



Maastricht University

# Annual Report on Student Social Safety



Social Safety Team - Students  
March 2024



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## Introduction

You are looking at the 2023 Annual Report on Student Social Safety. It has been a year of many significant changes: UM has adapted its care framework and set up a team dedicated to the social safety of its students. This report replaces the annual report by the confidential adviser for students.

Social safety is a prerequisite for good research, teaching, and learning. It is a subject that has gathered a lot of attention both in political debates and in the media. The UM Executive Board has contributed to these discussions, highlighting the importance of social safety in education and research as well as that of creating safe learning and working environments. This report offers an insight into the activities of UM's confidential advisers and Social Safety Team – Students, including the reports received by the team.

### How to read this report:

The first chapter provides information on the background and composition of the team, as well as on its vision, mission, and responsibilities. It also provides a cautious outlook on the team's future. The second chapter gives an overview of the definitions used and reports received by the confidential advisers and coordinator from the 1st of January to the 31st of December 2023. This chapter also describes the nature of the reports and the support offered by the team in response. The third chapter discusses the experiences and concerns raised, and provides recommendations for addressing them. The conclusion of the report briefly looks at the importance of (cultural) change and the opportunities individuals have to contribute to this.

Feeling safe in the academic environment is vital to students' personal development, to the atmosphere within the university, and to

students' social lives beyond our walls. In addition to this academic achievement tends to be higher when students feel valued and safe.

### **Reactions from students who have sought help from the social safety team**

*"Thank you for your support and the meeting. I appreciate very much that Maastricht University has an office one can turn to in such a case."*

*"Thank you very much again. It is good to have someone that listens and to hear myself say things out loud. I have a clearer picture now."*

UM offers its students many different frameworks of support. There are many staff members and students in the peer group making a valuable contribution to improving the social and psychological conditions at UM, both in general and in terms of providing individual support to students. We appreciate your dedication and input tremendously.

I hope you find this report interesting and eye-opening.

Ivanka Smitsmans  
Coordinator  
Social Safety Team – Students

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**"How do you incite safety?"**

## Summary

Social safety in higher education is currently a key issue in both political debates and the media. UM is very conscious of the importance of a safe learning and working environment, and in August 2023, the university's care framework was expanded with the Social Safety Team – Students. At present, this team consists of four confidential advisers and a coordinator. Over the course of 2023, the team received 79 reports, equivalent to 3.4 reports per 1000 UM students. However, these numbers only reflect the cases that were brought to the team's attention. As such, they probably represent only a small proportion of the incidents that actually take place within the UM community. The number of reports has risen in recent years; in particular, an increase can be seen from introduction week onwards. This correlates with the launch of the Social and Sexual Safety Programme teams and their associated promotional activities, flyers, and introductory lecture.

### Report categories

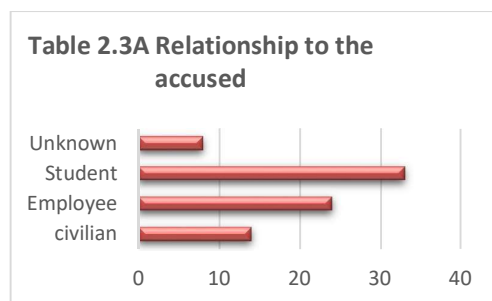
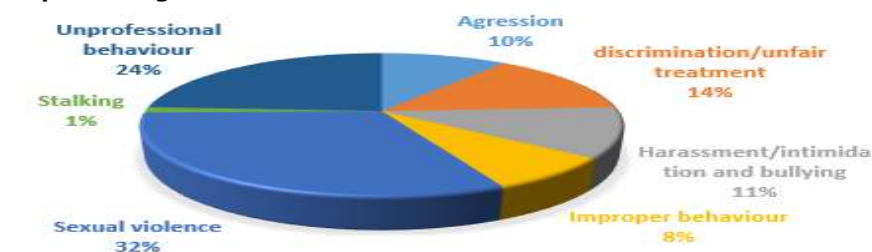
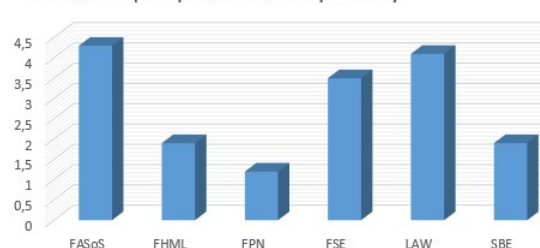


Fig 2.4A  
Number of reports per 1000 students per faculty



### Findings

Sexual violence, which makes up nearly a third of all reports, is primarily reported in student-to-student contexts (56%). Unprofessional behaviour is most commonly reported as taking place between students and staff (73%), and accounts for nearly a quarter of all reports.

At present, the Social Safety Team – Students is not always easy enough for staff and students to find. Many students remain unsure what they can expect from the team, or what options they can provide. Staff, too, are often not yet aware of the possibilities this new team offers, which include onward referral, sparring (role-playing situations or conversations), or making a report.

Students have advised us that they are afraid of repercussions if they report an incident, and often wait to do so until they have completed their module or course of study.

Students who are not Dutch seem to report unsafe situations both on and off campus at a higher rate than Dutch students. Reasons may include the lack of a strong local support network, and/or differing perceptions of (un)desirable behaviour compared to students raised in the Netherlands.

### Recommendations for the UM Executive Board

|                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                          |                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Ensure that the issue of social safety, including clearly defined roles and functions, is strongly embedded within the organisation | Invest in sexual safety specifically by looking at structural ways to address this issue | Provide a code of conduct and regulations appropriate to current conditions and contemporary societal developments | Support and train all staff in calling out improper behaviour and creating an environment in which it can be discussed—not just managers | Support initiatives developed by the peer-to-peer group |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|

# 1. Social safety: definitions, background, the launch of the team, and working methods

## 1.1 Definitions

There are several ways to define social safety. The KNAW report published in July 2022 defines it as follows: *Social safety concerns interpersonal relationships. In a socially safe learning and working environment, people do not feel threatened by the behaviour of others and can be confident that they can express a different opinion or bring forward new facts without being insulted, humiliated, intimidated, or silenced. What is needed in order to achieve this depends on the precise situation, and it may change from time to time<sup>1</sup>.*

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science includes the ability to safely report issues in its definition:

*A safe learning environment is a climate in which students are treated equally, know where they can go to report incidents, and can be sure that the complaints procedure is independent<sup>2</sup>.*

Creating a positive and socially safe learning environment also means preventing improper behaviour as much as possible and taking action if it does occur.

