



Date

2 November 2020

Executive Board response to the report: ‘Social Safety Needs Encouragement’

The topic of social safety should be open for discussion in order to prevent the normalisation of undesirable behaviour. The report by the External Commission on Social Safety is clear on this point. Its publication is a sign of the importance we place both on making undesirable behaviour something which can be discussed, and on responding effectively to any indications of a lack of safety in all sections of the University.

We wish to thank the committee, composed of Marry de Gaay Fortman, Mary Tupan-Wenno and Martine Bijkerk, for their analysis and recommendations.

Recommendations

The committee investigated the response within the study programme Conservation and Restoration and subsequently within the Faculty of Humanities to indications of social safety issues. The report describes how two worlds – that of students who felt exposed daily and in a very small setting to a lecturer whose behaviour they felt threatened their safety, and that of the roles, responsibilities and formal structures with regulations and protocols – were not aligned. On the one hand, the report outlines that there was an alert response, that the complaints were taken sufficiently seriously and that measures were put in place. On the other hand, the report indicates the students involved did not receive adequate help, did not feel properly heard and an external investigation was not initiated due to reliance on the regular complaints procedures.

There was inadequate consideration for the specific situation within this very small study programme. Although procedurally correct, the measures taken were evidently insufficient, as they failed to alleviate the feeling of a lack of safety in this vulnerable setting. A different – and better – response was required. As soon as the students exhausted their options in the regular procedure, an external investigation should have been launched. We will therefore have the dean implement the committee's recommendation to do so at this stage.

The committee made a thorough analysis of the University's social safety system, and looked specifically at the Complaints Regulations, the Complaints Committee and the acting ombudsperson. Their report identifies procedural bottlenecks in the regulations, and sees the Complaints Committee as inadequately equipped. The committee's recommendations are valuable, and will be used to further improve both social safety at the University of Amsterdam, and the accessibility of both the Complaints Committee and the ombudsperson.

Action

Social safety is a broad concept, ranging from an ethical culture where people can hold others accountable, to transparent and accessible complaints procedures and the establishment of clear boundaries for conduct. Overstepping these boundaries is never acceptable. Students and staff must have 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.

- Over the past 18 months, we have therefore critically examined and improved our system and procedures surrounding complaints and reports in various ways. We have established a code of conduct, improved the system of [confidential advisers](#), instituted a [Social Safety Taskforce](#), appointed an [acting ombudsperson](#), set up an [external reporting centre](#), improved accessibility to information and created a [guide to social safety for students and staff](#).
- Based on the committee's recommendations, the complaints procedure will be adapted to better accommodate complaints pertaining to social safety. 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.
- A definitive job profile and regulations for the position of ombudsperson will also be drawn up and submitted to the representative advisory bodies before the new year. This document will incorporate the committee's recommendations and devote specific attention to accessibility, expansion of the procedures, the scope of the regulations, and the independence of the position relative to the Executive Board.
- In addition to effective procedures, the recognition, discussion and prevention of undesirable behaviour remains essential. The same applies to aftercare for those who have reported or experienced such behaviour. For this reason, discussions and training courses will also contribute to the formation of a culture in which we hold each other accountable for behaviour, and where leaders are well-equipped to respond effectively.

Over the period ahead, we will discuss the above aspects with the representative advisory bodies, and ensure that discussions on social safety are held throughout the University. We will also invite those who submitted the complaints to meet with us.

Geert ten Dam, Karen Maex and Jan Lintsen

The Executive Board