



Summary 15th of February 2021 @Zoom

University Forum

*Special session in collaboration with the
Taskforce Social Safety*

Social Safety

After a year and a half of hard work, the Taskforce Social Safety presented its final report on the 15th of February during a special session of the University Forum. Forum members and dozens of other interested parties took note of the main recommendations through a panel discussion with Taskforce Chair Liza Mügge and several Taskforce members. The overarching theme and title of the report is 'breaking the silence'. Social safety is still insufficiently discussed and abuses go unnoticed too often.

These are the three overarching recommendations by the taskforce to address this issue:

1

Establishing a central Social Safety Expertise Team

The UvA has a great deal of in-house expertise in the field of social safety, so it is wise to bundle this together at a central location where everyone can turn to with questions. This can be about a policy issue, but also, for example, for guidance with a specific case.

2

Including social safety in the periodic self-evaluation of organizational units

At the moment, social safety is not yet part of the self-evaluation that faculties, departments, research groups, services and study programs carry out periodically. It is about time we change that. By including social safety in these evaluations, it is no longer dependent on the benevolence of individual managers whether or not accountability is given in this area.

3

Start with the awareness campaign "Break the silences"

Awareness is essential to recognize and prevent unsafe situations. A campaign via social media and posters can contribute to this. The play "The Learning Curve" has turned out to be very successful to get students and staff thinking. The taskforce therefore recommends organizing a tailor-made version of this play at the various faculties within the UvA.

In addition to the three overarching recommendations, the taskforce has formulated advice for each of the four domains: prevention, monitoring, physical & online environment and the handling of complaints. Subsequently, very concrete recommendations were formulated for each target group. The full report, including all recommendations, can be found on the web page of the Taskforce on Social Safety.

Attendees also had the opportunity to ask questions. Due to the limited time, not all questions were answered on the spot, but the taskforce provided them with a written response afterwards. You will find these questions and answers in the appendix to this report.

After the presentation of the report, the members of the University Forum and several other interested parties in break-out groups continued to talk. Unlike other meetings, not every break-out group was given a different sub-question, but they were all given the open task to reflect on the presentation of the report and to formulate questions that could serve as a starting point for the next meeting. Because the members were not able to read the report before this meeting, it is possible that some of the points that are raised are already reflected on in the actual report. Next time, members have had the opportunity to study the report themselves and delve a little deeper into the matter.

Reflections on the presentation of the report

The members of the University Forum are first and foremost pleased with the report and consider it an important contribution to improving social safety at the UvA. However, the extent to which that happens depends to a large extent on what exactly is being done with the report. The recommendations seem to be heading in the right direction, but because it has not yet been specifically determined everywhere who is responsible for taking up which recommendation, there is a risk that little will come of it. In the coming weeks, the recommendations must be crystallized in this area in a plan of action, which the University Forum is happy to help with. Moreover, the way in which the recommendations are addressed must be clearly communicated to the academic community.

Because the members had not read the report in advance, it was difficult to respond to the recommendations in substance. Below is a series of points that, in the eyes of the members, received insufficient attention from the first impression of the presentation and therefore deserve extra attention in the coming period.

Do the recommendations go far enough?

Perhaps the biggest question members raised about the report is whether the recommendations go deep enough to address the causes of socially unsafe situations. The taskforce states that the hierarchical structure of the university is perhaps the most important cause of social unsafety. However, it is that structure itself that the taskforce seems to leave largely untouched. How much are the recommendations going to improve social safety if the underlying cause is not fully addressed? Social unsafety is not just a matter of bad outliers, but of a hierarchical structure that is apparently no good. Within the university there is often a strong degree of dependence, for example between the doctoral candidate and the promotor. Changing this academic dependency is of course not easy, but the realization that this system contributes to socially unsafe situations could be a reason to focus more on solutions outside that system. The University Forum fully endorses the importance of good academic leadership in the field of social safety, but when things go wrong it should also be possible to find the solution outside the academic / administrative structure.

An interesting 'test' for the effectiveness of the proposed measures would be to pick up a case from the past (for example the most recent one from the Faculty of Humanities) and to examine how events would have developed if all the recommendations from the report had already been implemented. Could the incident have been prevented in this way? Had it come to light before? Would the faculty's response have been better? Such testing against existing cases would be a valuable exercise.

