

BMJ Open Strengthening universities' response to sexual harassment with an equity approach: the UNI4EQUITY mixed-methods study protocol

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Preventing online and offline sexual harassment (SH) is a public health priority, due to its worldwide magnitude and short- and long-term consequences to the victims and survivors. Universities are environments that may facilitate different forms of conflicts, including SH, but they also play a key role in preventing and addressing them. This paper describes 'Uni4Equity', a European project funded by the CERV-2022-DAPHNE Programme of the European Union (Ref. 101094121-Uni4Equity) aimed to reinforce universities' readiness to identify, map and respond to online and offline SH at workplace and other relevant settings (classrooms, digital space), with an explicit (but not exclusive) focus on minority social groups. More specifically, the project will address the research needs of conducting multidimensional diagnosis of SH at universities (scale and determinants) as a basis for preventive actions; assessing the effectiveness of preventive interventions such as social media campaigns and training workshops; creating a university culture that actively rejects SH; improving access to existing support services; and contributing to the acknowledgement of universities as an asset in preventing this issue.

Methods and analyses The project follows an exploratory sequential design for the period 2023–2026. In phase 1, a mixed-method initial assessment based on online surveys, semistructured interviews and desk reviews is planned in six targeted universities: University of Alicante, Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU), University of Maia, University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB), University of Antwerp (UAntwerp), University of Verona. Phase 2 integrates long-term and large-scale interventions at different levels of prevention (primary, secondary and tertiary) and implementation (interpersonal, institutional and social). These interventions combine online and offline training programmes addressed to students and staff, arrangements with internal and external support services and improvements in access to information and resources, including SH protocols and regulations. Phase 3 consists of qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the different Uni4Equity interventions and a final evaluation of the global impact of the project.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ Uni4Equity targets an ecological approach to sexual harassment drivers and integrates the multidisciplinary and multicentre efforts; the attention to multiple targets (victims, perpetrators and bystanders among the whole university community) and primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies within participatory mixed-methods research.
- ⇒ It is proposed to implement and assess the same educational programme across six universities, enhancing the programme's potential for transferability to other European universities.
- ⇒ The main limitation of both the initial mixed-method assessment and evaluation is related to the use of convenience samples and the limited number of students and staff who will participate in the trainings limits our conclusions about the level of awareness and growth.
- ⇒ Active participation is one of our project's main tenets and a basic contributor to the application of the social equity approach in our research, training and improvement strategies. However, this participation is limited to the arrangement of advisory groups and their engagement in different project phases.

Ethics and dissemination Ethical approval was obtained by the different universities research ethics committees (Universidad de Alicante, vice-rectorate for research: Ref. no. UA-2023-03-27; Università di Verona, Comitato di Approvazione per la Ricerca sulla Persona: Ref. no. UNIVR-24/2023; UAntwerp, Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities: Ref. no. EX_SHW_2023_38_1; AMU, Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Participants, Ref. no. UAM_19/2022/2023; UASB, Ethics Committee: Ref. no. UASB_28/08/2023; Universidade da Maia, Conselho de Ética e Deontologia: Ref. no. UMAIA_151/2023).

The research team will disseminate findings through peer-reviewed journal articles, presentations in scientific national and international events, policy briefs, infographics, videos and short reports.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment (SH) includes physical forms and verbal acts, as well as digital forms, such as cyber-harassment, which are sexually abusive.¹ Described as a form of gender-based violence,² SH affects mainly women in several contexts of their lives.³ Due to its prevalence and magnitude, SH against women in schools and the workplace has received great attention during the last decades,^{4,5} being recognised as an expression of sexism that reinforces gender-based inequalities in the distribution of social power.^{6,7}

Multiple risk factors have been associated with SH behaviours, ranging from macro-level systems of oppression and privilege, and meso-level variables such as organisational culture and the digital landscape,^{8,9} to micro-level, personal variables such as one's sexual norms and adherence to traditional gender roles.¹⁰ Overall, women are more likely to report unwanted sexual experiences than men, including online,¹¹ and especially in early adulthood.⁹ In addition, studies suggest that belonging to a gender, sexual and/or ethnic minority group, being disabled individuals as well as from gender or sexual minority groups,^{12,13} and people with disabilities have a higher risk of being a victim of SH.¹⁴

In universities, as well as in other organisations, gender inequalities exist that may facilitate SH. These are related to an unequal distribution of power between men and women in academic relations that promote hierarchies based on gender, class and other characteristics.¹⁵ According to the European Commission,¹⁶ occupational segregation in higher education prevents women from occupying more than 20% of high-ranking positions. The under-representation of women in high-level roles within the academic hierarchy reinforces gender asymmetries, potentialising situations of discrimination and sexual violence.¹⁷ Until relatively recently, there has been a systematic absence of universities demonstrating zero tolerance towards SH, and a tendency to under-report and normalise abusive situations.¹⁵ Victims and survivors feel insecure about reporting violence for fear of retaliation, revictimisation, not being believed or victim-blaming.¹⁸ In addition, there is a culture of tolerance or normalisation of harassment in the academia that may dismiss certain inappropriate comments or behaviours as 'harmless' and not serious enough for being reportable.¹⁹ Since university environments may enable different forms of harassment, including SH, they play a key role in preventing and addressing it.

