UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM

Summary March 12 2021 @Zoom

University Forum

Social Safety

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On March 12, 2021, the University Forum entered into a discussion about social safety for the second time. The first time, on February 15, the Forum gave an initial response to the presentation of the report of the Taskforce Social safety. In the meantime, the members have had the opportunity to study the report themselves and this second meeting has focused more on the concrete recommendations in the report.

Before the substantive part of the meeting could begin, there were two internal matters; the election of the chairman and the final adoption of the Internal Regulations (HR). Eva Groen-Reijman has been unanimously elected by the members of the Forum as (technical) chair. She had fulfilled that role ad interim since October. The Appointments Advisory Committee (BAC) described her as an intrinsically motivated, inclusive chair who has already proven her ability to support the Forum in this final phase of the pilot. The BAC also stated that it would be wise to explore whether compensation could be arranged for the position of chairman, which has so far been unpaid.

The proposals in the task force's report are divided into four domains, along with overarching and group-specific recommendations. This set-up was adopted in the meeting of the University Forum, where each break-out group focused on one of the different domains or the overarching recommendations.

1 Overarching Recommendations

The respons of the University Forum to the overarching recommendations in the report of the Taskforce Social Safety (p. 28-30)

One of the things that hinder social safety at the UvA is that offenders often do not seem aware of what they are doing wrong. Starting the conversation about this becomes very complicated, especially for the victim. We must ensure that it becomes clear what we at the UvA expect from those directly involved and from bystanders. Bringing a socially unsafe situation out into the open is not easy and requires specific skills that most people now lack. Training in this is therefore very important. It is also crucial that employees have someone they can turn to directly, preferably the immediate supervisor, but especially also close colleagues. The thresholds for a formal complaints procedure or even seeking out a trust person can feel very high, so it is important that everyone can rely on colleagues in the immediate work environment. The situation is different for students. For large bachelor courses, the distance to the teacher is so great that there is almost a "safe anonymity". The risk increases with smaller subjects, small courses and, for example, internship supervision, where the dependence on certain individuals can cause problems. This dependency relationship is perhaps most obvious in the case of PhD students. A second promoter has now been introduced, but there may still be a power relationship between those promoters. This is a persistent problem, but we can go a long way if we take stock of dependency relationships, become aware of them and thus learn to pay extra attention in such situations. Finally, the report still seems to rely heavily on the "tougher" measures. These are of course extremely important, but because of the high threshold for using them, you run the risk that many unsafe situations will still remain under the table. Let us especially look further at ways to further develop the "soft side".

2 Better Safe than Sorry

The respons of the University Forum to the recommendations whithin the domain 'Better Safe than Sorry' (p. 22-23)

The hierarchical structure of the university plays a major role in causing socially unsafe situations. More attention should be paid to the relationship between structure and the problems surrounding social safety; otherwise the recommendations remain too much on the surface. Tackling that structure is a long-term project, so we must take steps, especially in the short term, to do as much as possible for social safety also within the existing structure. Unsafe situations can often be prevented by raising awareness and accessible channels for reporting problems and for getting help. Both objectives can be pursued by conducting evaluative conversations, not only between employee and manager, but also with outsiders. The University Forum also endorses the importance of leadership training with sufficient attention to social safety, in order to increase the sensitivity of managers to social safety. Training could also add a lot for students, starting with first-years, but also students who joined later. Communication through newsletters rarely reaches the majority of students, so many students are currently unaware that something like the online flowchart actually exists. Stronger resources are badly needed to make them aware of what socially unsafe behaviour is and what to do when confronted with it. This should be taken into account in the awareness campaign recommended by the task force.

3 Monitor and Signal

The respons of the University Forum to the recommendations whithin the domain 'Monitor and Signal' (p. 23-24)

Managers have a great responsibility for identifying and monitoring social unsafety. Noticing high-risk dependency relationships or other forms of social unsafety is a competence that not everyone possesses, but also not something that is currently being closely monitored when appointing managers. First of all, that can be improved. Building on the first break-out group, it is good to mention again that the biggest challenge lies in the informal atmosphere; the "soft side". Are we aware of exactly how big the problem is? The great distance between the workplace, where socially unsafe situations occur, and management, where a large part of the responsibility for solutions lies, is not sufficiently recognized in the report of the task force. It is part of our university culture to give your academics a lot of space as a manager, but that also means that undesirable situations can go unnoticed for a long time. Another obstacle to detecting and monitoring social unsafety is the high workload and the competitive nature of the academic field. People are thus forced to look little further than their own tasks; if you are already struggling to keep your own head above what is going on, it is much to ask to also worry about colleagues. In terms of recommendations within this domain, the report is now relatively limited to making an existing instrument less informal, but there are still no concrete recommendations that go further than that.

4 Physical and Online Environment

The respons of the University Forum to the recommendations whithin the domain 'Physical and Online Environment' (p. 24)

A clearer demarcation between desirable and undesirable behaviour can make it easier to address each other when an undesirable situation arises. This is why a clear code of conduct is important. However, it is important to take into account the risk that a detailed code can never be all-encompassing and that people could also hide behind it when you would not want to. When further defining desirable and undesirable behaviour, it is important to include the digital environment, something that is very clearly emphasized by the taskforce. Socially undesirable situations can easily arise in the digital environment, where clear boundaries are currently lacking. Ultimately, we will not be able to prevent all cases of socially unsafe situations, so we must also consider how we should respond as directly involved individual or as a bystander. Training in giving, but certainly also receiving feedback, could help. Training is a clear part of the taskforce's recommendations, but focused on specific job groups. It would be instructive to bring UvA students and employees from different places in the hierarchy together in training and conversations on the theme of social safety. In this way we work towards mutual understanding and trust. In this entire process, so both the training in feedback and the definition of desirable / undesirable behaviour, it is necessary to also define the role of the bystanders more clearly. What do we expect from an employee or student if they are not involved themselves, but do observe socially undesirable behaviour? Finally, as at the previous meeting, the importance of follow-up was clearly highlighted. How do we support those involved after the problematic event? What exactly is our responsibility in this? A clear answer to these questions is crucial for a good action plan in response to the taskforce report.

5 Reports and Complaints

The respons of the University Forum to the recommendations whithin the domain 'Reports and Complaints' (p. 25)

Until now, the focus has always been on the "hard" side of social safety; the secure handling of formal complaints. However, an official complaints procedure is perceived as too big a step for much of the socially undesirable behaviour encountered in practice. This is where the "soft" side comes in. We need to find ways to confront each other about inappropriate behaviour, something that people do not feel free to do now. Sometimes there is a fear that raising an undesirable situation could result in a formal procedure, which the parties involved are not always interested in. It pays to clearly define when and when the formal procedure is relevant; when something falls within the "soft" or "hard" domain. A concrete suggestion for further improving the soft side would be to establish a "house of safety"; a place where there is room for intervision, open conversation, knowledge sharing and development. This could also be a place where problems can be tackled in groups, so that nobody should feel alone. See if such a place can be set up, possibly associated with the social safety expertise group that is to be set up by recommendation of the taskforce. A final concrete point concerns the recurring use of the "witch hunt" as an undesirable outcome of a strong social safety system. This term distracts and gives those in a position of power the benefit of the doubt at the expense of those who do not occupy such a position. We must avoid using the term.