Leadership

The role of managers in the social safety of a particular team or department is very important. The taskforce therefore makes various recommendations in this area. In the discussion in the University Forum, two points emerged that are relevant to include in the further elaboration. First of all, it is necessary that managers pay attention to defining socially desirable behaviour and that they remain keen on compliance with it. Furthermore, one meeting per year (if there is any meeting at all) is too little for a manager to sufficiently discuss social safety with an employee. Managers now too often have too limited a picture of the atmosphere in the workgroup or workplace.

Avoid fragmentation

The Social Safety Taskforce has presented a comprehensive report that is relevant to all parts of the UvA, but they are not the only ones who are committed to improving Social Safety. Ensure that the link between the process that follows the report and the existing efforts within the various faculties is optimal. Explicitly invite representatives of relevant groups to meetings such as the presentation of the taskforce report. In addition to that connection within the UvA, it would also be beneficial to engage in more discussions with other institutions. The problem of social safety is not unique to the UvA and as universities we must be able to learn from each other in how we tackle these problems.

Connection with diversity

Social safety has many interactions with diversity, but it has not become clear to members what the implications of these interactions are for the actual recommendations. Has the complex relationship between these two themes been sufficiently taken into account? Mutual coordination between the diversity team and the social safety steering group is very important. The interaction between social safety and diversity is an important topic to be further discussed at the next meeting of the University Forum.

More workload?

Many of the recommendations make use of the available time of employees and managers, who are already severely short of it. The sky-high workload of much of the academic community is an obstacle to the careful attention to social safety that is now required of the community. How do we prevent the problem of work pressure from getting in the way of measures against social safety problems?

Suggestions for monitoring

Those directly involved and bystanders of an unsafe situation may not speak out because of the potentially negative consequences in an extremely hierarchical context. Therefore, make sure to contact alumni and employees who have left to ask them about social safety in the department where they come from. Chances are that they feel more free to discuss this now that they are no longer in a hierarchical situation and in the case of departing employees, the departure itself may also have been caused by socially unsafe situations. Former UvA students and employees must have an immense amount of relevant information that we currently do not draw sufficiently from. This could be a good addition to the Taskforce's proposals for better monitoring.

Take care of victims

When dealing with complaints, the focus is usually mainly on the question of what should be done with the offender. When is a complaint declared well-founded and what exactly are the consequences for the person against whom the complaint is directed? Clear procedures with, for example, the immediate removal of teaching tasks are important steps for improving social safety. This also applies to a thorough investigation of the complaint and to prevent employees who are under investigation from being able to switch to another institution just like that. However, this focus is incomplete; caring for the victim is sometimes too much left out of consideration. Socially unsafe situations can cause far-reaching psychological complaints and the proper handling of the official complaint is a minimal, but not sufficient, effort from the UvA. It is important to make the complainant feel that they are being taken seriously and also to offer professional support when necessary.

Communication

It is still insufficiently clear where exactly you can go with which problem. The new 'wegwijzers' for students and staff are a step in the right direction, but not everyone is aware of their existence. The University Forum therefore encourages the taskforce's recommendation to start an awareness campaign. Pay particular attention to the visibility of the trust persons and the ombudsperson. Is it clear to everyone where you can go with which problem and especially what you can expect from what will be done with your complaint? Another thing that needs to be addressed further in communication is the scope of what exactly falls under social safety. It is now perceived that the theme is primarily about the prevention of serious (possibly even criminal) cases, while socially unsafe situations can also be much more subtle. Consider, for example, a possible culture of fear among students about the method of testing in a particular subject. Furthermore, it is currently insufficiently clear what exactly we at the UvA expect from bystanders in unsafe situations. What is their role and what do we expect them to do when faced with an unsafe situation? The answer to that question must be part of the awareness campaign as well.

Next meeting

The next meeting, on March 12th, will again be devoted to social safety. The members read the report of the taskforce in advance and consider the concrete proposals. It would be nice if members had the chance to watch the play “The Learning Curve” for inspiration. Particular attention should be paid in the discussion to the questions raised in this summary; such as the interface with diversity and workload. The results of the next meeting will be handed over to the social safety steering group, which will draw up an action plan based on (among other things) the taskforce’s report and our input.



Questions? Please contact secretary Roeland
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Appendix: Q&A with the Taskforce

Will the report be distributed to staff?

Yes, the report was published on the Task Force webpage and communicated in the employee and student newsletters on Wednesday, 17 February 2021.

Are there any proposals to diversify reporting routes and power structures so less power is concentrated in so few hands (particularly given the culture of fear that prevails)?

