



# External Intimidation, Hatred and Threats against Academics Monitor

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## Executive summary

1. Academia plays a crucial role in addressing social issues. However, academics and other staff are regularly confronted with hatred, intimidation and threats, which put pressure on academic freedom and the free expression of research findings. In response to this social trend, the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) launched the WetenschapVeilig (SafeScience) platform and reporting centre.
2. The purpose of this monitor is to provide insight into the extent to which academics and other staff at universities and research institutions have to deal with external hatred, intimidation and threats. It provides a quantitative picture of incidents where safety measures were taken, as well as a qualitative interpretation of trends, effects and needs. The data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to all participating institutions and a qualitative analysis carried out by Technopolis B.V.
3. Reports made to the reporting centre via [WetenschapVeilig.nl](https://wetenschapveilig.nl) are immediately and securely forwarded to the relevant institutions for follow-up. For privacy protection reasons, no personal information from the reports is stored; this can be viewed only by the institution where the reporter indicated that they are employed. Several dozen requests for help have been made to WetenschapVeilig since its launch in November 2022, with some requests resulting in measures being taken.
4. In the period from November 2022 to December 2023, a total of 45 one-off and 14 structural safety measures were taken for academics or university staff. These measures included taking contact details offline and physically relocating staff members. There were also institutions where no measures were taken for individual staff members but safety measures in general were increased.
5. The institutions have observed growing activism and a blurring of moral standards in society, resulting in more strident responses to academic communications, especially around controversial topics such as climate change and migration. In addition, the cursory nature of communication through social media and traditional media results in the rapid dissemination of negative responses, which undermines nuanced academic communication. The frequent use of anonymous accounts also makes it more difficult for recipients to assess how seriously a message should be taken.
6. As a result, some academics are more reluctant to communicate publicly about their work for fear of negative responses. Several institutions indicated that women and young researchers experience more hatred, threats and intimidation.
7. There is a growing need for awareness, education and preventative measures. Institutions are working to increase the visibility of existing tools and to support academics in dealing with threats.
8. In the coming months, the WetenschapVeilig platform will identify effective tools and examples of good practice and make them available to institutions.



## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 Rationale & purpose of this monitor

Academia has a crucial role to play in finding solutions for major social issues. Universities and knowledge institutions encourage researchers to share their findings with society. Unfortunately, some academics and other staff at these institutions face threats, hate-filled comments or intimidation because of statements they make in their professional roles. This puts pressure on academic freedom and the freedom of academics and can lead to self-censorship. Accordingly, the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) joined forces to launch the WetenschapVeilig ('SafeScience') platform and reporting centre, with a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The purpose of this monitor is to provide insight into the extent to which academics and other staff at universities and research institutions have to deal with hatred, intimidation and threats from external parties or individuals as a result of the performance of their roles. Specifically, this monitor is intended to provide both an initial quantitative picture of incidents where safety measures were taken and a qualitative interpretation of the trends, effects and needs of academics and other staff in this area. The safety of staff within their institution and in relation to colleagues, managers or students is outside the scope of the monitor; it falls under the heading of 'social safety'.

Since its launch in November 2022, the national incident reporting centre at [wetenschapveilig.nl](http://wetenschapveilig.nl) has received several dozen requests for help, which have been securely forwarded to the relevant institution. The website [www.wetenschapveilig.nl](http://www.wetenschapveilig.nl) acts as a referrer; it does not store information on the personal data of persons making the report. In addition, since it is expected that the requests for help received by the national reporting centre are only the tip of the iceberg, the participating universities and research institutes were surveyed in January 2024 to create a more complete picture. That survey focused on safety measures and the underlying trends and developments that could affect the issue of external hatred, threats and intimidation.

This monitor was conducted by UNL with support from Technopolis on behalf of the UNL Strategy, Public Affairs & Governance and Valorisation Steering Group (SSPG). All universities provided input in February and March 2024, and a joint response was also submitted by KNAW and NWO-i. It should be noted that at that time the demonstrations on campuses had not yet begun or had only just begun. The impact of these demonstrations on staff is therefore not included in this monitor.

### 1.1.2 Methodology & approach

For this monitor, a questionnaire was administered within the UNL's Safety and Security (S&S) network and among managers at the NWO and KNAW institutes. S&S managers are often the coordinators for reports and requests for help made within the institution, or are closely involved in the follow-up. The same applies to reports forwarded securely and anonymously from the reporting centre via the WetenschapVeilig website. S&S managers thus have good insight into reports made in response to hate-filled comments, intimidation and threats within institutions.

