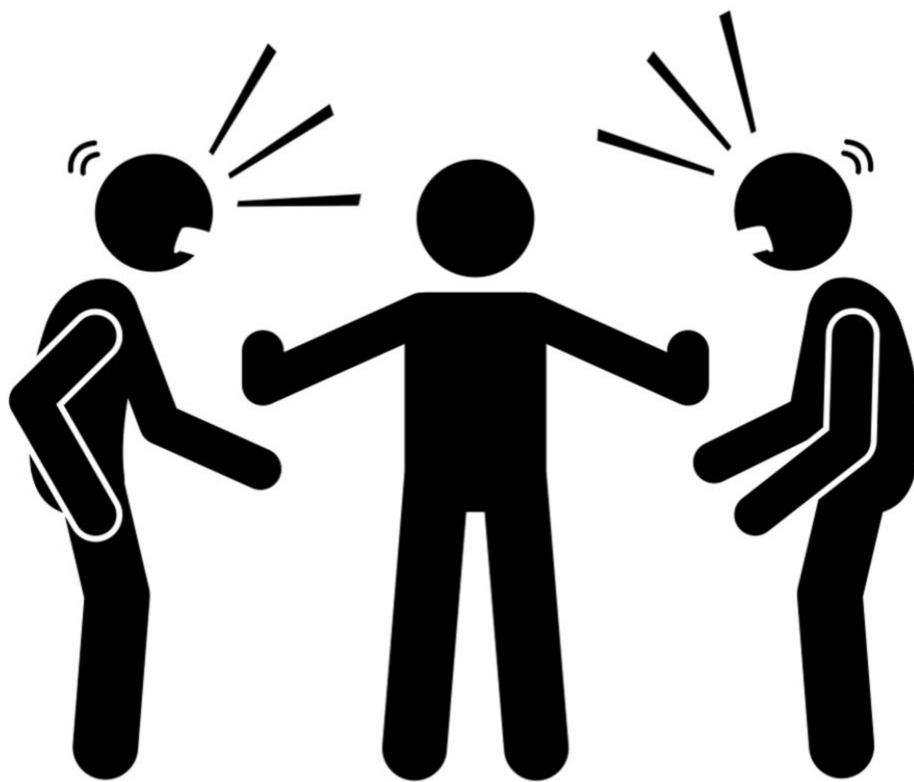


Social safety within universities

Introduction 2025, version 2.1
Human Centric



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Introduction

In universities people work with great commitment towards education, research and innovation. But behind that dedication something else hides: stress, inappropriate behaviour and a lack of social safety is a daily reality for many employees and students. A recent report by the Dutch Labour Inspectorate (published May 2024) based on 9.000 respondents concludes that:

- 70% of employees experience structural stress.
- Employees work on average 6 hours per week more than contracted.
- 54% of employees have experienced inappropriate behaviour in the last 2 years.
- 69% see that colleagues are negatively affected by this.

Based on findings of this report the Inspectorate calls upon universities to do more to reduce psychosocial workload (in Dutch: *psycho-sociale arbeidsbelasting*). Psychosocial workload refers to the stress that is caused as a reaction to inappropriate behaviour or overwork. It undermines health, motivation and performance, and leads to sick leave. It affects not only employees, but also students and the educational climate.

Want to read more? Read the report “*Psychosocial Workload at Dutch Universities*”, as well as the infographic by the labour inspection. [Link](#)

At Human Centric, we believe that social safety starts with awareness and action. This introduction is meant as a starting point for a conversation, reflection, and change. It is for leaders, managers, students and employees who want to contribute to a culture where they feel free to be themselves, speak up and enjoy working together. It forms the basis of our training and workshops within academia.

The following questions are addressed:

- What causes the lack of social safety within Dutch academia?
- What is inappropriate behaviour?
- How do we intervene when inappropriate behaviour occurs?
- What is the role of leaders in creating social safety?

What is social safety?

"Social safety is the extent to which employees feel protected against risks caused by others.

Psychological safety is the extent to which they feel free to be themselves at work, to make mistakes, and to speak up to colleagues.

A lack of social and psychological safety leads to poor performance. It also increases the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour."

- Source: SER

Want to know more? Read the guide. [Link](#) (in Dutch)

Social safety in Dutch academia

A university is socially safe when students and employees feel protected against the inappropriate behaviour of others. This implies an environment in which people feel comfortable to express themselves, where differences are respected, and boundaries are clear.

Commissioned by the Ministry of OCW, the KNAW prepared a guide in 2022 to improve social safety in science: *Social safety in Dutch academia - From paper to practice*. Its key conclusions were:

- A lack of time and money leads to high work pressure and stress.
- Strong hierarchical relationships and dependencies make it difficult to address inappropriate behaviour.
- Behaviour is rarely discussed; much remains unspoken.
- Managers often feel ill-equipped to act appropriately.

Table 1 summarizes the recommendations of the report on the next page.