## 1.2 Background

Creating and maintaining a safe working and learning environment is crucial wherever people work together. As well as a strong care framework and suitable policies, this primarily requires the ability to conduct open dialogue within the organisation and the ability to break silences around a topic. Increased awareness, education, and practical guidance are all necessary factors in achieving a socially safe working and learning environment.

In order to achieve this, Maastricht University has strengthened its care framework by setting up the Social Safety Team – Students. The initial steps were taken in January 2023 with the appointment of a

second confidential adviser for students and the creation of the Sexual Safety Programme team. The Social Safety Team – Students began its work with students on 21 August 2023 (the start of the general introduction week INKOM). The team is comprised of a coordinator (0.8 FTE) and four confidential advisers (0.6 FTE total).

## 1.3 Vision and mission

### Vision

The Social Safety Team – Students at Maastricht University sees the social safety of its students and staff as a vital component of their well-being, positive collaboration, and ability to produce and take part in qualitatively good research and education. People flourish and achieve more in a socially safe environment; it is a prerequisite for an enjoyable atmosphere to learn and work in.

### Mission

To contribute to increasing the social safety of students at UM through the aims listed below, creating a culture in which students can safely study and develop themselves.

### Aims

The Social Safety Team – Students was set up in 2023. This represents a significant change in the way students are supported at UM.

Prior to the launch of the new team, the main aim was as follows:

- Handle individual reports

The following aims were added following the launch:

- Establish a Social Safety Team – Students with approachable and knowledgeable team members that students can get in touch with for a chat and advice or a sympathetic ear.
- Set up a convenient contact point where students can reach the team
- Increase awareness of social safety among students, student organisations, and staff
- Increase awareness and findability of the new team

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<sup>1</sup> KNAW Advisory Report “Social Safety in Dutch Academia – From Paper to Practice”, July 2022

<sup>2</sup> “Sociale veiligheid in het hoger onderwijs” – Factsheet 2022 – Inspectorate of Education, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

## 1.4 Working methods

There are many support structures available to students at UM. The Social Safety Team is there to help students if they experience socially unsafe behaviour. This covers situations such as bullying, intimidation, and sexual violence. The team offers support to individual students who have experienced or been impacted by these kinds of issues. It also promotes and supports training programmes and campaigns related to social safety. Staff can contact the team for advice, to raise concerns about students or situations, or to discuss or prepare for situations or conversations ("sparring").

Discussions with a member of the Social Safety Team – Students are always confidential. The only exceptions to this are when the student has agreed to information being shared with third parties, or if a crime affecting or endangering others has been committed. The coordinator will discuss what the student or person making the report can expect, and if necessary will refer them onward to a confidential adviser or an internal or external source of support. The Social Safety Team – Students is an independent body within the university. The confidential adviser is there to listen to the student and support for their needs or interests. The coordinator communicates findings and trends from (interim) evaluations and reports directly to the UM Executive Board both as requested and on an unsolicited basis.

## 1.5 Role and function of the confidential advisers (CA)

Confidential advisers for students:  
Wendy Geijen (0.2 FTE)  
Romy Beuken (0.2 FTE, in role since January 2023)  
Wendy Brandt (0.1 FTE, in role since September 2023)  
Tessa Fox (0.1 FTE, in role since September 2023)

The confidential advisers offer independent advice and support and have all been trained and certified by LVV.

## Functions

Confidential advisers meet with the student to discuss their issue in confidence. They listen, offer advice, and help the student search for options to improve the situation. Everything discussed is treated confidentially and no steps are taken unless the student agrees to them. The complainant's feelings are the starting point for advice and support. The confidential adviser provides support to the student and is "on their side"—their role is to support the student. The student may also choose not take things further after having a conversation. Confidential advisers support students who have experienced something firsthand, have witnessed something concerning, or are worried about someone else as well as students who think they may have violated someone else's boundaries or who have been accused of misconduct. The confidential adviser only meets with and advocates for one of the parties involved. If one party in a dispute already has a confidential adviser, a different confidential adviser will be arranged to support the other party.

## Other activities

- Participating in peer-to-peer discussions
- Participating in twice-yearly consultations by the national platform for confidential advisers at Dutch universities
- Training and intervision (peer feedback and coaching) through the Dutch association for confidential advisers (LVV), as well as with confidential advisers at other universities and institutes of higher education
- Conducting intervision and maintaining contacts with confidential contact persons for student organisations
- Working with INKOM in an advisory role to support students who have experienced sexual violence
- Working with the coordinators of the FHML Master's programmes regarding any improper behaviour during internships and work placements
- Supporting the Kennismakingstijden Maastricht (KMTM) committee to

ensure that student organisations navigate the introduction period smoothly

- Acting as a confidential adviser for potential referrals from Taskforce QRS Maastricht, an initiative aimed at improving survival chances after sudden cardiac arrest.

## 1.6 Role and functions of the coordinator

Social Safety Coordinator – Students:  
Ivanka Smitsmans (0.8 FTE, in role since August 2023)

Remit of this new UM role:

The responsibilities of the Social Safety Coordinator – Students are divided into three categories.

### **1. Providing students with information on the topic of social safety in general and sexual safety in particular**

The coordinator is responsible for creating awareness as well as stimulating and facilitating dialogue across the broader topic of student social safety. The coordinator does this by keeping resources and information (e.g. on the website) up-to-date, offering education and advice, and ensuring the provision of relevant training opportunities for students and for staff in roles involving student support or large amounts of student contact. In addition to this, the coordinator shares responsibility for the development of (preventative) guidance on this subject at university level. The coordinator also acts as a “sparring partner” for other staff wishing to discuss individual cases or social safety in general.

### **2. Acting as first point of contact for individual reports**

The coordinator provides an easily accessible point of contact for students. Students can approach the coordinator for a listening ear, for advice, or to report improper or concerning behaviour. The coordinator makes a professional evaluation of the report, carries out a risk assessment, develops a plan for improving the situation and looks into possible support actions.

If necessary, the coordinator will approach and liaise with relevant colleagues—for

example a confidential adviser, faculty director, or (student) dean—and ensure that reports are appropriately and correctly carried forward.

The coordinator takes part in conversations at all levels, including with potential victims and (alleged) perpetrators, and occasionally in a mediating capacity.

### **3. Reporting, flagging, and coordinating cases**

In addition to receiving and referring cases onwards, the coordinator reports on the team’s work and the reports received, organises meetings related to cases, and highlights trends within the reports. The coordinator is the first point of contact when it comes to concerning and/or improper behaviour.

#### Cooperation

The coordinator’s tasks are carried out in consultation with the confidential advisers of the Social Safety Team – Students and the coordinator of the Concerns & Complaints Point (CCP), which has its own social safety team for staff.

