



university of  
 groningen

young academy  
 groningen

# Harassment at the University of Groningen

## Reaction by the Board of the University

All employees and students of the University of Groningen should be able to work and study in a safe environment where harassment and discrimination have no place. We strive to be a community where everyone feels welcome and valued, and can work in an environment that fosters successful research, teaching and learning. Abuse of power and/or discrimination based on gender, nationality, sexuality or other characteristics are not acceptable. Any threat to social safety must be tackled.

The executive board of the University of Groningen is saddened to learn from the report by the Young Academy Groningen that some colleagues were confronted with inappropriate behaviour. A few years ago we installed a zero-tolerance policy and have instituted various mechanisms to support this policy. We deeply regret -as the report shows- that despite these efforts, the interviewed employees still experienced undesirable behaviour.

We will continue our efforts to prevent this as much as possible. We have new initiatives underway to prevent harassment and bullying. In particular, we will ensure that the recently appointed Ombudsperson will have the ability and means to provide support to everyone that needs it. We have also initiated the setup of a management coordination team in which academic, social, and organizational integrity functions are represented. This team will monitor social safety at our university and raise attention if things (tend to) go wrong, as well as gather expertise on good practices in effectively preventing or dealing with harassment and discrimination. We will increase the number of Active Bystander Trainings in which people learn to address inappropriate behaviour at an early stage. Ensuring that colleagues and students are able to find help and support is of the utmost importance.

We will also continue to endorse discussions on harassment and discrimination in all faculties. We encourage and support deans and faculty boards to take responsibility for their role in safeguarding social safety and stimulate discussion within and across faculties on best practices and monitoring social safety.

We believe these steps will contribute to ensuring that all members of our university community can work and study in a socially safe environment.

As much as we are sorry to learn about the situations described in the report, we are also grateful for the Young Academy Groningen for providing this report together with their recommendations. We will continue to seek discussion with the YAG and other stakeholders to prevent undesirable behaviour together and put actions in place for ensuring that victims of harassment and discrimination are supported effectively. A safe university community requires continuous attention and awareness from all of us.

The Board of the University

Jouke de Vries, Cisca Wijmenga, Hans Biemans

# Harassment at the University of Groningen

## Acknowledgments

This report is the result of research conducted over a period of two years, by members of the Diversity and Inclusion working group of the Young Academy Groningen. Our interviewees found the courage to sit through often emotionally very difficult conversations with us. We appreciate their trust in us and their willingness to share their experiences, thereby contributing to making the university a safer and more inclusive work space. We are grateful for the invaluable feedback of two external experts on this report. One is a full professor at a Dutch university and wishes to remain unnamed. The other expert is Marijke Naezer, who was the lead author of the 2019 LNVH report “Harassment in Dutch Academia”.

## Executive Summary

In the past years, several high-profile cases of harassment, discrimination, and power abuse have appeared in Dutch academia. Past, and recent, examples include the University of Amsterdam (van der Hee & Strikkers, 2019), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Visser, 2020), Leiden University (Mantel, 2017), Utrecht University (Bronkhorst, 2020), and Radboud University (Hermans, 2020), leading a Dutch newspaper to conclude that it is raining complaints about intimidation at universities due to the psychologically unsafe environment (Chaudron, 2019). In 2019, the report *Harassment in Dutch Academia* (Naezer, van den Brink & Benschop, 2019) appeared, and caused nation-wide attention. However, those high-profile cases and the investigation across Dutch universities do not provide insights into the effects of discrimination and harassment within one single institution. Our report fills this gap. In this report, we present an analysis of experiences of harassment, bullying, and discrimination in the workplace that members of the working group on Diversity and Inclusion of the Young Academy of Groningen have collected over the past two years. Together, these experiences demonstrate that even at the University of Groningen, which has so far not had high-profile cases such as the universities mentioned above, serious cases of harassment occur, and remain under the radar.

This report presents the results from interviews with 26 current and past staff members at the University of Groningen who have experienced harassment, power abuse, scientific sabotage, and/or discrimination on the basis of sex, nationality, religious affiliation and race. We cannot quantify the relative prevalence of these experiences at UG, but the interviews do display certain patterns: all but one perpetrator were male, and all but one perpetrator were Dutch. All victims were dependent on their perpetrator. Thus, perpetrators were overwhelmingly male Dutch superiors. Complaints are typically managed in a way that protects the perpetrators and re-victimizes the reporters of misconduct. Often, victims are silenced, blamed, and bullied. Retaliation against victims is common, with perpetrators typically being supported by HR and higher management. Those who enable perpetrators’ silencing, blaming, and retaliation were all Dutch, and women and men were involved. Organizational and cultural factors that contribute to discrimination and harassment as well as to the ineffectiveness of complaint management, include a lack of accountability with line managers, nepotism (internal hiring, ‘crown princes’), conflict avoidance, and managers’ negative attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. The impact of harassment and discrimination on victims’ mental and physical health is tremendous. Arguably, the whole organisation ultimately suffers: Witnessing

perpetrators being protected and victims punished, instils a fear culture, leaving victims and bystanders increasingly intimidated and hopeless.

