

# Programme Plan for the Social Safety in Higher Education and Science Steering Group



# Colophon

This publication is by:

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# Why the Steering Committee on Social Safety?

On 3 June 2024, the Social Safety in Higher Education and Science Steering Group (hereinafter: steering group) was officially installed by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (hereinafter: OCW). The steering group consists of representatives of the various organisations in higher education and science, and independent experts. The aim is to give direction to a joint approach to promote social safety within higher education and science, while respecting the autonomy of the organisations in the field of social safety policy. The duration of the Social Safety in Higher Education and Science programme is 2024-2027. The core of the programme is to promote a safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working climate in higher education and science.

## Introduction

Several studies, reports and media items on inappropriate conduct and lack of social safety in higher education and science have prompted OCW to devise an integrated approach to make higher education and science safer, more diverse and more inclusive (see annex 1 for more background). The steering group is part of this approach.

Many organisations in higher education and science realise that their policies need updating, and have started working on promoting social safety as well as the development of various

approaches and initiatives. Organisations are eager to run with this. At the same time, they are struggling with figuring out how to initiate a culture change and ensure social safety in the interaction culture, the organisational structure and the system of complaint handling and prevention. The Social Safety in Higher Education and Science Steering Group was appointed to partner with the organisations in investigation and design.

In other words, the steering group wishes to strengthen collaboration within the sector regarding the topic of social safety, to increase knowledge sharing and action capacity, and to work towards the changes required to structurally increase social safety across the sector.

## Positioning

*The steering group as part of the national integrated approach to social safety*

The steering group is part of a national integrated approach. In the Parliamentary Letter of 8 June 2023, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science set out the policy to promote a safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working environment in higher education and science. Included in this is the strengthening of this policy by making budget available for the development of five action streams.

## The OCW approach, utilizing these action streams, is as follows:

1. The addition of a duty of care for student social safety in the Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (WHW);
2. The expansion of the reporting, consultation, and reporting obligations of sexual offences in the WHW and an exploratory investigation of a possible ban on non-disclosure agreements;
3. The improvement of facilities for student and staff complaints and reports;
4. The strengthening of social safety monitoring;
5. The launch of a nationwide programme encouraging universities, universities of applied sciences and student associations to work together in enhancing a socially safe learning and working environment for their students and staff.

The steering group is responsible for carrying out action stream five.

In this programme plan, we elaborate on the vision, objectives and results of the steering group. Its implementation should contribute to a culture change in the organisations involved, incorporating at minimum the recommendation by Government Commissioner Hamer on tackling sexual misconduct in higher education and science (2024)<sup>1</sup> and three aspects derived from the KNAW recommendation paper 'Social safety in Dutch Academia. From Paper to Practice' (2022).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Opinion of Government Commissioner Hamer on tackling sexual misconduct in Higher Education and Science: [Government commissioner Hamer: 'Higher Education an Important Place to tackle Sexual Misconduct' | News release | RCGOG](#)

<sup>2</sup> KNAW (2022). Social Safety in Dutch Academia. From Paper to Practice. Amsterdam, KNAW.

- the organisational structure of institutions;
- workplace culture, with putting behaviour up for discussion as its primary focus;
- the complaint handling and prevention system.

The vision in this programme plan is divided into four objectives and is annotated with corresponding outcomes for the 2024-2027 period. It also focuses on programme evaluation and assurance.

More background on social (lack of) safety in higher education and science (Annex 1), the grant scheme and assessment framework (Annex 2) and the communication plan (Annex 3) can be found in the annexes.

## **Objectives and outcomes of the steering group**

The aim of the steering group is to work with the sector to design and implement a national programme to promote social safety in higher education and science. The steering group aims to promote a safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working environment within the higher education and science sector by facilitating, initiating and encouraging initiatives in which universities, universities of applied sciences, student associations, PhD- and employee- organisations work together and learn together. The steering group aims to do this by stimulating, collecting, building, funding and monitoring, with a learning approach being the starting point.

In doing so, the steering group aligns with the objectives from OCW's 'Approach to Monitoring and Evaluating Progress on

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Research and Science Policy Objectives' (2023). In particular, the objective of 'giving space to diverse talent' puts the promotion of social safety in higher education and science at the heart of the approach (lower work pressure, more diversity, improving social safety). The steering group will link this objective to its own approach to promote the quality of higher education and science and attract and retain diverse talent, in conjunction with OCW's other objectives - strengthening the foundation and increasing social impact -.

## **To achieve this, the steering group focuses on the following four objectives:**

1. Stimulating debate on structural problems regarding social safety in higher education and science, nationally and within the organisations as well as between administrative and organisational layers, thus putting issues on the agenda.
2. Encouraging higher education and science to develop valid social safety knowledge and best practices within and between the organisations of higher education and science, identifying effective elements and improving collaboration within the sector on this topic.
3. Encouraging higher education and science across the board to strengthen existing initiatives aimed at promoting social safety and/or initiate new ones through the grant scheme.
4. Linking with other policy programmes on adjacent themes.



The steering group will implement these objectives through agenda setting, knowledge sharing and funding of its own initiatives and initiatives from the field.

## Elements of social safety

There are many different definitions of social safety, which internationally is often referred to as psychological safety.<sup>3</sup> The steering group has chosen not to provide a short definition, but rather a more detailed description that clearly sets out which elements are part of social safety in higher education and science. However, this is based on existing definitions of social safety and psychological safety.

### Higher education and science is a place:

- *where students and staff are protected and feel protected from personal harm caused by other persons;*
- *where everyone, appropriate to their own role and position, can and does take responsibility for their own behaviour and for (increased) social safety. That implies that everyone is aware of their own and others' behaviour and is equipped to act appropriately within it;*
- *where everyone feels free to be themselves, exchange views and express themselves, respecting the boundaries of others;*

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<sup>3</sup> Psychological safety is a key aspect in the work of, for instance, Professor Amy Edmondson: The Fearless Organisation (2019).

- *where everyone feels free to challenge or contradict each other, and report mistakes, problems, and abuses without fear of repercussions;*
- *where everyone feels free to share knowledge, participate (including in the lecture halls) and give feedback, and where the qualities of all involved come into their own;*
- *where inappropriate conduct such as aggression, violence, discrimination, (sexual) harassment and bullying does not occur;*
- *where a culture of respect and safety is key, regardless of political affiliation, gender, ethnic identity, sexual or other personal characteristics;*
- *and where people at every level are considerate towards one another.*

## Steering group members

The basis for the steering group is embedded in the Covenant on Social Safety in Higher Education and Science 2024-2027. In addition to OCW, the following partners have joined this covenant: The Dutch National Student Association (ISO) and the National Dutch Student Movement (LSVb) represent the students' perspective; Promovendi Netwerk Netherlands (PNN) represents, also on behalf of PostdocNL, the postdocs and PhD students within the Dutch universities; Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) and Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH) represent

the boards of the universities and universities of applied sciences; the General Education Union (AOB) and the Federation of Dutch Unions (FNV) represent the employees.

