



Ministry of Education, Culture and
Science

Advice and recommendations

regarding the advisory report
Social Safety in Dutch Academia –
from Paper to Practice

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Advisory Committee
Diverse and Inclusive
Higher Education
and Research

The advisory report Social Safety in Dutch Academia – from Paper to Practice stresses the urgent need for coordinated action from all parties with regard to social safety in education and research. Good scholarship is impossible without social safety. If efforts are made to approach social safety from a range of different perspectives, it becomes clear which problems need to be addressed. The report offers concrete action strategies aimed at changing the structure of organizations and their working culture.

The Advisory Committee on Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (DIHOO) welcomes the analyses and recommendations presented in the advisory report. It is now up to the academic community to take action. To that end, the Advisory Committee would like to add several considerations of its own.

Monitoring and enforcement

- **We advise the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) to place specific demands on institutions based on the advisory report.** It must be made clear where responsibility lies for implementing the advisory report's recommendations. Systematic monitoring is an effective way of providing transparency with regard to what steps are being taken to promote social safety, diversity and inclusion and what the results of these efforts are.
- **We advise the Ministry of OCW to request annual statistics on social safety, diversity and inclusion from all institutions.** This should include the number of reports of inappropriate behaviour, the nature of the reports, how satisfied those reporting are about the handling of their reports, and the demographic characteristics of those submitting reports (insofar as it is permitted to record these data). Systematic and transparent monitoring enables people reporting inappropriate behaviour to demonstrate that they belong to a group that faces systematic exclusion or is frequently confronted by inappropriate behaviour. A limited or declining number of reports of inappropriate behaviour may also indicate fear of reporting within one's own institution or insufficient clarity with regard to where complaints can be made. In view of this, the Advisory Committee suggests that it be made possible for complaints to be put to existing bodies, such as the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism or the Government Commissioner on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence. They would then be able to compile anonymous details of the reports they receive to supplement the statistics requested annually from the institutions by the Ministry.

- **If monitoring suggests the need for remedial action, make use of interventions that have proven to be effective** (Kalev & Dobbin, 2022). Interventions focusing on behaviour that have proven to be effective, such as *Active Bystander* training, should be introduced as standard for managers. Interventions of this kind can contribute to awareness-raising and prevention while also enhancing people's ability to raise the issue of inappropriate behaviour directly.
- **We advise institutions to be extra vigilant when it comes to warning signals.** There is a strong risk of the abuse of power in the case of:
 - programmes that mainly involve employees who are dependent on visas;
 - institutions that primarily employ their own alumni (Horta, Veloso & Grediaga, 2010);
 - institutions in which employees from marginalized and underrepresented groups are regularly assigned to lower positions, less likely to be given promotion or are more likely to leave.
- **We advise executive boards to be proactive in identifying unsafe situations within institutions that are not immediately visible.** Executive boards can intervene and prevent inappropriate behaviour from continuing, often for years, without any reports being made, by being alert to incentives that could encourage the ignoring of inappropriate behaviour or the punishment of anyone submitting reports. We explicitly call on executive boards to take responsibility in identifying where social safety is at threat or at risk of becoming so and to take action to improve or guarantee safety. This could take the form of a culture scan or, when appointing or considering the promotion of staff to managerial positions, being proactive in assessing people's suitability for staff responsibility and whether reports have been made in the past. It makes sense to investigate what legal possibilities exist within employment law that can be used for this purpose, for example screening or background checks. The current lack of reliable data primarily benefits those people who are undermining social safety at work. We advise the Ministry of OCW to call institutions to account if they make insufficient effort to maintain social safety.

Phasing out hierarchy and dependency

If inequality and social unsafety are allowed to continue within academia, this results in a lack of different perspectives. This, in turn, undermines the quality of research and stifles innovation (Hofstra et al., 2019; Kozłowski et al., 2022; National Academy of the Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). As a result, the value that research and education have for society is limited. If the academic community does not properly reflect society, issues and challenges can be overlooked. If issues are not visible, no effort will be made to search for or find solutions.

