



Maastricht University



Annual Report 2024

Social Safety

for employees

May 2025



Summary

Social safety remains a strategic priority at Maastricht University. In 2024, investments were made to strengthen the reporting structure, train managers and increase the visibility of support professionals. This commitment aligns with national developments, such as the inspection report by the Netherlands Labour Authority, which highlight the importance of a structural and well-organised approach. This annual report shows that social safety remains a complex and persistent issue that requires consistent leadership and ongoing vigilance.

A total of 139 reporting parties were registered in 2024, a decrease from 2023. Although this reflects a lower reporting rate (2.6%), employees appear more inclined to report issues at an earlier stage, increasing the likelihood of effective intervention. Most reports relate to intimidation, workplace conflicts and cooperation issues. Instances of bullying rose slightly, while cases of sexual harassment declined. In 60% of reports, a manager was involved either directly or indirectly, underscoring the importance of careful handling of power dynamics.

At the same time, there has been an increase in signals about concerning behaviour among students. Here, staff experience a tension between their duty of care and their own sense of safety. On the one hand they want to support students, but on the other they are confronted with behaviour that makes them feel anxious or unsafe.

The position of Chinese PhD candidates with grants from the China Scholarship Council requires special attention due to their dependence on these grants and their low willingness to report issues. This calls for proactive identification of problems and culturally sensitive support.

Approximately 80% of managers have now completed the mandatory Leadership and Undesirable Behaviour training course. Although the evaluations are positive, there is room for improvement in hearing both sides of situations and making well-considered decisions. People & Organisation Advisers (POAs) are being engaged more actively as advisers, but their involvement is not yet standard practice.

The Concerns and Complaints Point received 27 requests for advice, mainly from managers. In seven cases, an advisory panel was organised, which in some instances led to concrete measures.

Based on the signals from 2024, only a limited number of new recommendations have been made, as the 2023 recommendations remain relevant. The focus for 2024 is on maintaining existing measures, further professionalising managers, and enhancing the communication and accessibility of the reporting network. Social safety requires ongoing attention to behaviour, culture and reflection. In this sense, reports should not be viewed as problems, but as valuable signals that drive improvement.

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1

Introduction

1 Introduction

This Social Safety Annual Report 2024 for Maastricht University (UM) employees outlines the activities of the social safety professionals. It specifies the number and nature of the reports received, and presents an analysis of these reports. Finally, it offers a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing social safety.

Social safety remains a key priority within higher education. In 2023, Minister Dijkgraaf introduced a national approach to strengthening social safety at universities and universities of applied sciences. This approach included, among other things, the legal integration of the duty of care, improvements to reporting structures, and the development of a broader action plan for the education sector. Universities were not only tasked with implementing measures but also with demonstrating the impact of these measures within their own organisational context. A key component of this initiative is the National Programme for Social Safety in Higher Education and Research. The programme includes representatives from six covenant partners: Universities of the Netherlands, the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, the General Education Union (part of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions, FNV), the National Student Union, the Dutch National Students Association and the Dutch PhD Network, which also represents PostdocNL.

In April 2024, the Netherlands Labour Authority published a study on psychosocial workload within universities, encompassing work pressure and undesirable behaviour. The report attracted attention from trade unions (with the FNV describing the results as 'shocking'), politicians and the media, and prompted a strong call for action. At the UM level, the Labour Authority praised the organisation of the reporting structure, the Executive Board's promotion of norms and values, and the implementation of measures when employees fail to adhere to the rules of conduct. However, it also emphasised that it is important not only to take measures but also to assess their effectiveness, and to ensure proper aftercare for victims of undesirable behaviour.

As in 2023, the data from the ombuds officer has been incorporated into this joint annual report on social safety. This allows us to comply with Article 4 of the UM Ombuds Officer's Charter and, at the same time, fulfil the Executive Board's request for an integrated annual report on social safety. We recognise the importance of an integrated analysis to arrive at more effective recommendations.

Guide to reading

Chapter 2 outlines the organisation and activities of the social safety professionals. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the concerns, questions, reports and complaints received, the backgrounds of the reporting parties, and the handling of the reports. Finally, Chapter 4 presents the analysis and recommendations for the organisation.

2

Professionals Social Safety

2 Social safety professionals

It has been decided to separate the support structures related to social safety for UM staff and students. The professionals for these different groups collaborate wherever possible and necessary. This annual report focuses on reports filed by employees.

The social safety professionals for employees are:

- the coordinator of the Concerns and Complaints Point (CCP)
- the ombuds officer
- internal and external confidential advisers
- the counsellor for the accused.

These professionals was previously collectively referred to as the Social Safety Team, but this name is no longer in active use. The word 'team' suggests more interdependence and cooperation than is the case in reality; these professionals work independently and do not share information from individual reporting parties without their explicit consent.

2.1 Roles and working method

As indicated, the professionals operate independently, meaning their roles are not subject to the regular hierarchical structure within the organisation. They have no managers but instead report directly to the Executive Board. Jointly, they identify patterns, broader trends and developments related to social safety or other overlooked issues, and make recommendations – solicited or otherwise – to the Executive Board.



Conversations with the social safety professionals are always confidential, except in cases involving a criminal offence or when employee safety is at risk. In all other situations, information is only shared among these professionals or with third parties with the employee's explicit consent.

Concerns and Complaints Point (CCP)

The Concerns and Complaints Point (CCP) serves as both a gateway and a central point of contact where employees and managers can raise questions, concerns or reports related to social safety. This may involve undesirable behaviour, integrity issues, threats to academics or suspicions of concerning behaviour (which most often relates to students). Through the CCP, reporting parties can be referred to internal or external professionals, such as confidential advisers, the ombuds officer, the company doctor or the police.



"I interacted with three different staff members, and all of them were kind, professional and very understanding [...] They helped me understand my options, pointed me in the right direction and supported me in taking the next steps to de-escalate the situation. It's been reassuring for me to know that there is an institution there to support us, even when things are hard."