SH, like other forms of violence, requires the development of intervention strategies that address its multiple drivers.²⁰ This paper describes the Uni4Equity project funded by the CERV-2022-DAPHNE Programme of the European Union (Ref. 101094121-Uni4Equity). The general objective is to strengthen universities' prevention of and response to SH using an equity approach. It integrates knowledge, tools and recommendations from previous projects on SH and other forms of violence and discrimination in academia^{21–23} within an action

framework addressing different levels of prevention (primary, secondary and tertiary) and implementation in which problematic gender relations play a role (interpersonal, institutional/organisational and social) as it has been previously proposed.²⁴ In addition, the project considers the entire university community (students, faculty, and research and administrative staff), incorporating their diverse social environments.

Research objectives

The general aim of the Uni4Equity project is to strengthen the ability of universities to identify, prevent and respond to online and offline SH in the workplace and in other relevant settings (classrooms, digital spaces), with an explicit (but not exclusive) focus on vulnerable groups (students, women, representatives of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and other sexual and gender minorities) community, people with disabilities and those who belong to minority ethnic groups). Specific objectives include the following:

1. To conduct a multidimensional diagnosis of the problem of SH (scale and determinants) at universities as a basis for preventive action.
2. To assess (or evaluate) which intervention or set of interventions, including communication of SH report data at universities, social media campaigns and training workshops, are effective in raising social awareness on all forms of SH.
3. To evaluate the potential of social media campaigns and training workshops for improving knowledge about existing tools and resources in the university as well as practical skills.
4. To reduce the risk of SH exposure and perpetration among the whole university community by creating a university culture that actively rejects all forms of SH, challenging its normalisation through improvement of existing protocols, social media campaigns and training workshops.
5. To minimise the impacts of SH on victims and survivors by working with external support services, increasing access to information on existing support services (university e-tools) and workshops (skills to respond correctly and safely to victims and perpetrators of SH).
6. To contribute with our universities' experience in this project to the acknowledgement of universities as an asset in preventing and addressing online and offline SH at the workplace and in other related settings.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

To respond to research objectives, a consortium of six universities (University of Alicante (UA), University of Antwerp (UAntwerp), Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU), University of Maia (UMaia), University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB), University of Verona (UNIVR)) and two research entities with experience in gender, SH and violence prevention research,

intervention and dissemination (Centro Studi ed Iniziativa Europeo – Ente del Terzo Settore and (CESIE ETS) and Cooperative APLICA research and translation) was created.

The project is based on social equity, participation and mixed-method approaches.

Social equity refers to the absence of inequalities in people's health and social well-being that are systematic, socially patterned (and therefore avoidable) and unjust.²⁵ A social equity approach to preventing SH in the university requires the development of strategies to improve the social circumstances of the entire university community, with special attention to groups that may be marginalised, such as women in lower professional categories or students who belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Participation is defined as the active involvement of individuals, communities or community-based organisations in the design, implementation, management or evaluation of community services or systems.²⁶ In Uni4Equity, a participation approach includes creating advisory groups in all project settings composed of representatives of the target groups (teachers, students, administrative staff) to engage them in different project phases.

A **mixed-method approach** will be employed throughout the project, using an exploratory sequential design. In phase 1, a multicountry, mixed-method initial assessment will be performed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the universities involved in relation to their ability to prevent and respond to online and offline SH. Using the results of phase 1 as its foundation, phase 2 includes the design and implementation of long-term, large-scale interventions in primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of online and offline SH. These interventions will be implemented on both an interpersonal, institutional and social level, prioritising participatory and group dynamics. Phase 3 will consist of the evaluation of the interventions, as well as a global mixed-method final evaluation of the impact of the project as a whole in the different university settings, based on the online surveys and semistructured interviews conducted in phase 1. The project started in February 2023, with completion expected by February 2026.

Patient and public involvement

How was the development of the research questions and outcome measures informed by the public priorities, experience and preferences?