The coordinator works closely with the UM Sexual Safety Team and their programme, and is a member of the Sexual Safety advisory group.

The coordinator is in regular contact with other UM departments such as Integral Safety, Safety and Security, the Student Deans, and the Diversity Office.

#### Intervention and training

The current coordinator has completed the confidential adviser training (with a specialisation in sports) and has completed training on handling reports of sexual assault. She is a member of an intervention group and has trained as a mediator.

#### External activities

The current coordinator is a member of the Dossierhouders overleg sociale veiligheid (record holders for the consultation of social safety) group set up by UNL.

She is also part of the national knowledge network of social safety coordinators in higher education.

## 1.7 Achievements and intentions

Launched on 21 August 2023 (at INKOM), the Social Safety Team – Students is a new team that was only actively operational for the last four months of 2023. From January until the launch of the team, students were supported by two confidential advisers. The activities below (Achievements) are divided between the period prior to the team's launch and the period during which the team was operational.

### Achievements January – INKOM

- The team was expanded to 4 confidential advisers and a coordinator (from 0.4 FTE to 1.4 FTE)
- Work on the Sexual Safety Programme began in February 2023. This team has a dedicated programme manager (Joyce Grul), as well as its own action plan. The Sexual Safety Programme was also launched at INKOM 2023.
- Intervention was carried out with confidential advisers and confidential contact persons.
- The confidential adviser webpage was redirected to the Social Safety website
- The team received 34 reports

### Achievements INKOM – December

- Central, confidential, and anonymous reporting and raising of concerns was made possible via the Social Safety Team – Students
- Further locations where students can come to talk were established; Social Safety – Students offices and/or consultation rooms set up at the DACS faculty in Randwyck as well as the Kapoenstraat and Sint Servaasklooster sites in town.
- The team completed training and education to safeguard quality and professional standards
- The Social Safety website for students was expanded
- The team attended various meetings with student organisations
- The team supported several Sexual Safety Programme activities: the introductory lecture, a discussion with Mariëtte Hamer, and the plays performed by Safe Space

- The Contact Point was established to enable students to get in touch via WhatsApp, text message, telephone, email and in person
- The team's network of contacts was expanded both within and outside of UM
- Intervention was carried out
- Informational emails were sent to student organisations
- A national knowledge network of social safety coordinators was established
- The team received 45 reports

The team works alongside the Sexual Safety Programme team. The Sexual Safety Programme team is responsible for raising awareness, running campaigns, and organising events and training on the topic of sexual safety. This team has its own action plan and a schedule of projects that will involve ongoing cooperation with the Social Safety Team – Students.

A review of the regulations around informal procedures for improper behaviour has been initiated. Input is being sought from the UM Legal Affairs Department and an external legal office, both of which are working to develop and revise these regulations. The new regulations will more closely define the mandates and responsibilities of staff within the Social Safety Team – Students.

The team is working on establishing and expanding its network within UM as well as its external network. It hopes to work with various stakeholders and support providers in order to exchange information and knowledge, as well as to identify referral options for students and opportunities that enable the team to better support students directly

Within the university, for example, the team has established connections with study advisers, the Wellbeing Office, student deans, and the InnBetween student chaplaincy.

Beyond the university, the team has contacts with (among others) the police department that handles sexual offences, the Sexual Assault Center (CSG), @ease,

discriminatie.nl Limburg, and individual psychologists and psychiatrists.

### Looking forward

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is deeply interested in the topic of social safety in higher education.<sup>3</sup> It is expected to introduce a new national initiative and legal duty of care on the issue. The government commissioner for sexual violence and assault has published guidance on tackling the problem for the minister responsible.<sup>4</sup> UM is taking part in a pilot project monitoring sexual safety conducted by UNL, the organisation for the Universities of the Netherlands. A national survey on feelings of social safety within student organisations will also be conducted.

In the coming year, attention will be paid to structurally embedding the topic of social safety and the role of the team within the UM care framework, as well as to the division of responsibilities. Raising awareness of the topic of social safety is of significant importance for all staff and students in order to appropriately respond to the challenges that come under this heading.

Specific considerations for the coming year are to improve the team's "findability" and its cooperation with faculties, the creation of a protocol to be followed in cases of concerning behaviour, and the improvement and safeguarding of good service provision to complainants.

The role of ombuds officer for students was added to the team in January 2024.

## 2. Reports

For the purposes of our data, a "report" refers to any first interaction recorded by the team during which a student, bystander, or involved party identifies incidents or experiences of improper behaviour, requests advice, raises concerns or makes a complaint

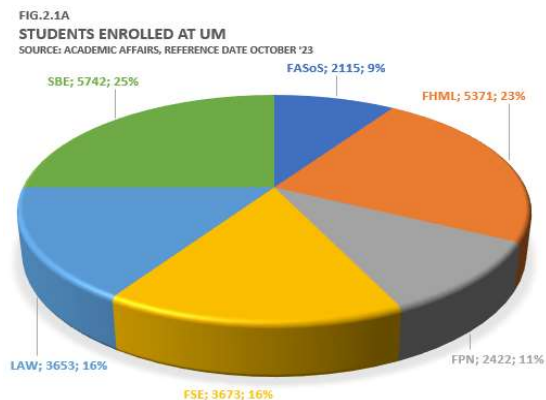
about (a lack of) social safety. This applies regardless of the severity of the incident

In addition to offering a sympathetic ear, the team will help the person(s) involved identify ways of improving the situation, potential next steps, and any further action. The person making the report retains control throughout the process. They are offered the option of submitting a formal complaint to UM's Complaints Service Point (CSP). If they wish to make a formal complaint, the team can offer the student support in doing so.

In addition to reports received by the Social Safety Team – Students, this annual report includes reports provided by faculty study advisers. These are recorded separately.

### 2.1 UM student population

As of October 2023, UM had a total of **22,976 students** spread across six faculties (see fig. 2.1A).



In addition to its Maastricht sites, the university has a campus in Venlo where three faculties provide teaching. The Venlo campus hosts 230 students. Student care at the Venlo campus is small-scale and can be easily accessed via the study adviser and psychologist on-site. In order to safeguard the anonymity of those involved, any reports potentially made at the Venlo campus are

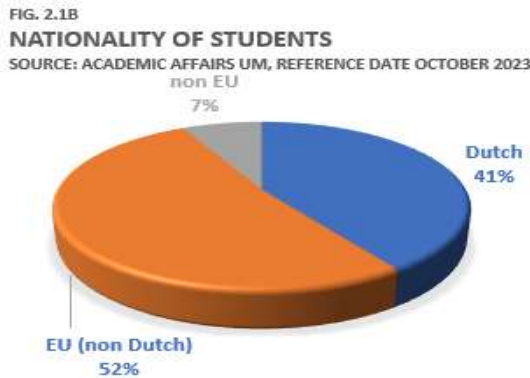
<sup>3</sup> Aanpak voor vergroten sociale veiligheid op hogescholen en universiteiten (Approach to increasing social safety in higher education and universities), 8 June 2023

<sup>4</sup> Advies aan demissionair minister van OCW over de aanpak van seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedragen seksueel geweld in het hoger onderwijs

en de wetenschap (Advice to the outgoing minister for Education, Culture and Science on tackling sexual violence and sexual assault in higher education and science), 24 January 2024

included under the relevant faculty, rather than listed separately.