Quote from a reporter

Ombuds officer

The ombuds officer is independent and serves as a neutral sounding board for UM employees. This officer can advise on employment-related laws, regulations and procedures. Additionally, the ombuds officer can mediate, identify issues and carry out investigations independently, either on their own initiative or in response to a report.

The advisory committee established under the UM Ombuds Officer's Charter conducts an annual evaluation of the role and reports its findings to the Executive Board. The latest evaluation took place in 2024.

Confidential adviser

The confidential adviser offers the reporting party a listening ear and reflects with them on the situation and/or their request for help, in order to jointly develop a plan of action. The adviser serves as a sounding board and sparring partner, with the reporting party always remaining in control. Employees are free to choose whether to report to an internal or external confidential adviser.

Counsellor for the accused

Employees accused of undesirable behaviour ('defendants') are offered support and guidance from a 'counsellor for the accused' (*begeleider beklaagde*). This is an external professional; internal confidential advisers do not take on this role to avoid finding themselves having to support both the reporting party and the accused, which could feel unsafe for all parties. As with a confidential adviser, conversations with a counsellor for the accused are confidential.

2.2 Mission

The mission of the social safety professionals is to enhance the social safety of UM employees with a view to creating a culture in which they can work and learn safely. The guiding principles are confidentiality, accessibility, transparency and expertise.

2.3 Activities

The activities of the social safety professionals fall into several categories. Within the university, various connections have been forged to increase the visibility of the social safety professionals among employees and to raise awareness of social safety in general. Outside the university, the professionals also take part in committees and initiatives aimed at strengthening knowledge and relationships.

Consultation with the Executive Board

Both regular and ad-hoc consultations take place throughout the year with the portfolio holder from the Executive Board.

Network meetings and internal consultations

All professionals maintain a range of contacts within the faculties and service centres, including with deans, directors, department heads and managers. They also engage with specific groups, such as the Leadership Academy, Diversity & Inclusivity, UnliMited, Legal Affairs and the POAs.

Presentations and workshops

Once again in 2024, considerable attention was devoted to raising awareness around social safety. Presentations and workshops were increasingly delivered at the request of managers, teams or departments. Over the course of the year, a total of 32 presentations, workshops and sessions of the

dilemma game *Is this okay?* were facilitated. The confidential advisers also presented two sessions at the national Study Day on social safety for PhD candidates in Nijmegen.

"It has raised my awareness and insight into how this is addressed more broadly across UM."

Quote from a participant

The Leadership Academy, in collaboration with the CCP and the confidential advisers, has launched a pilot for a learning community in which employees can register to take part. The initiative is intended as an extension of the mandatory leadership module on Social Safety.

The internal confidential advisers also delivered a workshop during a 'Wellbeing' theme day and gave presentations during the Science Days.

Communication

Together with the Communications department, efforts were made to improve the visibility of the social safety professionals and employees' awareness of them. Focus groups were organised to explore how best to shape communication from the employee perspective.

Information provision

Based on experiences with reports and investigations, a manual for managers and FAQs for both reporting parties and accused parties of undesirable behaviour were introduced in 2024.

Peer review and training

The ombuds officer is a member of the Dutch Association of Higher Education Ombuds Officers (VOHO), participates in peer-review sessions with ombuds officers from across the region, and engages in desired or necessary training. The confidential advisers are part of a peer-review group that meets four times a year and also participate in regular refresher training as part of their recertification.

Inter-university consultations

The CCP coordinator is a member of the Social Safety Portfolio Holders Committee of the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), which holds monthly meetings. The ombuds officer participates in the biennial UNL meetings for university ombuds officers. The internal confidential advisers are part of the Network of University Confidential Advisers (NUVP).

3

Concerns, questions, reports and complaints

3 Concerns, questions, reports and complaints

This annual report is based on reports filed with the CCP coordinator, the ombuds officer, the internal and external confidential advisers and the counsellor for the accused. The reports from the faculty PhD confidential advisers are addressed separately. This chapter also describes developments in management skills and in willingness among staff to report issues. Specifically, we reflect on how training courses and other initiatives for managers have influenced their approach to social safety as well as employees' willingness to file reports. These developments provide valuable context for identifying and understanding trends.

Every initial contact made by an employee with a central social safety officer is registered as a 'report.' This includes all reports, concerns, questions or complaints related to social safety within the organisation. Requests for advice, which primarily concern how to handle specific cases of undesirable behaviour, are registered separately.

3.1 Number of reports and reporting parties

In 2024, 139 reporting parties filed a total of 131 reports. The number of reporting parties exceeds that of reports because some reporting parties filed joint reports. The total number of reports in 2024 was lower than the previous year. In relative terms, the number of reports has decreased from 3.4% to 2.6% of the total employee count (Figure 1).

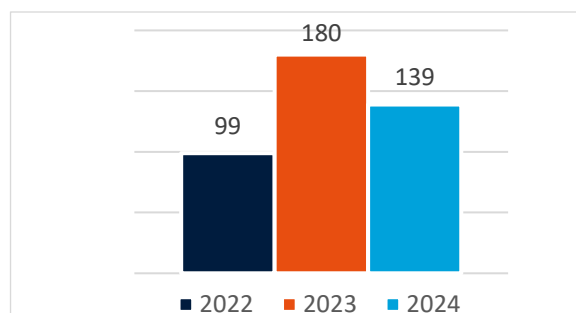


Figure 1: Number of reporting parties in 2022, 2023 and 2024

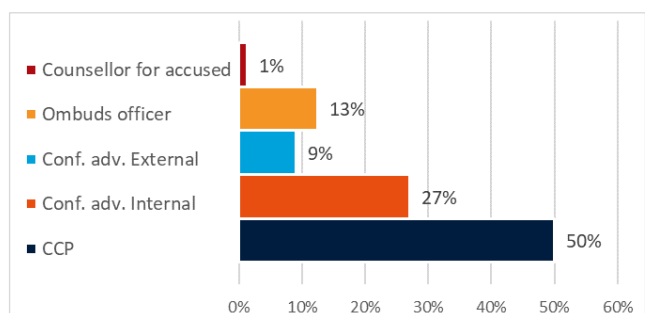


Figure 2: First point of contact for reporting parties in 2024

Reporting parties can be referred by the CCP or contact the ombuds officer/confidential advisers directly. Figure 2 shows the first point of contact chosen by reporting parties in 2024.