In addition, the steering group includes five independent experts. Besides knowledge about social safety, they bring substantive knowledge on various topics: diversity and inclusion, integral safety, organisational change and sexual misconduct. The steering group is led by an independent Chair and supported by the programme team. As the steering group is not a legal entity, UNL bureau is the leading partner for handling the administrative and financial process.



# Finance

€16 million was made available by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science for the 2024-2027 period, designated for the design and implementation of the national programme by the steering group in partnership with the sector. Through a grant scheme, the steering group and higher education institutions, student organisations, PhD organisations or employee organisations can apply for activities to promote social safety. Under objective 3, the grant scheme and assessment framework (Annex 2), you will find details of how the assessment of the grant projects from the steering group and organisations will take place. This is how the money will be distributed to the various organisations in higher education and science to work on social safety locally.

# Objective 1:

**To stimulate debate on structural problems in social safety in higher education and science, nationally and within the organisations as well as between administrative and organisational layers, thus putting these issues on the agenda.**

Various stakeholders in higher education and science are represented in the steering group. The steering group can approach the challenges around social safety in this sector from different perspectives, giving it a unique position. The covenant partners represent their constituencies, the experts contribute their specific expertise, and in the steering group these perspectives come together on a national level.

The steering group's first core task is aimed at bringing these perspectives together: stimulating debate on structural problems regarding social safety in higher education and science, nationally and within the organisations as well as between administrative and organisational layers, thus putting issues on the agenda.

The administrative autonomy of the participating organisations and the legal obligations the organisations have to comply with regarding social safety, are respected.

## Legislation and obligations

Under the *Working Conditions Act* and the *General Equal Treatment Act*, universities and universities of applied sciences are responsible for the working conditions of employees and must ensure a discrimination-free learning and working environment.

Under the Working Conditions Act, employers are obliged to pursue policies and take measures to prevent and/or control the risks of psychosocial workload (PSA). PSA includes work pressure, inappropriate conduct, bullying and discrimination. As employers, universities and universities of applied sciences are obliged to make a risk inventory and evaluation (RI&E), including a plan of action (PoA) that includes PSA. This RI&E must be constantly evaluated and renewed through the so-called PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act).

The Inspectorate of Education has developed a guide to promote social safety in higher education and conducts investigations at higher education institutions when there are multiple reports of a lack of social safety.<sup>4</sup>

OCW's integrated approach includes an action stream which adds a duty of care for students to the Higher Education and Science Act. Another action stream pertains to the addition of the duty to report, consult, and report sex offences to this Act.

## Own interpretation of social safety policy

Organisations in higher education and science are themselves responsible for a socially safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working environment. The steering group can provide support by offering suggestions as a sparring partner, ensuring that the topic remains on various agendas and stimulating the debate on social safety in the sector.

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<sup>4</sup> Guidelines for Managing Social Safety in Higher Education, [Guidelines for Managing Social Safety in Higher Education | Publication | Inspectorate of Education \(onderwijsinspectie.nl\)](#). An example is the study on compliance with laws and regulations by TU Delft: [Research on Compliance with Laws and Regulations by TU Delft | Report | Rijksoverheid.nl](#)

Interviews with various organisations in higher education and science show there is already a lot happening in the field of social safety. Action plans have been drawn up, the matter is included in employee surveys, projects are being carried out and exchanges take place at various levels within and outside the organisations. Organisations also do some things to stimulate debate about (in)appropriate behaviour and social safety (campaigns, festivals or trainings and workshops).

However, talking about these difficult and sensitive topics does not yet seem to come naturally and problems are still often seen as incidents. Organisations still face challenges in embedding social safety into all layers of the organisation and ensuring a safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working environment. Addressing incidents also often proves complicated and raises many questions.

## **Integrated approach**

The above shows that the higher education and science sector is mindful of social safety and that the topic is on various agendas.

The steering group wishes to work with the sector to ensure that structural factors contributing to the lack of social safety remain high on various agendas and are prioritised in the approach. This includes a focus on the three pillars of the envisaged culture change (KNAW 2022): organisational structure, workplace culture and the system of complaint handling and prevention. The steering group stands for an integrated approach to social safety with consideration to these three pillars of culture change and wants to ensure that this remains on the various agendas of the organisations.



The steering group's approach and the assessment of grant applications from the organisations explicitly focus on marginalised groups who run a higher risk of encountering situations in which they feel unsafe. Various studies have shown that female academics, young researchers in particular (PhDs and postdocs), external PhDs, people from the LGBTQ+ community, people with migration backgrounds and/or with disabilities are more likely to experience lack of social safety in higher education and science.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the steering group wants to pay special attention to these groups in its approach. When assessing the grant applications, it will therefore consider whether the activities promote the emancipation of these groups (see objective 3; annex 2).

Another area of concern is the workload. The sector will face budget cuts in the coming years, which will increase the workload and may put pressure on the time available to work on solutions to structural problems and an integrated approach to social safety.

## Role as a driver

The steering group wants to make a difference in this issue and wants to see change (before and after 2027). The steering group therefore wants to stimulate the sector to improve social safety, and to be the central player to pick up what is going on at different levels and where the needs are in the field of higher education and science. In addition, it can draw attention within the sector to social safety issues, mainly to be approached through the three pillars (organisational structure, workplace culture and the system

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<sup>5</sup> Research report: Safe Space, 'How Fares the Social Safety of Students, Theatre Performance Safe Space wants to know'. KNAW advisory report, Social Safety in Dutch Academia. LNVH report, 'Harassment in Dutch Academia. Occupational Health and Safety. Rathenau Institute, 'AShaky Start. Starting Researchers on Their Obstacles' (2024).

of complaint handling and prevention) to address the structural problems.

This means that the steering group wants to stimulate the conversation within and between organisations. Ownership, as mentioned, remains with the organisations, in line with their responsibility to make concrete changes to promote social safety. The steering group has been given a mission and resources and aims to gather knowledge and perspectives in an appropriate way and stimulate debate, within and between higher education and science organisations, on social safety and thus put issues on the agenda.

