

# **Equality in student association affairs**

# The aim of the training:

- Learn more about the concepts and legislation related to discrimination
- Understand discrimination as a phenomenon and the causes that create discriminatory behavior
- Learn methods for creating and maintaining safe, tolerant, respectful and supporting atmosphere in the student culture



# The structure of the training:

What is discrimination in student association affairs?

- Defining core concepts related to equality and legislation
- Special features in student associations

How to prevent and deal with discrimination:

- Discrimination as a phenomenon
- Safe Space Guidelines
- Equality Plan + student humor
- Equality representative and harassment contact person

How to support someone who has experienced harassment:

- Discrimination is not an individual problem

# Discrimination in student culture

## Finnish legislation:

- The Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014) forbids discrimination and any order to discriminate and its aim is to improve and safeguard the realization of equality and help anyone who has experienced discrimination. Equality means that everybody is of same value regardless of their personal attributes.

*Discrimination is forbidden due to personal attributes:*

*age, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, opinion, political activity, family relations, handicap, health, sexual orientation or other matter related to their person.*

- The Equality Act (609/1986) aims to prevent discrimination based on gender. According to this act everyone should be guaranteed equal opportunity and equal treatment regardless of one's assumed gender, gender identity or how one displays their gender.

## Discrimination

- Discrimination consists of treatment of an individual or group, based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category, in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated.
- Restricting members of one group from opportunities or privileges that are available to another group.

## Harassment

- Behavior violating basic human rights.
- Based on personal attributes recognized in legislation.
- Harassment is used to create a humiliating, degrading, defamatory atmosphere against someone.
- **One can experience harassment without being a member of the discriminated group.**
- Gender based and sexual harassment

# Special features in student associations

- Peer groups, voluntary work, secondary occupation, spare time (not formally accountable)
- Irregular attending to events and campaigns (not necessarily fixed groups or positions)
- Social media and digital communities
- Partying
- Employees, elected representatives, volunteers and target groups are mixed

# What kind of harassment may occur in student associations?

- Touching and commenting based on friendliness: familiarity culture.
- Party culture, different social norms in situations, drugs, sexual harassment in parties .
- People who harass others are known but nobody knows how to intervene in their behavior.
- Defamation and spreading rumors in social media.
- Sexual stalking, bullying and pressurizing into doing smth.
- Nonsensitive way of talking, unwanted sexual suggestions, reckless joking.

# How to prevent and deal with discrimination?

*In order to reduce discrimination, we need to understand the mechanisms behind it.*

## Social norms and power structures:

- Social norms and structures are representations - ways of thinking and talking - which are part of a culture and embedded in our daily lives. They're usually unconscious routines and considered normal.
- They define what is considered desirable and acceptable behavior in certain situations and also who has the right to define that behavior.
- The division of power leads to inequality in social representations where some cultural aspects are more valued than others. This causes some experiences (for example minority and women rights) to be systemically diminished.
- Social norms change in time when the cultural hegemony is unmasked, questioned and not taken for granted.
- The change usually leads to a conflict when privileged positions are exposed and challenged.



# Safe Space Guidelines

Considered as basic guidelines that are used for creating practices that allow everybody to feel welcome, safe and respected. They also serve as the rules of the student association. When participants are required to follow these rules they can be used as authority when solving problematic situations.

What increases safety and creates a sense of belonging?

- Safe environment: trust, the right to be vulnerable and to express oneself without fear of being judged
- Assuming diversity
- Being aware of social norms: Awareness of excluding practices makes it easier to eliminate them and create more tolerant atmosphere
- Right to define oneself: Everyone should have the right to choose which things are relevant in themselves in any given situation.
- Respecting privacy: The right to choose what to reveal and what not to
- Accessibility and availability

# Safe Space Guidelines

What increases safety and creates a sense of belonging?

- Everybody is an individual and may differ significantly from each other in terms of personal boundaries. One should never generalize their own preferences.
- Don't make assumptions of someone's identity, gender, sexual orientation or other trait related to their person. You simply can't know other people's experiences, thoughts or current situation in life.
- Since we do make some assumptions, one needs to be aware of them.
- Never define someone's experience or identity for them.
- Be open-minded and listen. Respect others, don't judge or belittle diversity.

# Equality Plan

Plan made by an organization which states the means of how the organization will improve equality and reduce discrimination.

