as well as feeling confident in intervening in dodgy consent situations I came across, and finally I discovered that I loved facilitating, and this is always going to be a part of my working life from now on. Thank you, Together Consent! (Facilitator feedback, n.d.)

Table 16.1 Overview of engagement with together consent programme (2016–2024)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Together Consent Workshops Students in Trinity Hall for first-year students	600	700	636	585	261	500	200	383	491

REFERENCES

- Döring, N. (2020). How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting our sexualities? An overview of the current media narratives and research hypotheses. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(8), 2765–2778. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01790-z>
- Everymum. (2022). *FRIES and fun sex—Trinity College Dublin launches Together Consent outreach programme*. <https://everymum.ie/my-family/relationships/sex-relationships/fries-and-fun-sex-trinity-college-dublin-launches-together-consent-outreach-programme/>
- Higher Education Authority. (2019). *Ending sexual violence and harassment in higher education institutions*. <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/>
- Lehmiller, J. J. (2020, March 23). How the pandemic is changing pornography. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/the-myths-sex/202003/how-the-pandemic-is-changing-pornography>
- McNamee, K. (2017, September 20). *Over 90% turnout for TCD hall consent workshops*. University Times. <https://universitytimes.ie/2017/09/90-per-cent-turnout-for-consent-classes/>
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2019). *Report on the review of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools*. <https://ncca.ie/media/4462/report-on-the-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-primary-and-post-primary-school.pdf>
- Synnott, J. (2019, March 26). *TCDSU votes to introduce full-time consent intern*. University Times. <https://universitytimes.ie/2019/03/tcdsu-votes-to-introduce-full-time-consent-intern>
- Trinity College Dublin. (2021, September 15). Trinity launches consent education tools and website. *News & Events*. https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/trinity-launches-consent-education-tools-and-website/
- Trinity College Dublin. (2023). *Sexual misconduct policy*. <https://www.tcd.ie/media/tcd/about/policies/pdfs/sexual-misconduct-policy.pdf>
- Trinity College Dublin. (2024, April 16). *Dignity, respect and consent service*. <https://www.tcd.ie/hr/dignity-and-respect/>

Trinity College Dublin Students Union. (n.d.). *Supporting disclosures of sexual violence and harassment in the Trinity community*. Trinity College Dublin. Students Union. https://www.tcdsu.org/images/pdf/publications/Sexual_assault_Disclosures.pdf

Union Students in Ireland. (2013). *Say something. A study of students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence & sexual assault*. <https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/say-something-Final-Online-Report.pdf>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

