



INSTITUTIONAL READINESS FOR ADDRESSING AND RESPONDING TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A policy brief from the Uni4Equity Project

[19/01/2026]

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Uni4Equity is a project funded by the cerv-2022-DAPHNE Programme of the European Union. **Project Number: 101094121** - Uni4Equity. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

1. Executive Summary:

Despite efforts at the EU level to address gender-based violence, sexual harassment remains a widespread issue, particularly in institutions like academic ones where a patriarchal system persists. Sexism is still evident through physical and verbal harassment, coercion, social pressure, and intimidation, among others, reinforcing gender inequalities in social power. The Uni4Equity project promotes collaboration between universities and other social entities to recognize, address and prevent online and offline sexual harassment in academic settings.

In this policy brief we describe how universities can build policies and protocols as a structured response to sexual harassment. First, we describe what sexual harassment is, in what way it confronts academia with a problem to be tackled, and for what reasons it is an urgent problem that needs to be addressed and responded to. In the second section we describe key problems and specific challenges that were revealed through international research on sexual harassment in academia. In the third section we give two best practices from different European universities that addressed sexual harassment (a dedicated comprehensive website; awareness raising trainings for staff and students). In the fourth section we list policy recommendations, structured along three levels of prevention.

2. Introduction:

Sexual harassment is a problem in higher education. We will first explain what we mean with sexual harassment, present prevalence data, and explain why it is important to tackle the problem.

What is sexual harassment?

According to the Istanbul Convention, sexual harassment is “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.” (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 40, p. 11). This definition is used as the reference for what constitutes sexual harassment in many policies and legal regulations throughout Europe. Sexual harassment thus includes: unwanted touching, unwanted fondling, unwanted sexual advance, sex-related jokes, sex-related insults, unwanted sexual gestures and unwanted sexual oriented text messages, letters and phone calls, amongst other unconsented conduct.

What is the prevalence of sexual harassment?

The Uni4Equity research included an online survey in the six universities participating in the project: University of Alicante, University of Verona, University of Maia, Adam Mickiewicz

University, University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, and University of Antwerp. With a total sample of 7563 people (5,2% of entire populations in these universities) the sample was not representative (feminised, and students were underrepresented compared to staff). The results about the prevalence of sexual harassment are in line with other surveys.

“The total frequency of respondents that have experienced at least one situation of sexual harassment ranges from 26,9% to 43,5% across universities. Women experience more sexual harassment, both online and in person, compared to men in most universities. [...] On the contrary, very few respondents self-identify their actions as sexual harassment [...]: self-declared rates of sexual harassment [...] are lower, between 11,2% and 18,3%, indicating potential underreporting or unawareness.” (Uni4equity survey: preliminary global results available on the website <https://web.ua.es/en/unidad-igualdad/results.html>)

That sexual harassment does not affect everyone equally is in line with other studies. Sexual harassment affects students, academic staff, and administrative employees, particularly young people in hierarchical relations, women, and minority group members (Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020).

The prevalence aligns with results reported in other recent studies. In 2022 UniSAFE conducted a survey in 46 research organisations and universities in 15 countries with over 42000 responses. 31% of the respondents disclosed having experienced sexual harassment (UniSAFE policy brief 1 available on the website <https://zenodo.org/records/7333222#.Y3d3T33MJPZ>).

The presence of underreporting is also consistent with findings from other studies. In the UniSAFE survey (which was about gender-based violence, of which sexual harassment is presented as one manifestation) the most often cited reasons were not being sure that the behaviour was serious enough to report, not recognising the behaviour as violence at the time, or not thinking anything would happen if it was reported (UniSAFE policy brief 1, on the website <https://zenodo.org/records/7333222#.Y3d3T33MJPZ>). The Uni4Equity survey adds the reason that people do not recognize a specific behaviour towards them as sexual harassment, although their description of the specific behavior matches the sexual harassment-definition of the Istanbul convention.

How can these results be explained?

