

## University-Based Prevention and Impact Research to Promote Safe and Equitable Spaces – Insights from the Uni4Equity Project

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### Abstract

*The EU-funded research project "Uni4Equity" aims to enhance universities' capacity to identify, document, and appropriately address sexual harassment. Partnering with seven European institutions, the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland plays a key role. The project highlights that gender-based inequalities and asymmetric power dynamics in academia often create conditions conducive to harassment. Addressing these issues aligns with social work's commitment to justice and human dignity, emphasizing the importance of initiatives like "Uni4Equity" in fostering safe and equitable academic environments.*

*The project implemented preventive awareness workshops targeting students and staff to promote understanding of sexual harassment and the role of "active bystanders." Workshops incorporated interactive methods such as case studies, role-playing, and group discussions. A mixed-methods evaluation included pre- and post-workshop standardized surveys to measure knowledge and competence changes, along with workshop leader reflections for qualitative insights.*

*The evaluation revealed significant improvements in several areas:*

- *Awareness: Participants demonstrated heightened sensitivity to sexual harassment issues.*
- *Willingness to Intervene: Increased readiness to act in harassment situations.*
- *Institutional Perception: Enhanced awareness of institutional resources for prevention and response.*

*Workshop leaders emphasized the effectiveness of participatory methods and the necessity of clear communication about institutional processes to build trust. Additionally, key university stakeholders were identified as critical contacts for students.*

*The project underscores the value of evidence-based, participatory prevention programs in creating safe and equitable university spaces. Structural and cultural transformation is crucial for long-term impact, requiring efforts to dismantle power asymmetries and ensure accessible mechanisms for prevention, reporting, and addressing incidents. Such transformations necessitate transparent and collaborative processes, fostering trust and shared responsibility. Social work's "triple mandate" of integrating scientific knowledge, professional ethics, and human rights further ensures inclusivity and fairness, particularly for marginalized groups. Sustainable implementation requires integrating prevention programs into institutional strategies, continuous staff training, and adequate resource allocation, coupled with improved re-search methodologies to assess long-term outcomes.*

*"Uni4Equity" provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of linking theoretical and practical approaches to advance safe, inclusive academic cultures. Beyond immediate effects, its findings point toward the potential for structural change, promoting equity and fostering an inclusive academic environment.*

**Keywords:** Active Bystanders, Safe and equitable spaces, Sexual harassment in the academic context, Evaluation

### 1. Safe Spaces in Higher Education

In the context of increasing awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) within academic settings, universities are being called upon not only to educate students but also to foster inclusive and safe

environments. The EU-funded research project Uni4Equity directly addresses this challenge. Coordinated by a partnership of seven European institutions, with the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland playing a key role, the project aims to enhance universities' capacity to identify, document, and appropriately respond to sexual harassment. It highlights how gender-based inequalities and asymmetrical power dynamics in academia often create conditions that enable harassment to occur and remain unaddressed. These structural issues are particularly relevant in the field of social work, whose professional mandate includes the pursuit of justice, equity, and human dignity.

As part of Uni4Equity, a series of workshops was implemented in 2024 and 2025 with students and university staff, aiming to foster awareness, knowledge, and the capacity to act against GBV. These workshops were not stand-alone events but key components of a participatory, evidence-based prevention strategy. They sought to empower participants to recognize sexual harassment, understand its broader social context, and respond appropriately - especially in the role of active bystanders. Across the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland and other institutions, these sessions incorporated interactive methods such as case studies, role-playing exercises, and group discussions. Pre- and post-workshop standardized surveys were used to measure changes in participants' knowledge and competencies, and qualitative reflections by workshop leaders added contextual depth to the findings.

A fundamental theoretical framework for these workshops was the concept of "safe spaces." Drawing from feminist pedagogy and critical social theory, safe spaces are environments that allow individuals - particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable groups—to express themselves openly and engage in difficult discussions without fear of reprisal. In these workshops, safe spaces did not mean avoiding discomfort. On the contrary, they facilitated engagement with sensitive topics such as harassment, discrimination, and power asymmetries in a manner that was respectful, inclusive, and rooted in trust.

## 2. Methods

The implementation of the workshops under the Uni4Equity project took place between September 2024 and February 2025. In total, eight structured workshop sessions were conducted at the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland across different academic programs, engaging a total of 120 participants. The workshops were distributed across three key work packages (WP3 and WP4) and targeted both international and national students from a variety of disciplines, including Social Work, Energy and Environmental Management, and Building Technology.

Specifically, five workshops were held with students from the Bachelor of Social Work and international student groups (WP3). These took place on September 10 and 11 (international groups), and on October 16, November 6, and November 27, 2024 (social work students). Participation ranged from 9 to 24 students per session. These workshops focused primarily on raising awareness about gender-based violence and deepening theoretical understanding.