The public (university community) was not involved in the original systematic review and did not contribute to identifying the issue of inconsistent reporting, the need for guidance and the research question.

How did you involve the public in the design of this study?

The public was not involved as research partners of the study. However, the advisory groups will continuously provide feedback on the project's data collection, analysis and dissemination strategies.

Were the public involved in the recruitment to and conduct of the study?

The public (university community) will be involved in the design, or conduct, or dissemination plans of Uni4Equity. The project includes creating advisory groups in all project settings composed of representatives of the target groups (teachers, students, administrative staff) to engage them in different project phases. Such as the review of the survey, finding stakeholders to interview, improvements proposals on the website of the project and the equality units, help in the dissemination of SH protocols, as well as social media campaigns, etc.

How will the results be disseminated to study participants?

The authors will disseminate the results via conference presentations, scientific dissemination, webpage repository, social media campaigns, etc. The public will help to disseminate the results by sharing them on social media, through the website, the violet points, etc.

Setting

UA (Spain) has the Equality Unit, a resource that offers multiple support tools, both face-to-face (such as volunteering against gender violence, violet dots and awareness-raising campaigns) and online (such as the Equality Unit website and the UA app, which provides information about available external and internal resources, posters, guides and disclaimers). All of them are aimed at all those people belonging to the university community who suffer or have suffered SH and/or gender-based violence. Also, at a tertiary prevention level, it includes the 'University of Alicante Protocol for the prevention and intervention against SH, harassment based on sex and other forms of discrimination and male violence' which establishes actions once the case has occurred.

AMU (Poland) in Poznań has several units and individuals who are responsible for equality issues and the prevention of SH: The Academic Rights and Freedoms Ombudsman, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Consultant, the Center for Research on Women's Participation in Public Space, and the Anti-discrimination and Mediation Strategy Team. Their websites provide information on primary, secondary and tertiary SH prevention, including procedures, contact information and actions dedicated to these issues. The most important document is the Equality and Anti-discrimination Policies of AMU, which contains all relevant information and procedures aimed at supporting victims and survivors of SH.

UAntwerp has established various support systems and protocols to address different forms of transgressive behaviour, including SH. These include an internal protocol to handle transgressive behaviours, which involves key services such as confidential counsellors and an external occupational health service. The University also offers psychological counselling for staff and students. At primary prevention level, UAntwerp has a code of conduct explaining which behaviours are expected of its members. At secondary prevention level, the university

has developed an in-house active bystander training to increase people's confidence and skills to intervene in potentially harassing situations.

UASB houses an official Staff Unit for Gender, Diversity and Equal Treatment with the Head of the Gender and Diversity Unit and an Equal Opportunities Officer. The focus of this unit is on raising awareness of gender and diversity and integrating it into teaching and research. Furthermore, there is an Ombudswoman for students. Her primary tasks include conflict resolution and mediation in matters, requests and misunderstandings between programme management, instructors, staff and students. The Ombudswoman is also intended to serve as a low threshold point of contact for concerns, complaints and requests of all kinds.

In the scope of UMaia (Portugal) Healthy Campus, different training actions and scientific events are promoted by teaching staff and information concerning SH is being disseminated among students, at the primary level. At the secondary level, UMaia's social media channels and website have been disseminating information on what SH is, and how and where victims can report SH cases and get specialised support. At the tertiary prevention level, in the last few years, UMaia created a *Code of Good Conduct for Preventing and Combating Violence and Harassment*, and an *Internal Report Channel* for the academic community. A Psychological Service and Support Centre is also available for SH victims. An Equality Office is being created.

UNIVR has the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Confidential Counselor, which are prepared to deal with individual cases of SH. UNIVR also adopted a regulation dedicated to bullying and SH, defining a general framework to tackle and manage cases of SH, especially from the point of view of the victims. UNIVR is also promoting initiatives aimed at raising awareness and reducing discriminatory stereotypes among the wider university community. UNIVR collaborates with local associations and institutions in the design and implementation of these prevention initiatives. Other resources, such as Occupational Health services, Psychological and Psychiatric counselling services, and Students Guarantor, may intervene on a case-by-case basis in order to support victims, bystanders and perpetrators as well.

Study phases

Phase 1: multi-country mixed-method initial assessment

Data collection will be conducted by triangulating an online questionnaire distributed to the university community, semistructured interviews with university stakeholders, and a desk review of existing policies, procedures and initiatives present in each targeted setting.