The high prevalence of sexual harassment in academia can be explained by **social features of the environment**. Contemporary academic cultures can be characterised as hierarchical, competitive, performance-oriented and individualised that facilitate gender-based violence (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022). Moreover, academic settings are historically male-dominated. Gender-inequality is a social determinant for gender-based violence which can take the form of sexual harassment. Gender-based violence can take the

specific forms in this context: dating violence, gender-based harassment, sexual violence, scientific sabotage, sexist jargon, physical and verbal threats and exclusion.

The underreporting of sexual harassment in academia has several explanations. According to our survey, the main reasons for not reporting were **uncertainty about whether the behaviour was serious enough to report** (54,7% of women (n=428) and 42,7% of men (n=86) who did not report) and **lack of recognition of the behaviour as violence** at that time (26,9% of women (n=211) and 20,8% of men (n=42) who did not report).

These explanations correspond with international evidence suggesting that underreporting is partly due to the ignorance about what qualifies as harassment. For example, Kirkner et al. (2022) list three main reasons for not reporting a case of sexual harassment: not interpreting the event as serious enough, concerns of not being taken seriously, and thinking that nothing would be done.

Why is it important to address sexual harassment?

Institutional readiness to address sexual harassment is essential because the issue is systemic, rooted in social norms, power structures, academic dependencies, and organisational culture. Effective responses must go beyond reactive measures and include structural, long-term prevention frameworks, as outlined in Section 4, where policy recommendations are presented.

Universities benefit from an accurate response and approach of sexual harassment. Insufficient readiness leads to broader social and structural consequences that reshape the functioning of universities. One major outcome is the persistent **underrepresentation of marginalized groups**. Women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, ethnic minorities, international students and staff more often face violence, microaggressions, and sexual harassment risk, discouraging them from academic careers (Ahmed, 2021).

Research shows that sexual harassment and gender-based violence can result in withdrawal from academic activities, avoidance of staff or peers, and, in severe cases, dropping out of studies or employment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Universities therefore **lose diversity as well as intellectual and creative potential**. Sexual harassment shapes decisions about career paths, supervisors, research projects, and long-term professional planning. Victims and survivors are less likely to apply for academic positions, pursue grants, or remain in academia to avoid perpetrators or toxic institutional cultures (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). This weakens universities' academic and educational competitiveness.

Sexual harassment **also harms mental health and wellbeing**, affecting both direct victims/survivors and those working or studying in environments where sexual harassment is downplayed or concealed. Experiences of sexual harassment are linked to depression, anxiety, insomnia, social withdrawal, and trauma-related symptoms (Campbell, Goodman-Williams &

Javorka 2019). Victims and survivors often report reduced motivation, concentration difficulties, and feelings of helplessness. Research from organisational and educational psychology indicates that these consequences may persist for years, shaping long-term career trajectories (Hill & Silva 2005).

Lack of an adequate institutional response also reinforces an **unhealthy organisational culture** in which sexual harassment becomes normalised, marginalised, or invisible. These mechanisms are especially strong in hierarchical academic settings where dependency relations enable power abuses. Normalisation lowers trust in institutions and creates a “culture of silence” where victims and survivors become isolated or blamed.

All these issues relate to **universities’ broader social responsibility**. As institutions educating future generations and shaping social norms, universities are expected to uphold standards of equality, safety, and dignity. Those who effectively prevent sexual harassment build public trust, foster a culture of accountability, and promote democratic values. They also set an example for other sectors like public administration, schools, NGOs, and private organisations. Preventing sexual harassment should therefore be viewed as a core component of the university’s ethical and social mission.

3. Key Issues & Challenges:

The mere existence of sexual harassment at the university—affecting both students and staff—is itself a serious concern. The problem is further intensified by additional, context-specific factors identified through the Uni4Equity survey results.

The first key problem that stands out from the Uni4Equity survey is lack of information. University members do not get sufficient (or easy to understand) information about available institutional support and reporting channels nor about possible next steps in the complaint procedures

- **“In the event of sexual harassment, I’d know where I’d be able to seek institutional support”**, shows a moderate awareness of across universities, being between 23,6% and 51,6% in all university communities. There is also a moderate knowledge about official reporting across universities, with items such as **“I know where to make a report of sexual harassment”** ranging from 19,3% to 43,7%. Compared to staff, students show less awareness of available institutional support, reporting procedures, and reporting channels.