As the European university of the Netherlands, UM has a highly international student population (see fig. 2.1 B).



The gender distribution (as provided in registration data) is as follows:  
Female: 59.8 %, male: 40.0 %, other/not provided: 0.2 %

The number of non-binary students who do not identify as either male or female is likely to be higher than this registration data indicates. These numbers are provided as research carried out at UM on sexual violence indicates that most victims are women<sup>5</sup>. Other groups often victimised are students with a disability, who are part of the LGBTQI+ community, or who are members of a study or student (sports) organisation. Precise numbers for these groups are unknown by the social safety team or not recorded.

## 2.2 Reports over the past 5 years

Number of reports made to the confidential advisor for students for the past five years:

| Year              | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of reports | 36   | 37   | 66   | 67   | 79*  |

\*Reports made after 21 August 2023 were made to a member of the Social Safety – Students team.

## 2.3 Number of reports in 2023

In 2023, 84 reports were made. Of these, 63 were made through a confidential adviser and 21 were reported via the coordinator. A number of complainants made reports via different team members on separate occasions, and the nature of some reports is unknown. Within the reports, one pattern indicating a number of reports relating to the same situation and/or perpetrator(s) has been identified. A total of 79 reports were therefore included in the creation of this report.

Two of these cases included indications of concerning behaviour by a student. This ultimately led to the further investigation of one of these cases. Concerning behaviour is defined here as behaviour with a (potential) impact that represents a safety risk for the relevant student or those around them. This is a complex case requiring a multi-disciplinary approach alongside care for the student in question<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.4 Breakdown of report categories

Between January and the induction week (INKOM), there were two confidential advisers at UM. This initial period covers 232 days during which 34 individuals contacted a confidential adviser for one or more conversations. The second period, starting with the launch of the Social Safety Team – Students, covers 133 days during which 45 individuals contacted a member of the team for one or more conversations.

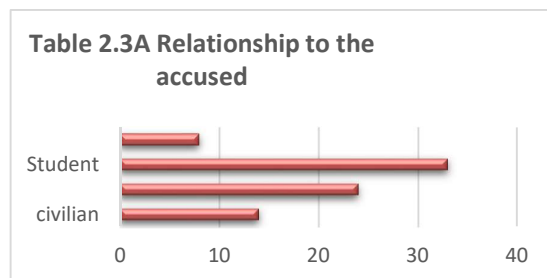
Adjustments have been made to the reporting format since the launch of the team. As a result, more information is available from 21 August 2023, but not all reports have been recorded in the same way. For anonymous reports, the student making the report has control over which details are recorded. If details are listed as “unknown” or “not specified” below, this indicates that the team is not aware of these details, that the details were not relevant, or that the team was asked not to record them.

<sup>5</sup> Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment among Maastricht University Students, Wellum, Lange *et al*, 2021

<sup>6</sup>Platform Integrale Veiligheid Hoger Onderwijs, “Are you worried about a student’s behaviour?”, magazine

Since 21 August 2023, the team has also recorded when the incident or period of improper behaviour took place. This information indicates that of the 45 reports, 35 incidents/experiences of improper behaviour took place or began in 2023. The remaining 10 reports concerned incidents/experiences concerning (long-term) improper behaviour that took place or began before 2023. In many cases, students wait until they had completed a module or even finished their studies before discussing an experience of improper behaviour with a confidential adviser or the Social Safety Team. Reasons given for this delay include fear of repercussions, fear of being assessed or graded poorly, believing the behaviour was not serious enough to report, and not knowing what to expect from a confidential adviser.

In 24 cases, the report concerned one or more members of staff (16 reports concerning research staff, 5 concerning support staff, and 3 concerning general staff members whose role is unknown). A fellow student was involved in 33 cases, and 14 cases concerned a member of the public. In 8 cases, the relationship to the accused was not recorded. (See table 2.3A)



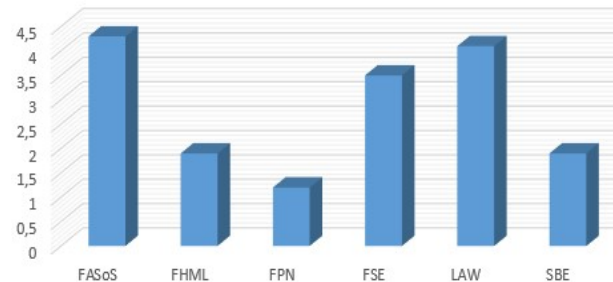
Over three-quarters of all reports were made by female students; 60% of UM students are female. 5% of the reports were made either by multiple individuals (male and female), or the gender of person making the complaint was not specified. Just under one-fifth of reports were made by male students.

## 2.5 Reports made to faculties

The number of reports to the Social Safety Team was 3.4 per 1000 students. Across the reports made, the reporting student's faculty was recorded in 61 cases; in 17 cases, the faculty is unknown. One report was made by a member of the public about a student. On

the basis of this data, fig. 2.4A shows the number of reports per 1000 students for each faculty.

**Fig 2.4A**  
Number of reports per 1000 students per faculty



In many cases, the faculty study advisers/counsellors are the first to hear about instances of improper behaviour. Experiences of transgressive behaviour can also lead to academic difficulties. In total, the faculty study advisers and counsellors indicated that they received 59 reports of improper behaviour in 2023. Due to the use of different reporting procedures, different kinds of improper behaviour are not always recorded in the same way across faculties. It is assumed that the total number is higher than those recorded. Of the reports made, 36 concerned sexual violence. In cases of sexual violence, the FASoS, LAW, and FPN faculties always refer the student on to a confidential adviser or the Social Safety Team. Approximately half of students who make reports to the SBE and FHML faculties are referred onwards, while the FSE faculty seeks to identify solutions with the student directly and rarely refers them. Due to the importance of confidentiality and anonymity, it is not known whether the students referred onward by their faculty ultimately contacted the Social Safety Team or a confidential adviser. However, if the student making a report agrees, a connection can be made between the team and faculty reports. This is done in cases where it is expected that this will improve matters for those involved.

