

Memo

Date
26 March 2021

Subject
2021 Memo on Social Safety

Please refer to Dutch text for definitive wording.

1. Introduction

The University of Amsterdam (UvA) is committed to providing a positive working environment and study environment, in which we treat each other with respect and everyone can develop their talents to the full. We want to offer everyone the assurance of a safe foundation for their work or studies and, if necessary, for engaging in difficult or critical conversations. Students and staff must have the opportunity to raise concerns, discuss dilemmas and make complaints within UvA. They must feel safe to do so, and have confidence that their report or complaint will be taken seriously.¹

Recent experience in particular tells us that improvements are needed in this regard. In recent months UvA has been experiencing the impact of a more global, ongoing movement towards emancipation, which focuses on diversity, equality and inclusion. As a result of this movement, unsafe and inappropriate behaviour is reported more often and at an earlier stage. A focus on social safety is a priority for the VSNU and is also on the agenda of other universities. Integrity issues, sexually inappropriate behaviour, discrimination and exclusion occur not only in the academic world but in many other sectors too. This is triggering a conversation around how we treat each other with respect and work with each other in a respectful way. Many people are working hard to recognise (signs of) inappropriate behaviour and to ensure that we respond adequately to such reports and complaints. It is crucial that these reports and signs are addressed and carefully followed up. Only then can we further improve social safety within UvA and ensure that students and staff have confidence in it.

1.1 Purpose of this memo

This memo outlines the conceptual framework used for social safety within UvA, provides an overview of the status of social safety initiatives from 2019 to 2021 and provides insights into the actions that will be implemented from 2021 onwards.

The purpose of this memo is to inform the UvA community of the improvements in the field of social safety. It provides insight into the process of UvA as a learning organisation, through which we share the expectations and responsibilities of initiatives around social safety for the short, medium and long term.

¹ <https://www.uva.nl/over-de-uva/over-de-universiteit/sociale-veiligheid/veilige-omgeving/veilige-omgeving.html>

2. Social safety at UvA

Social safety is a broad concept, ranging from a strong 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. Students and staff must have a means at their disposal to raise concerns, dilemmas and complaints at the University. They must feel safe in doing so, and have confidence that their report or complaint will be taken seriously. Existing legislation and regulations, both within and outside of the University, set out the definitions and frameworks for the social safety of staff and students. Examples of this include the Working Conditions Act (*Arbowet*), the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), the collective labour agreement (CAO NU) and internal regulations. Under the Working Conditions Act, social safety is defined as follows: *‘social safety in the workplace means knowing and feeling assured that you are protected from inappropriate behaviour and from the threat of danger as a result of human actions in or in relation to the university.’* Social safety involves all groups in the UvA community: all staff and all students. Visitors to the University are also part of the UvA community. Social safety can come into play in any relationship within and between these groups, but external parties can also play a role in this context.²

UvA has a [Code of Conduct](#) (August 2020) for all staff and students, which provides guidance on acceptable, socially safe behaviour. This Code states that: “Staff and students are considerate of each other, listen to each other, seek to create an inclusive environment and respect interpersonal differences, for instance with regard to cultural and/or socioeconomic background, personal beliefs, political preferences, age, gender, sexual orientation, functional impairment or chronic disease.”

2.1 Unacceptable behaviour

The UvA Code of Conduct also defines what is meant by unacceptable behaviour: ‘Unacceptable behaviour is harmful and therefore not acceptable. Unacceptable behaviour comprises any behaviour on the part of a staff member or student that is stressful to the person on the receiving end, because it either jeopardises or injures the other person's bodily or mental integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, physical or verbal aggression, harassment or sexual harassment, discrimination and exclusionary behaviour, bullying and academic sabotage. Unacceptable behaviour refers to any situation where at least one person involved may reasonably feel that the behaviour is unacceptable. Staff and students must challenge unacceptable behaviour, even when they are witnesses rather than persons involved.’

2.2 Help in unsafe situations

Should students or staff be confronted with unsafe situations or unacceptable behaviour, there are a number of different individuals and bodies they can approach. These include the confidential advisers, the ombuds person and an independent Complaints Committee. In addition to having effective procedures, it is crucial to recognise, discuss and prevent unacceptable behaviour, and to support those who have reported or experienced unacceptable behaviour. For this reason, discussions, workshops and training courses will also focus on creating a culture in which unacceptable behaviour can be discussed and supervisors, managers and others are equipped to respond effectively to signs of unacceptable behaviour.³

The UvA Code of Conduct stipulates that supervisors who receive a report on unacceptable behaviour always take such reports seriously; supervisors assume responsibility, treat both the person filing the complaint and the person whom the complaint concerns respectfully and

² Summary Memorandum on Social Safety 2019, UvA.