## Consultation structures

At a national level, there are various relevant consultative structures where the debate on social safety is put on the agenda and conducted, such as chairpersons of Boards of Trustees, Association of Supervisors of Universities of Applied Sciences (VTH), safety coordinators (Integrated Safety Platform), Network of University Confidential Advisors, Association of Ombudsmen of Higher Education and UNL's working group on social safety. The steering group wants to ensure that social safety remains on the agenda in these consultations and also within the organisations themselves, so that everyone, across all layers of the organisation, is engaged in this topic and has a course of action.

In conjunction with the organisations it also wants to explore what else is needed to stimulate debate on this topic and bring the expertise of the steering group and others to the discussions. This allows everyone to responsibility for (more) social safety appropriate to their own role and position. The aim here is to

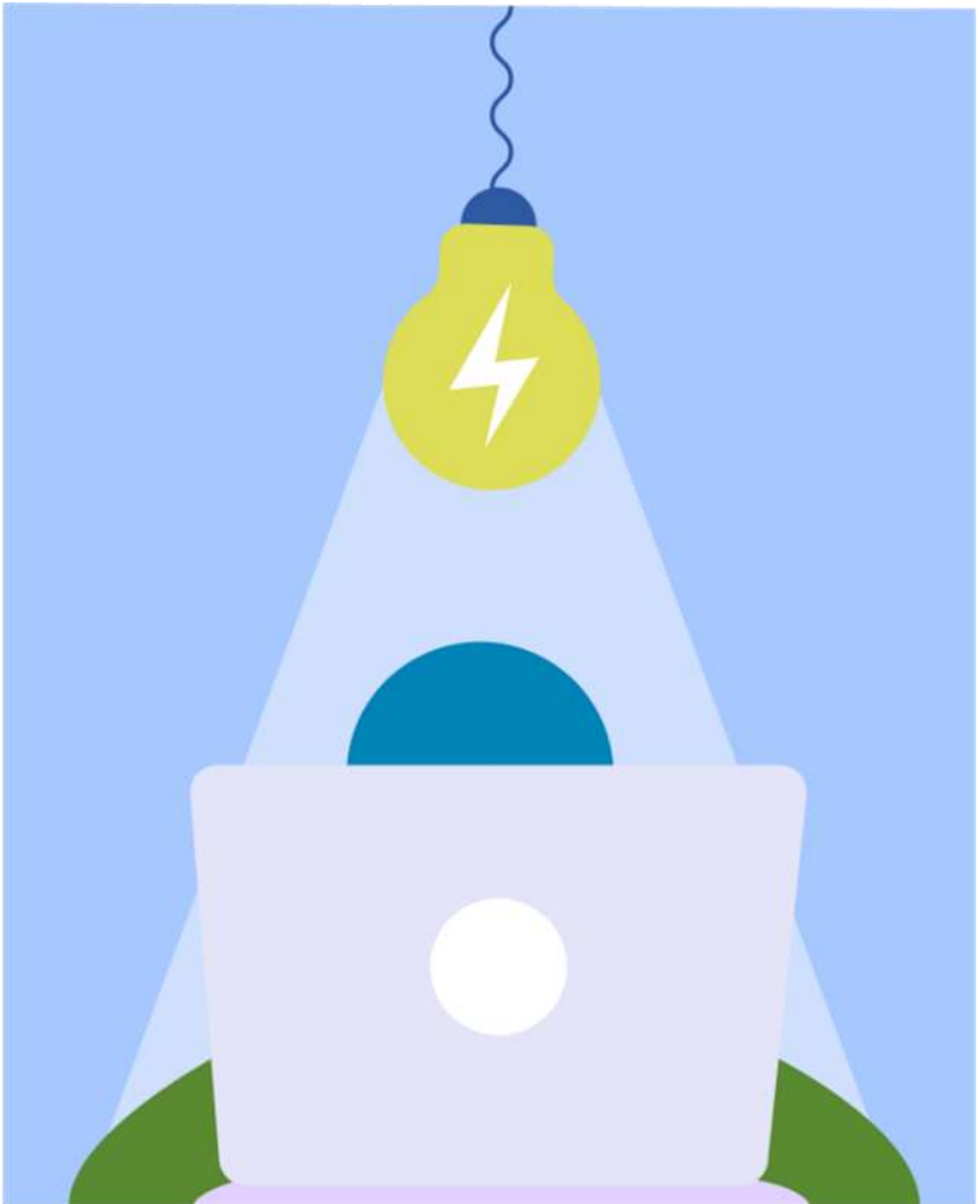
ensure that everyone is aware of their own behaviour and that of others, and equipped to act on it appropriately.

## **Results over the 2024-2027 period**

- Discussions on social safety are embedded within higher education and science. The steering group, as a driver, is currently laying a solid foundation for this during the 2024-2027 period, as well as for maintenance after 2027.

Important sub-objectives are:

- institutions take an integrated approach to social safety based on the three pillars to address structural problems, also taking into account relevant legal obligations;
- students and staff experience that they have been given the space and have the skills to discuss social safety at any level;
- the steering group is the spider in the web of the various consultation structures on social safety in higher education and science until 2027. One task of the steering group is to link these consultation structures, exchange knowledge and be a sparring partner to continue stimulating the conversation on social safety nationwide;
- the steering group develops a plan for securing (establishment of knowledge centre see objective 2) this role after 2027.



# Objective 2:

**To encourage higher education and science to develop and share valid knowledge and best practices in the field of social safety within and between organisations of higher education and science, to identify effective elements and to improve collaboration within the sector on this topic.**

As set out above, the first objective of the steering group is to stimulate debate on social safety within the sector at national and local levels.

The second objective of the steering group is: to encourage the sector to develop and share valid knowledge and best practices in the field of social safety within and between organisations of higher education, to jointly identify working elements and to improve collaboration within the sector.

## Local and national exchange

To achieve this objective, the steering group wishes to encourage exchanges regarding social safety within and between organisations. The steering group wants to take the lead in this and play a facilitating role in connecting the sector and improve collaboration. The steering group facilitates by encouraging the organisations to develop, collect and monitor knowledge and share best practices and valid knowledge on social safety both within the organisations at a local level (e.g. between faculties), and

between the organisations at a national level. To this end, the steering group provides resources.

The aim of the steering group is to have the organisations come together in a national Knowledge Centre for Social Safety in Higher Education and Science, in which the various sections of the sector exchange knowledge and find methods for their own task. In consultation with the organisations, the steering group will develop a plan for the composition and content of this centre.