Through the survey, UNL obtained data on the numbers of incidents involving safety measures, and asked questions about trends and developments around hatred, intimidation and threats, as well as the needs of academics and other staff. The questionnaire was administered

between late 2023 and mid-February 2024. All 14 universities responded. In addition, UNL received a joint response from both NWO-I and KNAW on behalf of the research institutes affiliated with the two organisations.

Based on these responses, UNL asked the research agency Technopolis B.V. to develop a qualitative analysis and trend overview incorporating other relevant, recent research. It is important to mention that the findings come from an initial exploratory survey among institutions. The S&S managers circulated the questionnaire among relevant departments in their organisations, such as confidential advisers and communication departments. Where relevant, the insights have been supplemented with research findings from external sources.

To arrive at a reliable and substantiated sector-wide picture, the results and observations from the survey were tested and validated via a written feedback round and a number of interviews with the institutions that have the most experience with these issues.

### 1.1.3 Context: incidents concerning hatred, intimidation and threats

Before embarking on a description and interpretation of the results of the monitor, this section briefly considers the context of hatred, intimidation and threats directed at academics and other staff. Below, we provide a number of definitions that are important for this monitor. We also briefly discuss the background of how reports and incidents involving hatred, threats and intimidation were measured.

Term	Definition
Hatred	"Any person who, in public, and verbally, in writing or through images, incites hatred or discrimination against others or violent action against the person or property of others because of their race, religious or philosophical beliefs, gender, heterosexual or homosexual orientation or physical, mental or intellectual disability, shall be liable to a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years or a fine of the fourth category." (Article 137d, Criminal Code)
Intimidation	"1. Any person who unlawfully compels another person to act or to refrain from certain acts or to tolerate certain acts by an act of violence or any other act or by threat of violence or threat of any other act, either directed against that other or against others; 2. Any person who compels another person to act or to refrain from certain acts or to tolerate certain acts by the threat of slander or libel." (Art. 284, Criminal Code)
Threats	"The threat of public violence jointly committed against persons or property, the threat of violence against an internationally protected person or his protected property or the threat of any serious offence endangering the general safety of persons or property or resulting in general danger for the provision of services, of rape, of indecent assault, of any serious offence against the life of a person, of hostage-taking, of aggravated assault or of arson." (Art. 285, Criminal Code)
Reports and requests for help	Any staff member (academic or support staff) of a member university or a KNAW or NWO institute may make a report of hatred, intimidation and/or a threat at <a href="http://www.wetenschapveilig.nl">www.wetenschapveilig.nl</a> . The report will then be securely and anonymously forwarded to a contact person at the relevant institution. The contact person will contact the reporter within one working day to discuss the request for help and take appropriate action where possible.
One-off	A staff member becomes the subject of attention on a single occasion due to hatred, intimidation or threats. Appropriate one-off measures are taken, such as providing security at a public event or stepping up access card checks.
Long-term/structural	A staff member becomes the subject of attention on a permanent basis due to an ongoing series of incidents. Appropriate measures are taken, such as personal security, moving the staff

member to a secure location or introducing access card checks in the faculty. This person will have more frequent contact with the S&S team to ensure their safety.

Internal and external For inappropriate behaviour between academics, other staff and students, we use the terms 'social safety' or 'internal component'. In the case of hate-filled responses, threats and intimidation directed at academics and other staff by external parties, we use the term 'external component'. This includes intimidation, hate-filled comments and threats posted by anonymous accounts on social media as well as threatening emails and phone calls.

For this monitor, when considering the hatred, intimidation and threatening responses directed at academics and other staff, a deliberate decision was made to emphasise qualitative interpretation. Not all incidents involving these kinds of responses are reported and/or recorded by academics and other staff. In addition, not everyone feels the need to report hatred, intimidation or threats. This could be because the academic or other staff member in question is already receiving support from colleagues who have experience with unwanted messages from external parties. There could therefore be several reasons behind a decision not to make a report. If a person does decide to make a report, it is not always clear to them what procedures or resources are available. WetenschapVeilig.nl is trying to solve this problem with its nationwide referral function. Because we do not have insight into all incidents, and because incidents do not always lead to reports, the decision was made in this monitor to emphasise the qualitative interpretation of the trends and developments, needs and risks identified by universities and research institutes.

