

All college and university staff given new resource to help them support anyone experiencing gender based violence

The launch of a project to support all college and university staff handle disclosures of gender based violence takes place at Edinburgh Napier University today (Thursday, 27th September) with support from the Deputy First Minister of Scotland.

Over 100,000 cards have been printed and distributed to every college and university across Scotland so that staff can have details of the national, specialist support services at their fingertips. The cards fit into wallets, purses and staff ID badges. It's hoped that awareness of the cards in college and university will encourage victims of gender based violence to disclose their experience to someone they feel comfortable speaking to, knowing that they will be believed and receive the right support.

The idea for the cards came from Ms Fiona Drouet, mother of Emily Drouet, who tragically took her own life having experienced a campaign of gender based violence whilst a student at university. Ms Drouet founded the #EmilyTest campaign. The cards recognise that any one of the 75,000 staff working in universities and colleges may receive a disclosure of gender based violence or witness something, but not everyone will know what to do. The cards offer the basic information needed to quickly refer someone experiencing any form of gender based violence to specialist services. Many colleges and universities took the option to customise their cards to include details of the support services available on campus.

Given to colleges and universities from early September, the cards have a very practical purpose but they also pay tribute, in a very small way, to Emily Drouet. The cards are printed in Emily's favourite colour.

Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP said:

"Tackling violence against women and girls and the attitudes that help perpetuate it are key priorities for the Scottish Government. It's vital that we work with universities and colleges to ensure they are places where students are safe to live, study and research. The support cards launched today will empower university staff to support students and provide advice on where they can access help. This an important step towards fostering a culture that is clear in its condemnation of gender based violence and gives staff and students the confidence to report unacceptable behaviour."

Commenting at the launch of the cards, Fiona Drouet, founder of the #EmilyTest Campaign said:

"I hope the support cards will help to bridge gaps and, if used effectively, have the potential to save lives. This is a positive step towards safeguarding students and staff alike. While many students will hopefully benefit from the increased awareness this new tool provides, staff are currently vulnerable to receiving disclosures with the absence of appropriate training."

"I believe this practical tool will give staff something powerful to offer to students needing urgent help and support. The aim of the card is not a solution or a fix all, but to empower staff when handling a disclosure. Statistics show us that a supportive and understanding response to a disclosure is vital. Encountering a dismissive response often escalates self-blame and substantially reduces the chance of the victim/survivor ever seeking further help."

“These cards have come too late for Emily, but we hope staff will embrace this resource by keeping it on their person at all times and never underestimating the difference it could make to someone's life. We hope they will offer a much needed lifeline to victims/survivors.”

The cards were developed over the spring and summer with input from Fiona Drouet, NUS Scotland, staff and students at universities and colleges across Scotland, the representative bodies of colleges and universities and with guidance from women's organisations and the Equally Safe Team at the University of Strathclyde. The card design and copy was tested with focus groups of students, staff and the project sought the views of survivors of gender based violence. The project has the support of the Scottish Government.

Professor Andrea Nolan, Convener of Universities Scotland and Principal of Edinburgh Napier University said:

“The cards are a practical step in supporting staff with this responsibility, recognising that anyone could receive a disclosure but not everyone will have received specialist training. The cards complement the training and other activities that universities have in place to tackle gender based violence. We are pleased we could help to realise this goal of the #EmilyTest Campaign and glad that this resource is available in every university and college across the country.”

“Every student and member of staff at university has a right to feel safe and respected and everyone has a responsibility to support that environment. We want everyone to know that they can seek help from any member of staff, if they are experiencing something that doesn't feel right to them; they will be believed and will quickly receive the right support.”

Shona Struthers, Chief Executive of Colleges Scotland, said:

“The development and roll-out of this resource is extremely significant and welcome. It is essential that we create the safest possible environment for students and staff members in our colleges and universities – one which effectively tackles the threat of sexual harassment and abuse – and the provision of these cards represents an encouraging success for the #EmilyTest Campaign.”

“The college sector has robust procedures in place to deal with sexual harassment and gender-based violence, but more needs to be done, which is why we are collaborating with all the organisations involved in dealing with this very serious issue. We will continue to work closely with partners to also focus on prevention, tackling unacceptable behaviour, and ensuring survivors have access to the best possible support.”

Commenting, NUS Scotland Women's Officer, Shuwanna Aaron said:

“It's crucial staff and students alike, across Scotland, know where to go to report gender based violence, get support, and feel confident in doing so. We hope these cards will help do just that, and that in future they can be rolled-out to Scotland's students too.”

“This is a significant first step in the fight against gender-based violence on our campuses, but there's much still to do – like providing effective prevention and intervention training, supporting survivors, mainstreaming gender equality in the curriculum, and much more.”

The cards complement work to tackle gender based violence led by colleges and universities across Scotland and the support provided by the Equally Safe Toolkit for higher education, launched in March this year. The support cards and digital assets circulated across Scotland also provide a six step guide for staff on how to handle a disclosure of gender based violence; the disclosure guidance is taken from the Equally Safe Toolkit.

Gender based violence is an issue in our society. The #MeToo movement has raised global awareness of this issue and it is one that colleges and universities are determined to tackle in their staff and student communities. Sadly, a survey by the National Union of Students suggests that as many as one in four female students experience unwanted sexual behaviour during their studies.

ENDS

NOTES

- The two key messages on the card encourage students to seek support *“if something doesn’t feel right”* and aims to raise awareness that *“psychological, emotions, physical and sexual abuse can take many forms.”*
- The project to develop the cards has been led by Universities Scotland, working with a steering group including Fiona Drouet of the #EmilyTest campaign, AMOSSHE Scotland (the professional network of university Student Service departments), the College Development Network, Colleges Scotland, the Equally Safe in HE team at Strathclyde, university HR Directors, NUS Scotland, the Glasgow branch of Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Government, Scottish Women’s Aid, UCU Scotland, and Universities Scotland.
- The term ‘gender based violence’ is used because Scotland recognises that women and girls are more likely to experience it and men more likely to perpetrate it because of their genders. The card provides information on specialist services run for women, for women of black and minority ethnicities, the LGBT+ community and for men who have experience abuse.
- A new microsite to support the cards has also been launched: www.endGBV.uk including a suite of digital assets to be in use across colleges and universities.
- NUS Scotland ran smaller-scale pilot of similar cards last December, distributing cards to students during the *16 Days of Action Against Gender Based Violence*. The project launched this week builds on pilot with a different design and copy, taking it national to staff in all universities and colleges.
- The statistic that one in four female students have received unwanted sexual attention during their studies comes from a 2014 National Union of Students survey: <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/nus-research-reveals-one-in-four-students-suffer-unwelcome-sexual-advances/>