## Learning approach

The starting point is a learning approach. Each higher education organisation has its own culture and challenges, which often differ from one organisation to another. The social safety approach should provide room for this. Several organisations have already faced problems/incidents.<sup>6</sup> Other organisations can learn from this.

Through the exchange, organisations can jointly identify effective elements from existing approaches and incorporate them into their own approaches to further strengthen them, transform effective approaches to suit their own culture/needs and implement them in their own organisations. The steering group will initially focus on building on existing knowledge and approaches by sharing and learning from them. Through the learning approach, the steering group aims to increase action competence in the entire sector and achieve an acceleration in achieving greater social safety in higher education and science.

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<sup>6</sup> Inspectorate of Education (2023). Managing Sustained Social Safety in Higher art and Fashion Education<sup>1</sup>.

Through this knowledge gathering and knowledge sharing of good examples, an overview of evidence-based and theoretically grounded approaches is created within the knowledge centre that organisations can use, adapt for their own organisation/faculty/team, and test and reinforce.

## **(National) Social Safety Monitor**

From the Higher Education Integrated Safety Platform, two monitors have been developed for higher education institutions to gain a better understanding of the state of social safety within higher education institutions:

- the systematic monitor: a monitor to assess the presence and functioning of the system to promote social safety in the institution. This monitor was issued at all universities and universities of applied sciences;
- monitor social safety: a monitor to map perceived (un)social safety among students and staff. Four universities of applied sciences participated in a pilot (HHS, HU, HvA and HR). An evaluation of this pilot will follow.

Higher education institutions and employee organisations monitor social safety in various ways (e.g. MTOs, NSE, PNN monitor, national PhD survey, Female Professors Monitor). Initially, the steering group wants to link up with existing instruments to monitor the objectives/results of its programme.

Furthermore, the steering group, together with the Platform for Integral Safety, will explore how they can further use the systematic monitor and the Social Safety Monitor pilot in the sector. Here, the yet-to-be-established national knowledge centre can play a role in

bringing more unity to the way organisations in higher education and science monitor social safety.

## **Visibility and securing a national knowledge centre**

The yet-to-be-established national knowledge centre plays an important role in making visible the knowledge and approaches aimed at improving social safety in higher education and science. In the period 2025-2027, a solid foundation will be laid by the steering group for making this knowledge and experience visible (e.g. on the steering group's website) and also for securing it after 2027 when the steering group's term ends.

### **Results over the 2024-2027 period**

- By 2027, at the end of the steering group's term, there will be a national Knowledge Centre on Social Safety in Higher Education and Science jointly maintained and supported by the organisations.
- An annual conference/meeting will be organised in 2025, 2026 and 2027 to exchange valid knowledge and best practices and to set up the national knowledge centre.
- At the end of the steering group's term, an overview of evidence-based and theory-based interventions on social safety in higher education and science will be in place and accessible to all higher education and science organisations.
- The steering group will monitor the achievement of its objectives/results through existing instruments of the organisations of higher education and science.



- The steering group, together with the Integrated Safety Platform, will explore opportunities to further expand the sector's systematic monitor and pilot monitor social safety to monitor the development of social safety across the sector.
- The steering group will explore which central role the knowledge centre can play in monitoring social safety at higher education institutions and in student, PhD and employee organisations.

# Objective 3:

**To encourage higher education and science to strengthen existing initiatives aimed at promoting social safety and/or to initiate new initiatives through the grant scheme.**

The steering group will facilitate the realisation of objectives 1 and 2 with the introduction of a grant scheme.

The steering group wants to encourage the sector across the board (students, PhDs/postdocs, teachers, researchers, support staff, administrators) to apply for grants for implementing or strengthening existing social safety initiatives, and/or to start new ones. This may involve both small and large-scale projects for the long and short term.

In addition, the steering group will also initiate its own projects. These will mainly be large-scale, long-term projects, such as setting up the national Knowledge Centre for Social Safety in Higher Education and Science and organising annual conferences.

Within the grant scheme, a budget of €16 million is available for the period 2025-2027. In 2025 the sector can apply for grants on one occasion (summer); in 2026, the sector and the steering group can apply for grants on two occasions (spring/summer). In 2027, the grant scheme will only be open to spring applications. All projects will run until 31 December 2027 at the latest.

## Balanced distribution

Higher education and science is a large sector spread throughout the Netherlands with many different target groups: students, PhD students/postdocs, lecturers, researchers, support staff, administrators. The grant scheme is open to all these different target groups, i.e. any higher education institution or student, PhD and employee organisation may apply. The steering group aims to ensure a balanced distribution of funds among the various target groups and organisations.

Target groups may apply for grants for different types of projects to promote social safety. For example, on the one hand, these could be short-term projects such as a conference, training course or festival. On the other hand, it could be long-term projects in which, for example, research is conducted on the effectiveness of an approach or a culture change project in the workplace. It is important that the applications are linked to practice, i.e. interventions on the work floor, in the lecture hall/campus or at the association to really contribute to culture change, within one or more of the three pillars (workplace culture, the organisational structure and the system of complaint handling and prevention). Furthermore, it is important that applications contribute to the emancipation of marginalised groups, (such as female academics, young researchers (PhDs and postdocs), people from the LGBTQ+ community, people with migration backgrounds and/or with disabilities).

The grant scheme for Social Safety in Higher Education and Science 2024-2027 and its assessment framework set out the criteria that grant applications must meet (see annex 2). It also details who will assess the grant applications by the steering group

and organisations and how, while remaining mindful of a balanced distribution across the various organisations.

## **Communication/promotion**

Communication/promotion of the grant scheme to higher education and science organisations will take place starting from the end of 2024. The core message of the steering group is to promote a safe, inclusive and respectful learning and working climate within higher education and science in collaboration with the entire sector.

The steering group will disseminate information about this scheme through the website, a sample application, newsletters, advertising on the campus and posters/flyers. They will also use the communication tools, such as website and social media channels, of the organisations involved.

The steering group also wants to proactively encourage the sector and various target groups to apply. The steering group wants to have a visible presence on the organisations' sites and advise on any applications.

Annex 3 contains a detailed communication plan.

## **Results over the 2024-2027 period**

- The grant scheme and activities of the steering group will be visible and known to all stakeholders.
- Enough proposals of sufficient quality are to be generated in 2025-2027 to actually spend the grant.

- At the end of the steering group's term, there should be a balanced distribution of projects within the grant scheme, with a reasonable division across different organisations.
- At the end of the steering group's term, all projects funded from the grant scheme will have been made part of the national knowledge centre and accessible to the entire sector.