Another reason for choosing to take a qualitative approach is that the number of reports and incidents can give an ambiguous picture of the issues. For example, a high number of reports of hatred, threats and intimidation could mean that academics and other staff at an institution experience many such incidents. On the other hand, it could also indicate well-developed, visible, accessible reporting procedures and tools and a culture in which reporting an incident is encouraged or common practice. Contextualisation of the number of reports and incidents presented in the monitor is therefore useful.

## 1.2 Research into hatred, intimidation and threats against academics and other staff

Hatred, intimidation and threats against academics and other staff have received more attention in recent years. WetenschapVeilig was created in part to enable individuals to report hatred, intimidation and threats so they can find appropriate resources or tools in their own institutions. This section cites findings from a number of recent studies to place the monitor's findings in a broader perspective.<sup>1</sup>

Several studies have been conducted in recent years on topics related to the issue of hatred, intimidation and threats against academics and other staff in the Netherlands. This includes the 2023 study on self-censorship in Dutch higher education and science, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This study identified the causes and mechanisms leading to feelings of restriction and self-censorship among academics, lecturers and students. Although the study focused on a different topic, it produced insights that also relate to external hatred, threats and intimidation. When asked about the extent of perceived restriction in a number of academic activities, most respondents indicated that they felt no or very little restriction in their research activities. However, a substantial minority (13–29%) felt restricted to

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that for most studies no baseline was taken, and increases and changes in the trends discussed are based on the experiences of academics, staff and other respondents.

a moderate, large or very large extent. In external public communication activities, academics most often reported feeling restricted to a moderate to very large extent (29%).

The study showed that when researchers actually self-censored, it was mostly in statements to managers, colleagues and peers, but also in external public communications. The main reasons for feeling restricted and self-censoring came from the media, politics and the general public and, in particular, caused fear of creating a negative image, social exclusion, fewer funding opportunities and reduced career opportunities among academics. The study also showed that 13% of participating academics had a moderate to strong fear of threats of violence. This study indicates that academics experience a certain amount of pressure from outside their institutions, and in some cases refrain from external communications about their work.

Although no baseline was included in the study, the interviews revealed that some academics feel there is less and less room for nuanced debate, and some are more cautious in their external communications for fear of negative consequences.<sup>2</sup>

Other publications point to similar trends and developments. For example, an international survey by the think tank Economist Impact found that a third of the 253 Dutch academics who responded had directly or indirectly experienced online insults and/or intimidation.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the ICTU indicated that 7.1% of academic staff and lecturers have faced intimidation/threats from students or external parties. Furthermore, 14.4% reported experiencing verbal aggression from students or external parties.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an analysis by the Netherlands' General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) shows that extremism is on the rise in some parts of society and is undermining trust in political, legal and academic institutions. The AIVD also reported last year that social media and the ease with which people can be found online is playing a role in the rise of extremism, including anti-institutional extremism. This form of extremism targets not only the government but also other institutions such as the media, the courts and knowledge institutions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Safety measures for academics and other staff**

For this monitor, S&S managers in universities and managers in KNAW and NWO institutes were asked how many staff members had been the subject of one-off or structural safety measures between November 2022 (when WetenschapVeilig was launched) and December 2023:

- Academics and other staff for whom occasional/one-off safety measures were taken: 45
- Academics and other staff for whom structural safety measures have been taken: 14

Examples of safety measures include taking contact details offline, scaling up access card checks in buildings, physically moving a staff member to a different location or forwarding all mail to the S&S department. The S&S department filters out hate-filled responses, threats and

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<sup>2</sup> University support staff were outside the scope of the Ministry study on self-censorship.

<sup>3</sup> Economist Impact (2022), Confidence in research: researchers in the spotlight, <https://impact.economist.com/projects/confidence-in-research/>

<sup>4</sup> ICTU (Commissioned by UNL), Social Safety and Inclusion in Research Universities: In-depth analyses based on the 2022 Work Survey, <https://www.universiteitenvanederland.nl/files/publications/ICTU%20onderzoek%20sociale%20veiligheid%20en%20inclusie%20in%20het%20WO.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> AIVD, (2023), Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands: a serious threat to the democratic legal order?, <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/documenten/publicaties/2023/05/25/anti-institutioneel-extremisme-in-nederland-een-ernstige-dreiging-voor-de-democratische-rechtsorde>

intimidation and creates a file, in case a police report needs to be made. If so, the institutions help the affected staff member file a police report at the employer's address. Security guards (or extra security guards) can also be brought in for public meetings or deployed to certain parts of a campus.

