

## Factsheet

# Frequently asked questions about social safety

We want everyone to feel welcome at the UvA and for staff and students to treat each other with respect and refrain from undesirable behavior. Unfortunately, undesirable behaviour does happen, also within a university setting. This fact sheet sets out what the UvA is doing to foster a safe environment in which to work and study.

### What do we mean by social safety?

The UvA is committed to providing a positive study and work environment in which we treat each other with respect, nobody feels unsafe and everyone can develop their talents. Students and staff must have the opportunity to address concerns, dilemmas and complaints within the UvA. They must feel they are safe to do so and that their report or complaint will be taken seriously. We want everyone to be assured they have a safe basis for their work or studies and, if necessary, to conduct difficult or critical conversations. Social safety is a broad concept, ranging from a sincere culture in which people can hold others accountable, to transparent, accessible complaints procedures and the establishment of clear boundaries for conduct. Overstepping these boundaries is never acceptable. The UvA has a code of conduct for all UvA staff and students. We have also drawn up a statement on social safety in conjunction with the other Dutch universities.

### How is the UvA ensuring a safe environment?

Students and staff must have the opportunity to address

concerns, dilemmas and complaints within the UvA. They must feel safe in doing so, and have confidence that their report or complaint will be taken seriously. Should students or staff find themselves faced with unsafe situations or undesirable behaviour, there are different individuals and institutions they can turn to. (see Social Safety Support Guide), e.g. one of the confidential advisers, the ombudsperson, an independent complaints committee and an independent reporting point. In addition to effective procedures, the recognition, discussion and prevention of undesirable behaviour is essential. The same applies to aftercare for those who have reported or experienced such behaviour. Consequently, discussions and training courses are being held to foster a culture in which undesirable behaviour can be discussed and managers and others are equipped to respond effectively to red flags. An awareness campaign aimed at all staff and students has been scheduled for the spring.

### How come things went wrong three times over the past few years?

Unfortunately, undesirable behaviour does happen, also within a university setting, including at the UvA. In response to recent cases, we asked external experts to scrutinise the efficacy of the UvA's existing social safety system. Their advice includes recommendations for improvements, which will be implemented.

### **Is it true that the UvA only took action after stories were published in the media?**

At the Faculty of Law, an external committee conducted an investigation, after which the professor in question left the UvA. In the study programme French, the committee ruled in 2018 that the complaint was partly well-founded and partly unfounded, and a new investigation started in November 2020. At Conservation and Restoration, a complaints procedure turned out not to be possible because the complainants wanted to remain anonymous, but disciplinary measures were taken nevertheless. In each of these cases, the action was taken before the stories appeared in the media.

### **How many reports on undesirable behaviour are made each year?**

The total number of reports or complaints regarding undesirable behaviour is low, amounting to a few dozen a year from almost 40,000 students and 5,000 staff. As it happens, all universities have a similar level. The employee survey indicates that 22% of staff have experienced undesirable behaviour, mainly gossip, exclusion or verbal abuse. Sexual harassment does occur too, with 1.1% saying they have experienced it. We believe that undesirable behaviour is more common than reports would suggest.

### **Why are so few cases reported, then?**

Possible explanations include the reporting threshold being too high, insufficient awareness of the possibility of making a report or lack of confidence in the process. Over the past couple of years, we have done a great deal to bolster the reporting system and to raise awareness of the reporting options. In addition to setting up a Social Safety Task Force, we have created a 'Social Safety Support Guide' for staff and students and the topic frequently features in internal newsletters.

### **It is said that there were 248 complaints, of which only 5 culminated in an official complaint being lodged.**

The complaints committee has handled 23 complaints over the past few years, of which one was on unacceptable/undesirable behaviour on the part of a lecturer. Of these 23 complaints, 11 were found to be baseless and five were upheld. Complaints from students usually pertain to the way in which UvA departments or teaching staff communicate and complaints from staff are

often about treatment by managers. Complaints not handled by the complaints committee are forwarded to the complaints coordinator of the relevant faculty or department and handled there. These complaints are most commonly about course structure, library opening hours or the number of study places.

### **Critics say that submitting a complaint or making a report is not worth the effort, as nothing will be done about it.**

We deem it extremely important that signs of undesirable behaviour are flagged, and we take them very seriously. Undesirable behaviour needs to be discussable, reports need to be made and issues need to be flagged and dealt with. We are working on improving accessibility when it comes to making a report, the procedure itself and training to ensure that issues are flagged up and responded to effectively.

### **What other improvements has the UvA made?**

We have reviewed and improved our system and procedures surrounding complaints and reports of undesirable behaviour in various ways. In that process, we drew on the recommendations of the external Social Safety committee headed up by Marry de Gaay Fortman, which we approached to have the social safety system (and how this was working) assessed.

- A new code of conduct has been drawn up;
  - The confidential adviser system has been critically examined and recommendations have already been partially incorporated;
  - We have appointed an acting ombudsperson (to lay the groundwork for its definitive role);
  - An independent reporting point has been set up;
- We have improved the availability of information on social safety, which includes the 'Social Safety Support Guide' for staff and students.

### **Is this not primarily about a culture change?**

In addition to effective procedures, the recognition, discussion and prevention of undesirable behaviour is essential. The same applies to aftercare for those who have reported or experienced such behaviour. Consequently, discussions and training courses are being held to foster a culture in which undesirable behaviour can be discussed and managers and others are equipped to respond effectively to red flags.



### **The Social Safety Task Force is to be disbanded. Why?**

The task force is set to present its final report to the academic community in February 2021. The conclusions and recommendations will be discussed with the members of the University Council, the Board and the representative advisory body. The organisation will then need to see to the implementation, which will mark the completion of its task.

### **What else needs to be done?**

The suitability of the complaints procedure for social safety complaints will be improved. Among other modifications, this will include a specific complaints procedure for social safety, widening the scope for investigation and including extended deadlines, greater accessibility for international students and options for former students and staff to submit complaints. The finalised job description for the ombudsperson and the confidential adviser scheme have been presented to the representative advisory body.