- In 3 of the university communities less than half of the staff reports that they are able to guide students in cases of sexual harassment. (“**If a student asked me for information on university resources for sexual harassment cases, I’d know where to guide them.**”)

A second and related key problem is the lack of knowledge about the phenomenon sexual harassment. There is lack of clarity about what qualifies as sexual harassment alongside insufficient awareness of its harmful impact contributing to a normalisation and invisibility of the phenomenon.

- In 4 of the 6 university communities, victims and survivors of sexual harassment shared their experiences with someone within the university more frequently than they kept silent. Informal reporting was around 50% at most universities. Yet official reporting happens much less frequently, between 1,2% - 7,9%. The most frequently mentioned reason for not reporting in all participating universities is “**Unsureness if the behaviour was serious enough to report**” (41,5% - 67,6%). The second most common reason concerned participants’ “**lack of recognition of the behaviour as violence at the time**” (25,6% - 41,9%)

A third key problem that is well-known and that was confirmed by the Uni4Equity survey, is the inequality in experience with sexual harassment. Women, LGBTIQ+ people, younger university members, people with disabilities and those with limited socioeconomic support, face a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment.

- This feature is further discussed in the policy brief “Equity-centered approaches to sexual harassment prevention in european universities” (Available on the Uni4Equity website: <https://web.ua.es/en/unidad-igualdad/results.html>).

There are more key problems that were indicated by the qualitative interviews in the Uni4Equity study and that are in line with other international studies on sexual harassment in higher education. We outline five key challenges within formal support resources in academia: *secondary traumatization, the harmful effects of the ideal victim-trope, the practice of victim-blaming, the institutional requirement to tell a traumatic story several times, the phenomenon of institutional betrayal.*

Key challenges encountered in formal support resources in the academia

International literature highlights several mechanisms of secondary harm and unfair treatment experienced by targets of sexual harassment. **Secondary traumatization** occurs when survivors feel stress, guilt, or alienation in response to how others react to their disclosure. Research shows that this includes reactions from relatives, colleagues, and formal institutions (Campbell 2008).

Survivors who do not fit the socially constructed **profile of the “ideal victim”** are more likely to face stigma and credibility challenges. The literature notes that the “ideal victim” is typically perceived as someone who was not under the influence of alcohol or drugs, was attacked by a stranger, and experienced clear physical violence. Any deviation from this stereotype increases the likelihood of blame and suspicion from police, institutional actors, or the broader community (Christie 2019).

A frequently documented mechanism is **victim blaming**, which appears both explicitly and in subtle forms. Closely related is the experience of not being believed or listened to, which significantly affects psychological well-being, willingness to report, and further engagement with institutions (Grubb & Turner 2012).

Another major issue identified in research is the **requirement to repeat one’s story multiple times to different parties**, which increases stress and contributes to re-traumatization. The lack of coordinated procedures that limit duplication and unnecessary contacts is considered a key factor in secondary victimization.

Victims and survivors frequently fear breaches of confidentiality, retaliation, or limited trust in existing procedures (Hearn, Strid, Humbert, Bondestam & Husu 2025). In this context increasing attention has been paid to the concept of **institutional betrayal**, drawing on the work of Jennifer Freyd (Freyd 1996; Smith & Freyd 2014). It refers to situations in which an institution such as university fails to prevent harm, does not respond appropriately to reports, or does not offer adequate support to the survivor. Institutional betrayal encompasses both actions and omissions that undermine trust and intensify the emotional and social impact of the initial trauma.

4. Best Practices & Case Studies:

Best practices include both systemic and operational measures and are recognized as particularly effective in creating safe academic environments. The examples below are selected from the international literature and stand out due to their scope, transparency, research-based foundations, and successful implementation across large and diverse university communities.

One best practice is the “Report + Support” model developed at the University of Edinburgh (<https://reportandsupport.ed.ac.uk/>), which offers a transparent, centralized platform for reporting sexual harassment, violence, and discrimination. The platform supports both anonymous and named reports and provides access to trained advisors as well as educational resources.