It is important to note here that numbers vary significantly between the participating institutions. For example, there are institutions where no safety measures were needed to be taken for any academics or other staff members, and there are institutions where multiple one-off and/or structural safety measures have been put in place. There were also institutions where no measures were taken for individual staff members but safety measures in general were increased.

Context: As at 31 December 2022, Dutch universities employed 65,537 staff, 28,333 of which support staff and 37,204 academic staff. NWO-I employs over 1,700 staff and the KNAW employs around 1,500. This means that less than 0.1% of the total number of staff require safety measures due to hatred, intimidation or threats from external parties.

### 1.3 Trends and Developments – hatred, intimidation and threats directed at academics and other staff

The survey distributed to the universities and institutes asked about trends and developments that could affect hate-filled responses, intimidation and threats against academics and staff members as they perform their duties in the public arena. The trends and developments described here mostly relate to external communications by academics and other staff and the associated responses. The input from the institutions has been enriched with insights from other research into censorship, self-censorship, threats and intimidation. Two main trends emerge.

#### 1.3.1 Increasing polarisation and controversies in society

The universities and institutes have observed growing activism in society, which also affects academic education and research. This picture is in line with a broader social trend also found in other research. According to a recent study by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), three-quarters of Dutch people believe that polarisation has increased, although again no baseline measurement was mentioned in the study.<sup>6</sup> This impression, that polarisation in society is increasing, was also frequently mentioned by participants in the study on self-censorship in higher education and science.<sup>7</sup> The exploratory SoFoKleS survey (which interviewed eleven university staff members, including six persons who reported external threats and/or intimidation) also suggests that academics and other staff feel that hatred and threats are increasing both online and in the real world.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, (2022), BURGERPERSPECTIEVEN (CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVES), <https://www.scp.nl/binaries/scp/documenten/publicaties/2022/12/29/continu-onderzoek-burgerperspectieven---bericht-2-2022/Burgerperspectieven+message+2+2022.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> SoFoKleS, (2023), External Intimidation and Threats Against University Staff, <https://sofokles.nl/publicatie/januari-2024-externe-bedreiging-en-intimidatie-van-universitaire-medewerkers/>

Some S&S managers have also noticed a blurring of moral standards in terms of how people treat each other in society. The way people treat each other and what is considered acceptable behaviour towards one another seems to be shifting. The ways in which responses are addressed to academics and other staff are also shifting. Several S&S managers have observed this recurring trend of a blurring of moral standards both inside and outside institutions. Its effects include more extreme negative responses received by academics and other staff to their external communication activities.

Negative responses, threats and intimidation are particularly directed at academics involved in research areas that receive relatively high amounts of media and social attention. Many topics of this type (such as vaccination policies, climate change, migration) are perceived as controversial in society. Researchers, lecturers and students active in disciplines that interface with social debates experience more pressure and apply self-censorship more often.<sup>9</sup> Although this is not the same as receiving responses containing hatred, intimidation or threats, this finding does show that polarisation and the anticipation of potentially negative responses are higher among academics working on these topics. A well-known, more recent example of polarisation in society around controversial issues and its impact on academics is the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry study on self-censorship showed that more attention was paid during this period<sup>10</sup> to public communication in relation to the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3.2 The role of social and traditional media

The channels of interaction between academia and society are constantly evolving. They include newspapers, magazines, TV broadcasts, academic publications, etc. In addition, relatively new channels such as social media are also evolving rapidly. These forms of media require new communication styles specific to the medium.<sup>12</sup> An increase in social polarisation often leads to strong responses from society, according to the academics interviewed<sup>13</sup> and S&S managers. These responses can reach academics through both traditional and social media.<sup>14</sup>

The role of social media in relation to academic communication is in full development. An important aspect of the evolving communication channels between academia and society is the cursory nature of the way in which information is shared. Particularly on social media, but also increasingly in traditional media, messages are shared faster and negative responses from the outside world also arrive faster.<sup>15</sup> Social media allows for more direct and more accessible interactions between academia and society. Comments and messages (both positive and negative) can be disseminated quickly and shared directly with academics through this

