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UniSAFE Crisis Communication Checklist:

A checklist for research and higher education institutions on crisis communication about cases of gender-based violence

This document draws on contributions of experts who participated in the UniSAFE workshop that took place in Prague on 16 October 2023 and was compiled by Panagiota Polykarpou, with input by Lut Mergaert, Alain Denis, Vasia Madesi, Maxime Forest, Ana Belen Amil, and Monica Lopes.

This checklist is part of the UniSAFE toolkit (www.unisafe-toolkit.eu) developed under the UniSAFE Project "Gender-based violence and institutional responses: Building a knowledge base and operational tools to make universities and research organisations safe".

UniSAFE Consortium Partners

Aim of this document

This checklist is designed to guide research and higher education institutions through the challenging process of crisis communication in the event of a case of gender-based violence at the institution getting wide, public attention. Such situations require a swift, sensitive, well-grounded, and strategic response to address public concerns while safeguarding the welfare of the university community. This document provides a structured approach to navigating these complex matters, ensuring effective communication, victim protection, and preservation of institutional integrity.

For whom?

This document is intended for administrators, communication professionals, and any staff involved in addressing gender-based violence (e.g. Gender Equality officers, Gender Equality committees, task forces or working groups on gender-based violence, human resources personnel and legal advisors, etc.). It aims to serve as a resource for those responsible for developing and executing crisis communication strategies in research and higher education institutions.

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✎ Before the crisis

☐   **Form a diverse crisis management team**, with gender-based violence expertise. Ensure that at least one member of the team is trained in crisis communication. Alternatively, provide media response training to one or more members of this team.

☐   **Define communication objectives** and establish goals focusing on the following aspects of **victim protection, accountability, acknowledgment of the crisis and identification of shortcomings** in current procedures.

☐   **Outline communication principles**, such as **empathy** towards victims and the affected community, **transparency** and **honesty**, and **cultural sensitivity in communications.**

☐   **Develop a crisis response protocol** that outlines the previous points and ensures a coordinated and comprehensive approach to managing cases of gender-based violence. This protocol should include procedures for immediate response, internal and external communication strategies, support services for victims, and guidelines for the review and improvement of policies and practices.

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⚠️ During the crisis

☐ **Immediate notification to crisis management team**
- Swiftly activate the crisis response protocol.
- Gather the crisis management team for an emergency meeting.

☐ **Assessment and information gathering**
- Collect all relevant information about the incident.
- Assess the immediate needs and safety of the victim(s).

Communication directed at internal stakeholders

☐ **Development of internal communication strategy:** Formulate clear, empathetic messages for internal stakeholders, based on agreement reached in the crisis management team. Key elements include:

- **Inform faculty, staff, and students:** Share information about the incident and subsequent actions, including the internal investigation process, as appropriate. See Prosecution in UniSAFE toolkit. Ensure that the message shared includes only disclosable information.

- **Highlight the institution's commitment to action:** Clearly demonstrate the institution's dedication to addressing the crisis with urgency and resolve. This includes acknowledging areas where policies may fall short but also outlining specific steps being taken to rectify these issues and prevent future occurrences.

- **Promote institutional responsibility:** Stress the collective responsibility within the institution to manage the situation effectively. Advise against external communications, encouraging the use of established internal communication channels for discussions and updates.

☐ **Set up dedicated channels for the community** to express and discuss their concerns, such as platforms for community dialogues. These platforms will serve as a space for managing and aligning community expectations, fostering an environment of support and mutual understanding during the crisis.

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Tips for messages

- Ensure the message is reviewed by the crisis communication team.

- Ensure the message remains uniform across all communications and channels, is based on facts, and conveys empathy.

- Foster trust by assuring that all concerns raised will be acknowledged and addressed.

☐ **Support service announcement**
- Share information on available support services for affected individuals.
- Provide details for counselling, legal consultation, and additional relevant services.
- Encourage those affected, including bystanders, to share their experiences and seek support.
- Offer guidelines for faculty and teaching staff on engaging with and supporting students who might want to talk with them.

☐ **Initiate or cooperate with investigation**
- Decide on internal investigation needs and collaborate with external authorities, if involved.

☐ **Provide ongoing updates**
- Ensure ongoing transparency and accountability by keeping internal stakeholders informed about developments and next steps, maintaining a balance between transparency and the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. Embed mechanisms to uphold accountability throughout the process, ensuring that this commitment to openness and responsibility is actively maintained over time.

☐ **Address feedback and concerns**
- Respond to internal stakeholder feedback and provide additional information, if needed.

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Communication directed at external stakeholders

☐ **Prepare external communication content**
- Ensure all messages are approved by the crisis communication team.
- Prepare a public statement or press release.
- Inform about the specific platform where updates will be posted.
- Tailor the message for external audiences, based on facts and actions taken.

Key elements to include

- Acknowledge the occurrence of an incident and affirm a dedication to safety, justice and policy improvements.

- Clearly state the commitment to follow established procedures.

- Pledge to safeguard the victims and all affected parties.

- Actively address policy inadequacies beyond verbal assurances.

- Demonstrate the institution's commitment through concrete actions to reform and strengthen existing policies.

- Focus on the efforts to strengthen and enhance response mechanisms.

- Maintain respect for privacy while showing empathy in communications.

- Pledge only what the institution can feasibly deliver.

- Emphasise that actions and decisions will be based on facts, not on speculation.

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☐ **Manage media relations**
- Consider the possibility of designating a spokesperson with training in crisis communication who can competently represent the organisation, has a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence issues, and the ability to effectively engage with media outlets, ensuring adept representation of the organisation during the crisis.
- To safeguard the crisis management team members from potential public offences or harm, opt for written statements and releases for disseminating information.
- Keep a close watch on media reports and public feedback. Restrict the engagement of social media managers on platforms.

☐ **Inform external entities, as relevant**
- Strategically identify and categorise external entities requiring notification, distinguishing between groups that need immediate information due to legal obligations or case severity, such as law enforcement and legal counsels, and stakeholders like sponsors and donors, who are informed as part of integrity preservation and damage control efforts.
- Work together with external agencies, as needed, for a unified response.

☐ **Public statement release**
- Release the public statement or press release across various media channels and social media platforms.
- Guarantee that the public message aligns with internal communications for consistency.

☐ **Engage with the wider institutional community**
- Actively engage with different groups such as alumni, unions, local organisations and NGOs involved in support services. The extent of engagement should reflect the level of interest or involvement of each stakeholder group.
- Offer clear, correct and disclosable details about the incident to the broader community.

☐ **Monitor media and social media platforms and response**
- Observe media coverage and public reactions, including on social media platforms.
- Oversee responses and interactions on social media platforms, especially those involving staff and students.
- Engage on social media only to reiterate official statements, avoiding discussions.

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☐ **Continuous external communication**
- Announce the start of the investigation, including details about the committee's composition and external members.
- Include the following key points in the communication at the end of the process:

Key elements to include

- Determination of policy breaches (without necessarily specifying details).

- Imposition of sanctions, where applicable.

- Identification of policy areas needing improvement.

- Reaffirmation of the institution's ongoing commitment to safety and transparency.

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