In Section 5, the Task Force describes power relations and hierarchy as a cause of people feeling unsafe and, in Section 6, sets out solutions and measures that can help prevent this problem. The overarching recommendations in Section 7 can also contribute to this.

Has an estimate been made of the extent of the problem?

See Section 2 (Feeling unsafe: some numbers) in particular. Sections 3 and 4 also address the extent of the problem, focusing on manifestations and causes.

What were the results of the polls during the presentation?

Poll results: Are you...

54	Support staff
36	Academic staff
13	Student
6	PhD candidate
109	Total

Poll results: Where do you work or study?

32	One of the shared service units or executive staff
30	Faculty of Humanities
15	Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences
10	Faculty of Science
9	Faculty of Dentistry
6	Amsterdam Law School
3	Faculty of Medicine
1	Faculty of Economics and Business

106 Total

Poll results: The following recommendation appeals to me the most (NB: based on the presentation, the report had not yet been published)

46	Awareness campaign
41	Social Safety Expertise Team
16	Periodic Social Safety self-evaluation
103	Total

What if the manager him/herself is the ‘perpetrator’?

If an employee is confronted with unsafe situations or undesirable behaviour, there are a number of different people and bodies to whom he/she can turn. Depending on the situation and preference, the employee can make use of the options set out in the Social Safety Support Guide for staff or students. The existing system of reports and complaints offers various options for discussing the situation or for getting help in the event that the manager concerned is the cause of someone feeling unsafe.

Section 5 of the Task Force’s report describes the following as causes of people feeling unsafe: power relations and hierarchy, the social safety system and diversity and structural inequality. This includes the situation of ‘manager as perpetrator’. Various solutions and measures (Section 6) and the Overarching Recommendations (Section 7) can help ensure early recognition, identification and prevention of such situations.

How do the results of the Employee Monitor reach the shop floor? And who’s going to talk about this? Often, employees who are in an unsafe situation don’t dare to do so.

The results are shared via the UvA newsletters and are included in the A-Z list.

In the Monitor itself, employees can give their (anonymous) opinion on, among other things, workload, career opportunities, communication, facilities and internal service provision. In addition, employees can specify and give details of issues that are not covered by the survey. The survey makes it clear which issues require attention or perhaps more detailed investigation, and what employees are happy with. The Employee Monitor therefore serves to identify issues that need addressing. The results form a basis for the development of policy and concrete improvement actions. The dialogue around this can take place in teams or among employees and managers. These conversations may be difficult, but it is important that we have them. If we

don't, silences such as those described in the Task Force's report may occur: silences that occur because employees are afraid to speak up, ask questions or come forward with new proposals. In the report, the Task Force proposes a number of solutions, measures and recommendations for breaking these kinds of silences.

Regarding the awareness campaign: does it include training? For staff and students?

Training courses will be a structural component of the tools provided to strengthen social safety. The campaign consists of campaign communications on the one hand and a website/platform containing available tools, such as training courses, on the other. The campaign communications lead to that platform. The content of the training courses and the campaign will be aligned and brought to people's attention in a clear and recognisable way.

I have watched the performance of 'The Learning Curve' twice, and both times I was very impressed by the impact it had on those present. I do have one recommendation, however: as things stand, the performance is only in English and, in my view, is therefore not accessible to all interested parties. Ideally therefore, there should be a performance in Dutch.

Thank you for the recommendation/question. We will discuss it with the Acteursgenootschap, the group that performed The Learning Curve.

If this is such a priority, will a budget actually be made available for it? Currently, confidential advisers don't get hours allocated to them for their work, do they?

Confidential advisers are allocated time and facilities to carry out their role.

Are differences in culture between faculties also taken into account?

Yes, the solutions and measures are divided into domains and target groups. This allows tailor-made solutions that focus on the specific situation of each organisational unit or target group to be put together. The overarching recommendations also provide scope for a targeted approach.

I haven't seen the awareness campaign. Is it on its way?

The awareness campaign is due to be launched in spring 2021. The exact start date is not yet known.

Other universities have a system of online anonymous reporting. Why can't we do the same?

The Task Force does not make recommendations on this. The formal side of ensuring social safety, including the handling of complaints and the positions of the Ombudsperson and confidential advisers, has been examined elsewhere and reforms are under way. The Task Force does however address subjective experience of and trust in the system. See, among others, Section 6.4 on the handling of complaints.