At the University of Amsterdam, a system of faculty-based confidential advisors has been implemented to provide first, confidential support to survivors. Internal evaluations indicate that the presence of locally embedded, trained advisors significantly decreases the number of informal or unreported incidents, as students and staff feel safer approaching someone they already know from their daily academic environment (<https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/policy-and-regulations/codes-of-conduct-and-social-safety/annual-reports-of-confidential-advisers.html?cb>).

Other interesting model is the “Trauma-Informed Campus” approach at the University of Michigan. This model includes training for staff and faculty on recognizing trauma responses, adopting more empathetic institutional language, and auditing procedures to minimize secondary victimization (Weber e.a. 2024).

In the Polish context, the University of Warsaw was a pioneer and currently offers the most comprehensive solutions for preventing and responding to sexual harassment through the “Równoważni” (translated as “equally important”) project (<https://rownowazni.uw.edu.pl/>). The Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznan conducted the most recent detailed research on sexual harassment at universities in Poland, covering four groups: students, doctoral students, academic staff, and administrative Staff (Kokociński M., Waszyńska K., Chmura-Rutkowska I., Kokocińska A. 2025, [open access](#)). AMU has also developed a comprehensive system to counteract sexual harassment. Existing structures include the Team for Equal Treatment and the confidential consultant for sexual harassment prevention, psychological support services, and an increasing number of faculty-based initiatives for equality and safety. The integration of these efforts into a coherent institutional strategy could serve as a model for other academic institutions in Poland and beyond universities (<https://bezdyskryminacji.amu.edu.pl/>).

Across these examples, several common features emerge: centralized and transparent procedures, survivor-centered approaches, the presence of trained first-contact personnel, community education and awareness-raising, and continuous monitoring and auditing.

We zoom in on two best practices developed within the context of Uni4Equity. The first best practice is the website of the University of Alicante, which particularly addresses the first two key challenges mentioned above (lack of knowledge about available institutional support and lack of clarity regarding what constitutes sexual harassment) through a comprehensive strategy of information provision, prevention, and support. The second best practice comes from the University of Maia (UMAIA) and focuses on the development and implementation of awareness-raising training sessions for both staff and students. These trainings are oriented towards primary prevention of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in social, workplace, and academic contexts, thereby contributing to the strengthening of an institutional culture grounded in equality, awareness, and collective responsibility.

Best practice 1: A comprehensive website (University of Alicante)

The University of Alicante has the “Equality Unit”, which was created in 2008 as part of the organisational structure of the University of Alicante for the fulfilment of functions related to the principle of equality between women and men. With the aim of making all the information accessible to the entire university community, the “Equality Unit's” website was created (link: <https://web.ua.es/es/unidad-igualdad/inicio.html>). This website on sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence:

- Increases the accessibility and visibility of information related to sexual harassment and gender-based violence through a clear structure and easier navigation.
- Provides clear and accessible information about the internal and external resources for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence.
- Includes all the prevention initiatives across the three levels of prevention (primary, secondary, tertiary), such as awareness and social campaigns, actions addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, and the two protocols for intervention in cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.
- Encourages engagement and community participation through workshops, training activities, awareness campaigns, and a suggestion box.
- Ensures an inclusive and intersectional approach, with multilingual content, easy-to-read versions, visual elements, and international mobility victimisation guidance procedures and global support resources.
- Facilitates access to reporting channels and offers key information about the reporting protocol in a clear, inclusive, and user-friendly manner (e.g., FAQ section on the protocol).
- Increases transparency through the integration of local and global sexual harassment and gender-based violence data (e.g., Uni4Equity survey).
- Offers relevant academic and institutional materials on an ongoing basis, such as guidelines, reports, and articles related to gender equality.
- Strengthens user support through updated procedures, more secure accreditation processes, and improved clarity on how to act in sexual harassment and gender-based violence cases.