# Objective 4:

To connect with other policy programmes on adjacent themes.

The steering group aims to establish connections not only within higher education and science, but also with at least the following ongoing policy programmes:

- The National Action Plan for Tackling Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence;
- The Agenda against discrimination and racism;
- The National Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research;
- The Recognition and Reward programme;
- The Student Welfare Fund.

These programmes have already made good steps in the right direction on adjacent themes (including discrimination, diversity and inclusion) that also promote social safety.

The steering group wishes to promote a structural place at higher education and science institutions and employee and student organisations for the outcomes of these policy programmes.

## Policy programmes

The steering group will connect with other policy programmes that can contribute to promoting social safety in higher education and science. By 2024, these will be at least the following programmes. Should other relevant programmes commence during the term of steering group, the steering group will connect to these, too.

## **OCW Agenda Against Discrimination and Racism (2022-2026)**

The Agenda Against Discrimination and Racism sets out how the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science aims to combat discrimination and racism and promote inclusion and equality. Part of the Ministry's ambition is to include a safe, accessible and inclusive learning and working environment. Additionally, the National Programme against Discrimination and Racism was launched in 2023.

## **National Action Plan on Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research (2020-2025)**

The National Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research was presented on 1 September 2020. In this National Action Plan, too, the starting point is the creation of a diverse and safe learning and working environment.

When there is social safety, the benefits of diversity come into their own properly. A successful diversity and inclusion policy is only possible where there is a safe learning and working environment. Diversity among students and staff offers different perspectives and ideas, which contributes to innovation and better performance.

In a socially safe working environment, students and staff feel free to share ideas, concerns and mistakes without fear of negative

consequences. This promotes inclusion, as people from different backgrounds feel heard and valued.

## **National Action Programme Tackling Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence (2022-2026)**

The National Action Programme was established to prevent and counteract sexual misconduct and sexual violence. The aim of the programme, besides improving regulations and organisational processes for prevention, complaint handling and assistance, is to work towards a culture change to create a society where people treat each other equally and respectfully and everyone feels socially safe. Bystanders have an important role in this.

Sexual misconduct is often linked to power differences, (social) inequality and sexism, which also takes place in the specific domain of higher education and science. Signalling, regulation, complaint handling and (referring to) assistance are important factors in the improvement of social safety in higher education and science.

## **Recognition and Reward Programme (2019-2026)**

In the Recognition and Reward programme, the participating organisations (universities, UMCs, research institutes and funders) aim to recognise and appreciate the work of scientific staff more widely. The focus should be more on the quality of research results, rather than on the quantity of research and publications. It also calls for more recognition and appreciation of other aspects of the work of scientific researchers, such as teaching, leadership, and team performance.



Within this context of Recognition and Reward, all academics are able to take responsibility appropriate to their own role and position for creating a safe and inclusive learning and working environment and promoting social safety.

## **Student Welfare Fund (2019-)**

The Student Welfare Fund is part of the health insurance policy Studenten Goed Verzekerd (Well-Insured Students), set up by The Dutch National Student Association (ISO) and the National Dutch Student Movement (LSVb). The aim of the fund is to improve the physical and mental well-being of students in a broad sense. Social safety is an important prerequisite for student welfare.

## **Results over the 2024-2027 period**

- The strengthening of connections with other policy programmes whose objectives also touch on social safety in higher education and science, through:
  - organising regular meetings with the programme managers/programme secretaries to exchange knowledge;
  - designing of joint approaches;
  - organising joint knowledge sessions/conference.
- The promotion of knowledge/approaches from adjacent policy programmes to improve social safety in higher education and science.
- The promotion of embedding of good knowledge/approaches from adjacent policy programmes into the yet-to-be-established knowledge centre.

# Steering group evaluation

The steering group will report annually on the implementation of the programme. In these progress reports, the steering group will evaluate its activities and the progress of the subsidy scheme for higher education and science organisations. After each annual evaluation, it will consider whether the programme's objectives should be adjusted.

The steering group will reflect on the entire 2024-2027 period in its final report. The Minister of OCW will also conduct a final evaluation.

## Assurance of steering group

The steering group will share the important lessons and experiences arising from the initiatives of the steering group and organisations in higher education and science with the minister and the sector to improve (national) social safety policy within the sector.

The National Knowledge Centre for Social Safety in Higher Education and Science, as yet to be established, will play an important role in securing the results of the activities of the steering group and the sector.

# Annex 1: Background

Several studies, reports and media items have put the topic of social (in)safety in higher education and science on this sector's agenda. It transpired that higher education organisations and student associations are often still searching for a way to promote social safety and tackle inappropriate conduct.

There is significant diversity in the higher education and research sector in terms of the population, but also in terms of culture and structure (higher education institutions/study and student associations) and within the institutions (faculties, departments, departments and teams). People's experience of social (lack of) safety will differ and also vary across different locations – additionally, the factors that create a breeding ground for inappropriate conduct may differ. At the same time, there are also similarities. The steering group's national programme is aimed at all institutes of higher professional education and employee and student organisations, and will focus on both similarities and differences in the experience and approach to social (lack of) safety.

## Student perspective (Universities of applied science and universities)

In 2022, a survey 'Social safety in higher education' was conducted by ResearchNed on behalf of The Dutch National Student Association (ISO) on how students in higher education experience social safety. It shows that 20% of the students have felt unsafe on occasion. The LGBTQ+ group is particularly vulnerable and more

often victim of, for example, bullying, discrimination, harassment and sexual misconduct.<sup>7</sup>

An exploratory study by the Inspectorate of Education also shows that not all students in higher education experience a safe learning environment, and that inappropriate conduct does occur. In many cases, students do not know where to report it.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, students also experience inappropriate conduct outside the educational institution, in student nightlife. This is demonstrated by various incidents at student associations, among others. Social pressure, alcohol, drugs and social media play a role in this.<sup>9</sup> This has a major impact on students' lives, as well as on their experience of safety at their educational institution.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that there are differences in student experiences is highlighted, for example, in the thematic study 'Managing Lasting Social Safety in Higher Art and Fashion Education' (Inspectorate of Education 2023). Art and fashion courses require students to step out of their comfort zones to a larger extent given that they present personal work. This makes them even more vulnerable to inappropriate conduct. These students reported that they sometimes felt unsafe due to the way they received feedback, experienced an excessive study load and also encountered sexual misconduct. Several measures have been implemented to change this, but there is still room for improvement in securing the approach.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Brink, M. & van den Broek, A. (2022). *Social Safety in Higher Education*. ResearchNed. Higher art and fashion education too experienced a substantial number of signs of an unsafe learning climate in 2021. For this reason, the Inspectorate of Education investigated the sector, and several measures were implemented. Education Inspectorate (2023). 'Managing Continued Social Safety in Higher Art and Fashion Education'.