There are 19 faculty PhD confidential advisers. They are positioned within the faculties and do not have an independent position like the central confidants, the ombuds officer, and the CCP.

Input was provided from all faculties on the reports filed by PhD candidates. A total of 36 reports were received, ranging from none to seven per confidential adviser. The majority of the reports concerned cooperation issues.

3.2 Profiles of reporting parties

Figure 3 shows the distribution of reporting parties between administrative and support staff (OBP), academic staff (WP) and PhD candidates. Relatively few reporting parties were support staff: they make up 45% of the UM workforce, yet only 35% of the reporting parties. Similarly, PhD candidates make up 16% of employees but only 12% of the reporting parties.

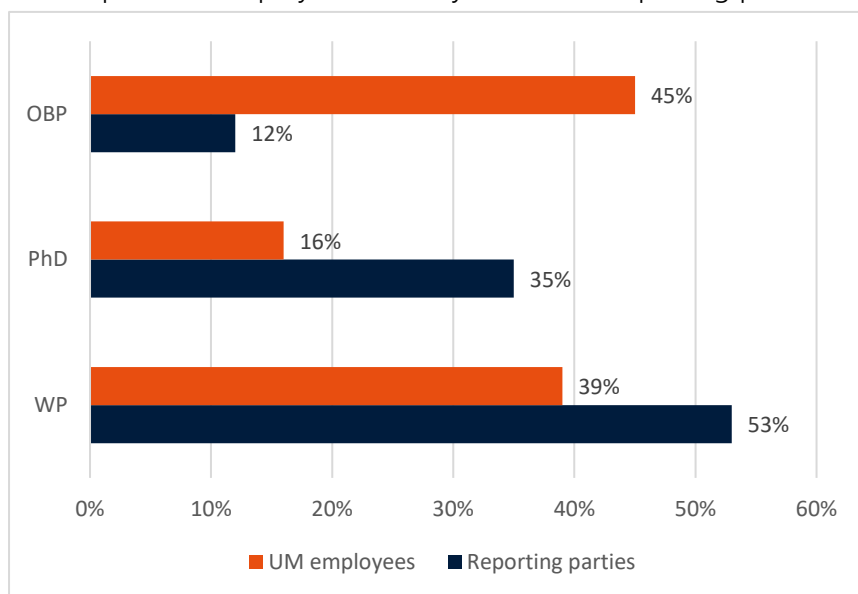


Figure 3: Profile of reporting parties in 2024 (%)

Notably, almost all reporting parties were UM employees (Figure 4), with the majority holding permanent contracts. During meetings with social safety professionals, employees on temporary contracts occasionally expressed concerns about their future in academia if they were to take action following their report. The figures do not, however, constitute concrete evidence that individuals on temporary contracts are less likely to report. The 4% listed as 'not applicable' refers to reporting parties without a UM employment contract (i.e. externally hired parties).

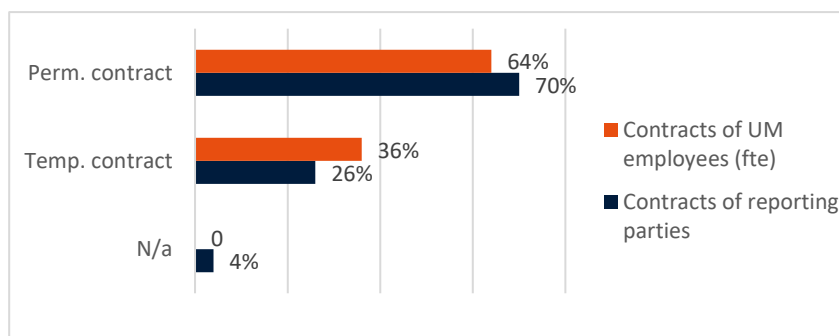


Figure 4: Legal status of reporting parties in 2024 (%)

3.3 Nature of reports

Employees can turn to the CCP with reports of undesirable behaviour, workplace conflicts or (suspected) integrity violations. In practice, these issues do not always fall neatly into defined categories, and there are often grey areas and overlap. Reports of threats to academics are also recognised, along with reports of concerning behaviour and antisemitism (see Appendix 1 for descriptions of these categories). In 2024, some reports were prompted by the war in Gaza, reflecting both Israeli and pro-Palestinian perspectives.

Generally, reporting parties dealing with undesirable behaviour or cooperation issues are referred by the CCP coordinator to the confidential advisers, while those experiencing workplace conflicts are referred to the ombuds officer. Reports range from mild and relatively straightforward to resolve to highly complex cases with potentially serious consequences. In 2024, 2% of reporting parties reported a criminal offence.

While individual reports can be considered separately, broader patterns often emerge only when multiple signals are analysed together. It is important to recognise that reports are rarely isolated in nature; they often involve a combination of behaviours within complex social or organisational dynamics. This calls for careful interpretation of the context.

As shown in Figure 5, each report is assigned a main category to facilitate analysis and help build an overall picture. In practice, reports could often fall under multiple categories.