The desk review plans to gather the existing information, strategies and resources related to SH and other forms of gender-based violence at each targeted setting in the project, including the following: (1) units or services attending cases of SH and other forms of violence belonging to the university; (2) services offered

by external organisations; (3) primary, secondary and tertiary preventive initiatives; (4) SH prevalence data or related documents; (5) legislation and policy strategies on SH affecting the university; (6) other relevant issues. Once the data collection is finished, a qualitative synthesis and comparison of the information will be conducted.

The online survey targets the six university communities participating in Uni4Equity, aimed at understanding SH prevalence, the broader institutional climate of social safety, and the institutional capacity to respond to SH. The purpose of this study is to recruit a convenience sample of the main university groups (students, teachers, research and administrative staff). At least 25%–30% would be desirable for each category. Each university will disseminate the questionnaire through internal communication channels. For data collection, we will use a 15 min questionnaire in English and the universities' vernacular languages (Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, Italian, German and Dutch). The survey will be developed based on previous studies with similar purposes^{27–29} and other questions related to climate, knowledge of resources, SH prevalence, the reporting process and sociodemographic information of participants. An original common questionnaire will be designed in English and then it will be translated and adapted by the partner's teams to their context. The survey back-translation, monitoring and first descriptive analysis will be conducted by APLICA, and the university teams will elaborate interpretations of the results grounded in their own contexts.

The last research technique involves conducting qualitative interviews with institutional stakeholders on SH and related issues. We plan to conduct between 13 and 15 interviews in each targeted setting, covering the following key-informant profiles: university staff (including administrative staff and professors from various faculties), university policy makers (including equality officers and SH resource managers), student representatives (including student senators and members of student associations), and public institution representatives from city or regional equality programmes. However, the final sample of each setting will be assessed during the fieldwork and may vary according to the level of saturation of the collected information. A shared script will be developed, focusing on themes like SH perceptions, university resource knowledge, resource access barriers and policy recommendations (online supplemental file 1). Each project partner's team will conduct the pre-analysis based on a common template prepared by APLICA to ensure consistency during the interpretation. The template will cover aspects such as general perceptions, resource knowledge, access barriers, and policy recommendations.

Phase 2: design and implementation of long-term and large-scale prevention strategies

The second phase integrates the revision of internal regulations, protocols and formal agreements with external services; a training programme based on online and offline workshops with both students and university staff;

Table 1 Sexual harassment (SH) prevention programme in the academia

Prevention levels	Implementation levels		
	Social	Organisational	Interpersonal
Primary	Social campaign: a large-scale social campaign at social media with relevant actors (NGOs, students' associations, schools, external companies) to increase social awareness about SH and engage different target groups in a culture of no tolerance towards this issue (social level).	Regulations: desk review and analyses of internal related regulations to promote directly or indirectly an institutional support of SH strategies.	Workshop: a large-scale online training and practical workshop programme based on participatory and group dynamics which addresses all university target groups and focuses on team leading, work relationships and educational styles, incorporating a gender-transformative and intersectional approach. The programme aims to increase awareness about SH, identify abusive behaviours, promote healthy interpersonal relationships and challenge misperceptions of gender norms.
Secondary	External services: identify and improve the coordination with external services of support for affected groups through formal or informal agreements and arranging common activities (workshops, seminars, meetings...).	E-tools: increase access to information about existing support services through the development of a specific webpage or mobile app or the improvement of the existing ones.	Workshop: design, implementation and evaluation of a workshop programme to engage active bystanders among students, professors and administrative staff. It will be structured in three main parts: knowledge about attitudes towards SH and the importance of being an active bystander; skills to correctly and safely respond to victims and perpetrators of SH; existing resources at the university to inform affected persons.
Tertiary	External services: improve coordination between universities and other relevant sectors to manage and follow up SH cases.	SH protocols and codes: review and improvement of existing protocols to improve means of following up on victims and perpetrators.	Workshop: a capacity-building programme about grey zones and red flags in sexual violence and harassment situations; healthy and gender equal sexual consent, and assertiveness skills practice which will be addressed to the whole university community affected or potentially affected as victims, bystanders or perpetrators of sexual violence and harassment.
NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations. Uni4Equity project (2023–2026).			

and the improvement of access to existing infrastructures at the university to give advice on, attend to and follow up cases of SH in the university (table 1).

At the social implementation level, the main action is identifying and reinforcing coordination with external organisations. Improvements in accessing these services and the university's capability of following up reported cases are among the main objectives of this coordination strategy. It also includes an SH awareness campaign through different media channels (short videos and Instagram reels; infographics with results of the initial assessment of phase 1; and policy briefs addressed to other universities).

