



## Fostering a safe and respectful campus: Supporting first-year students through dignity and respect initiatives

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### ABSTRACT

This vignette discusses the establishment and impact of the Dignity and Respect Support Service (DRSS) at University College Dublin (UCD), created in response to a national commitment to foster safe and respectful campus cultures. Launched in November 2021, the DRSS aims to support first-year students through dignity and respect initiatives during orientation, a crucial period for establishing a sense of belonging. By September 2022, the DRSS began its engagement with UCD's orientation program, enabling the promotion of awareness regarding resources and support for students facing issues such as bullying and sexual misconduct.

Recognizing the pivotal role of student leaders in shaping the campus environment, the DRSS developed a workshop series to equip these leaders with the skills and knowledge to address inappropriate behaviours effectively. The workshops inform participants about relevant policies, define key terms related to misconduct, and discuss case studies grounded in real-life experiences that enhance relatability and understanding.

The initiative's rationale is built on the understanding that the initial weeks at university are marked by heightened vulnerability to unwanted behaviours, thus emphasizing the need for informed peer support systems. By training student leaders to embody the values of dignity and respect, the DRSS not only aims to empower these individuals as role models but also to cultivate a campus culture where respectful interactions become the norm. This vignette considers the program's design and effectiveness, highlighting its importance in creating an inclusive and safe environment for all students at UCD.

**Keywords:** bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct, student leaders, orientation

### Introduction

The Dignity and Respect Support Service (DRSS) was established in November 2021 at University College Dublin (UCD), in response to the publication by the Irish Department of Education and Skills of a document entitled 'Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions'. This document laid out a vision for Irish Higher Education Institutions to foster campus cultures that are safe, respectful, and supportive, providing a roadmap for achieving this transformative cultural change (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). UCD, Ireland's largest university, hosts nearly 40,000 students each year, welcoming over 5,000 new undergraduate students every September. These students participate in the university's extensive "Welcome to UCD" orientation program (UCD, 2025).

The orientation period is critical for shaping students' initial experiences of belonging and safety, as well as introducing them to the various support services available to them throughout their time at UCD.

September 2022 marked the first opportunity for the DRSS to actively engage in the orientation program and to promote messages of dignity and respect at the beginning of these students' journeys. During the months following the service's establishment, the team developed a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing student safety and awareness moving forward. By contributing to existing institutional efforts, the DRSS aimed not only to raise awareness about the support available for those affected by bullying, harassment, or sexual misconduct, but also to foster a campus culture rooted in mutual respect and inclusion.

### Rationale for the Student Leader Workshop

Due to the high number of incoming students, the DRSS team recognised the University's network of student leaders as essential partners in fostering a respectful campus culture. UCD's student leadership network includes both paid and voluntary roles, such as Peer Mentors, Residential Assistants, Global Guides, and Access Leaders. These individuals have a strong presence during the opening weeks of the academic year and often serve as the first point of contact for new students. They play a crucial role in shaping peer culture and social norms.

Recognising the importance of these groups, the team set out to create a workshop series aimed at equipping student leaders with the language, confidence, and practical tools needed to recognise and respond to inappropriate behaviours, as well as effectively direct their peers to relevant university support services. The rationale behind this initiative was twofold: to empower student leaders to become role models who embody the values of dignity and respect in their everyday interactions, and to establish peer-led channels for support that extend beyond formal university structures (UCD, 2023).

This initiative acknowledged that the first six weeks of university are a period of particular vulnerability to unwanted sexual behaviour (NUIG, 2020). By training informed and confident student leaders, the workshop programme aims to make a measurable difference in promoting inclusion and ensuring that appropriate support is accessible from within the student community.

### Format of the Student Leader Workshops

The Dignity and Respect workshop, developed to last 50 minutes, was designed to be part of the sometimes day-long training sessions organized by local units overseeing various student leader groups. Initially, we faced challenges introducing our workshops into these established training sessions, which were often short on time. However, through perseverance and by sharing data from our service on the occurrence of unwanted behavior, as well as findings from the NUIG (2020) research, we successfully convinced the local units to integrate our workshop into their training sessions.

The format of these workshops has remained consistent since their inception, grounded in best practices and our team's previous experiences (Humphreys & Towl, 2020). Each session begins with an overview of the service, familiarizes participants with the relevant policies, and defines key terms such as bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct. Additionally, we discuss the resolution options available to students who may have experienced these behaviours and explore case studies.