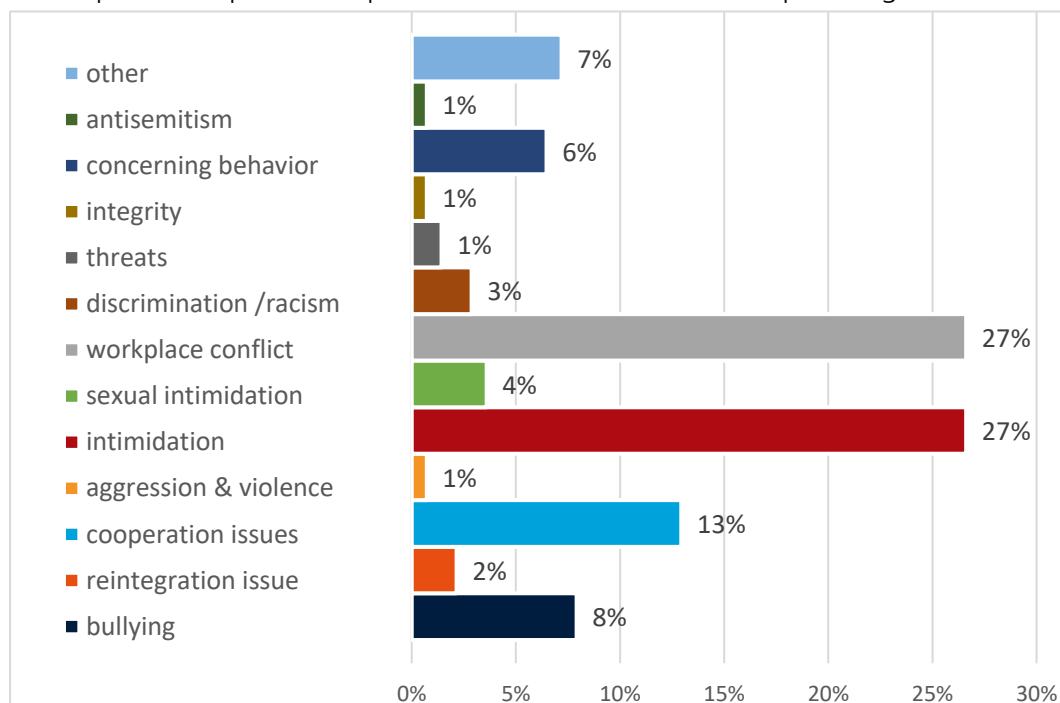


Figure 5: Nature of problems reported in 2024 (%)

It is notable that in 60% of the reports, the defendant held a managerial position (Figure 6), including direct managers, more senior managers or PhD (co-)supervisors. This highlights the importance of being alert to power dynamics within the organisation.

Of reports filed by PhD candidates with faculty confidential advisers, 83% relate to a supervisor or co-supervisor. The remaining reports concern direct colleagues. Reports received centrally show a broader range of defendants, indicating that undesirable behaviour is not limited to a single job group but can occur at various levels of the organisation.

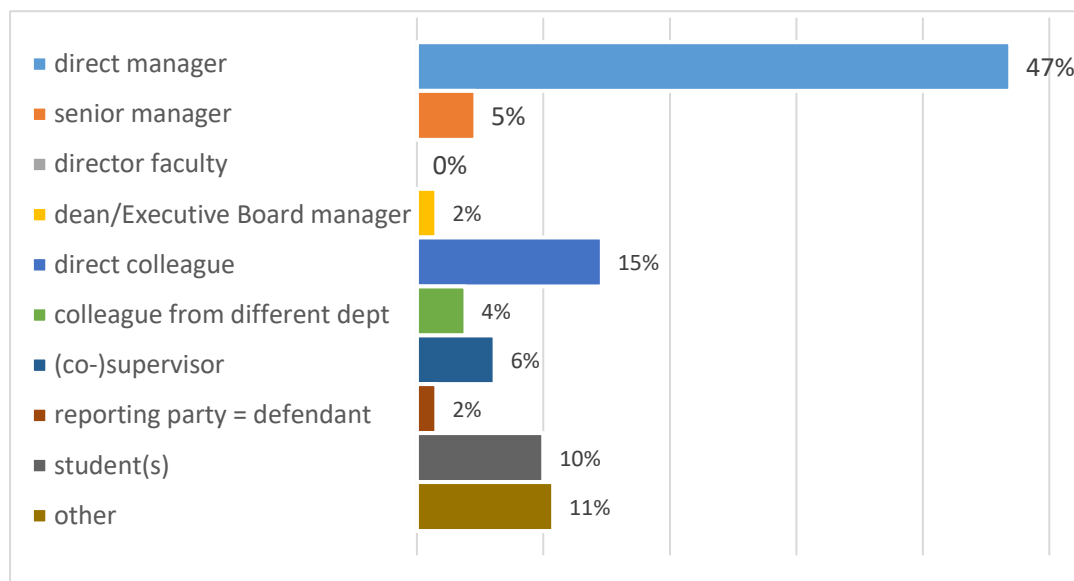


Figure 6: Accused parties as identified in reports (%)

The reports also highlight the blending of work and private life through close relational ties. Issues may involve a PhD team that includes spouses, a situation where one partner manages the other, or close friendships that prevent colleagues from holding each other accountable.

3.4 Reports to the CCP

In 2024, the CCP coordinator handled various signals of undesirable behaviour and other concerning situations. This section discusses the referral of reporting parties, the nature of the advice requests received, and the process and outcomes of advisory panels in which complex cases were discussed. Additionally, a number of areas for improvement are identified to contribute to the further professionalisation of the approach.

Referrals

Reporting parties were referred from the CCP to a wide range of internal and external support providers (Figure 7). In total, there were 27 referrals:

- 15 to the ombuds officer
- 7 to a confidential adviser
- 2 to the counsellor for the accused
- 3 other referrals: to the manager, the police and the company doctor.

The majority of referrals were made to confidential advisers and the ombuds officer. The confidential adviser appeared to be more widely known and was approached more readily, partly due to increased attention paid in wider society to undesirable behaviour within organisations. The function and role of the ombuds officer may require further explanation and visibility, considering the relative newness of the position and its specific mandate.

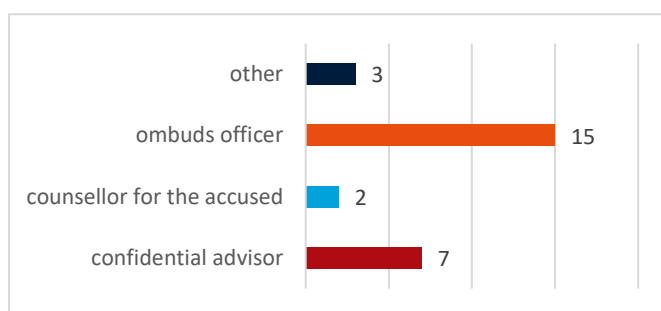


Figure 7: Referrals by the CCP

Requests for advice in 2024

A total of 27 requests for advice were registered, an increase from 18 in 2023. Of these requests, 22 were filed with the CCP. The majority came from managers and POAs (14 requests from managers, 1 from a POA, and 5 joint requests from a manager and a POA). Two requests came from other professionals.