I would like to highlight the following points made by faculty study advisers for this annual report:

- For some students, their time at university can be a period during which triggers/certain other factors may uncover childhood trauma. In

these cases, students are offered support and/or referred to external sources where they can access help. These include, for example, organisations such as [www.veilighuis.nl](http://www.veilighuis.nl) and psychological support.

- Unsafe behaviours take place both on and off campus, as well as in contexts unrelated to students' social and academic lives. Increasingly, students (and non-Dutch students in particular) seem to be experiencing feelings of being unsafe in public spaces in Maastricht. Examples include being catcalled or spat at.
- In cases of intimidation or discrimination, there seems to be a significant barrier to contacting a confidential advisers in that students fear this could have a negative impact (on their grades).
- Intimidation and discrimination are reported primarily between students and staff.
- By contrast, sexual violence is primarily reported in student-to-student contexts.

## 2.6 Report categories

### Definitions

**Sexual violence:** Sexual violence is an umbrella term for any sexual behaviours a person is forced to carry out, experience, or witness. This can include sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, or online abuse.<sup>7</sup>

In the reports, a distinction is made between physical sexual violence in the form of (attempted) sexual assault, rape, or other physical contact, and non-physical sexual violence such as verbal and online sexual violence (including non-verbal improper behaviour such as sending unwanted images). For more information, see UM's Sexual Safety website<sup>8</sup>.

**Stalking:** continually harassing someone, whether online or offline, in a way that often includes a sexual element and causes a strong feeling of unsafety

**Unfair treatment:** treating someone differently for reasons that are unknown or not covered by discrimination

**Unprofessional behaviour:** behaviour that is not appropriate to the relevant person's function or role; negligence

**Physical aggression:** violence with the aim of harming someone else physically

**Verbal/non-verbal aggression:** this covers emotional violence, threats of physical violence, and pressuring someone in an aggressive manner. Verbal and non-verbal aggression can take place in person, online, by phone, or via apps.

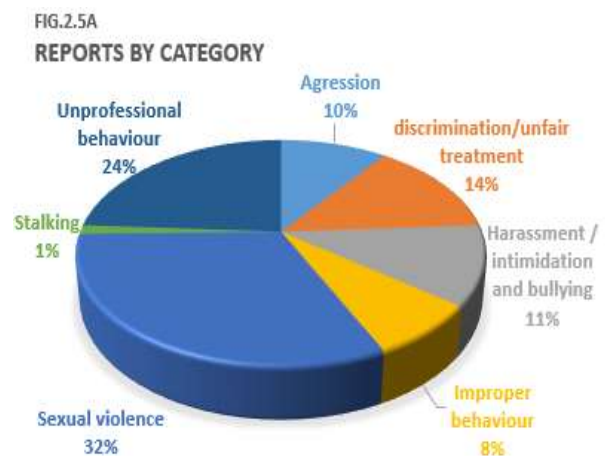
**Bullying:** bullying means intimidating someone in an ongoing, structured way. It is systematic behaviour that causes physical, verbal, or psychological harm to the target. The power dynamics between the people involved often play a role in this.

**Discrimination:** discrimination means excluding, disadvantaging, or treating people differently on basis of their (personal) characteristics.

**Harassment/intimidation:** intimidation is a form of manipulation. It involves scaring someone by threatening negative consequences. Intimidation can be physical, verbal, written, or take place online or via social media.

**Improper behaviour:** inappropriate behaviour not covered by any of the other categories that falls outside of accepted forms of interaction in our society and at our university

See fig. 2.5A for reports by category. This is a simplified representation; for full details, see appendix 1.



<sup>7</sup> <https://centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/en/home-english/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/sexual-safety>

## 2.7 Reports of sexual violence

In total, there were 25 reports of sexual violence. This represents approximately a third of all reports received. Of these reports, 64% relate to physical sexual assault and 36% relate to non-physical sexual violence. Research shows that 1 in 10 UM students experiences sexual assault or rape (penetration without consent) during their time at university, and almost 50% indicate that they have experienced other types of sexual violence one or more times (see footnote 5).

Data from the study Let's Talk About Yes by Amnesty International shows similar results<sup>9</sup>.

The UM research indicates that while some reasons for not reporting an experience are personal, others include insufficient trust in the institution or a lack of clarity in terms of what support UM can offer internally.

### Gender of accused parties:

Female: 3, including 1 staff member and 2 fellow students

Male: 15, including 1 staff member, 10 fellow students, and 4 members of the public

Not specified: 7, including 2 fellow students, 2 members of the public, and 3 with an unknown relationship to the complainant

### Gender of victims:

Female: 22

Male: 2

Not specified: 1

All victims were students at the time the incident or behaviour took place.

In the period prior to INKOM, there was on average just below one report of sexual violence per month. Following the introductory lecture and launch of the Sexual Safety Programme, this number more than doubled to an average of 2.3 reports per month. This appears to indicate that the efforts of the Sexual Safety Programme Team are succeeding in spreading awareness of this issue, that students feel more able to speak up about incidents and improper behaviour, and that the findability of the Social Safety Team is slowly improving. This tentative conclusion is further supported by

the number of complainants who indicate that they found the Social Safety Team or the website via the introductory lecture, the Sexual Safety Programme, or the Safe Space performances.

## 2.8 Power relationships and improper behaviour

Unprofessional behaviour, discrimination, intimidation and unfair treatment are all improper behaviours in which real, assumed, or perceived power dynamics can have a compounding impact. There were a total of 37 reports across these 4 categories. The accused's relationship to the complainant is shown in fig. 2.7A.

*WP: scientific staff (wetenschappelijk personeel)*

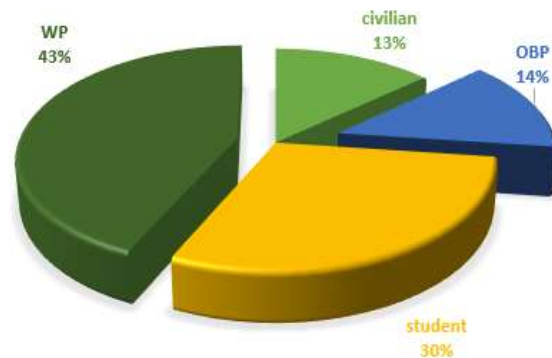
*OBP: support staff (ondersteunend en beheer personeel)*

*Fellow students in a position of authority, higher years, or a tutoring role can also be perceived as individuals in a position of power.*

FIG 2.7A

### **POSITION/RELATION ACCUSED**

AT ALLEGED INTIMIDATION, DISCRIMINATION, UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND UNFAIR TREATMENT

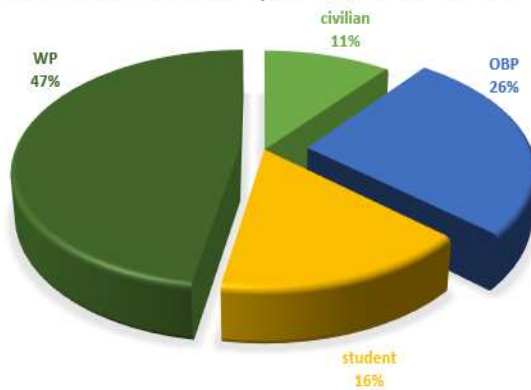


The largest grouping of complaints was unprofessional behaviour with 19 reports. The distribution of remaining reports when this category is filtered out is shown in fig. 2.7B.