A socially safe working environment is not a given. It requires recognising and addressing the underlying causes of stress, such as high work pressure, unclear expectations, and dependencies within teams. Additionally, there needs to be structural attention to four building blocks of social safety:

- Talking about (inappropriate) behaviour.
- Providing constructive feedback and alternative viewpoints.
- Intervening when inappropriate behaviour occurs.
- Effective care structures for all employees. Figure 1 summarises the elements for these structures.



Risk assessment & evaluation



Confidential councillor outside of management



Complaint procedure & committee



Code of conduct



Culture & communication



Registration, monitoring & follow-up

Figure 1: interventions to prevent and address inappropriate behaviour.

Want to read more? The report *Social safety in Dutch academia - From paper to practice* is a must-read to understand social safety within universities. [Link](#)

What remains underemphasised in the report are the structural interventions that contribute to social safety. Often, the organisational structure is seen as a given. That is misguided: smaller teams, less complexity, clear management, better information, lower work pressure, long-term contracts, and stable financing structures can also contribute to safety.

Social safety is not only created by an inclusive culture, but also by a systemic approach in which behaviour, culture, and structure go hand in hand.

Want to know more? Read the LinkedIn post by Mark Noort and the attached article by Leake et al. [Link](#) (Dutch post, English paper attached)

Table 1: summary of recommendations in Social Safety Dutch science - From paper to practice

	Pressure	Changes
Organizational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarcity of time & money and heavy workload threaten quality. • Power differentials and dependencies put cooperation to the test. • The complex organisation makes visibility and alignment of behaviour difficult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investments only eliminate the negative effects of scarcity and workload if they also improve cooperation. • Organizing responsible leadership prevents abuse of power. • A fine-grained structure to map behavioural risks does justice to the complexity of the organization.
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour is seen as a given and is therefore not a topic of discussion. • Ability to speak about behaviour is lacking and not prioritised. • Nevertheless, the illusion is maintained that everyone can have a say. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about behaviour provides insight into its causes and consequences. • The organisation has a role in the development of competencies that contribute to social safety. • By giving everyone a voice, you can question unwritten rules.
System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention is poorly executed because the concern for social safety is not sufficiently clear either on paper or in practice. • In the event of inappropriate behaviour, the employer has conflicting responsibilities towards both parties. • It is difficult to achieve a balance between these responsibilities, which means that none of those involved feel well or fairly treated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By developing codes of conduct together, you bring them to life • To avoid escalation, timely adjustments are needed. • Connecting people who solve problems together provides a safety net for everyone involved.

Inappropriate behaviour

Inappropriate behaviour is behaviour that harms social or psychological safety. It comes in many forms, ranging from visibly transgressive behaviour to subtle patterns that can be equally harmful over time. There are five legally established forms of inappropriate behaviour in Dutch law (see figure 2):

- 1. Intimidation:** Threatening or manipulating, for example by implying negative consequences.
- 2. Aggression and violence:** Verbally or physically violent behaviour, threats, or insults.
- 3. Bullying:** Systematically excluding, ridiculing, or assigning unnecessary tasks.
- 4. Discrimination:** Unequal treatment based on, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.
- 5. Sexual intimidation (also harassment):** Unwanted sexually inappropriate behaviour, verbal or non-verbal.



Figure 2: Five legally established forms of inappropriate behaviour

Recognise inappropriate behaviour? Take a look at the TNO-guide for bullying, discrimination, and sexual intimidation. [Link](#) (in Dutch)

Other behaviour that may seem more innocent, but is still considered harmful, such as:

- **Microaggressions:** Subtle comments or questions that perpetuate stereotypes and exclude people.
- **Punishing mistakes:** This limits openness and collaboration.
- **Exclusionary humour:** Jokes at the expense of others or groups.
- **Ignoring boundaries:** Increasing stress by setting unrealistic deadlines or not respecting working hours.

Inappropriate behaviour is not black and white, and it can often arise from ignorance, stress, or blind spots. But what matters is the effect on the other person. Behaviour is considered **inappropriate** if it is experienced as such. This creates tension: the intention is often different from the experience. It is essential that we learn to listen, reflect, and act. We call behaviour **transgressive** when the person exhibiting the behaviour is supposed to know that it is inappropriate and still crosses that line.

Safety only arises when behaviour can be discussed, and boundaries are recognised.

Recommendation: Watch this animation that illustrates the effect of microaggressions. [Link](#)

Unsafe vs. uncomfortable

Sometimes a student or colleague might say in a conversation: "I feel unsafe" or "You are creating an unsafe situation." This can catch you off guard. You might feel the urge to immediately defend yourself: "That's not what I meant" or "That's not unsafe, is it?"

However, this is precisely the moment to pause. Not to focus on your intention, but on the other person's feelings. What does that person mean by 'unsafe'? What exactly happened? And what does someone need to feel safe?

The person who feels unsafe also has a role in this. Exploring together where the feeling comes from often opens up the conversation about feelings such as fear, insecurity, helplessness, or injustice. The invitation is to stay connected, not to judge immediately, and to make room for what is happening.

Tip: Don't forget to pay attention to your own stress level. Stress makes it harder to listen openly, which is exactly what is needed at such moments.