Figure 1. Frequently Asked Questions about the University of Alicante protocol for sexual harassment



Activa contra la Violencia Machista

[Punto Violeta](#) ▾ [Acoso Sexual](#) ▾ [Violencia de Género](#) ▾ [Recursos externos](#) ▾ [Voluntariado VM](#) [Redes UA contra VM](#)

Websites of interest

FAQs

<p>1. How can I report a case of gender violence? ▾</p>
<p>2. If I visit the Equality Unit, am I reporting? ▲</p> <p>No. Visiting the Equality Unit does not imply reporting.</p> <p>The Equality Unit is not only a place where you can report a case of harassment, discrimination, or gender-based violence. It is also a consultation body whose purpose is to offer information, advise on how to deal with the conflict, analyze needs, and coordinate with other services of the university (Student Care Center CAE) and/ or external services (24h Women's Center etc.) that can respond to the identified needs.</p> <p>It is a safe and confidential space where you can talk about your problem without having to give the names of the people involved.</p>
<p>3. Who can report on a case of gender violence? ▾</p>
<p>4. What are the phases of the University of Alicante protocol for the prevention of and intervention against sexual harassment, gender-based harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination? ▾</p>

Best practice 2: Awareness raising trainings for staff and students (University of Maia)

UNI4Equity's primary intervention training on gender-based violence and sexual harassment, targeted at all members of the academic and work communities, aims to promote awareness to gender-based violence and sexual harassment in social, work and academic contexts using gender-transformative and intersectional approaches. Not only do these workshops seek to promote critical reflection about gender and power dynamics but also aim to empower the higher education institutions and their communities to recognize gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and challenge sexist attitudes that enable them.

These 10-hour workshops are composed of three modules, each focusing on a different context: Module 1 – Gender-based violence in social and learning contexts (4h), Module 2 – Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace (3h) and Module 3 – Sexual Harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the academia (3h). The workshops can be delivered in person, fully online, or both, in a hybrid format, and its content materials can be adapted according to the feasible duration and available university resources.

The workshops are mainly theoretical as they intend to foster knowledge, but contain several practical activities, from news, adverts and music lyrics and video analysis to case studies analysis, conducted (preferably) using group discussion or interactive and participative learning methods. For being primary level prevention workshops, they approach other concepts that

relate to gender-based violence and sexual harassment, such as gender and sex at birth, gender stereotypes, discrimination, sexism, misogyny and sexual objectification.

During the Uni4Equity project, 13 editions of these workshops, ranging from 2.5h to 10h, were conducted across six partner universities with 463 people, mostly students ($n = 265$, 57.2%), and women ($n = 336$, 72.6%). Overall, results reveal increased knowledge after conducting the training, with a 3-point average difference between the pre and post assessment moments ($M = 15.5$ vs $M = 18.5$, in a 21-point-item assessment questionnaire). The questionnaire which assessed knowledge on several topics revealed a significant increase across 18 out of 21 items, with the greatest percentage increases of correct answers shown in items that assessed knowledge on intersectionality and gender-transformative approaches. After the training, students and staff were also able to identify more reporting and psychological support resources at their universities. This greater awareness fosters the ability for one to report or seek help or even to forward others in need, acting as active bystanders.

By addressing gender-based violence and sexual harassment via primary intervention workshops, higher education institutions foster community awareness on how to prevent and combat these phenomena, particularly if the trainings are mandatory for students to graduate and for staff to progress at work.

5. Policy Recommendations:

In order to prevent, detect and respond to sexual harassment in academia, a comprehensive and structured approach is essential. A fundamental component of this approach is the establishment of a formal, institution-wide protocol that clearly defines sexual harassment, outlines the rights and responsibilities of all members of the academic community and prescribes what will happen in case inappropriate behaviour is reported in an institutional context (UniSAFE, 2023).

Addressing sexual harassment requires pursuing three interconnected goals, each corresponding to a different level of prevention. We present policy recommendations at each level.

- Increase awareness about the significance of preventing and addressing all types of sexual harassment, emphasizing the crucial role of the academic community;

= **Primary prevention:** the goal is to prevent the occurrence of sexual harassment. This requires sensibilisation and awareness raising of the problem, as well as of the rights and responsibilities of all members of the academic community in preventing sexual harassment. The target group is the whole university community.