<sup>8</sup> Education Inspectorate, 'Social Safety in Higher Education', [Factsheet+social+safety+in+higher+education.pdf](#)

<sup>9</sup> Student pact. Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence. An Action-Oriented Student Approach to Positive Sexuality in Student Life (August 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Brink, M. & van den Broek, A. (2022). *Social Safety in Higher Education*. ResearchNed. Mariëtte Hamer, Opinion on tackling sexual misconduct and sexual violence in higher education (24 January 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Inspectorate of Education (2023). 'Managing Sustained Social Safety in Higher Art and Fashion Education'.

Many students in higher education face internship discrimination. Students are discriminated against on the basis of identity characteristics such as colour, migration background, sexual orientation, gender, religion and disability when seeking internships. Internship discrimination has a major emotional impact on students' lives (e.g. lower self-confidence) and causes study delays and dropouts. In 2022, a manifesto was signed between the VH (the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences), UNL (universities of the Netherlands), student organisations ISO and LSVb, the Ministries of OCW and SZW and employer organisations VNO-NCW and MKB-Nederland to combat internship discrimination. It was agreed that each body would work in its own way to devise solutions for combatting internship discrimination. In partnership with ECHO (Expertise Centre for Diversity Policy), efforts are being made to raise awareness in society about internship discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

## Employee perspective (universities)

Several reports and studies have recently been published on the lack of social safety at universities and in academia, such as the LNVH report 'Harassment in Dutch academia' (2019)<sup>13</sup>, the report 'Harassment at Groningen University (2021) by the Young Academy Groningen'<sup>14</sup>, the KNAW advisory report 'Social Safety in Dutch Academia-'From Paper to Practice' (2022)<sup>15</sup>, the Education Inspectorate's report on TU Delft (2024)<sup>16</sup>, the Labour Inspectorate's study(2024)<sup>17</sup> on psychosocial workload at all Dutch

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<sup>12</sup> 'Manifesto Signed to Combat Internship Discrimination' (2022) [Manifesto signed to combat internship discrimination | News release | Rijksoverheid.nl](#)

<sup>13</sup> LNVH report (2019). 'Harassment in Dutch Academia. Exploring Manifestations, Facilitating Factors, Impact and Solutions.

<sup>14</sup> Harassment at the Groningen University (2021). [Microsoft Word - Draft BoE preface harassment YAG report 120921.docx \(rug.nl\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> KNAW (2022). Social Safety in Dutch Academia. From Paper to Practice. Amsterdam, KNAW.

<sup>16</sup> Inspectorate of Education, Research on Compliance with Laws and Regulations at TU Delft (Utrecht 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Netherlands Labour Inspectorate (2024). Health and Safety in the Workplace Special: Research report. Psychosocial Workload at Universities.

universities, the PNN monitor (2023) and the Rathenau study (2024) on the obstacles for starting researchers and international PhD students.<sup>18</sup>

From these studies, what emerges time and again is that many employees at universities and in academia feel socially unsafe, experience excessive workload and do not know how to address inappropriate conduct.

Several factors at the universities form the breeding ground for this lack of social safety, such as the hierarchical structure, informal power relations, nepotism, unclear embedding into the organisation of external PhD students and an individualistic and competitive culture, combined with a scarcity of resources and workplaces. In many cases, employees are therefore afraid to speak out, fearing that it will harm their careers, prevent them from being promoted or prevent their contracts from being renewed.

In particular, several underrepresented and marginalised groups in academia, such as female academics, young researchers (PhDs and postdocs), people from the LGBTQ+ group, people from migrant backgrounds and/or with disabilities, indicate that they experience a lack of social safety more often.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the experience of people belonging to these groups is that they have no say in changing prevailing behavioural standards, and that they in many cases leave the science field.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rathenau Institute (2024). A Shaky Start. Starting Researchers on Their Obstacles. The Hague. Authors: Koens, L., L. Hessels, S. Vogelesang and A. Vennekens. Anneke Kastelein, Charlotte de Blecourt, Junfeng Zhu, Lotte Weedage, Marcela Martínez Ibarra, Marie Stadel, Marije Sluiskes, Roël Vrooman & Yvette Woltman (2023). PNN Monitor. International scholarship PhD candidates. Amsterdam.

<sup>19</sup> Research report: Safe Space, 'How Fares the Social Safety of Students, theatre performance Safe Space wants to know'. KNAW advisory report, Social Safety in Dutch Academia. LNVH report, 'Harassment in Dutch Academia. Occupational Health and Safety. Rathenau Institute, 'A Shaky Start. Starting Researchers on Their Obstacles' (2024).

<sup>20</sup> KNAW opinion, Social Safety in Dutch Academia. LNVH report, 'Harassment in Dutch Academia. Occupational Health and Safety.

# **KNAW research -'From Paper to Practice'**

In 2022, OCW commissioned a committee led by Professor Naomi Ellemers to investigate the breeding ground of the lack of social safety in the culture of interaction, the organisational structure and the complaints system of Dutch academia. This KNAW advisory report 'Social Safety in Dutch Academia-From Paper to Practice' was published on 14 July 2022. In this advisory report, recommendations were made and practical tools were suggested to the university sector for engaging in a culture change incorporating the three components of the organisation (working culture, organisational structure and complaints system), to allow for practical application of these concepts by the institutions.

Each institution adopts its own approach to social safety, and faces different challenges. This KNAW report therefore stresses the importance of the approach to social safety being supported by all layers of organisations in the higher education and science sector, so that it can be approached from an integrated approach. The report recommends starting a national programme on social safety in which all target groups in higher education and science are represented. Exchange within the sector encourages institutions to learn from each other and to implement changes.<sup>21</sup>

## **Employee perspective (universities of applied sciences)**

In the study 'Inappropriate conduct and Social Safety in Universities of Applied Sciences' (2022), employees of universities

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<sup>21</sup> KNAW opinion, Social Safety in Dutch Academia.

of applied sciences indicated that they are generally slightly more positive about perceived social safety and inclusion compared to universities. Nevertheless, various forms of inappropriate conduct do occur in this educational sector, by both externals/students and internals (co-workers, supervisors), meaning that not everyone experiences a safe learning and working climate. As in universities, staff from marginalised groups, such as women and staff from non-western migration backgrounds, in particular, are more likely to experience inappropriate conduct and discrimination, including from externals/students. It is also noted that teaching staff experience inappropriate conduct by colleagues and supervisors slightly more often than support staff.