The requests for advice covered a diverse range of issues, including:

- intimidation, bullying, slander or stalking (9 requests)
- concerning behaviour by students (3 requests)
- sexual harassment, both in terms of interpretation and guidance (2 requests)
- unwanted communication or treatment (2 requests)
- cooperation issues (3 requests)
- other themes, such as aftercare for reporting parties (3 requests).

In many cases, multiple forms of undesirable behaviour were involved simultaneously, increasing the complexity of the situation. The advice varied, ranging from personal handling by the manager to calling in a neutral mediator or organising a team intervention. The nature of these interventions also differed in intensity, from team coaching to low-threshold methods such as the game *Is this okay?*, designed to initiate dialogue within teams. In three cases, the request for advice resulted in the setup of an advisory panel.

Advisory panels in 2024

In 2024, seven advisory panels were organised in which the CCP was involved. An advisory panel is a multidisciplinary consultation where cases are jointly assessed by the manager, the POA, the CCP coordinator and, if necessary, other professionals. The manager retains ultimate responsibility and acts as the decision maker. The aim is to carefully interpret the situation, determine the necessary follow-up steps, and monitor progress until resolution.

The distribution of the cases was as follows:

- 3 reports about students
- 4 reports about employees
- 1 report about a former employee.

Five cases involved reports of undesirable behaviour, two cases involved concerning behaviour, and one involved a workplace conflict. Two advisory panels were set up in response to multiple reports about the same individual. One advisory panel continued from 2023.

The outcomes of the advisory panels varied, from providing guidance to adjusting an employee's activities, to making agreements with the parties involved, filing a police report, or issuing advice to a dean or the Executive Board. In one case, the process led to the departure of an employee. Another advisory panel is still ongoing.

3.5 Reports to confidential advisers

In 2024, a total of 59 reporting parties contacted one of the internal or external confidential advisers directly, and 7 reporting parties were referred by the CCP. The reports received by confidential advisers primarily related to undesirable behaviour and cooperation issues. These categories are often complex and affect both the personal and professional functioning of employees and PhD candidates. In line with the definitions in the Working Conditions Act, undesirable behaviour includes (sexual) harassment, aggression and violence, discrimination and bullying (see Appendix 1). The Act also stipulates that the recipient of the behaviour determines what is perceived as undesirable, and places the responsibility for ensuring a safe working environment with the employer.

The sections below explain the signals reported in 2024 for each category. Categories with too few reports are not discussed further in order to maintain confidentiality.

Cooperation issues

The percentage of reporting parties who filed reports on cooperation issues with colleagues decreased from 23% in 2023 to 13% in 2024. Cooperation issues were reported more often by support staff than by academic staff. Some reporting parties indicated that although they raised concerns, their manager did not intervene. In some cases, there was a lack of knowledge about how to address the issue, while in others, concerns were dismissed.

It is worth noting that cooperation issues often start small but can build up over time, resulting in workplace conflicts. Tensions between two individuals invariably affect the work environment, sometimes leading to division or even the creation of factions within a department. Furthermore, managers always play a role in cooperation issues, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is their responsibility to recognise signals and take appropriate action.

Intimidation

Intimidation was reported by 27% of reporting parties, a figure comparable to 2023 (29%). In half of the reported cases, the direct supervisor was the defendant, while in the other half, (direct) colleagues were identified. A total of 78% of reports were filed by female employees. The majority of reports involved verbal intimidation. Reporting parties often stated that they found the management style intimidating but felt unable to raise the issue for discussion. The POAs did not always appear to be involved in this type of report.

Bullying

Bullying was reported by 8% of reporting parties, an increase from 3% in 2023. This often involved both direct colleagues and the direct manager. The manager's role varied, from active bullying to passive participation (i.e. not intervening). The impact of bullying on the reporting parties could be significant, leading to sick leave and/or absenteeism. Generally, the support procedures for bullying involved the highest number of meetings.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment was reported by 4% of reporting parties in 2024, a decrease from 11% in 2023. The majority of the reporting parties were female PhD candidates. In some cases, the reporting party simply wished to file a report; in other cases both the reporting party and the defendants received guidance as a result of the report. In two cases, discussions were held with the parties involved and measures were taken. In no case was it deemed necessary or desirable to open an investigation.

Discrimination and racism

Discrimination or racism were involved in 3% of the reports, the same figure as in 2023. When reporting parties were willing to waive their confidentiality to follow up on the report, measures were taken in response.

Concerning behaviour

There were 9 reports of concerning behaviour, compared to 2 in 2023. In the 2023 annual report, we noted that employee anxiety had increased following the shooting incident at Erasmus University Rotterdam in September 2023. This concern continued into 2024. All reports of concerning behaviour involved students. What stood out in these cases was the reporting parties' sense of feeling unsafe while also being concerned for the wellbeing of the students involved.

Other issues

Other signals related to a variety of topics, including questions or complaints about protests on UM grounds, academic integrity and issues with organisational culture.

3.6 Reports to the ombuds officer

In 2024, the ombuds officer received 45 reports directly from employees. Additionally, 15 reporting parties were referred to the ombuds officer through the CCP.

More than 70% of the reports filed with the ombuds officer concerned workplace conflicts. A workplace conflict always plays out between manager and employee. The reports concerned a range of issues, such as CAO matters; deviations from UM's career policy; disputes over workload, performance, assessment, reintegration and improvement processes; and conflicts regarding combined employment contracts at UM and azM.

Reports concerning CAO matters were varied, but primarily focused on deviations from the CAO-NU. Common concerns included the non-payment of leave, failure to fully reimburse overtime, and disputes over sabbaticals or parental leave. Reports related to performance and improvement processes often revolved around unclear justifications (e.g. anonymous complaints), sudden initiation of processes and unrealistic improvement actions. In reintegration procedures, reporting parties expressed feelings of insecurity, often due to high pressure or because the process was linked to concerns about alleged underperformance.

