

WIT lecturer awarded €10,000 over sexual harassment by students

Eoghan Dalton Reports

A lecturer at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) has spoken of her “enormous relief” after being awarded €10,000 following her sexual harassment by students. Louise Walsh, from Waterford, was speaking after the Labour Court had published its decision to order WIT to pay the compensation for not doing enough to prevent her harassment.

The Labour Court’s determination said the money was for “the distress and the effects of sexual harassment and harassment based on her gender”. “It’s an enormous relief,” she told the Munster Express. “This took a long time, around five years, to see through to the end so I’m just glad it’s now over.

“It was intimidating to have to go into that class and it did have an impact on me.” The Labour Court decision requires WIT to review the effectiveness of its policies and procedures for dealing with its sexual harassment. “I hope now that WIT will follow through and implement the proposals that would mean this won’t happen again,” Ms Walsh said.

She added she did not believe WIT was treating her claims seriously as it never sought to inform or interview students in the class on the back of her complaint, while she was unable to identify the students behind the harassment. The case related to a number of incidents on various dates between October 10 2014 and March 2015.

Walsh stopped teaching the group of students in March 2015 but she continues to work at WIT today. Representing herself in the Labour Court, Ms Walsh outlined how the harassment had come from a large group of males in her agricultural science class.



Sexual references

The harassment began after WIT assigned Walsh a combined class of 100 students from three courses with around 85 of the students male. One incident detailed involved how she had been subjected to comments about how the male students “would do her”.

Throughout the six month period Ms Walsh had been subjected to inappropriate sexual references and sexual language including coarse words as well as references to sexual acts. On October 10 2014 Ms Walsh informed WIT that she had been sexually harassed by a large group of male students in her assigned class.

Following an incident on October 24, she informed the Head of Department of this experience and advised her that the behaviour had the purpose and effect of violating her dignity and creating an intimidating and hostile working environment. WIT took the decision to split the class subsequent to another notification from the lecturer on November 9.

Louise Walsh told the Labour Court that WIT had not taken any adequate steps when responding to her complaints. WIT contested the claim and told the Labour Court that it took all practicable steps to avoid the occurrence of sexual harassment or harassment based on gender.

However, chairman of the Labour Court Kevin Foley said that the court was satisfied that WIT is liable for the sexual harassment and the harassment suffered by Walsh on the grounds of her gender. Mr Foley stated that while WIT did take steps in response to Walsh's complaint, WIT "cannot be found to have taken such steps as were reasonably practicable to avoid a recurrence of sexual harassment and harassment based on gender".

No mechanisms in place

He said that the Head of Department, course leaders and the then President of the Student's Union spoke to the class concerned, however he added that there was "no evidence" that sexual harassment had been raised during these discussions.

Due to WIT's Student Disciplinary Committee being non-functioning at the time of the harassment, for reasons unrelated to the case, there were no mechanisms in place to facilitate a response to Ms Walsh's complaints.

The Labour Court ordered WIT to review the operation of its dignity and respect policy and in particular the effectiveness of arrangements in place to communicate the policy to students.

WIT must also review the effectiveness of arrangements in place to respond to complaints made by teaching staff of sexual harassment and harassment by students, including where the identity of individuals involved is not known to the victim.

Responding to the Munster Express, a WIT spokesperson said the Institute would be "taking the time to reflect on the decision of the Labour Court".

"WIT is committed to providing a safe working environment to all employees and takes this matter very seriously," the spokesperson said adding that the Institute would "continue to work with staff and their representatives in the monitoring and review of our policies and procedures to ensure that such an environment is free of all forms of bullying, harassment and discrimination."