At the organisational or institutional level, we plan to revise and improve internal codes and regulations such as the existing SH protocols of action at the targeted universities. Content analysis will be based on:

1. The UniSAFE guideline: 'Developing a Protocol for addressing gender-based violence in research and higher education institutions: UniSAFE guidelines',³⁰ which aims to support research and higher education institutions in designing a protocol to address gender-based violence. This guideline explains what a protocol is

and what elements it should cover, along with practical tips and sample practices.

2. The 'Protocol university guideline',³¹ which provides a guide to prevent and address situations of gender-based violence, SH and harassment based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression within the university environment. It also establishes a system for collecting quantitative and qualitative indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of protocols at the university level.

At the interpersonal level, a training programme with three 10-hour workshops will take place online and/or offline (depending on the needs of each university setting) (table 2). Each of these workshops' series covers a different SH prevention level and will prioritise evidence-based activities. The secondary prevention workshop, for instance, will be based on the 5D's of bystander intervention proposed by Hollaback.³² The workshop series focused on tertiary prevention will be built upon the Sensoa Flag System.³³ All workshops will use case studies co-created by Uni4Equity research teams. They are fictitious cases that do not reproduce reality at any time and will be created for didactic purposes to facilitate the

Table 2 Overview of Uni4Equity training workshops for the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of sexual harassment (SH)

Objectives	Sessions	Activities	Time/activity (in minutes)*
Primary prevention: sexual harassment and main drivers with an intersectional and gender-transformative approach			
1. To critically rethink and self-reflect on personal gender-related views, behaviours, norms and values.	Session 0: Introduction.	Pre-assessment survey	20
		Presentation of Uni4Equity project	15
		Workshop Contents	5
		Self-presentation and expectations round	15
2. To increase awareness on gender, intersectionality and power dynamics in the academia and society.	Session 1: Gender-based violence in social and learning contexts.	Gender transformative and intersectional approach	45
		Gender-based violence	45
		Gender-based violence in the mass media	45
3. To create a safer working and academic environment.		Sexual Harassment	45
		Evaluation test	10
4. To contribute to education and awareness raising about the importance of positive and healthy interpersonal relationships based on respect.	Session 2: Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace.	Gender-based violence and SH in the workplace	45
		Case study analyses	90
		Reflecting in SH in your own context	30
		Evaluation test	10
5. To enable the university community to acknowledge gender discrimination and SH.	Session 3: Sexual Harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the academia.	Magnitude of SH in the academia	10
		Causes of SH (case studies)	90
		How to prevent and act upon SH	25
6. To endorse the university community in challenging sexist and tolerant attitudes towards gender-based violence and SH.		Evaluation test	10
		Results and satisfaction assessment	40
Secondary prevention: promoting active bystanders against SH			
1. To reinforce universities’ teams, networks and units in charge of gender equality issues through structural reforms, improved work processes and the engagement of key stakeholders for the prevention of SH.	Module 1: Introduction to Sexual Harassment.	Pre-assessment survey	20
		Presentation of the Uni4Equity project and active bystander’s programme	15
		Introduction to Sexual Harassment	60
		Introduction to Active Bystanders	90
		Evaluation of the module	20
2. To increase the social awareness about the importance of rejecting all forms of SH and the need to contribute to its prevention among university members.	Module 2: Bystanders: crisis’ assistance.	Intervention in a crisis situation	60
		Social and communication skills: empathy and active listening	40
		Victim needs, what to do and what not to do	40
		Intersectionality	30
		Red flag system. Classifications	90
		5D Intervention model: distract, delegate, document, delay, direct	40
		Evaluation of the module	20
		Module 3: Available resources at the university to address Sexual Harassment.	University resources (adapted to each country)
Evaluation of the module+post-assessment survey	30		