<sup>9</sup> Let's Talk about Yes – at university – manifesto

FIG. 2.7B

POSITION/RELATION ACCUSED; UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR



## 2.9 Report responses / follow-up

In 63% of cases, the report resulted in an internal or external referral. In 37% of cases, the report was recorded, the student was offered a sympathetic ear, and advice was provided as appropriate.

Within UM, for example, students were referred to SSC psychologists with the QPR (Quick Psychological Referral) or support or cooperation was sought within the relevant faculty or service centre. In several cases, multiple discussions were also held with a confidential adviser.

Students were also referred to and received help from external support providers beyond UM. These providers included the police, the Sexual Assault Center (CSG), GPs, and external psychologists or psychiatrists.

Students who make a report are advised of the option of making a formal complaint. If the student wishes to do this, the Social Safety Team can support them in submitting a formal complaint via the Complaints Service Point, as well as offering further support throughout the process. This year, the team supported one complainant in making a formal complaint.

## 3. Experiences, concerns, and recommendations

### 3.1 Experiences

Currently, there is a great deal of interest in social safety in both the media and current

political debates. The complexity of this theme requires care and attention. Our understanding of what is and is not “allowed” is not always clear and may differ from person to person. As such, these situations require clarity from all parties, as well as a culture of speaking up. Often, bystanders fail to intervene because they are afraid or don't know how to do so. It is essential that both staff and students learn how to identify undesirable behaviour and how to act when faced with it.

In many student organisations, the topic of social safety is already high on the agenda. Committees implement codes of conduct and set house rules, and have protocols for what to do if boundaries are violated despite them. In practice, however, there is often a significant gap between what the committees are seeking to change or achieve and how these efforts are received by existing members and influential alumni still involved in the organisations—particularly in the traditional Maastricht societies. The number of confidential contact persons operating as a first and accessible point of contact within student organisations is a positive development.

There is a wide range of opinions on the topic of social safety among UM staff, often relating to their own position within UM's unwritten social norms and their own experiences. Staff (both research and support and maintenance staff) who work closely with students can play an important role in preventing and/or handling incidents of sexual violence.

### 3.2 Concerns

The findability of the Social Safety Team, and as such the confidential advisers, is still limited. Last October, a small-scale

investigation by the *Observant*<sup>10</sup> demonstrated that only a small number of students could describe how to locate the Social Safety Team. The introductory lecture to first-year students during faculty introductions has helped to make the team more findable. However, a communication strategy must be developed in order to really embed awareness of the team among both students and staff.

The Social Safety Team lacks diversity. The only option available for students who approach the team is to receive assistance from by a white, female staff member from Limburg. In order to provide good accessibility for all students, consideration must be given to the composition and diversity (gender, background, nationality) of the group of staff members that makes up the team. Furthermore, it will be necessary to take stock of functions within the team to ensure that the role of confidential adviser does not conflict with another role or function held by the relevant staff member, as well as to ensure that complainants are able to choose a confidential adviser they feel they can trust and—if necessary—identify with.

Language is an important factor in how we treat one another in our society. Language use appears to have ossified in some ways, resulting in difficulties when it comes to respectful communication. This can be recognised in both the communication among students and in the communication between students and staff at the university.

Although Maastricht University proudly calls itself the European university of the Netherlands, the Dutch attitude of things being “not so bad” regularly seems to predominate. It can be very difficult to see things from the perspective of a social circle you are not involved in, which can result in the normalisation of inappropriate behaviour. Both on and off campus, it appears that international students experience more undesirable behaviour than Dutch students.

### 3.3 Points for the Social Safety Team – Students to consider

Based on the findings, experiences, and concerns, the following points have been formulated for the team to consider.

#### **>>> Formulate a clear action plan with a defined mission statement**

The team was only operational for 4 months in 2023. The team’s methods of working, task distribution, and procedures need to be evaluated. Following this, the team must look to the future and formulate a clear action plan appropriate to the existing situation, the care and attention the subject of social safety is due, and the financial resources available.

#### **>>> Improve the team’s findability**

The findability and consequently visibility of the Social Safety Team – Students needs to be improved for both students and university staff. This must include clearly communicating what options the team offers and what students can expect from it. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to create a suitable communication plan.

#### **>>> Further expand the network both within and beyond the university**

Another goal is to expand the network and strengthen contacts with internal and external stakeholders. The internal network is vital to increasing the team’s findability and enabling students to be referred to and supported by staff in other departments. It also aids staff in sharing knowledge, taking practical steps when dealing with cases at hand, and increasing overall awareness. The external network benefits the exchange and sharing of professional expertise, as well as enabling a targeted response to both individual cases and the causes of sexual violence. This includes, for example, liaising with the Maastricht police regarding off-campus safety.

#### **>>> Maintain and increase professional expertise within the team**

Continue investing in the team’s training and education so as to maintain existing knowledge and skills, as well as to enable the

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<sup>10</sup> Observant Online - Students hardly know where to seek help after unacceptable behaviour

team to engage with the rapidly evolving dynamics of the issue. It is important to carry out intervention for the purposes of reflection and to strengthen team members' competencies for tackling individual cases. Ensure diversity within the team.

**>>> Recognise the importance of peer-to-peer support**

There are many student initiatives and individual students seeking to get more involved in improving social safety. Support student organisations in an advisory capacity and as a sparring partner. Involve students in developing new plans and ideas.

### 3.4 Recommendations for the Executive Board

The following recommendations for the Executive Board have been developed from the findings and associated experiences and concerns.

**>>> Ensure that the topic of social safety, including clearly assigned roles and functions, is strongly embedded within the organisation**

Ways of delivering information on the topic of social safety, as well as cooperation with multiple UM departments (D&I, CCP, Sexual Safety Programme, Social Safety Team – Students) on this subject, are already being discussed on behalf of the Executive Board. Improving the response to (the lack of) social safety requires the effective coordination and agreement of these parties, as well as committed collaboration and a clear division of responsibilities.