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO (2024), The Safety of Scientific Researchers: Data, Trends and a Typology of Threats, pp. 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> There is a certain trade-off that comes with the increase in speed (sometimes at the expense of diligence) seen in both traditional and social media. Trends such as sensationalism and claiming unclaimed attention among media consumers all play into news media discussions but a review of this trade-off is beyond the scope of this monitor and trend overview.

medium. Combined with the pace of reporting and communication, there also seems to be less room for substance and nuance in discussions on social media, and in some cases in traditional media.<sup>16</sup> In the self-censorship study, academics said they more frequently considered opting out of a talk show or interview on TV or with a newspaper because what they said could be taken out of context and an incorrect statement or finding could be attributed to them and their research. Scholars value nuanced and substantive debate and wonder to what extent it can be conducted in the current formats of both traditional and social media.

Academics also fear this kind of negative response more often. The survey revealed that the level and frequency of threats and hate-filled responses has increased since 2020. The form in which threats are conveyed also seems to be changing. For instance, anonymous accounts are regularly used on social media to intimidate or threaten, which can have a profound impact on the recipient because it often makes the danger difficult to assess. This picture is in line with the aforementioned AIVD analysis on the growth of anti-institutional extremism and the experience of S&S managers and academics that polarisation in society seems to be increasing and that academics are being exposed to negative responses more often.<sup>17</sup> On socially controversial topics in particular, academics are increasingly aware of the risks involved in external communication.<sup>18,19</sup> This trend potentially undermines Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to reap the rewards of academic progress.<sup>20</sup>

## 1.4 Impact on the Target Group, Institution and Policy

### 1.4.1 Self-censorship and fear among academics

The survey of university S&S managers also asked about the main impacts of the above trends and developments on academics and institutions. The S&S managers indicated that the anticipation of negative responses, verbal and physical threats and intimidation can lead to fear and result in academics being less willing to engage in public debate. This translates into a possible refusal or reluctance to participate in things like talk shows and interviews. In addition, there is an increased level of awareness among academics regarding controversial topics and a possible greater resistance to being involved in public communication regarding these topics.

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<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

<sup>17</sup> SoFoKleS, (2023), External Intimidation and Threats Against University Staff, <https://sofokles.nl/publicatie/januari-2024-externe-bedreiging-en-intimidatie-van-universitaire-medewerkers/>

<sup>18</sup> <sup>18</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Nature.com (2023), Trolled in science: "Hundreds of hateful comments in a single day", <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-01399-x>.

<sup>20</sup> Utrecht University, (2023), 75 Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.uu.nl/onderwijs/universele-verklaring-van-de-rechten-van-de-mens-75-jaar/artikel-27-kunst-cultuur-en-wetenschap>



#### 1.4.2 Vulnerable groups

The survey responses and interviews with institutions revealed that certain groups are particularly vulnerable and more likely to face hate-filled responses, threats and intimidation from external parties. For instance, several institutions indicated that women are more likely to be affected than men. External research also shows that women receive different types of responses than men, such as sexual intimidation on social media.<sup>21</sup> In addition, young researchers are vulnerable because they usually have less experience with public communication and with dealing with the potential downside involved.

#### 1.4.3 Safety measures and initiatives in institutions

The institutions indicated that measures, policies and facilities are important for a safe working environment. Policies can serve as a guide for how institutions can protect their staff. There has been an increased focus on social safety in institutions in recent years, leading to actions such as professionalising risk assessments and intensifying information and awareness-raising activities.

The negative effects of the above trends (Section 1.3) on staff can be mitigated by developing various measures and facilities that can identify problems and provide support to staff. The visibility of the available facilities is important. For example, work is being done to increase the visibility of internal reporting centres for hatred/threats/intimidation by external parties, as well as to provide support to academics dealing with threats and intimidation.

A study by SoFoKleS on threats and intimidation against academics shows that there are differences between institutions in terms of the measures, facilities and tools offered to staff. Although that study was conducted with a more limited sample than the other studies cited here, S&S managers and other research support this finding. While some institutions are highly proactive in offering support and prevention, there are also institutions where less support and fewer preventative and follow-up measures are in place.<sup>22</sup> This finding is confirmed by the interviews from the study on self-censorship, in which academics indicated that the level of support available from an institution (and also the support experienced by academics) can vary.<sup>23</sup> The validation by S&S managers shows that the extent to which academics and other staff receive responses containing hatred, threats or intimidation can vary greatly, and that the issue is less prevalent at some institutions.