³ <https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/about-the-university/social-safety/safe-environment/safe-environment.html>

implement appropriate measures, while always giving the person who filed the complaint the appropriate level of protection.⁴

3. Social safety initiatives from 2019 to 2021

In February 2019, the Executive Board adopted a summary memorandum on social safety, which outlines a number of different tools and initiatives designed to promote social safety within UvA. Partly in response to specific incidents, we asked a number of experts, some of them external, to review the efficiency of UvA's existing social safety system. In September 2019, a task force was set up to drive and inspire improvements in policy, culture and communication and to develop an integrated approach to the issue of social safety for staff and students. We also took on board the recommendations of the external committee on social safety.⁵ In addition, valuable advice was received from the representative advisory bodies, the Senate, the Chief Diversity Office (CDO) and various other bodies. The Quick Scan of the confidential adviser system conducted by BING in 2019 also contained a number of recommendations.

We translated these into a number of concrete improvements:

- Since 2019, a culture in which unacceptable behaviour can be discussed has been promoted through discussions and training sessions. The Academic Leadership Programme, for example, focuses specifically on the issue of social safety, the role of supervisors and managers, as well as the ability and courage to respond adequately to signs of unacceptable behaviour.
- In 2019 we appointed an acting ombuds person (who is also tasked with laying the groundwork for the definitive ombuds person role).
- A new Code of Conduct was drawn up in 2020.
- An independent external reporting point was set up in the summer of 2020. Following a review in the first half of 2021, a decision will be made on whether or not to continue with this.
- Information on social safety has been made more readily available to students and staff. The '[support guide](#)' produced in 2020 forms part of this.
- Faculties and units have launched various initiatives in relation to training, workshops and tools for improving social safety.

The following relevant initiatives have been under way since the end of 2020 and are nearing completion:

- The complaints procedure is currently being made more suitable for complaints relating to social safety. Among other modifications, this will include a specific complaints procedure for social safety, widening the scope for investigation and extending the time limit, greater accessibility for English-speaking students and staff and options for former students and staff to submit complaints.
- The complaints procedure will be presented to the representative advisory bodies in the first quarter of 2021.
- The Social Safety task force presented its final report to the academic community in February 2021. Partly on the advice of the Social Safety task force, a draft awareness campaign aimed at all students and staff entitled *Break the silences* was set up at the end of 2020. The final campaign is due to be launched in the spring of 2021.
- A proposal for the definitive structure of the position of ombudsperson was recently submitted to the representative advisory bodies. Attention was paid to accessibility, broadening of the procedure, scope of the regulations and the independence of the ombuds person from all parties involved and the Executive Board.

⁴ UvA Code of Conduct

⁵ <https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/about-the-university/social-safety/safe-environment/safe-environment.html#Report-of-the-External-Committee-on-Social-Safety>

- The regulations regarding confidential advisers are currently being revised and amended and will also be submitted to the representative advisory bodies in the first quarter of 2021. Special attention is being paid to the role of confidential advisers, facilitation (time, training, guidance, coordination and peer feedback) and independence.
- The Whistleblower Scheme is being updated by Legal Affairs; this is expected to be finalised by the summer. It is mentioned here in view of the common ground between this scheme and social safety. However, the scope of this scheme is broader than social safety.
- An e-learning module for all supervisors will be available by the summer of 2021.
- Improving understanding of social safety among HR and P&O staff. This, too, will be initiated by the summer of 2021, and subsequently developed further.

Improving social safety requires a long-term focus at both central and decentralised levels within UvA.

4. From 2021 onwards: building the ‘House of Social Safety’

UvA is taking further steps towards creating a safer work and study environment. Based on the recommendations of various experts (e.g. the external commission, the Social Safety task force), the CDO and the representative advisory bodies, we are working on the establishment of a *House of social safety*. This will accommodate the strengthened expertise with respect to social safety, as recommended by the task force. This chapter provides an overview of the initiatives that will be implemented in the short, medium and long term. A work plan for social safety, which sets out specific actions and actors in more detail, can be found in Section 5.