For this reason it is advisable that the Executive Board speaks out about the importance of this issue and follows through on the implementation of the care provision needed across UM.

Faculty managers need to appreciate the importance of increasing social safety and understand and actively play a role in contributing to and modelling appropriate behaviour.

It is important that the centrally organised teams work together with the service centres and faculties to this end.

All this will require a concrete action plan and communication strategy for staff and students.

**>>> Invest specifically in the topic of sexual safety by looking at structural ways to address this issue**

As an institution, it is not enough to have a point of view on relationships, intimacy, and sexuality alongside a code of conduct and a sexual violence protocol. Experiences of sexuality and sexual boundary violations are deeply personal. As such, these incidents can have an enormous impact on those involved. It is vital for organisations to possess the right knowledge and information, and to be comfortable talking about this subject. Within the organisation, it is very important to invest in efforts to promote and maintain an up-to-date awareness of the topic<sup>11</sup>. Our students are at a life stage in which they are discovering and exploring their own sexuality. As young adults, our students have reached the point at which they are required to live independently for the first time. Expectations are high, and they are under significant pressure to perform well in their studies. They often lack a safety net at Maastricht; 60% of our students are not from the Netherlands. As a rule, these students have no family nearby and have not yet built up a social circle. On top of this, students who are not Dutch are often unfamiliar with the Dutch care and healthcare systems. On average, Dutch young people first experience penetrative or PIV (penis in vagina)<sup>12</sup> sex at 18.7 years old<sup>13</sup>. For most, the first time they have penetrative sex (often colloquially termed "real sex") takes place during their time at university. Their educational institution is faced with the tasks of illuminating the topic of sexuality in a positive way, ensuring that there are thorough procedures in place for dealing with boundary violations, fostering an environment in which the subject can be discussed, increasing understanding, and

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<sup>11</sup>"Het grote 9-tot-5 taboe" by Christel van der Horst en Jeroen Hindriks (Dutch)

<sup>12</sup>"De waarheid over seks" by Rik van Lunsen en Ellen Laan (Dutch)

<sup>13</sup>"Seks onder je 25<sup>ste</sup>", Rutgersstichting, 2023, <https://rutgers.nl/> (research on sex below the age of 25, Dutch)

creating a culture in which people feel able to speak up.

As such, our advice to the UM Executive Board is as follows:

- Give this topic the attention it deserves. Already the Sexual Safety Programme Team has been put into place at UM early 2023. Extra attention is paid to positioning this theme within UM as well as the opportunities it has to collaborate with other higher education institutions in the Netherlands.
- Appoint a Sexuality and Sexual Violence Strategy Officer (see footnote 11) and embed the Sexual Safety Programme in the university's structure (planned for 2024)
- Integrate consideration of this topic in teaching and include it in the university's long-term research and education plans
- Include the subject in day-to-day work activities so that all staff members remain up-to-date on relevant protocols and know how to act or refer students on if necessary (compare with BHV/Emergency Response Officer protocols, trainings, and exercises) (see footnote 11)
- Ensure that all staff have sufficient training and knowledge—not just managers
- Contribute to creating a culture of openness in which we are able to address one another with concerns in a positive way and in which making a report is seen as a safe option

**>>> Provide a code of conduct and regulations appropriate to the current situation and contemporary societal developments**

Provide a clear code of conduct for both students and staff (a new code of conduct for staff has already been drafted). Revision of the current code of conduct is highly desirable in light of societal developments and dynamics around norms and values and general feeling of what social (un)safety entails.

Ensure that the guidelines, relevant to procedures related to social safety, will be reviewed. While new functions have been created and implemented (such as those of the Social Safety Coordinator – Students and the Ombuds Officer for Students) their mandates and responsibilities are not always clear. This process for reviewing is put into motion at the end of 2023.

**>>> Support and train all staff in calling out improper behaviour and creating an environment in which it can be discussed—not just managers**

The whole university needs to be invested in increasing social safety. Recognising and flagging up issues, following protocols, fostering understanding, and knowing how to speak up are central to changing the culture. We all have a part to play in creating a safe environment. Unfortunately, talking about improper behaviour remains taboo in many cases, and it has been difficult to encourage discussion of the topic. It is very important that students and staff know and understand what behavioural norms and values are expected of them on campus (see the Code of Conduct) and where they can go to seek help if boundary violations do occur. Beyond this, there is a need for greater clarity in the matters of where students can access support and what support they can expect from UM when it comes to improper behaviour off campus.

**>>> Support initiatives developed by the peer-to-peer group**

A growing number of students are deeply engaged with the topic of social safety. Support these students in the long-term development and implementation of their plans. Many student organisations have made a strong start in tackling issues related to social safety, and the subject remains high on their agendas. Offer them the opportunity to further implement their plans and provide financial support for good ideas, regardless of whether or not the student organisation is a traditional one.

*Be a role model! Good examples will be followed; cultural change starts with yourself.*

## Conclusion

The following activities are on the Social Safety Team's agenda for 2024:

- Increase the team's visibility by being physically present within faculties and during events and activities
- Continue supporting the existing programmes and training aimed at improving social and sexual safety
- Continue investing in the development and training of the team
- Work closely with national knowledge networks
- Take on and engage with new programmes, training, and workshops that support social safety
- Dedicate more time and attention to the topic of social safety within student organisations, and create or strengthen alliances
- Create increased awareness by carrying out campaigns (for example by cooperating with the Sexual Safety Programme on the implementation of GreenDot, a university-wide bystander intervention initiative)
- Work closely together with staff in the CCP social safety team and Integral Safety Coordinator to implement a protocol for concerning behaviour
- Create a clearly defined action plan
- Continue operating the Contact Point and providing professional support for individual cases



Finally, I would like to highlight that modelling good behaviour starts with your own actions, and that people will follow your lead. Kindness is met with kindness, and

everyone makes mistakes sometimes. However, the complaint that "you can't say anything nowadays" is fundamentally flawed. In the past, people were able to say inappropriate things without being challenged—but those days are over. Taking time to re-evaluate your own language and behaviour can be a positive and refreshing experience, as can checking your language and habits with someone outside your usual social circle.

Studying and working in a context with an often hierarchical structure requires mutual respect, open communication, expectation-setting, and politeness. While it is important to take different backgrounds into consideration, we must be clear about what conduct and behaviours are expected and appropriate both at UM and in the Netherlands.

In student-to-student contexts, this means treating one another with respect, setting clear expectations and boundaries, and speaking up if something starts going wrong. If we respect one another's boundaries and take our community's diversity into account, there's no reason for students not to have a great time both on and off campus while studying at Maastricht University.