#### 1.4.4 Need for awareness, education and preventative measures

When asked about the needs of academics and other staff in this area, S&S managers indicated that the demand for education, preventative measures and facilities for follow-up care is growing. It is important to raise awareness among academics and other staff of existing facilities at institutions, as well as national facilities like WetenschapVeilig. It was observed that some academics are not aware of the support options and the facilities available. The importance of being aware of the availability of advice, help or support is highlighted by the impact that online and offline threats, negative responses and intimidation can have on academics and other staff.

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<sup>21</sup> UNESCO (2024), *The Safety of Scientific Researchers: Data, Trends and a Typology of Threats*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> SoFoKleS, (2023), *External Intimidation and Threats Against University Staff*, <https://sofokles.nl/publicatie/januari-2024-externe-bedreiging-en-intimidatie-van-universitaire-medewerkers/>

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), *Study on self-censorship in higher education and science*, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

## 1.5 Risks and needs

The survey sent to the universities and institutions asked what risks the institutions anticipate for staff safety and what needs the target group has in terms of the potential negative consequences from contact with external parties.

### 1.5.1 Risks from polarisation and online intimidation

When asked where they see risks to the safety of academics emerging, respondents mentioned a number of topics closely related to the above trends and developments. For instance, respondents indicated that they see polarisation in society, and that this translates into how people react to research outcomes, particularly research on sensitive or socially relevant topics. Climate change, the 'woke debate', colonisation/decolonisation and the war between Israel and Hamas were specifically mentioned. Similar observations are mentioned in other research, with COVID-19, the Russian war against Ukraine and migration emerging as polarising topics.<sup>24</sup>

The way in which political debate is conducted and how political leaders position themselves on socially important and/or sensitive issues and towards academia can also contribute to the risks for academics. Furthermore, a number of respondents noted that an increasingly activist attitude can be observed in society. This could explain why academics and other staff have observed increasing levels of hatred, intimidation and threats from external parties since 2020. This can be seen in other research (see Section 1.2) and is reflected in the perceptions of institutions' S&S managers. Taken together, these trends mean that people may have more extreme responses to research on such issues and move more quickly towards hatred, intimidation or threats. Academics may experience negative responses or even hatred, intimidation and threats in relation to controversial or sensitive issues in particular. Some survey respondents suggested that this is linked to how political leaders debate certain issues.

Academics are becoming more aware of controversial publications and the kinds of negative responses they can potentially receive about their research due to polarisation, politicisation and growing activism in society. As a result, institutions have also observed an increasing need among staff and academics for support with communication, to avoid negative responses resulting from participation in public appearances. There is a risk that if it is no longer safe for academics to communicate externally about research this could widen the gap between academia and society and erode the evidence base for policy.

Particularly in a context where, as some respondents said, academic research is increasingly being disputed, it is important for academics to continue to communicate externally about their research. Although debate about research is seen as normal and healthy, the way the debate is being conducted is changing.

### 1.5.2 Need for support, guidelines and preventative measures

Respondents to the UNL survey mentioned a number of key potential needs for researchers and other staff.

Prevention and education: needs in this area include awareness training on how best to communicate with the public, which channels to use and how to formulate research findings

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023). Study on self-censorship in higher education and science, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>

effectively, as well as training on how to avoid threats. Communication and media training or workshops are often mentioned in this context as a way to reduce the risks of hatred, intimidation and threats. Attention could also be drawn to the risks of public communication and the tools available at institutions during the onboarding of new staff members.

Educating academics and other staff about what constitutes hatred, intimidation or a threat was identified as a need. The importance of making academics aware of the steps they can take if any of these occur was also mentioned. Threats and intimidation, for example, are criminal offences in which the police can be involved. Institutions can therefore help academics and other staff to file police reports and collect evidence (e.g. screenshots of threats on social media). Some institutions, by agreement, temporarily forward a threatened staff member's emails to the S&S department to filter out nasty and/or criminal responses and to create an evidence file.