In addition to the main issue, many reporting parties also reported experiencing undesirable treatment and intimidation, frequently attributed to the management style.

A total of 27% of all reports with on of the sociale safety professionals involved workplace conflicts, an increase from 21% in 2023. In these cases, the ombuds officer was either directly involved from the outset or brought in through referral. In 84% of the workplace conflicts, the reporting party identified the direct supervisor as the cause of the conflict.

Due to circumstances, the reports have not yet been analysed in detail.

3.7 Handling of reports

As shown in Figure 8, 19% of reporting parties indicated that they wished only to file a report without further follow-up (up from 8% in 2023). In some cases – since a fair process requires hearing the accused’s side of the story – reporting parties expressed concerns about potential job loss, career damage or other repercussions if their confidentiality was waived. In other cases, they simply wanted the situation documented, so that action could be taken if similar reports were made in the future.

The majority of reporting parties (39%) sought advice on how to handle the situation independently. Additionally, 17% – a slight increase compared to last year – required guidance. This was primarily in relation to reports of intimidation, bullying and cooperation issues. Guidance typically involves an intake interview and follow-up sessions with a confidential adviser, as well as meetings with a manager or the accused. If requested, both reporting parties and defendants can receive support during interviews related to investigations and in the context of aftercare.

Mediation took place in seven cases, a slight increase compared to 2023. No investigations were initiated in response to central reports.

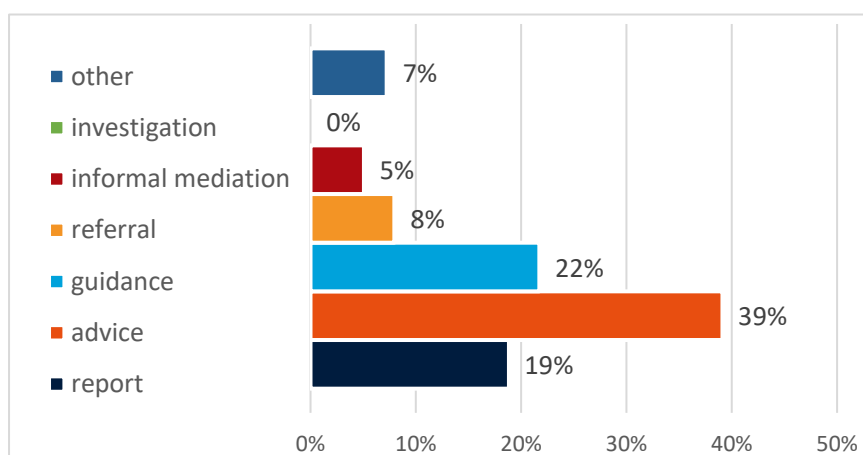


Figure 8: Follow-up of reports in 2024 (%)

3.8 Other pillars of social safety

This section discusses other key pillars of social safety within UM, including the development of management skills, peer reviews with the POAs, and employees' willingness to report issues. These factors are essential in strengthening social safety and fostering a culture of openness and trust. We explore the progress made so far and highlight areas that still require attention to create an even safer working environment.

3.5.1 Management skills and leadership

By the end of 2024, approximately 80% of managers had completed the mandatory module on Leadership and Undesirable Behaviour. The training received an overwhelmingly positive response, with managers reporting that it provided new insights into their role and responsibility in fostering a socially safe work culture.

"The interactions between UM managers revealed that there are differing perspectives across disciplines on what constitutes acceptable behaviour."

"The actors help you to experience how behaviour is unintentionally received."

Quotes from a manager

This foundation was further strengthened through three follow-up sessions for management teams and two learning communities organised by the Leadership Academy in collaboration with the CCP and the confidential advisers. During these meetings, managers exhibited genuinely active and open attitudes: there was space to reflect, share experiences and ask specific questions. It is encouraging to see that an increasing number of managers and POAs are actively seeking guidance on appropriate behaviours.

In short, a growing group of managers are actively committed to enhancing social safety. They are increasingly seeking advice, adopting a learning mindset, and making deliberate efforts to handle situations with care – for instance, by ensuring both sides of the story are heard or by bringing in external expertise when needed. Participants in training courses and learning communities demonstrate both commitment and the ability to reflect. These are promising signs that positive change is underway.

At the same time, the figures indicate that this development has not yet been fully realised across the board. In 60% of reports, a manager was identified as the defendant. In many other cases, managers played an indirect role, for instance by not listening adequately, engaging in clumsy

communication, or failing to recognise their position of power. In some cases, action was taken in haste without carefully hearing both sides. These findings highlight the ongoing need for further professionalisation in handling tense situations.

3.5.2 POAs and peer review

In 2024, a peer-review pilot programme was launched for the POAs to strengthen their role as neutral discussion partners and advisers for both managers and employees. The POAs play a crucial role in supporting employees with their reports and in advising managers. The aim of the pilot is to enhance their knowledge and skills in managing complex situations related to social safety and reports.

An employee reported to her supervisor that she repeatedly felt disrespected by a colleague. The supervisor took the concern seriously and first spoke to the reporting party to properly understand her experience. He then separately spoke with the colleague involved to hear his side of the story. Only then did he bring both parties together – with their consent – for a joint conversation. By giving space to both perspectives, mutual understanding was fostered and clear working agreements could be made. The reporting party felt heard and taken seriously, while the colleague was given the opportunity to clarify his actions and adjust his behaviour.

3.5.3 Netherlands Labour Authority

In May 2024, the findings of the 2023 investigation by the national Labour Authority were presented. During a visit to UM, the Authority assessed the risks and measures related to psychosocial workload, such as work pressure and undesirable behaviour. Below is a brief summary of the key points for UM. A follow-up inspection is scheduled for 2025, focusing on the implementation of the recommended measures.