These case studies are a central focus of the training, and an area where student leaders consistently provide the strongest positive feedback. We draft the case studies based on our experiences in accepting disclosures and develop them in close consultation with the managers of each Student Leader group, to

ensure they are relevant and relatable to each group. In some cases, and with the agreement and support of the person who disclosed, we have used anonymized versions of real disclosures. Each case study is chosen to reflect situations that other students may encounter and to help participants apply the definitions discussed earlier in the training while considering the impact of these behaviours on those affected. Below is an example of a case study used in training the Residential Assistants.

#### *Sample Case Study*

*Marie and Sara have moved into their new apartment in the UCD Village with two others. The group established a rota for chores and set up a WhatsApp group for flatmates to share key information about the flat share. Sara feels the arrangement is working well until she inadvertently overhears Marie telling friends that her new roommate, Sara, is lazy and never cleans up after herself, even though they have a rota. Sara decides to redouble her efforts to clean the apartment.*

*Despite Sara's efforts, Marie starts to leave notes around the apartment where Sara has tidied, commenting on the substandard level of cleanliness and questioning how Sara was raised. When the other flatmates see these notes, Sara feels humiliated and undermined. When Sara chats with the other flatmates, they agree that her contribution is no less standard than theirs. Yet Marie never queries their contribution.*

*One morning, while Sara is having a lie-in, Marie starts banging on her bedroom door and shouting at her to get out of bed and stop being so lazy. Sara is a bit frightened and does not respond. Marie's insults become more abusive. Eventually, Marie leaves. Later that day, Sara notices that Marie has removed her from the flatmates' WhatsApp group.*

#### *Discussion Guide:*

- *How would you label the behaviours?*
- *How many individual instances of inappropriate behavior are there?*
- *What might the impact on Sara be?*

### **Development of the Student Leader Workshops**

Although the overall format of the student leader training has remained consistent, we actively seek feedback after every workshop. This feedback has been consistently positive, with students overwhelmingly indicating that they feel better prepared to respond to incidents of bullying, harassment, or sexual misconduct, and signpost their peers to support after completing the session. One area of consistent feedback was requests for more opportunities to interact. To facilitate this, we've added a range of interactive elements to the 50-minute workshop. These include small-group discussions in which participants develop definitions of the key terms, as well as activities that explore discriminatory grounds and we facilitate the examination and discussion of case studies. These changes have helped maintain high engagement levels, especially during what can be an intensive, long day for the student leaders.

We have received consistent feedback that there is a strong desire for more case studies or additional time dedicated to them. While we have been unable to fully accommodate this request due to the time constraints of the existing schedules of student leader groups, we have increased the amount of time devoted to case studies within the 50-minute session. Anecdotally, student leaders have reported that this

additional time allows them to engage more thoroughly with the concepts and considerations presented in the scenarios.

Our workshops are complemented by additional online training available to the student leaders. This includes the "*Active Bystanders: Challenging Bullying, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct – #NotInOurUCD*" online module. Recently, we have partnered with sectoral partners to develop an additional online training module titled "*Supporting Trauma-Informed Responses to Sensitive Disclosures*" and this is an additional resource we highlight during our workshops. Alongside other related initiatives, such as *Active Consent* training, these efforts are part of our continuous commitment to providing structured training and support for student leaders.

The student leaders have provided valuable feedback indicating that our workshops have effectively prepared them to prevent and address issues related to dignity and respect. They maintain contact with first-year students throughout the crucial six-week period and beyond. Anecdotally, we have observed an increase in their confidence when referring these students to our service for support. Additionally, as student leaders, they are also fellow students, and their active participation in our workshops reinforces our trust in them as engaged, positive members of the UCD community.

## Conclusion

Due to UCD's large student population, it was essential to strategically raise awareness about the support available for those affected by bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct. The university's student leader groups were identified as crucial partners in promoting a respectful online campus environment. Alongside other outreach activities conducted by the DRSS, these groups played a key role.

The service took advantage of existing training sessions with these groups to develop a 50-minute workshop aimed at familiarizing attendees with key concepts and utilizing case studies for practical application. These workshops have not remained static; instead, they have evolved based on student feedback and have been complemented by additional online training available to all students.

By sharing this vignette, we aim to assist other practitioners who are looking to address similar issues within their student populations.

## Biographies

*Kate Bruton* serves as a Dignity and Respect Support Adviser at University College Dublin. She is committed to helping members of the university community who have experienced bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct. Her research interests include gender studies, with a particular focus on supporting individuals who disclose incidents of sexual misconduct.

*Catherine Tormey* is the Dignity and Respect Response Manager at University College Dublin and oversees the UCD Dignity and Respect Support Service. She is dedicated to fostering a culture of dignity and respect in higher education, ensuring that every individual's contributions are valued and that all community members feel a sense of belonging.

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