The connection between the various forms of inappropriate conduct, discrimination and a high workload also creates a socially unsafe climate in higher education and has a major impact on employees' work experience and enjoyment.<sup>22</sup> This education sector is therefore also part of the steering group's approach, so that all organisations in higher education can support each other in promoting social safety.

## Key factors

There are a number of key factors that create the lack of social safety across higher education and science, both for teaching or research staff and for support staff and students. Examples include: power inequalities and discrimination, lack of a diverse and inclusive working environment, lack of transformational leadership (leading by example, fostering collaboration, taking into

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<sup>22</sup> This research was conducted in 2022 by Zestor: 'Inappropriate Conduct and Social Safety in Universities of Applied Sciences. In-depth Analyses of the Work Study of 2022', [rapport\\_verdiepende\\_analyses\\_werkonderzoek\\_sociale\\_veiligheid\\_hbo\\_def.pdf](https://rapport.verdiepende.analyses.werkonderzoek.sociale.veiligheid.hbo.def.pdf) ([zestor.nl](https://zestor.nl)).



account personal wishes/needs), mutual competition and high workload.<sup>23</sup> The latter factors are only expected to increase in the coming years due to the announced cuts in higher education and science by the Schoof government.<sup>24</sup>

It is important that organisations start working together to address the problems regarding social safety, as the consequences of lack of social safety have a major impact on the personal lives, health and further careers of those involved. In addition, lack of social safety is damaging to the quality of science and education.<sup>25</sup>

## Positive developments

In 2022, an Administrative Agreement was concluded with Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) and the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH). This Agreement includes several ambitions regarding social safety and inclusion. The commitments were made to strengthen higher education and science, and are in line with OCW's objectives to make higher education and science safer, more diverse and more inclusive.

Various measures have been implemented, such as the appointment of confidential counsellors, the renewal of the whistle-blower scheme, the appointment of ombudsmen, the engagement of external confidential counsellors, the introduction of codes of conduct, the creation and/or renewal of the system of complaint handling, and the scheduling of conferences on social safety.

In the process, steps were taken to raise awareness of social safety at the various institutions, and guides were published and

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<sup>23</sup> National Action Plan for more diversity and inclusion in higher education and research.

<sup>24</sup> KNAW opinion, Social Safety in Dutch Academia. Occupational Health and Safety.

<sup>25</sup> LNVH report, 'Harassment in Dutch Academia'.

initiatives taken to facilitate discussions on social safety and inappropriate conduct. Examples include the 'Recommendations on Tackling Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence in Higher Education and Science', the 'Guide to Culture Change in the Workplace' and the Student Pact by Government Commissioner Mariëtte Hamer; the National Action Plan for More Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research; lobbying by the National Network of Female Professors; the development and screening of the interactive theatre performance 'SAFE SPACE' by the Time Out Foundation, theatre performances '#MeToo Academia- The Learning Curve' and 'Scenes on Social Safety' by the Actors' Society, the theatre performance 'Mindlab'; the organisation of active bystander trainings; and the development and implementation of workshops and trainings on social safety by, for example, the Our Bodies Our Voices Foundation and GELIJKSPEL (workshop on manners around sex).<sup>26</sup>

This shows that many people within the sector do feel the urgency: changes are needed with regard to social safety. Some of these changes are implemented, but some are not, and the introduction of the changes is at times more laborious than is desirable. Moreover, individuals sometimes pay a high price for putting the issue on the agenda. It is therefore important that organisations exchange information with one another on what works and what does not in making higher education and science a safe and inclusive place for all.

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<sup>26</sup> Student Pact . Research Report: Safe Space. Codes of Conduct: [Codes of Conduct in Social Safety | Universities of the Netherlands: Association of Universities of Applied Sciences](#)

# Annex 2: Assessment framework

Section	Assessment criteria	Assessment aspects	Point scale
<b>1. Ambition</b>  Maximum of 800 words	1. The reason and need to improve social safety.  2. The emancipation of (a) marginalised group(s) (such as female academics, young researchers, PhD students and postdocs), people from the LGBTQ+ group, people with migration backgrounds and/or with disabilities.  3. Social safety ambition and feasibility of the ambition.	1. The reason why this grant application is needed to promote social safety is clearly described. The need for the grant application is clearly described and substantiated.  2. How the grant application addresses the emancipation of marginalised group(s) is clearly described and substantiated.  3. The objectives are ambitious, clear and concrete. Also, the targets are realistic and achievable.	1-5
<b>2. Impact</b>  Maximum of 800 words	1. Three pillars of culture change (working culture, system, structure) regarding social safety.	1. Substantiated how the grant application impacts one or more of the pillars of culture change within the	1-5

	<p>2. Goals and outcomes of the Steering group, as formulated in the Steering group programme plan (Article 1).</p>	<p>organisation(s) or other stakeholders involved.</p> <p>2. The intended impact of the grant application on (one of) the steering group's objectives and results, as formulated in the programme plan, is clearly formulated and substantiated.</p>	
<p><b>3. Anchoring</b></p> <p>Maximum of 800 words</p>	<p>1. Sustainable anchoring and visibility of knowledge and insights gained within one's own organisation(s).</p> <p>2. Visibility for other organisation(s).</p>	<p>1. The sustainable anchoring of the results of the grant application within the organisation(s) and the way in which the knowledge and insights gained are made visible are clearly described. It is substantiated why this form has been chosen.</p> <p>2. The way in which knowledge sharing is facilitated is clearly set out so that practices, knowledge and insights can be used by (an)other organisation(s) after the end of the activity(/ies).</p>	1-5
<p><b>4a.</b></p> <p><b>Description of activity(/ies)</b></p>	<p>Per activity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- objective</li> <li>- monitoring the progress of the activity</li> <li>- planning</li> </ul>	<p>For each activity, the objective is clearly and concretely described.</p> <p>For each activity, the way progress is monitored is clearly</p>	<p><b>Satisfactory or insufficient per activity</b></p>