- **We advise institutions to take measures to equalize hierarchical relationships within the academic community.** The Recognition & Rewards (*Erkennen & Waarderen*) programme has made an important contribution to acknowledging and valuing the range of tasks and responsibilities expected from academics. It must be possible for all academics who supervise doctoral candidates to be designated as promotors (*ius promovendi*), irrespective of their job titles. The distinction drawn between

university lecturer, associate professor and full professor is generally not an adequate reflection of the actual workload involved. This distinction is not drawn in neighbouring European countries (Storm, 2018).

- **We call for HR staff to be given a more independent position.** This will enable them to call anyone within the institution to account for inappropriate behaviour, regardless of their position within the hierarchy. Institutions must ensure that training is provided that properly addresses the problems and dilemmas faced by HR staff in practice.
- **In the event of demonstrable, systematic exclusion of marginalized and underrepresented groups within institutions, we advise the Ministry of OCW to enable the employment and education inspectorates to take serious action in response.** This can be achieved by identifying systematic and institutional exclusion as mismanagement. Marginalized and underrepresented groups within academia are more likely to experience a lack of social safety (e.g. [UniSafe report 2022](#)). In practice, these are the academics and students most likely to face discrimination, exclusion, intimidation, the abuse of power and retribution if they report or share their experiences (e.g. [Young Academy Groningen report 2021](#)).
- **We call on the Ministry of OCW to make efforts to improve legal protection for people reporting social safety issues.** This will involve identifying the amount of public resources invested by institutions in legal proceedings against staff employees and students who have reported socially unsafe situations, how many reports have been handled to the satisfaction of the person reporting, which measures have been taken to improve the safety of the situation in question and whether those reporting (are obliged to) leave the university after having reported situations that are unsafe. The task of providing this information could possibly be delegated to ombudspersons.

Raising awareness of power and privilege

The advisory report contains specific recommendations for achieving cultural change, such as holding discussions on what is deemed to be normal behaviour at work. However, the success of this kind of initiative can be impeded by power differentials.

- **We advise administrators, deans and others with responsibility for staff to participate in training courses designed to create and/or increase their awareness of their own power and privileges.** Research has shown that inappropriate behaviour is more readily accepted of people who fit in with the norm. If there is a failure to explicitly address power differentials and privileges, interventions, such as a discussion on what is deemed to be normal at work, will not result in the cultural change envisaged. Anyone in a position of power can shape the narrative within a conversation. This results in inequality being maintained. Training programmes that are designed to raise people's awareness of their own power and privileges can help achieve the sensitivity required to combat the abuse of power.
- **We call for academics from marginalized and underrepresented groups who are at the start of or midway through their careers to be allowed to take the lead in determining what new, responsible and inclusive leadership entails.**

This will prevent any new definition of effective leadership being determined by people who are unaware or insufficiently aware of their own power and privileges or who prioritize maintaining their own position of power.

- **In the policy and efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, we advise all signatories of the national action plan for more diversity and inclusion in higher education and research to be alert to the fact that actively counteracting social safety for one's own interests must not be rewarded.** Recent studies have shown that some academics deliberately cause unsafe situations in order to remove undesired competition in favour of advancing their own careers (Mansfield et al., 2019; Täuber & Mahmoudi, 2022). In such cases, socially unsafe situations become a means for acquiring and protecting one's own position of power. The partners must make active efforts to prevent bullying and the abuse of power being rewarded with career advantages (Forster & Lund, 2018; Tjink et al., 2016).

An inclusive approach that takes account of employees and students

- **In the development of policy and activities aimed at enhancing social safety, we call on institutions to take explicit account of students and support staff.** Social safety is very important for everyone who belongs to an institution and not only for academic staff. In attempting to counter and prevent inappropriate behaviour, several institutions already take explicit account of students and support staff in their strategies. They should serve as an example to other institutions.
- **We call for an integrated and intersectional approach to diversity, inclusion and social safety for the entire sector.** The lack of diverse perspectives develops long before people reach higher education. Exclusion mechanisms start at the point of entry to institutions – and even before that – and can hold students and staff back throughout their studies or careers. The Advisory Committee recommends a coordinated approach in which equal attention is paid to both education and research.

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This is a publication by the Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (DIHOO)

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