- Enhance the capabilities of university staff and the resources at their disposal to combat sexual harassment on campus;

= **Secondary prevention:** the goal is to improve early access to formal support services, especially for those who are in high-risk circumstances. In this sense, it is crucial to prevent lack of response or ineffective response to instances of sexual harassment. The target groups are bystanders and front-line professionals or those with academic and administrative responsibilities in the university. At this level of prevention, particular attention must also be given to groups at higher risk due to their social vulnerability.

- Reduce the negative impact that sexual harassment has on victims and survivors;

= **Tertiary prevention:** the goal is to prevent further damage and revictimization. The target groups are victim-survivors of sexual harassment and offenders.

Primary prevention:

- Tackling sexual harassment at university requires collaboration across multiple internal departments, including the Diversity Team, Internal Health and Safety Department, Communication Department, Human Resources (responsible for training, onboarding, and welcome brochures for new staff), and Student Services. To ensure coordination and maintain an overall perspective, it is useful to **appoint a Sexual Harassment Prevention Coordinator** who can bring together all relevant stakeholders and keep the overview.
- **Develop a specific and separate sexual harassment protocol** to avoid information being scattered across different documents, ensuring easier access and clearer understanding of measures. Protocols on sexual harassment should:
 - **Clearly define sexual harassment** and specify which behaviour is unacceptable and sanctionable, both online and offline violence. Sexual harassment should be presented as part of a whole continuum of violence (sexual misconduct, physical, psychological, etc.).
 - **Acknowledge that anyone can be a victim-survivor or a perpetrator.** The protocol should assume that any member of the university community (students, faculty members and staff, both internal and external such as service providers, suppliers or event participants), regardless of gender identity, can become a victim-survivor or perpetrator.

- **Define the scope of applicability**, clarifying to whom, where, and under which circumstances the protocol applies (students, faculty members and staff, both internal and external, covering behaviours both inside and outside the institution, online and offline).
- **Adopt an inclusive and intersectional approach**, recognising stereotypes, power and gender relations, as well as their roots and consequences in the application and evaluation of the impact of the protocol. This approach should ensure the protection and recognition of the rights of individuals who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination or structural inequality (e.g., racialised people, people with disabilities, etc.).
- **Implement regular training and capacity-building programs** for staff, managers, policymakers, service providers, and students, on sexual harassment and its underlying causes in order to increase knowledge and awareness of the issue..
- **Develop ongoing information and awareness-raising campaigns on sexual harassment and gender-based violence**, using multiple formats (stickers, social media, posters, video-clips, educational platforms, etc.). A key challenge lies in ensuring regular repetition so that messages remain visible and effective over time.
- **Create a central, dedicated website on sexual harassment**, containing all relevant information, including institutional policies and regulations such as codes of conducts or ethic codes, the full protocol with a clear visual representation of reporting channels, available trainings, links to awareness campaigns and special activities (e.g., 8 March, Women's Day), and a list of internal and external resources for support. The website should also include an FAQ section and a glossary defining key terms (e.g., sexual harassment, victim-survivor, etc.), and related concepts in order to remove doubts for victims-survivors and bystanders about whether an incident constitutes harassment (e.g., the UniSAFE glossary gives a helpful overview of relevant concepts and definitions <https://unisafe-toolkit.eu/glossary/>).
- **Assess the prevalence of sexual harassment** in the university community through recurrent evaluations of the working and study environment, such as including sexual harassment questions in general well-being questionnaires, programme evaluations or climate assessments.
- **Promote continuous intersectional awareness campaigns** that strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion across the academic community, ensuring that students and staff develop a shared understanding of respectful behaviour.