Maximum of 400 words per activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- (where applicable) collaboration.</li> </ul>	<p>and concretely described.</p> <p>The planning of the activity(/ies) is realistic and implementation is completed by 31 December 2027 at the latest.</p> <p>In case of a partnership, it becomes clear which party takes on which role in the activity(/ies).</p>	
<b>4b. budget by activity(/ies)</b>	<p>A realistic budget for the activity(/ies).</p> <p>Assessed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whether the costs are proportionate to the intended results;</li> <li>- Whether the budget is balanced;</li> <li>- Whether HOT rates have been used, which already includes overhead and administration (if applicable).</li> </ul>	<p>For each activity(/ies), the budget specifically and clearly states what costs are incurred by whom. For each activity, the budget must clearly show the associated costs.</p>	<b>Satisfactory or insufficient per activity</b>

# Annex 3: Communication plan Social Safety Steering group

Achieving the objectives of the steering group, as described in the programme plan, requires good visibility of the steering group. This communication plan is designed to effectively communicate the steering group's mission, vision and objectives to universities, universities of applied sciences, student, PhD and employee organisations, and to encourage them to apply for grants. Through these means, the steering group aims to shape, in conjunction with the sector, the integrated approach to promote social safety and bring about a culture change, according to the three pillars (organisational structure, workplace culture and the system of complaint handling and prevention).

## 1. Research question

In what way can the steering group use communication to stimulate debate on structural problems regarding social safety between and at all organisations of Higher Education and Science (universities, colleges, student, PhD and employee organisations), strengthen collaboration and knowledge sharing, and to encourage organisations to apply for funding for projects to promote social safety?

## 2. Communication objectives

The purpose of this communication plan is to provide a structured approach to the visibility and communication activities of the steering group, as well as to the grant scheme. It covers the following objectives:

- make the steering group visible to the sector as a discussion partner and to put social safety issues on the agenda in Higher Education and Science;
- make the grant scheme visible and accessible to the sector to encourage institutions (**universities, colleges, student, PhD and employee organisations**) to make use of it;
- connecting the sector to:
  - stimulate the conversation on social safety among institutions and student, PhD and employee organisations;
  - share valid knowledge with each other (best practices and approved grant applications);
  - to create awareness of what initiatives exist or are starting up in the field of social safety;
  - connect with neighbouring policy programmes and exploit their results.

## 3. What is our message?

The steering group's core message is to **promote a safe and inclusive learning and working environment within Higher Education and Science** through facilitating, initiating and encouraging initiatives in which universities, universities of applied sciences, and student, PhD and employee organisations work

together and learn together. The steering group aims to do this by stimulating, collecting, building and monitoring, with a learning approach as the starting point.

## 4. Target groups

The primary target audiences for this communication plan are:

Target	Setting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Board (managers)</li> <li>• Teachers and academic staff</li> <li>• Support staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-universities and universities of applied sciences</li> <li>-employee organisations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Postdocs and PhD students</li> <li>• External PhD students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-universities and universities of applied sciences</li> <li>-Postdoc NL</li> <li>-Promovendi Netwerk Nederland</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Students</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-universities and universities of applied sciences</li> <li>-student associations</li> </ul>



## 5. Strategy

The communication strategy will consist of several components:

- **Informing the sector about the steering group and grant scheme**

The steering group wants to inform the sector about the activities and the grant scheme. This includes practical information (deadlines, procedure), as well as substantive information on which grant applications match the steering group's objectives (e.g. sample grant applications).

- **Encourage and strengthen partnerships between institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences, and student, PhD and employee organisations)**

The steering group wants to use communication to strengthen partnerships between institutions and encourage the sharing of good practices and valid knowledge. Many institutions are working on approaches to promote social safety. The steering group wants to ensure that good examples become visible to higher education and science institutions and student organisations, so that they can be adopted and transformed to suit the institution's and organisation's own culture/needs. The steering group also wants to make the grant applications that are honoured from the grant scheme visible to the sector and disseminated.

- **Steering group wants to be visible at institutions in Higher Education and Science**

Furthermore, the steering group intends to proactively encourage the institutions (universities, colleges, and student, PhD and employee organisations) and the various target groups to apply for the grants by being visible at the institutions and advising which

projects are likely to succeed and are linked to the steering group's objectives.

It is expected that policy staff at institutions will have time during working hours to work on an application. Other target groups, such as postdocs/PhDs/students, will mainly do so in their own time. To encourage these target groups to submit an application, the steering group also wishes to be visible at the institutions to provide information/advice on the grant scheme. This could be, for example, in the form of Webinars, setting up drop-in sessions at the institutions or implementing a desk at a central location. Interested parties can give a short pitch or presentation on an idea or activity for the steering group to provide feedback. This allows the steering group to advise the target group at the earliest stage on which grant applications are likely to succeed and which adjustments will be required.

The steering group also plans to organise various activities at the institutions to increase visibility.

## 6. Communication channels

The following channels will be used to achieve the communication objectives:

<i>Online</i>	<i>Offline</i>
Website steering group	Promotion on campuses through advertising screens and posters/flyers
Communication channels (website/social media) of universities, universities of applied sciences, student,	Central desks and advisory points at institutions/organisations for

PhD and employee organisations	interested parties to apply for grants
Newsletters or e-magazine	The organisation of steering group meetings at the institutions with drop-in sessions for interested parties
Webinars	Conferences, symposiums
Aggregating and visualising approved grant applications	Aggregating and visualising approved grant applications

## 7. Schedule

2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Design of a communication strategy</li> <li>- Building the corporate identity, the steering group logo, a template newsletter</li> <li>- Building the website (who the steering group is, its purpose, vision and mission, contact options)</li> <li>- Promotion of the grant scheme through the website, social media and communication tools of the institutions of Higher Education and Science</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Draft plan for the representation of the steering group at the institutions (webinars, consultation hours, etc.)</li> <li>- Translation of the documents and communication resources to English</li> <li>- Review of the communication in 2024 and outlook for 2025</li> </ul>
2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further development of the website</li> <li>- Implementation of the draft plan for the representation of the steering group at the institutions (webinars, consultation hours, etc.)</li> <li>- Deployment of communication channels of the institutions/organisations</li> <li>- Review of the communication in 2025 and outlook for 2026</li> </ul>
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further development of the website</li> <li>- Implementation of the draft plan for the representation of the steering group at the institutions (webinars, consultation hours, etc.)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deployment of communication channels of the institutions/organisations</li> <li>- Review of the communication in 2026 and outlook for 2027</li> </ul>
2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further development of the website</li> <li>- Implementation of the draft plan for the representation of the steering group at the institutions (webinars, consultation hours, etc.)</li> <li>- Deployment of communication channels of the institutions/organisations</li> <li>- Securing of communication after 2027</li> </ul>