Positive findings	Points for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-organised reporting and support structure (CCP, ombuds officer and confidential advisers) - Reports and complaints are generally taken seriously - Mandatory Social Safety module for managers - Clear communication from the Executive Board regarding applicable norms and values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of insight into the underlying causes of undesirable behaviour - To date, no insight into the impact of measures to prevent undesirable behaviour - No documentation in place for aftercare of victims of undesirable behaviour

4

Analysis and recommendations

4 Analysis and recommendations

This chapter presents an analysis of the reports filed with the social safety professionals. These reports should not be viewed as threats, but as valuable opportunities for improvement. Based on the insights gathered, recommendations have been made with the goal of collectively developing a safer working environment.

4.1 Analysis

The 2023 annual report highlighted two key pillars for improving social safety: (1) strengthening management skills and (2) increasing employees' willingness to report issues. In 2024, both positive developments and areas for attention emerged in these areas. At the same time, broader trends and practical dilemmas are also becoming evident. There are concerns about the misapplication of the concept of social safety, such as when dissatisfaction with performance is labelled as unsafe behaviour. There has been an increase in reports of concerning behaviour, particularly among students. And the vulnerable position of certain groups, such as Chinese PhD candidates, requires additional focus. This combination of progress and complexity underscores the need for careful interpretation, ongoing assurance and continued support in our efforts to create a socially safe working environment.

Management skills

There is growing awareness among managers of their role in fostering a socially safe working environment. However, concerns persist regarding the behaviour of a significant number of managers. While reports only reflect one side of the story and do not constitute evidence in a legal sense, in 60% of cases, reporting parties view the behaviour of managers as a direct cause of a lack of social safety. This recurring theme emphasises the need for ongoing training and guidance for managers, with a focus on acting with care, listening to both sides of the situation and avoiding hasty interventions.

In addition, it is crucial to continue to strengthen the role of the POAs. Their position as neutral discussion partners and advisers is key to fostering a culture of trust, where employees feel safe to file reports.

Willingness to report issues

The reports and concerns recorded in 2024 reflect both progress and ongoing challenges within the organisation. A positive development is the increased willingness to report: employees are

coming forward earlier and more frequently at an initial stage, which improves the likelihood of resolving issues effectively.

However, despite this encouraging trend, there has been a slight decrease in the overall number of reports. Given that reports have only been systematically recorded since 2022, the current timeframe is too limited to draw reliable conclusions about trends in reporting behaviour.

This combination of factors highlights the continued importance of fostering a safe reporting culture and closely monitoring signals within the organisation.

Concerns about false reports

Conversations with employees, managers and other stakeholders reveal concerns and dilemmas that call for reflection. A recurring signal is the perceived misuse of the concept of social safety. Some managers report that employees frame performance-related feedback or disagreements over substantive decisions – such as assessments or task allocation – as socially unsafe situations. Similar concerns have been raised about students making social safety-related complaints to express dissatisfaction with academic assessments.

Although these signals are difficult to quantify, they point to the need for a clearer definition of what constitutes social safety, particularly in relation to situations that are challenging, uncomfortable or stressful. A well-defined framework is essential to ensure that genuine risks to social safety are recognised and addressed appropriately.

Reports of concerning behaviour

There has been a rise in reports of concerning behaviour, particularly involving students. These reports often reflect a combination of concerns about both safety and wellbeing. Staff members describe feeling torn between their duty of care towards students and their own sense of unease or reluctance to intervene. This highlights the need for appropriate support, clear guidance and policies that maintain an appropriate balance between social safety, psychological wellbeing and academic boundaries.

Vulnerable position of Chinese CSC PhD candidates

PhD candidates with CSC scholarships from China require, as a group, special attention. Reports and signals indicate that they are especially hesitant to come forward with problems. At the same time, the risks for this group are considerable if they are unable to complete their PhDs for any reason. Loss of their scholarship, residence permit or reputation can have far-reaching personal and professional consequences, placing these candidates in a particularly vulnerable

position. This underscores the need for heightened vigilance from supervisors, PhD coordinators and policymakers to provide clarity in a timely manner about the feasibility of the PhD programme, offer appropriate support where needed and remain alert to any warning signs.

4.2 Recommendations

This year, we consciously opted to focus on embedding, elaborating and monitoring the recommendations made in 2022 and 2023. Many of the previously proposed actions are still in progress or need time to take full effect. We are, however, adding one new recommendation concerning the advisory panel. Key recommendations are outlined below.

Continue to invest in training and guidance for managers

Despite encouraging signs of engagement in training courses and openness during sessions, the reports indicate that managers' behaviour often still plays a direct or indirect role in situations perceived as unsafe. This highlights the fact that leadership is a professional skillset that requires ongoing development and practical support. It is therefore recommended to establish follow-up pathways – mandatory or otherwise – focused on applying these skills in practice, for example through peer review or on-the-job coaching. Additionally, the evaluation of leadership competences should become a standard aspect of recruitment and selection processes for managerial roles. This will help to ensure that those in leadership positions possess the necessary skills and awareness of social safety.

One recommendation for all UM employees and managers is to continue improving the quality of mutual communication. Many cases reveal that communication between parties is often inadequate. The reporting party and the defendant frequently misunderstand one another, and meaningful dialogue is lacking. Moreover, reporting parties are sometimes hesitant to take the next step beyond submitting a report, partly due to fear of repercussions but also out of reluctance to engage in difficult conversations.

Managers need to be made aware of their responsibility for the social safety of their employees. This includes the fact that they cannot guarantee confidentiality if an employee shares something with them. In our presentations and workshops, we frequently encounter managers who are unaware of this.

Finally, it is essential to remain alert to the intertwining of personal relationships within teams and organisational structures. This is particularly important in recruitment and selection, where awareness of potential conflicts of interest or a culture of favouritism is crucial. When the boundaries between personal and professional lives become blurred and managers are, as a

result, unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, the risk increases of socially unsafe situations for both individual employees and the team as a whole.

Optimise the advisory panel process

Based on the experiences in 2024, several areas for improvement have been identified to further strengthen the advisory panel process and related advisory procedures:

- Status of recommendations: clarify the formal status of recommendations made by advisory panels, including whether deviations are permitted and who is authorised to do so.
- Follow-up and monitoring: establish clear agreements on the follow-up of decisions and actively monitor the progress of agreed actions.
- Reporting and documentation: clarify how advisory panel processes and recommendations are reported, who is responsible for this task, and how the information is managed and shared.