The external committee commissioned by the Executive Board to investigate the system of reports and complaints relating to social safety at the UvA, and the operation thereof, addresses the issue of 'anonymity' in its advisory report, p12 and p26.

The UvA has an independent reporting point for undesirable behaviour, in addition to the other facilities in the Social Safety Support Guide. All reports received by this reporting point are logged by CAOP (Centre for Public Sector Labour Relations) and forwarded to the UvA. The CAOP ensures that the reports are followed up by the UvA. For information and contact details, go to: www.reportingpointundesirablebehaviouruva.nl

Some people think that the UvA cares more about image. Is there an image problem?

In the Task Force's report, 'the perception of the handling of complaints' is discussed in Section 6.4, which, among other things, looks at the confidence of staff and students in the system, aftercare and the 'soft side' and 'hard side' of the handling of reports and complaints.

The UvA is committed to providing a socially safe environment in which students and staff can raise concerns, dilemmas and complaints. They must feel safe to do so, and have confidence that their report or complaint will be taken seriously. The UvA has reviewed and improved its systems and processes and is working on recognising, discussing and preventing undesirable behaviour. The Task Force's recommendations will help give shape to the 'House of Social Safety' and build familiarity with and confidence in the processes for reporting and handling complaints.

Why didn't the Task Force do 'research'?

The Task Force's mission was not to do research, but to develop an integrated approach to the issue of social safety for staff and students and to catalyse improvements in policy and culture. To this end, the Task Force conducted a comprehensive problem analysis and gathered information from in-depth interviews and online questionnaires, on which the solutions, measures and recommendations are based.

Various examinations and surveys in the field of social safety have already been conducted at the UvA. The Task Force has drawn on these, 'stands on the shoulders of this rich internal and external knowledge' (p7).

Many people experience negative consequences when they speak out about undesirable behaviour (harassment). How can this 'backlash' be tackled? What can managers do about it?

Focusing more on prevention (e.g. bystander training) and awareness (campaign) should make holding each other accountable for undesirable behaviour more normal. The Task Force recommends that managers be trained to support employees properly in this regard and learn to recognise and discuss negative consequences.

Why internal self-evaluation if the problem is partly to do with power relations in which people protect each other? Wouldn't external evaluations be better in that case?

See more information on Periodic self-evaluation in Section 7.2 of the report. In this recommendation, the Task Force states that faculties and service units must be able to demonstrate how they work to monitor and ensure social safety at the level of the department, research group, and team.

In addition to norms and values around the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, social safety is also about subjective experiences: what is the university doing in this regard?

The Task Force understands that there are different worlds and perspectives and that emotions around feeling unsafe can't always be clearly defined. There is often a grey area in which a line may or may not have been crossed at any given time (p14). The Task Force's recommendation for the awareness campaign, as well as the other recommendations and a number of solutions and measures, will help acknowledge and raise awareness

of this, break silences and allow the issue of 'social safety' to be discussed.

Are the recommendations consistent with the complexity of the problem? It looks to me as though a team of experts is going to endeavour, yet again, to find out what the problem is, when, in my view, we are already well aware what the issues are. In my opinion, the checklist is the best, it works really well in hospitals too.

See Section 7.1 for more information on the expertise team; this team would enable the existing system to function more effectively. The expertise team would focus on providing help and support for tackling specific problems and would act as a hub in the web of departments and services responsible for various facets of the system, such as Legal Affairs and HR.

Comments from participants

- Recognition - acknowledgement and recognition start with awareness
- Self-evaluation may also mean that the organisation can protect certain people (or at least that's how it may feel). An external independent party would help here, I think.
- Awareness campaign: the first thing to do is to get people talking about behaviour/undesirable behaviour.
- Colleagues, as far as the expertise team is concerned, coming as I do from AHM (Heritage, Memory & Material Culture), I can tell you that this issue is very closely related to the expertise of my School. Please ask... for example, the advice you often hear, that people should speak up immediately if something is wrong, because we know that traumatic events persist until people feel comfortable talking about them.
- Mandatory, annual 360 degree feedback from team to manager seems to me to be a good idea, with associated guidance and coaching for managers, where appropriate tailored to the feedback. Currently, too much depends on the courage of individual employees to call managers to account for any undesirable behaviour. I'm thinking not only of behaviour that goes beyond what is deemed by law to be appropriate but also of behaviour that people perceive to be unacceptable.