Improving social safety focuses on: education and awareness (prevention), help and support and the system for reporting and complaints. Progress in these three areas is interlinked (a visual representation of this can be found in the appendix). Effective reporting and complaints procedures will only work if staff and students know they exist and have confidence that they will work. The provision of help and support will only work if there is a basis for recognising, discussing and preventing unacceptable behaviour.

a. Prevention

Counteracting unacceptable behaviour means prevention, as well as preventing or reducing the damage that results from it. This requires an open discussion around the norms and behaviours needed for a safe learning and work environment. Prevention is about recognising, reporting, learning to give feedback and discussing unacceptable behaviour.

The involvement of everyone in the UvA is necessary to create a safe environment. Initiatives in 2021 are aimed at making it (self) negotiable and addressing each other, for example through training courses for recognizing signals and workshops on the role and responsibility of bystanders. Attention is also being paid to the provision of education and information, by conducting an awareness campaign, for example. The development of policy and suitable tools, such as information on the code of conduct, will receive further attention.

b. Help and support

The provision of help and support starts with providing useful sources of information which staff and students can access should they need to do so. Last year saw the publication of support guides [for students](#) and [for staff](#), which point users to a number of different individuals and bodies such as the confidential advisers, student counsellors and psychologists, the ombuds person, confidential counsellor for academic integrity, student doctors, complaints committee and an independent reporting point for unacceptable behaviour.

Initiatives in 2021 are aimed at strengthening the roles and responsibilities of parties who provide help and support, in the form of the ‘House of *Social Safety*’. The available support for staff and

students will also be made more accessible and better support will be provided to those involved. Besides supervisors, managers, confidential advisers and the ombuds person, P&O staff also play a role in this. There will also be an additional focus on bringing the relevant information together and making it easier to find on the website.

c. Report and complaints systems

The report and complaints system allows people to report unacceptable behaviour or unsafe situations, and to use the complaints procedures with the associated frameworks and take further action, including legal action, where appropriate.

Initiatives in 2021 are aimed at strengthening the complaints procedures, setting up a definitive position for an ombuds person, and evaluating and possibly further developing the external reporting point. Complaints without the name of the person who files the complaint being divulged will also be logged in the ‘House of *Social Safety*’. Work is under way to further streamline the support structure around progress, monitoring and aftercare & follow-up.

5. Work plan for social safety

UvA is a learning organisation in which we continuously make improvements based on our experiences with how the system works. As a result, a work plan for social safety is constantly evolving and is adapted on the basis of the experiences gained. This plan will be further shaped and implemented together with the UvA community, including the representative advisory bodies, faculty experts, the CDO, etc. As we develop initiatives to strengthen social safety at UvA, we also continue to learn from recent incidents.

A social safety coordinator⁶ is involved in the implementation and ensuring the cohesion of the initiatives.