- When creating the plan the experiences and opinions of members of the community should be taken into account. Association can make equality or wellbeing surveys to collect data.
  - Aims of the plan are explained
  - Responsible authority is named for each aim
  - The methods are listed
  - How to measure the realization of the plan

Basic principles in the plan:

- Acknowledging the groups that experience unequal treatment.
- Minorities are heard when promoting their interests.

# Equality Plan

Examples of themes that should be considered in the plan:

- Transparency
  - Good governance: people know how, what, and when something is decided. Possibility to attend meetings and read the minutes. No pressuring, corruption, hiding information or power abuse.
- Pricing
  - Participation fees of events should be reasonable. There should also be plenty of activity that doesn't require substantial financial commitments.
- Communication
  - Extensive, proactive and open. Ambiguous and confusing communication should be avoided. Use relevant languages and communicate in good time. Contact information is provided.
- Gender and sexuality
  - Diversity is respected and binary separation avoided. Sexuality is not assumed or unnecessarily asked.

# Equality Plan

- Accessibility
  - When communicating about events it's clearly stated should the premise be inaccessible and how: not just "inaccessible" but for example 5 stairs, a threshold etc. When signing up to an event organizer should ask if there's need for special arrangements. There should be a person who to contact for questions.
- Events for everyone
  - All students are encouraged to participate in student association activity – creating a culture where everyone feels welcome. Different kind of events.
- Alcohol
  - There is always a possibility to participate in activities with a non-alcoholic beverage. Nobody is pressured to drink alcohol. There will be non-alcoholic events and non-alcoholic drinks are invested in (other than water).

# Student humor

- Vital part of the student culture and colourful at times.
- Humor is a difficult form of art – there's no one recognized authority to tell what's acceptable and what's not.
- It depends on how humor is perceived and how people react to it.
- Basic principle should be that everybody can have fun and nobody feels attacked.
- Humor fails should it hurt somebody, people feel unsafe or someone feels that it's hard or unpleasant to participate because of it.
- **Negative stereotypes and racist jokes maintain discriminative power relations.**
- Supposed to be easy, insightful, and fun – for everybody. Therefore, hard, polemical, tough, or otherwise emotional subjects should be avoided.
- People should have the right to have fun and participate without the risk of having to confront hard subjects unexpectedly.
- It's about the atmosphere: negative humor decreases everybody's mood.

# Equality representative

*Each student union would benefit for having a person responsible for equality affairs and who could solve problematic situations to some extent.*

- Evaluate the association and its activity, recognize unequal practices such as some traditions and raise awareness of them as well as informing the board of equality problems.
- Coordinates and leads the process of solving equality problem together with other relevant people.
- Creates feedback channels and conducts equality surveys.
- Coordinates the creation of Equality Plan and Safe Space Guidelines.
- Promoting equality and unmasking discriminatory traditions usually faces a lot of emotional criticism. Correcting traditions and changing them into equal ones might be a sensitive thing for the community. Rep should expect opposition.

# Harassment contact person

- Manages feedback and personal calls: offers help and support but doesn't try to solve cases or act as a judge.
- If the person wishes to solve their case, person helps in arranging a meeting and advises where to contact further.
- Unbiased and doesn't express value-based comments.
- Primary responsibility is to listen to and support the person who experienced harassment.
- All calls are confidential.
- Problematic situations are subjective experiences, different from each other, and there is no universal solution for them.
- Let the person tell what happened and define their own experience.
- Person accused of harassment always has a chance to defend themselves.

Wellbeing of the person who experienced harassment can be improved without solving the case or confronting the offender.



# Supporting the person who experienced harassment

- Harassment might be hard to recognize – especially immediately. Unfair experience can become clear even after years have passed.
- It's extremely hard to confront the offender without any support.
- Person experiencing harassment might be too exhausted to deal with the situations but they still need support or it might be virtually impossible to tell the offender since cooperation with them is needed in the future.
- Harassment situations are about power abuse. It requires tremendous amount of courage to stand up to one's offender even for the bystander and an individual should never be demanded to do so.
- **Instruction that demands action from the victim places the responsibility from the offender to the offended and strengthens unequal oppressive culture.**

*Discrimination is not an individual problem but the whole community's and it can be reduced by creating such a culture and practices that condemn discrimination with emphasizing collective responsibility in the realization of equality.*

## In conclusion

*Small things can have a tremendous impact in promoting equality but at the same time it requires continuous and goal-oriented action.*

- Discrimination is a group phenomenon and never an individual problem. It affects everyone in the community.
- Only by listening to the members of the community we can understand what needs to be improved
- Tradition can't be used as an excuse to discriminate.