Secondary prevention

- **Widely disseminate the protocol and related policies** through online and face-to-face channels (intranet, website, social media, newsletters, student welcome days, staff onboarding, training activities), ensuring information is accessible, visible, and continuously reinforced.
- **Ensure easy and early access to reporting mechanisms** by providing multiple, confidential and accessible channels (online, in-person, phone, anonymous, multilingual), and ensuring that all available options are clearly visible across student and staff platforms. Institutions should create accessible flowcharts on the student portal (e.g., Moodle) and on the intranet for staff, clearly explaining the steps to follow in the event of a complaint and the services related to sexual harassment, thereby reducing doubts and barriers to early reporting.
- **Ensure strict confidentiality throughout the reporting, consultation and support process**, by limiting information-sharing to strictly necessary personnel and ensuring the secure handling of all sensitive data. Confidentiality should be explained to victims and survivors from the first point of contact and consistently respected by all internal and external actors involved, in order to prevent secondary victimisation and encourage early help-seeking.
- **Ensure professional and timely responses from staff**, providing basic training to all employees on how to recognise early signs of sexual harassment, respond appropriately to disclosures and refer cases to competent services. Decision-makers, trusted advisors, ombudspersons, and disciplinary bodies should receive advanced, trauma-informed training to avoid re-victimisation and procedural delays.
- **Activate the university community to enable early detection by organising regular bystander intervention trainings** that include both clear and ambiguous scenarios, helping students and staff recognise inappropriate behaviours and understand when and how to intervene. Some forms of sexual harassment (e.g., inappropriate touching) are easier to recognize as they involve the clear violation of physical boundaries. More subtle behaviors, such as ‘compliments’, gestures or comments may also constitute sexual harassment if they are unwanted, unwelcome, undesired or perceived as inappropriate by the person receiving them. Discussing a range of both clear-cut and ambiguous cases, and providing tools to assess such situations, is therefore particularly valuable in bystander intervention training.

- **Adopt inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory practices** across all documents, reporting channels and guidelines, by ensuring gender-neutral and bias-free language. Protocols, flowcharts and guidance materials should be adapted for non-native speakers and vulnerable groups through translation and simplified language.
- Universities should **implement targeted support measures for high-risk groups** and involve specialised professionals, such as psychologists, legal experts and cultural mediators, to provide targeted support and counselling for minority groups throughout the reporting and follow-up process. Therefore, anti-retaliation protections must be explicit and robust to guarantee that victims/survivors and bystanders can report incidents safely.

Tertiary Prevention

- **Adopt a survivor-centred approach** to addressing sexual harassment by fostering a safe and supportive environment for victims-survivors to come forward, ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences are believed. Institutions should provide comprehensive resources and support systems to assist victims-survivors in their recovery and, if they choose, in pursuing justice.
- **Avoid retraumatization at every stage**, ensuring that testimonies are never dismissed or minimised, and providing transparency at every step.
- **Offer trainings on trauma-sensitive listening** to staff responsible for the reporting channels and for members of disciplinary committees, ensuring empathetic, consistent and non-judgemental responses.
- **Enable accessible and, where possible, anonymous reporting channels**, including multiple low-threshold, anonymous reporting options (e.g., digital platform, confidential counsellors), ensuring victims/survivors and bystanders can report safely and without fear of exposure. If anonymity cannot be guaranteed, institutions must communicate this transparently, ensure that promised support is reliably provided, and offer appropriate assistance, such as free psychological help and special facilities (e.g., grant extension of study or promotion deadlines).
- **Implement coordinated case-management**, assigning a dedicated case coordinator and strengthen communication between all involved actors to guarantee consistency, transparency, and efficiency in handling cases, whilst ensuring confidentiality.
- **Maintain continuous communication with victims-survivors, providing regular updates** about the progress of their case, reducing uncertainty and reinforcing trust in

each step of the process. Also, the university must guarantee that disclosing parties are informed of the existence of other anonymous disclosures, in order to strengthen credibility and support.