In parallel, four capacity-building workshops (WP4) were organized between October 17 and November 30, 2024, with students from technical and environmental study programs. These sessions were designed to strengthen bystander intervention skills and included both full-time and part-time student cohorts. A total of 38 students participated in these sessions. Each workshop followed a modular structure, combining face-to-face components (10 hours) with digital learning (5 units via Moodle). The participatory format included role-plays, discussions, and input phases led by experienced facilitators.

All sessions were evaluated using mixed-method approaches, including standardized pre- and post-questionnaires and qualitative feedback from participants and facilitators. This structured implementation allowed for comparative insights across different academic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and levels of prior knowledge-laying the foundation for a nuanced evaluation of learning outcomes and the effectiveness of participatory workshop methods.

## 3. Results

Across the different workshop formats, the results demonstrated clear impacts in three key areas. First, there was a measurable increase in awareness: participants reported greater sensitivity to the various forms of sexual harassment, from overt acts to more subtle behaviors such as unwanted messages or the abuse of hierarchical authority. Second, the workshops improved participants' willingness to intervene: more students and staff indicated that they would feel capable of acting in

harassment situations, whether by directly confronting inappropriate behavior or by supporting the affected person. Third, there was increased recognition of the institutional support structures available for prevention and response though it was also evident that many participants lacked detailed knowledge about these mechanisms before the workshop.

The workshops were delivered to diverse student cohorts, including Bachelor of Social Work students, international students from various degree programs, and students from the Bachelor's program in Energy and Environmental Management. Notably, the workshop with international students showed a clearer before-and-after improvement in knowledge and understanding of key concepts. Participants were better able to identify false assumptions about sexual harassment and to critically evaluate how social and cultural narratives—such as those found in music or media—reinforce gender stereotypes. In contrast, Bachelor of Social Work students, despite being in a discipline closely aligned with social justice, showed an increase in uncertainty in the second knowledge assessment. This may reflect time pressure, linguistic challenges, or the complex nature of the material. Nevertheless, most students rated the sessions as useful, and many expressed interest in applying the knowledge in both professional and everyday contexts.

In the capacity-building bystander workshops (Work Package 4), the use of the 5Ds model—Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct—provided practical strategies for intervening in harassment situations. These interactive sessions encouraged participants to explore their own biases, reflect on past experiences, and practice responses to hypothetical but realistic scenarios. This participatory structure was well received. Students appreciated the opportunity to reflect on institutional roles and social norms, particularly in environments where hierarchical or cultural pressures often discourage reporting or intervention. In one particularly impactful moment, a student shared their experience as a DJ in a nightclub organizing the “Ruf Luisa” campaign—a coded intervention system for harassment. Others reflected on their role as youth coaches or shared experiences of discrimination in school systems. These moments brought theory to life and underscored the importance of empowering individuals to act within their spheres of influence.

An important element emerging from the workshops was the link between institutional trust and participant confidence. While the majority of students indicated they understood what steps to take in harassment cases, many also expressed skepticism about whether their institutions would support them. Workshop facilitators emphasized that transparent and accessible processes for reporting and follow-up are essential for building this trust. Furthermore, the workshops highlighted a continued need for institutional accountability. Participants often struggled to differentiate between legally actionable harassment and ethically problematic but non-criminal behavior—revealing gaps in policy communication and legal literacy.

From a structural perspective, Uni4Equity demonstrates the value of integrating prevention programs into broader university strategies. Sustainable implementation requires more than one-off events: it demands continuous training for staff, dedicated resources, and institutional policies that prioritize inclusivity and fairness. This is particularly relevant for universities committed to the social work ethos, which balances scientific knowledge, ethical responsibility, and human rights. Social work’s “triple mandate” serves as an ideal lens through which to view the transformation of university spaces—emphasizing not only the mitigation of harm but also the proactive cultivation of equity.

Another important outcome of the project was the identification of key stakeholders within universities—figures such as ombudspersons, deans, and program leaders—who must be visible and accessible in supporting victims and encouraging reporting. Their role is crucial in creating what might be called institutional safe spaces: structures that go beyond the classroom to ensure that students and staff have clear, confidential pathways for seeking help.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The workshops analyzed in this article provide a compelling case for the integration of safe space principles in university-based GBV prevention strategies. By prioritizing emotional safety, inclusivity, and active participation, these sessions demonstrated the potential of educational interventions to shift campus cultures. Moving forward, universities must recognize their dual role as both educational and

social institutions—charged not only with imparting knowledge but also with modeling and cultivating equity, dignity, and care.

Ultimately, the *Uni4Equity* project affirms the power of linking theoretical and practical approaches in advancing inclusive academic cultures. While immediate learning outcomes were positive, the project's broader significance lies in its contribution to structural change. It calls for dismantling harmful power dynamics, embedding safe space principles into policy and pedagogy, and promoting shared responsibility among all members of the academic community. Universities must recognize that fostering a safe and equitable environment is not a peripheral task but a core institutional mandate—integral to learning, teaching, and the pursuit of knowledge itself.

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