Continued

Table 2 Continued

Objectives	Sessions	Activities	Time/activity (in minutes)*
Tertiary prevention: promoting the awareness and capacity to identify sexual harassment			
1. To increase awareness on the three roles each university member might need to take on with regards to sexual harassment.	Module 1: How to recognise boundaries of the other person?	Introduction to the programme	20
		Sensoa’s flag system.	150
		Application of flag system to relevant cases	110
		Conclusions	10
2. To increase knowledge on how to recognise other people’s boundaries, and how to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behaviours.	Module 2: How to listen and react appropriately?	Introduction	10
		Reacting towards the person who exhibited the behaviour, using Sensoa’s flag system	80
		Reacting towards the person affected, using a trauma-informed approach	40
3. To improve skills on how to listen and react appropriately when another university member discloses an experience of SH.	Module 3 for staff: Reflecting on the grey areas of transgressive behaviour, consent and hierarchy.	Overview of available university reporting channels	40
		Conclusions	10
4. To gain insights in how to clearly communicate one’s own boundaries to others.		Introduction	20
		Warm-up: true or false?	10
		Boundaries between students and teachers: case study	20
		Consent as a legal criterion	5
5. To create a safer working and academic environment.		Is a sexual relationship between teachers and students permissible?	70
		Discussion and critical reflection of material using case study	15
		Overview of available university resources	10
		Conclusion	30
	Module 3 for students: Reflecting on the grey areas of transgressive behaviour, consent and hierarchy.	Introduction	20
		Quiz: test your legal knowledge	20
		Beyond the legal framework: play the flitertwister	20
		Case study to invite reflection on practice of consent: what can you do?	60
		What can the university do to decrease sexual misconduct?	25
		Resources and services on and off campus	5
		Conclusions	30
5D: Intervention model comprising five strategies to respond to harassment - distract, delegate, document, delay, and direct Uni4Equity project (2023–2026).			
*Planned timeline is approximate. This distribution can vary depending on the group characteristics and the complexity of the activity.			

comprehension and practice of the theoretical explanations, as the examples in [table 3](#).

Phase 3: qualitative and quantitative evaluation of interventions

The above-mentioned interventions will be evaluated in-site using forms assessing participants' topical knowledge before and after the workshop (outcome parameters: knowledge and understanding of gender and

discrimination; knowledge of SH and gender-based violence; knowledge of harassment in the workplace and university environment; knowledge and trust towards universities support services and SH prevention strategies; skills about how to act when witnessing SH; knowledge of resources; knowledge on how to recognise other people's boundaries; knowledge on how to distinguish

Table 3 Examples of case studies and activities for Uni4Equity training workshops for prevention of sexual harassment (SH)

Objective	Examples of case studies*	Activities	Tips for trainers
Primary prevention: sexual harassment and main drivers with an intersectional and gender-transformative approach			
To identify (a) the type of SH, (b) power imbalances considering intersectionality and groups in a vulnerable situation (if existing), (c) strategies that should have been adopted (individual, leadership, the organisation), and also (d) protective and risk factors in each situation.	Johana, a 22-year-old lesbian line cook, complained to the restaurant management about inappropriate invitations to sexual contact by his 60-year-old chef with a chronic health condition, named Antony. Antony strongly denied all the accusations, manifesting that he was the victim, and he was suffering from all the stress Johana had caused him. The restaurant did not investigate the complaint and the restaurant manager fired Johana, reasoning that it was easier to replace a line cook than a chef. Despite this, when going back to work, coworkers blamed Noa for the harassment suffered.	To discuss about types of SH present in the case	Verbal (ie, inappropriate invitations to sexual contact)
		To identify power imbalance (considering intersectionality)	The hierarchical relationships between Johana and Antony, and age difference between them. Sexual orientation – possibility of being in a vulnerable situation. Could have Johana's sexual orientation, intersecting with her gender, influenced Anthony's behaviour?
		To identify protective and risk factors	Risk factors: ▶ Johana's dismissal; ▶ Absence of investigation by the employer; ▶ Absence of consequences to Antony; ▶ Antony's health condition (which circumvents Anthony of being held accountable for his actions, thus constituting a risk factor for the victim); ▶ Absence of Johana's protective factors. Protective factors: none
		To assemble strategies that should be adopted (individual, leadership, organisational)	▶ Johana's psychological and legal support (if needed) ▶ Articulation with a public (eg, police authority) or non-public (eg, LGBTI+ organisation) entity to report the alleged sexual harassment
Tertiary prevention: promoting the awareness and capacity to identify sexual harassment			
To build the capacity to respond towards someone who has been identified as perpetrator or victim.	During a lecture, a professor uses the fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood to explain something. In discussing the fairytale, he tells a female undergraduate student in the classroom that this story is about “young, innocent women such as yourself, who should be protected against men who want to have sex with you.” He proceeds to tell another student, “I pretend to be in love with you, but actually I only want to sleep with you.” The classroom goes quiet after this remark, except for some hushed laughter in the back.	Reacting towards perpetrator	Depending on the classification of the flag: green, yellow, red or black, you can respond as: Green: (1) Don't stop the behaviour; (2) There's no need to respond to healthy behaviour. If you do respond, send out a positive message; (3) Name or question what you see or hear; (4) Respond empathetically: discuss the feelings of all involved; (5) Affirm the behaviour. Explain why. Yellow: (1) Stop behaviour or distract; (2) Name or question what you see or hear; (3) Discuss the feelings of all involved; (4) Affirm the aspects of the behaviour that are positive and explain why; (5) Limit the aspect that is not OK and explain why; (6) Agree on how things can be done and how to address them.
	Katarzyna, a young professor, is giving an online guest lecture through the digital platform Zoom for a group of undergraduate students from another department. Through the private messaging function, a male undergraduate student sends her messages saying she looks beautiful and smart, telling her he would like to get to know her better, and asking whether he can take more of her classes. Katarzyna ignores the messages. They make her feel uncomfortable and this affects her focus while teaching the class.	Reacting towards the victim	Red: (1) Stop the behaviour; (2) Name the behaviour; (3) Ask about the perceptions of all involved; (4) Affirm the behaviour: what is OK and why; (5) Limit the behaviour: say or show what is not okay and why; (6) Negotiate agreements: how to deal with this in the future?; (7) Monitoring: increase supervision, suggest measures; (8) Register internally; (9) Provide follow-up care. Black: (1) Stop the behaviour; (2) Name the behaviour; (3) Ask about the perceptions of all involved; (4) Affirm the behaviour: what is OK and why; (5) Limit the behaviour: say or show what is not okay and why; (6) Negotiate agreements: how to deal with this in the future?; (7) Monitoring: increase supervision and act on measures; (8) Register internally and externally; (9) Provide follow-up care.