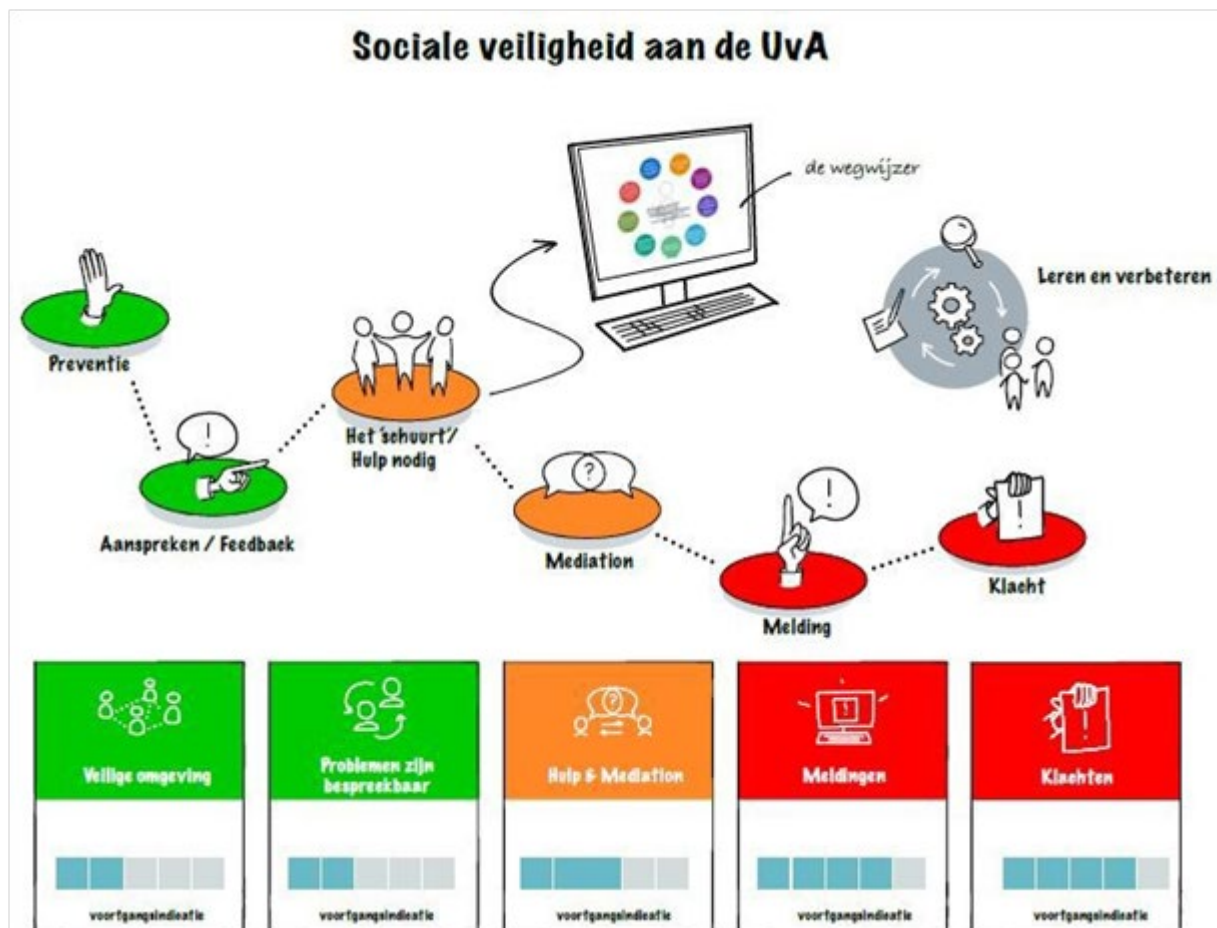
Initiatives	(Main) actors involved	Time line
Prevention		
‘Breaking the Silence’ awareness campaign	Executive Staff and Communication	Q2 2021
Embedding Social Safety training in all leadership programmes	Executive staff (HR)	Q2 2021
E-learning modules/workshops	Executive staff (HR)	Q2 2021
Raising profile of and implementing Code of Conduct	Executive Staff and Communication	Q1-2 2021
Education and information	Executive Staff and Communication	Q1-4 2021
Help and support		
Confidential advisers system	Executive Staff (HR and Legal Affairs)	Q1 2021
Support with tasks/status of confidential advisers	Executive staff (HR)	Q1 2021
Coordination of confidential advisers	Executive staff (HR)	Q1 2021
Updating of Whistleblower Scheme	Executive staff (Legal Affairs)	Q2 2021

⁶ Appointed in summer 2020.

Initiatives	(Main) actors involved	Time line
Aftercare & follow-up development and aftercare & follow-up policy development	Executive Staff (HR and Legal Affairs)	Q2 2021
Improving understanding of social safety	Secretary General of the University	Q2 2021
Support with tasks/expertise of HR and P&O	Executive staff (HR)	Q2-4 2021
Rapid Response Team (help with incidents)	Secretary General of the University	Q2 2021
Report and complaints system		
Profile of ombuds person and the related regulations	Executive Staff (HR and Legal Affairs)	Q4 2020 – Q1 2021
Definitive appointment of ombuds person	Executive Board	Q2 2021
Modification of complaints procedure	Executive Staff (Legal Affairs)	Q1 2021
External reporting point – evaluation and further development	Executive staff (HR)	Q1 2021
Improving progress, processing time and aftercare & follow-up	Executive Staff (HR and Legal Affairs)	Q2-4 2021
Periodic monitoring and evaluation	Executive Staff (HR and BI)	Q2-4 2021

Appendix

Social safety at UvA: a visual representation of the interplay between actions around prevention, the organisation of help and support and the system for reporting and complaints – Social Safety Coordinator, November 2020 (in Dutch).



Social Safety at UvA

The support guide

Learning and improving

Prevention	Addressing issue/Feedback	There's a problem / Help needed	Mediation	Report	Complaint
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Safe environment	Problems can be discussed	Help & Mediation		Reports	Complaints
Indication of progress	Indication of progress	Indication of progress		Indication of progress	Indication of progress