



WITS Statement on Sexual Harassment in 3rd Level Institutions

Founded in 1990, WITS is a national, independent voluntary organisation representing women studying and working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in Ireland.

In response to today's Irish Times report, "My Two Years of Harassment at UCD", 5th September 2020, Women in Technology and Science (WITS) would like to express its support for former executive committee member, Dr Aoibhinn ní Shúilleabháin, Assistant Professor in the School of Mathematics and Statistics in UCD. Dr ní Shúilleabháin has decided to share her experience of ongoing criminal sexual harassment in the workplace in an attempt to ensure that no other member of staff or of the student body will have to endure a similar experience.

In November 2018, the United Nations General Assembly described sexual harassment in educational institutions as an issue that has 'a negative impact on women and girls in the enjoyment of their rights and equal opportunities, ... [with] negative physical and mental health consequences...and [one that] may negatively affect their families'. WITS would like to underline that sexual harassment is not only illegal, but in an academic setting damages students' and staff members' well-being, health, education and future or current career prospects. In short, everyone has the right to work and study free of harassment.

WITS welcomes the recent announcement made by Minister for Higher Education Simon Harris of a planned national annual survey of staff and students on experiences of sexual harassment and looks forward to reading the detailed plan for this survey. It also recognises the work undertaken in this area by UCD. As their annual Equality Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) report says the university is 'constantly looking to better understand where difficulties lie, from wide-ranging sources and perspectives, and how we might best address them'. The university's Dignity & Respect policy is currently due for review, with the inclusion of a section on monitoring and reporting of sexual harassment rightly considered a priority.

WITS calls on the UCD EDI Group to ensure that the voices of victims of sexual harassment are part of this review to allow complainants to feel confident that they will be heard, and that their complaints will be treated with the seriousness and respect they deserve. It is not enough that the appropriate processes exist, they should also be effective and employed when necessary. The university's anonymous Report and Support tool is an important part of its complaints procedure. Similarly, regular staff and student surveys on sexual harassment would allow underreporting to be evaluated. Complainants should feel secure when coming forward, and not discouraged due to the onerous nature of registering a complaint. While in the short term, the number of reported instances of sexual harassment would increase under this system, by acting promptly to stop inappropriate behaviour before it escalates, the distressing harassment endured by Dr ní Shúilleabháin need not be repeated.

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