- **Clearly communicate that complaints are welcome.** Complaints are ways to detect problems and make academia a better place. Having procedures and protocols in place is not sufficient; universities must also clearly communicate their intention to actively use and enforce them. For example, if two separate complaints are made about sexual harassment by a professor, the university should initiate an independent investigation to assess whether additional students or colleagues may have been affected.
- **Strengthen early detection of repeated cases,** through regular updates and information exchange between confidential counsellors in order to identify patterns of repeated misconduct and ensure timely action.
- **Systematically monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of protocols and prevention measures** by tracking implementation, reviewing procedures, and assessing the impact of training and awareness campaigns. Also **create case summaries, unified databases and digital dashboards** with anonymized statistics (disaggregating data by intersectional variables such as gender, age, role, nationality, etc.), define clear effectiveness indicators, and publish annual public reports. These reports should summarize prevalence, patterns, and institutional responses, and case summaries should be prepared following each incident analysis and outlining actions taken, lessons learned, and recommendations for improvement.
- **Ensure external and independent oversight,** by establishing disciplinary boards composed primarily of external members to increase impartiality and trust in the process.
- **Integrate sanctions within a broader reparative strategy,** combining punitive measures with compensatory and restorative measures. **Restorative measures** should aim to address and repair harm at the level of research groups or collectives, extending beyond the individual relationship between victim-survivor and perpetrator to restore trust and improve the broader working environment. **Compensatory measures** focus on granting specific groups of individuals targeted rights or entitlements in order to redress imbalances in their situation in relation to other groups. In addition, **symbolic reparative measures** may be implemented, either alongside or, where appropriate, in place of punitive measures. Such measures should be adopted in agreement with the affected person and take into account the impact of the events experienced (e.g., promoting actions of rejection against this type of violence, making tributes and commemorations to the victims-survivors).

- **Provide access to therapeutic and re-educational resources** by providing different tools, services or programs (own or public) to individuals who have committed any of the behaviours referred to in the protocol, supporting the development of their skills, knowledge and abilities, with the aim of avoiding the repetition of these behaviours.
- **Guarantee immediate access to specialised support services**, including confidential counselling, psychological assistance, legal guidance, translation services and a diverse pool (in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, etc.) of trained counsellors that victims-survivors can freely choose from. Support should be free of charge, culturally sensitive and accessible to individuals with disabilities or special needs. Also, **offer group sessions for victims-survivors**, as an additional support mechanism by helping survivors share experiences and strengthen resilience in a safe environment.
- **Strengthen coordination and effectiveness of institutional responses** by formalising protocols that regulate how internal units and external services work together, establishing clear communication rules, shared responsibilities and follow-up procedures. Coordination should include structured knowledge exchange, regular updates on available resources and joint workshops with external professionals. A central, confidential registry of reports of inappropriate behaviour should be established to identify serial perpetrators through monthly updates among trusted advisors.
- **Ensure regular and long-term follow-up**, establishing systematic follow-up with both victims-survivors and perpetrators, including periodic recontact by services, long-term psychological monitoring, and post-procedure follow-up of the accused person.

6. Conclusion & Call to Action:

Sexual harassment remains highly prevalent in higher education. As institutions that seek to maintain trust and credibility among society at large, as well as current and prospective students and staff, higher education institutions bear a particular responsibility to address this issue. Tackling sexual harassment requires a structured and comprehensive approach, which we organise across three levels of prevention. Implementing the proposed policy recommendations necessitates close collaboration across multiple internal departments, including the Diversity Team, Internal Health and Safety Department, Communication Department, Human Resources (responsible for training, onboarding, and welcome brochures for new staff), and Student Services. To ensure effective coordination and maintain an overarching perspective, appointing a Sexual Harassment Prevention Coordinator can be highly beneficial, as this role can bring together all relevant stakeholders and oversee implementation efforts. Importantly, a sexual

harassment prevention policy should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention. It requires continuous improvement and systematic monitoring through regular surveys, stakeholder consultations and transparent reporting.

While a structured and comprehensive approach to sexual harassment prevention is a vast enterprise, significant progress can already be achieved by improving information provision and awareness. Findings from the Uni4Equity survey, in line with numerous international studies, point to two central knowledge gaps: lack of knowledge about the available support services and insufficient clarity regarding which behaviours constitute sexual harassment. To address these gaps among students and staff, universities should provide clear and accessible information on inappropriate behaviours, legal frameworks, reporting procedures, services, and protection measures, and it can use an e-tool as a central access point for this information. In this regard, creating a website as described in best practice 1 can be considered as a quick win for universities. However, its effectiveness depends on being complemented by ongoing and recurring communication efforts—such as social media campaigns, posters, newsletters, student portals, onboarding sessions etc. to ensure that students and staff know how to access the website.

7. References & Resources

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DISCLAIMER: Uni4Equity is a project funded by the European Union's CERV-2022-DAPHNE Programme. Project number: 101094121 - Uni4Equity. However, the opinions and views expressed are solely those of the research team and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



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