Addressing these areas for improvement will help to further professionalise the advisory and decision-making process. This will enhance transparency, rigour and consistency, while ensuring careful treatment of both reporting parties and defendants.

Improve visibility and accessibility of social safety professionals

It is crucial that employees are aware of the reporting structure and know where to seek help. In 2025, the CCP, confidential advisers and ombuds officer will make the following contributions:

- update communications: rewrite presentations, flyers and Umployee/webpages from the user's perspective, making them clearer and more concise
- implement a structured campaign to reach employees through, for example, presentations of varying lengths.

4.3 Outlook 2025

To the best of our knowledge, the following activities are planned for 2025:

- Aftercare Guide: A guide for aftercare after undesirable behaviour will be submitted to the Executive Board for decision in 2025.
- Social safety training: this training is planned on an ongoing basis. Employees who have not yet attended this training will be given another opportunity to participate.
- Review Recognition & Rewards: the R&R training will be updated in 2025 and is continued from autumn onwards.

- E-modules: UM is working with a consortium of eight higher education institutions on a grant application to develop e-modules to prevent sexual transgressive behaviour and violence, aimed at students and staff.
- Cooperation UNL: Within the UNL 'Dossierhoudersoverleg' on Social Safety, joint projects are being worked on to strengthen social safety within universities.

APPENDIX 1

Definitions

Difference between signal, report and complaint

Signal (informal)	When undesirable behaviour occurs within (part of) the organisation, signals such as stories or rumours often emerge before a report is made. These signals may require follow-up steps to understand the situation and determine whether intervention is necessary.
Report (informal)	A report is made when an employee explicitly speaks out about undesirable behaviour, regardless of who receives the report or where it is filed. The person making the report is referred to as the <i>reporting party</i> . This term clarifies who is involved without implying any legal judgement.
Complaint (formal)	A complaint is when a reporting party or group of reporting parties submits a written statement to the external Complaints Committee for Undesirable Behaviour, in accordance with the Joint Complaints Procedure for Undesirable Behaviour. This initiates a formal process in which an independent committee handles the complaint following established procedures.

Definitions of undesirable behaviour

Intimidation	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. When a person unlawfully compels someone to do, not do or tolerate something by force, violence or another act or by threatening force, violence or another act2. When a person compels someone to do, not do or tolerate something by threats of slander or libel (Art. 284, Criminal Code).
Sexual harassment	Any form of verbal, nonverbal or physical behaviour of a sexual nature that aims to, or results in, violating a person's dignity, particularly when it creates a threatening, hostile, insulting, humiliating or offensive situation.
Bullying	A form of psychosocial workload, which leads to work-related stress.
Concerning behaviour	Actions that pose, or may pose, a safety risk to the individual involved or to those in their immediate surroundings. These are often complex situations that require a multidisciplinary approach and careful attention to the wellbeing of the person concerned.

Threat	Conveying the message that a person will endanger the general safety of the victim's person or property through rape, assault, kidnapping, arson or any other crime against person or property (Art. 285, Criminal Code).
Aggression and violence	When an employee is subjected to harassment, threats or assault, either verbally (e.g. swearing, insults) or physically (e.g. kicking, hitting, being threatened with a weapon or robbed). It may also involve psychological violence, such as intimidation, coercion, threats relating to a person's home situation or damage to personal property. Such behaviour may originate from individuals within the organisation (e.g. colleagues or managers) or from third parties (Working Conditions Act).
Discrimination	Unlawfully distinguishing between and disadvantaging individuals or groups based on characteristics that are irrelevant to the specific situation. There are 13 recognised grounds for discrimination, including race, age, nationality, disability/chronic illness and working hours.
Racism	Disadvantaging or excluding individuals or groups based on their skin colour, national background or ethnic origin.

Conflicts

Employment law conflict	A (long-term) conflict between an employee and their employer or manager, in which the hierarchical relationship plays a role.
Cooperation issues	A (long-term) conflict between two or more employees, often involving the manager in either a passive or active capacity.

Interventions

Report	When a reporting party wishes to document a situation or one or more events without seeking follow-up actions.
Advice	When a reporting party receives advice on potential next steps in one or two meetings and opts to follow this advice individually.
Guidance	When a reporting party is involved in multiple meetings in response to a report and is, for example, accompanied during these meetings (typically by the confidential adviser).
Referral	When a reporting party is directed to (specialised) help beyond the social safety professionals, such as an HR adviser, company doctor, psychologist, police or mediator. When a social safety

	professional refers a reporting party to a fellow social safety professional, this is not considered an official referral.
Mediation	When mediation is provided by the social safety professionals, typically the ombuds officer or, in some cases, the CCP. If mediation is carried out by an external party, it is considered a referral.
Investigation	When a report either directly or indirectly leads to an investigation. The investigation may be conducted internally or externally and can involve various types of investigations.

Handling of reports

Consulting with the Social Safety professionals may lead to one of the following situations.

Report

Sometimes a reporting party simply wants to explain what happened and have the situation or event documented. For various reasons, such as fear or perceived hassle, the reporting party may not wish to pursue further action. The report is documented in the social safety records, and the identity of the reporting party and the content of the report are confidential.

Advice

Sometimes, an employee cooperates with a social safety expert in one or two meetings to explore possible and acceptable follow-up steps. The 'escalation ladder' is often used, starting with the option of taking no action (which may be a legitimate choice for the reporting party) and escalating to more extreme actions, such as involving the media. In all cases, it is crucial that the reporting party remains in control and decides for themselves whether or not to take the next step. These meetings are, of course, confidential.

Guidance

This is a somewhat longer process in which the social safety expert supports the reporting party through multiple meetings, assessing both the underlying reason for the report and the progress of subsequent steps. The reporting party may also receive assistance during any required meetings. This is primarily provided by the confidential adviser, who guides and supports the reporting party throughout the process.