Continued

Table 3 Continued

Objective	Examples of case studies*	Activities	Tips for trainers
LGBTI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and other sexual and gender minorities. Uni4Equity project (2023–2026).			
*Case studies are fictitious and do not reproduce reality at any time.			

between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours; improved skills on how to listen and react appropriately). For the evaluation of the entire project, a mixed-method approach based on phase 1 will be conducted. For this, quantitative indicators of effectiveness will be measured in terms of mid-term changes in availability and community awareness of improved different policies, protocols, services and activities to identify and manage on-line and off-line SH cases (indicators: changes in yes/no questions about knowledge of recent prevention interventions and existing support resources); mid-term changes produced in attitudes towards the problem and the need to tackle it (indicators: changes in Likert scale score assessing perceptions about university climate regarding SH, safety and interpersonal support; changes in Likert scale score assessing the perception of university support resources; changes in frequency of SH exposition and in frequency of reporting SH situations—suffered or witnessed; and changes in Likert scale score assessing reporting process assessment); mid-term changes in bystander attitudes within different groups at the university (changes in Likert scales' score assessing bystander attitudes); and mid-term changes in engagement of key relevant actors including social minority groups (stratified analysis of the previous indicators by sex, gender, age, sexual orientation, self-identification as part of an ethnic minority, academic/professional status and other relevant sociodemographic variables). In addition, a qualitative assessment based on semistructured interviews with stakeholders (at the university and other related settings) will be developed later in order to evaluate the long-term impact on attitudes, engagement, availability of different policies, protocols, services, and reinforcement of coordination networks of the implemented actions in Uni4Equity (indicators: changes in general conception of SH; in perception of SH climate at the university; in knowledge, perceptions and assessment of resources and initiatives; in perceptions about access to resources and process assessment; in the assessment of coordination networks regarding SH prevention; and in the assessment of risks, opportunities and policy recommendations).

The variability across participating universities, which may influence the comparability of results, will be carefully considered in the study design, interventions and evaluation. Differences in institutional policies, resources, reporting mechanisms and campus cultures can shape how SH is perceived, officially reported and addressed. These factors could lead to variations in the effectiveness of the planned interventions. To address this, our analysis will incorporate contextual factors,

examining how institutional characteristics mediate the outcomes. Although partners have assembled the same tools (desk review protocol, survey and interviews guide) to collect qualitative and quantitative data, each of them will be adapted to the different study settings (eg, contents related to existing resources may vary as well as references to professional categories and positions). In order to adapt the data collection tools to context variability, we will benefit from the pilot experience of the local advisory groups involved in the project, made up of students and staff. Additionally, to manage variability in the data analysis, we will use stratification techniques and sensitivity analyses to assess the robustness of findings across different university settings. By doing so, we aim to provide nuanced insights that acknowledge institutional diversity while ensuring meaningful cross-setting comparisons.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Across the European Union, there is an increasing need for effective interventions to reduce the incidence of different forms of SH. Preventing and combatting online and offline SH at European universities is in line with several Equality Plans and European Regulations such as the Gender Equality Strategy (2022–2025) and the 2019 International Labour Organization Convention.³⁴

Uni4Equity's main contribution lies in its encompassing and varied approach of SH prevention (primary, secondary and tertiary prevention), data collection method (desk review, survey and interviews) and intervention development (theoretical explanations, case studies, e-tools and other means to improve access to existing resources). The active participation of our advisory groups allows diverse representatives of the universities' communities to contribute to the design and pilot implementation and evaluation of research, training and resource accessibility.