Effective interventions

When socially inappropriate behaviour occurs, intervention is important. Without intervention, this sort of behaviour tends to be normalised and become more common.

However, it is quite difficult to intervene in the moment, particularly when other people are around. This lack of action is often attributed to the bystander effect and explains why we do not act when there are others around us.

The good news? You can learn to act. The five steps of the **Bystander Intervention Model** can help us move from a passive to an active bystander (see below).

Table 2: the 5 steps of the Bystander Intervention Model

	Step	Barrier to overcome / question that prevent you from taking action
1	Noticing & recognising behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have sufficient knowledge to recognise inappropriate behaviour?• Do you notice the situation taking place?
2	Determining the need for intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you interpreting the dynamics of the situation correctly?• Do you let the passivity of others determine your own reaction?
3	Taking responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How responsible do you feel when others are present?• Do you dare to take the risk (physically, socially & emotionally)?
4	Knowing how to intervene	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have sufficient knowledge and experience when intervening? Can you also apply this to the specific situation?
5	Deciding to intervene	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you convinced that you could create a positive effect, and do you dare to do it (risks)?

Want to read more? Movisie has written a report on the Bystander Intervention model, [Link](#) and created an infographic [Link](#) (in Dutch).

Intervening doesn't always have to happen immediately. Often, a conversation afterwards is just as valuable: asking how someone is doing or giving feedback. There are various ways to guard a boundary or offer support. Choose an option that suits you, the situation, and the people around you. At the moment itself, you have four important options (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Four possible interventions in the moment

Want to know more? In our training and active bystander workshop, you learn effective interventions and receive a practical guide.

The role of the leader

Managers play a key role in creating social safety. They set the tone and can make a difference by offering support, making behaviour discussable, setting clear standards, and leading by example. This requires courage, focus, and practice. There are four core skills that every manager can develop to become stronger in this. (see Figure 4).

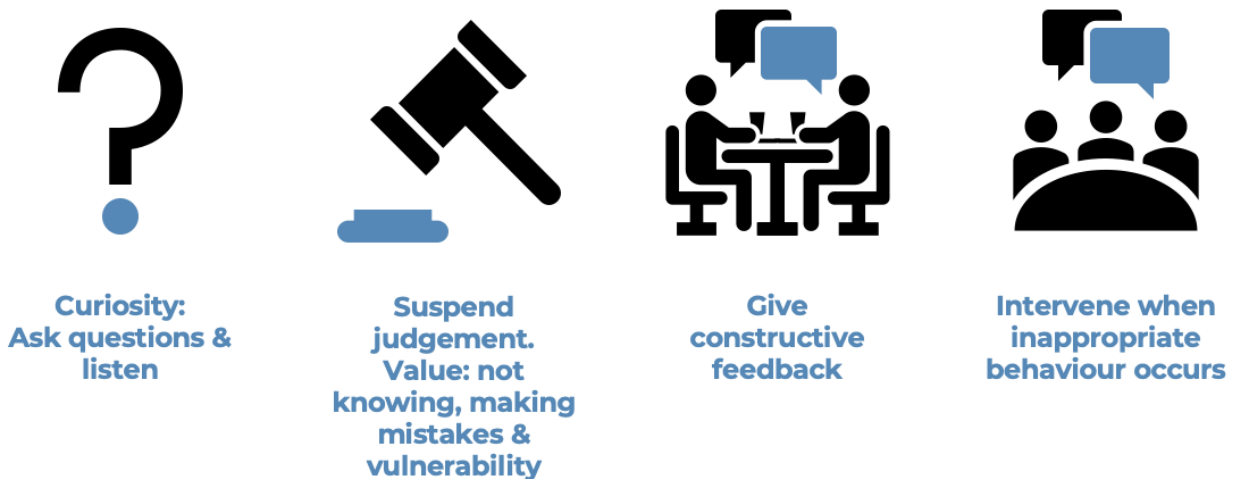


Figure 4: Four exemplary behaviours to focus on as a leader.

Be kind to yourself: you don't have to do everything perfectly. Making mistakes is part of the process. But taking responsibility is also part of it. Even, and especially, if you find it daunting or have doubts. Especially then. Social safety doesn't start with knowing, but with doing.

Transgressive behaviour by managers

Research shows that a significant portion of transgressive behaviour — between a third and a half — comes from managers. This is confronting, but not surprising. The behaviour of someone with power or authority is often experienced more vividly by others.

This is precisely why self-reflection is essential for managers, not to condemn yourself, but to remain aware of your influence. Your behaviour sets the tone. What you say, do, and don't do has an impact.

Social safety begins with managers who dare to look at themselves.

Want to know more? Join our training for managers — you will learn more. Contact us with questions or for advice.

About the author



Rutger Legeland is a partner at Human Centric. He is specialised in inclusive decision making (strategy development, recruitment & selection) and social safety. He combines his experiences as a management consultant and deputy department head with knowledge from various academic domains, to help people, teams and organisations become more inclusive and make better decisions.

Rutger is a registered confidential counsellor ([open](#)).

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