Increasing the resilience of academics was often mentioned in the answers to the survey. Making researchers more aware of the negative responses they may experience and providing training and other support on how to deal with such responses were mentioned as important measures. In addition to resilience and media training, support from the institution can help researchers become more resilient when communicating publicly. Informal support from colleagues and managers can also make a difference by reminding researchers that they are not alone and that they have support; this can make a big difference to researchers' resilience. Guidelines, resources and tools on how institutions, managers and colleagues can provide support to victims of incidents could help in this regard. This could build on the UNL handbook *Addressing Threats to and Intimidation of Academics* and the website [www.wetenschapveilig.nl](http://www.wetenschapveilig.nl).<sup>25</sup>

From a support perspective, guidelines and tools (on how to deal with incidents of hatred, intimidation and threats) are needed in institutions for both academics and other staff who experience these threats, and for institutions and managers. Examples of such support range from talking to a staff member to see how they are doing, to publicly expressing support for them and their work. In some cases, supervisors, S&S managers and/or communication departments can help gather evidence about an incident and help the victim to file a police report if necessary.

Respondents to the SoFoKleS study and UNL survey indicated that visibility to academics and other staff of existing resources is important. Other research also shows that many resources already exist at some institutions, but that academics and other staff do not always know of their existence or who to contact to access them.<sup>26</sup> Respondents indicated that a central helpdesk or point of contact at the institution for various resources could be useful. Furthermore, other research shows that academics are not always familiar with existing procedures, the responsibilities of various actors in the process and what the possible outcomes are.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> UNL, (2023), handbook *Addressing Threats to and Intimidation of Academics*, <https://www.wetenschapveilig.nl/documenten/17679-07-unl-handreiking-aanpak-bedeiging-wetenschappersweb.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> SoFoKleS, (2023), *External Intimidation and Threats Against University Staff*, <https://sofokles.nl/publicatie/januari-2024-externe-bedeiging-en-intimidatie-van-universitaire-medewerkers/>

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2023), *Study on self-censorship in higher education and science*, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-a8f49cda3fc489c34f2cc03d7b0af4d5d6af0f8e/pdf>.

## 1.6 The possible role of WetenschapVeilig

With regard to the role that WetenschapVeilig can play in addressing incidents of hatred, intimidation and threats, some respondents to the survey indicated that the platform could provide more support in preventing these incidents. At the moment, the platform's information and reporting function focuses more on what to do when an incident has occurred, and aims to help researchers find support within their own institutions. Since the majority of incidents are reported within institutions, the national WetenschapVeilig platform also focuses on collaboration and sharing examples of good practice.

Stepping up efforts to share information on the implementation of effective preventative measures could be considered, as could more specific information for academics on when to report their experiences and the steps involved. The platform could build on existing knowledge and provide a community of practice. In a community of practice, greater efforts can be made to translate information regarding the types of measures universities can implement into practical steps, including the key prerequisites for the effective implementation of the chosen measures within the institution.

Moreover, the initiators of the WetenschapVeilig platform and expertise centre can explore collaboration with other initiatives, such as the National Expertise Centre for Science & Society that is under development.

## 1.7 Conclusion and recommendations

The key trends and developments observed by the affiliated institutions in recent years include polarisation in society, a growing awareness of controversial issues among academics, and the fact that 59 staff have needed security protection due to hatred, intimidation or threats. The institutions have also observed a need for facilities, training and awareness around public communication.

These trends have had a number of consequences, such as a hesitance or reluctance to communicate with the general public about research on controversial topics because of negative responses on social media and, in extreme cases, hatred, intimidation and threats. This development has put pressure on academic freedom and the freedom of academics. Certain groups, such as women and young researchers, are particularly vulnerable.

According to the institutions, risks to the safety of academics and other staff arise from social trends such as polarisation, the political debate around and politicisation of specific issues, growing activism in society, and the cursory nature of communication through social and, to some extent, traditional media. This sometimes leads to a misrepresentation of academic outcomes that prevents substantive debate, and even to more extreme responses that may be made directly to an academic or other staff member (mostly via social media or email).

Although various resources are available at universities and the KNAW and NWO institutes for prevention, support and follow-up care around these types of incidents, the availability of these types of resources varies between institutions. The WetenschapVeilig platform will therefore step up its position as a knowledge bank, to provide more information to institutions on effective tools and resources. UNL, as the coordinator of WetenschapVeilig, will work to identify such resources as well as examples of good practice, to provide institutions with concrete tools for dealing with hatred, threats and intimidation.