The Uni4Equity project's short-term goals include reinforcing university teams focused on gender issues by engaging the whole university community to prevent both online and offline SH.³⁵ Medium-term goals include improved institutional support, skills and attitudes in detecting, addressing and following up on SH cases. This is focused on increasing university members' awareness of harmful sexual norms and consequent SH normalisation, as to decrease one's vulnerability of SH perpetration and victimisation.^{36 37} In line with previous findings,³⁸ we hope students and staff will be better equipped to identify SH and understand SH protocols, while staff will gain a

deeper understanding of SH, power dynamics and how to support students.

Long-term effects include heightened social awareness about SH prevention, reduced exposure to SH risk factors and increased recognition of universities as safe spaces. The project also addresses key challenges like power imbalances and the fear of reporting SH by implementing policies supported by equality plans.³⁹ These measures will hopefully foster a zero-tolerance culture towards SH across universities, empowering the entire academic community to recognise, report and prevent harassment. Through Uni4Equity, we hope to reinforce our universities' ability to respond to SH through mutual learning and sharing of best practices that have been already implemented in our contexts or will be implemented as part of the project planning. In addition, we also plan to share our experience with other European universities.

Limitations and strengths

The project will have to face several limitations related to research and planned interventions.

The main limitation of both the initial mixed-method assessment and evaluation is related to difficulties in recruiting target participants at the university. Convenience samples are not representative of the entire university populations and instead mainly include members who are interested in the studied topic. The fact that only a limited number of students and staff will participate in the trainings limits the conclusions we can draw about the level of awareness and growth. In addition, workshops are not going to be given in clinical conditions so differences in pre-post cannot necessarily be attributed to the trainings.

Active participation is one of our project's main tenets and a basic contributor to the application of the social equity approach in our research, training and improvement strategies. However, this participation is limited to the arrangement of advisory groups and their engagement in different project phases.

Regarding the training programme, we will implement and assess the same workshops across six universities, each with varying contexts in terms of SH prevalence and available support services. While English serves as our shared language, all training materials and selected evaluation indicators must be translated and adapted to our respective languages to ensure they are applicable to our target populations. This diversity may be considered a strength, as it enhances the programme's potential for transferability to other European universities.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Ethical approval was obtained by the different universities research ethics committees (Universidad de Alicante, vice-rectorate for research: Ref. no. UA-2023-03-27; Università di Verona, Comitato di Approvazione per la Ricerca sulla Persona: Ref. no. UNIVR-24/2023; UAntwerp, Ethics

Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities: Ref. no. EX_SHW_2023_38_1; AMU, Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Participants, Ref. no. UAM_19/2022/2023; UASB, Ethics Committee: Ref. no. UASB_28/08/2023; Universidade da Maia, Conselho de Ética e Deontologia: Ref. no. UMAIA_151/2023).

Informed consent forms will be provided to participants of both on-survey and semistructured interviews as well as pre-post surveys for the results and process evaluation of training workshops. The project adheres to the principles outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19); the Helsinki Declaration;⁴⁰ Convention No. 108 of the Council of Europe of 28 January 1981, regarding the protection of individuals in relation to the automatic processing of personal data; Directive 95/46/EC of the European Parliament and Council of October 24; and Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of the European Parliament and Council of 17 December 2013.

The project's procedures and objectives will be thoroughly explained to ensure that potential participants are fully informed and do not feel pressured to give their consent. The consent and information forms explain that participants can skip the survey/interview or workshops at any point if they want and guarantee confidentiality. The Qualtrics survey platform ensures that responses are anonymised.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is important to conduct the planned interventions with caution. The team of UAntwerp has therefore developed a guide on how to prevent retraumatisation during the project's workshops and interventions.⁴¹

Each participating university has created their own project webpage to guarantee a more effective dissemination of the research findings, workshops and campaigns in their own communities. In addition, they will explore different ways of transferring knowledge such as infographics, policy briefs, Instagram reels, podcast programmes, meeting presentations and peer-reviewed publications. Advisory groups will participate in identifying the best ways to ensure students and university staff receive project updates and results.

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SJ, SP, AC, ADC, AM-H, MM, BJ, MW and VS's contributions. CV-C, MB-B and VP-M wrote the first draft of the manuscript. SN, JMC, SvDV, SJ, SP, AC, ADC, AM-H, MM, BJ, MW and VS reviewed, improved with significant contributions in all sections and approved the final version of the manuscript. Guarantor: CV-C.

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