If you have any questions or comments about this report, please contact the Social Safety Team – Students at:  
[ivanka.smitsmans@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:ivanka.smitsmans@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

**VERANDEREN**

**BEGIN MAAR VAST**

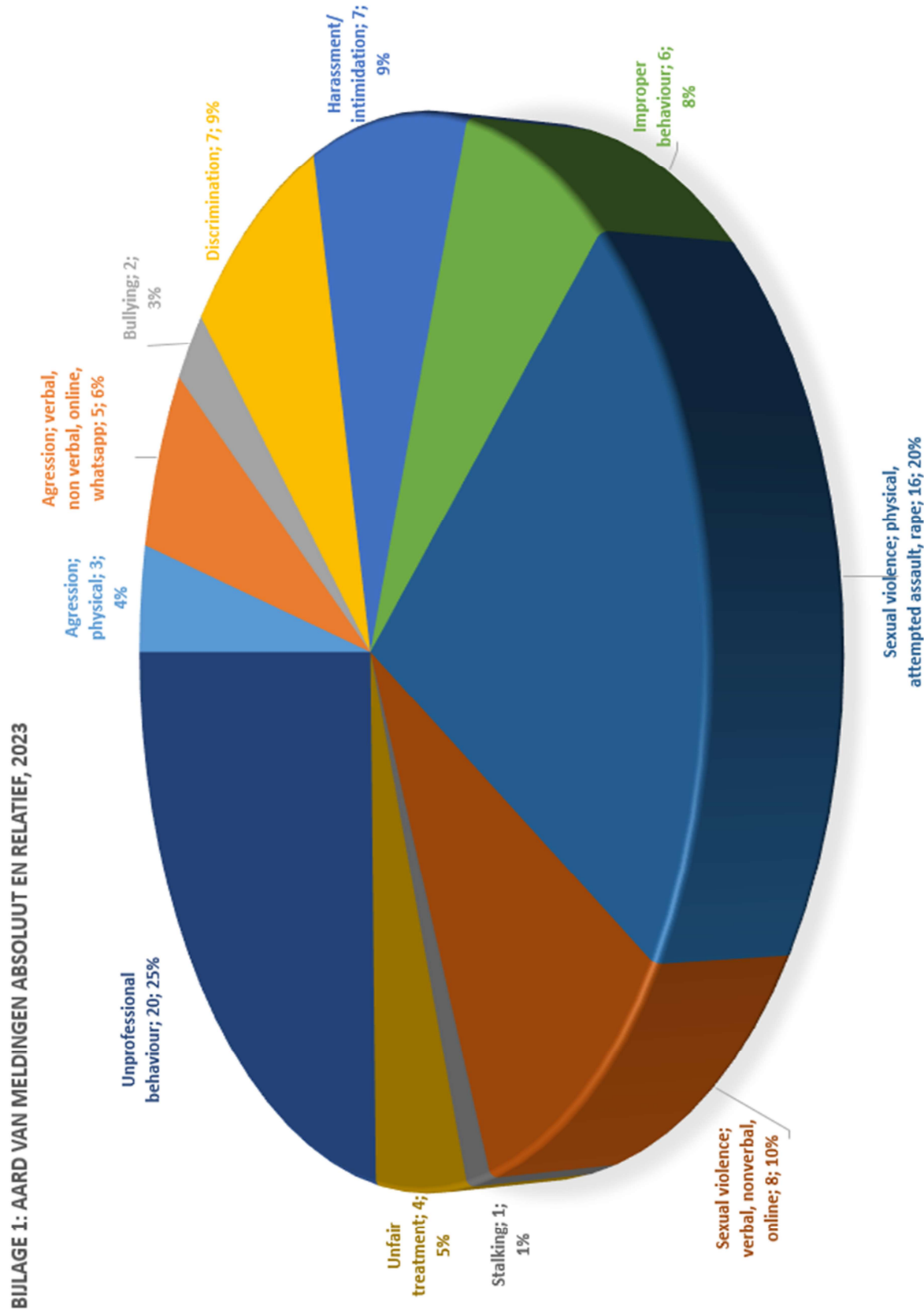
**DE MAATSCHAPPIJ  
KOMT WEL**

*Loesje*

www.loesje.nl  
leden@loesje.nl

**"Society will change eventually – but you can start now"**

Appendix 1: Report categories



## Appendix 2: Works and sources referenced

Sources referenced in this annual report:

- 1) KNAW Advisory Report "Social Safety in Dutch Academia – From Paper to Practice", July 2022
- 2) "Sociale veiligheid in het hoger onderwijs" – Factsheet 2022 – Inspectorate of Education, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- 3) Aanpak voor vergroten sociale veiligheid op hogescholen en universiteiten (Approach to increasing social safety in higher education and universities), 8 June 2023  
<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/06/08/aanpak-voor-vergroten-sociale-veiligheid-op-hogescholen-en-universiteiten>
- 4) Advies aan demissionair minister van OCW over de aanpak van seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag en seksueel geweld in het hoger onderwijs en de wetenschap (Advice to the outgoing minister for Education, Culture and Science on tackling sexual violence and sexual assault in higher education and science), 24 January 2024  
<https://www.rcgog.nl/>
- 5) Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment among Maastricht University Students, Wellum, Lange *et al* 2021
- 6) "Are you worried about a student's behaviour?" Magazine on alarming behaviour by the Platform Integrale Veiligheid Hoger Onderwijs  
<https://ivho.maglr.com/hva-alarming-behaviour/what-is-alarming-behaviour>
- 7) Sexual Assault Center - <https://centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/en/home-english/>
- 8) Sexual Safety at UM - <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/sexual-safety>
- 9) Let's Talk about yes – at university – manifesto  
[https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2021/11/AMN\\_21\\_17\\_manifest\\_Engels.pdf](https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2021/11/AMN_21_17_manifest_Engels.pdf),  
<https://www.amnesty.nl/wat-we-doen/campagnes/letstalkaboutyes/overzicht/achtergronden-bij-het-manifest-voor-hoger-onderwijsinstellingen> (Dutch)
- 10) Observant Online – Students hardly know where to seek help after unacceptable behaviour  
- <https://www.observantonline.nl/english/Home/Articles/id/61042/students-hardly-know-where-to-seek-help-after-unacceptable-behaviour>
- 11) "Het grote 9-tot-5 taboe" by Christel van der Horst en Jeroen Hindriks (Dutch)
- 12) "De waarheid over seks" by Rik van Lunsen en Ellen Laan (Dutch)
- 13) "Seks onder je 25<sup>ste</sup>", Rutgersstichting 2023, <https://rutgers.nl/> (research on sex below the age of 25, Dutch)