The intention of publishing this report is not to point fingers, but rather, to demonstrate how devastating the problem of harassment is--taking place across faculties of our university. The problem requires urgent action. Crucially, we provide a series of concrete recommendations for counteracting and preventing such situations. The main recommendations include to reform the complaint procedure, hold managers accountable for the harassment and discrimination that takes place on their watch, make changes within HR, ensure more training options throughout our organisation, appoint diversity officers and ombudspersons that have the necessary expertise and sufficient power to make changes in the unequal power relations, and can track patterns of debatable behaviour before they escalate, as well as making effective support of lower-ranked staff an important criterion for promotion. We sincerely hope that the stories collected here, together with our recommendations, can provide the impetus for the University of Groningen to become a safer and more inclusive workplace.

## Introduction

### Background

In 2019, the report *Harassment in Dutch Academia* (Naezer et al., 2019), commissioned by the Dutch National Network of Women Professors (LNVH), caused nation-wide attention. The report analyzed women academics' experiences of harassment, intimidation, bullying, and abuse of power, and derived concrete recommendations for universities. Despite the attention and outrage caused by the report and numerous high-profile cases of discrimination and harassment covered by the Dutch media over the past years, meaningful progress towards a cultural change is still lacking. Therefore, the current report specifically tries to understand why and how culture change in the university is prevented.

In the most recent staff satisfaction survey at the University of Groningen from 2019 (Effectory, 2020) almost one in six staff members state that they have experienced unwanted behaviour (e.g. verbal or physical abuse, bullying, discrimination, sexual harassment, or "other") on the work floor. 13.7% report to experience this occasionally, and 2.6% experience it regularly. In an organisation with some 6000 employees these percentages translate to hundreds of victims of such behaviours.

Throughout the last years the Diversity and Inclusion working group at the Young Academy Groningen (YAG) have regularly been contacted by (current and past) staff members of the University of Groningen with experiences of harassment, bullying and discrimination in the workplace. Upon publication of the LNVH report, the Diversity and Inclusion working group decided to conduct an exploratory investigation of experiences of harassment and discrimination at our own institution. Nanna Haug Hilton and Susanne Täuber had the mandate to conduct the investigation and write the report. The result is the piece you have in front of you now.

The focus of this current report is to expose the different types of harassment and discrimination experienced by academic staff, to show the consequences that these experiences has on the individual, to outline the responses and protocols upheld by management in instances of harassment, as well as gathering insight and reflections from victims, that can all help our University community improve its response to such situations. In this report we first give a short background about harassment and discrimination, as well as the regulations that the University of Groningen is working with. We then present our instrument and participants, before exploring the main findings of the investigation. We end with a reflection and some concrete action points that can improve the

situation at the University.

## Harassment and Discrimination in Dutch Academia

While Universities in the Netherlands work with Codes of Conduct and have clear definitions about what constitutes harassment and discrimination, previous findings have indicated that discrimination and harassment are relatively common in the academic workplace. In an investigation conducted by FNV some 40% of University employees state having experienced a socially unsafe situation at some point in their career (Heerekop, 2019). In a 2019 report (Naezer et al., 2019) LNVH identified the hierarchical, competitive and individualistic culture characterizing contemporary academia as a facilitator of harassment. Harassment was particularly pronounced for less powerful groups, such as junior academics with little organizational authority and academics from socially marginalized groups such as women.

The authors of the LNVH report pointed to inadequate responses from bystanders, supervisors and academic leaders as another facilitator for harassment. The participants' stories indicate that bystanders and leaders did not believe victims, trivialized their experiences, and/or denied them support and intervention. The majority of the participants who asked for help received no support and were made responsible for solving the issue. They were advised to keep silent or confront their harassers themselves, while management (e.g., supervisors, heads of departments, deans, HR advisors) remained unable, or unwilling, to intervene. This lack of intervention on the part of managers protects harassers and silences victims, who do not feel safe to speak up as a consequence. Both "self-silencing" among victims and inadequate responses to incidents reproduce hierarchical, competitive and individualistic academic cultures and structures, and contribute to an environment where harassment is normalized. The authors of the LNVH report concluded that it is essential that the codes of conduct are enforced; simply having such a code on paper is not enough. These codes must also be maintained and there must be consequences for those not adhering to the code, which is primarily a task for the academic institutions themselves.

In the LNVH report, the main manifestations of harassment concerned sexual harassment, physical and verbal threats, denigration, exclusion, and not facilitating "special needs". Furthermore, the authors coined the term *scientific sabotage* that pertains to all behaviours that directly obstruct a person's work as a scientist and their careers. This includes everything that falls under regular definitions of harassment and discrimination (see below for the University of Groningen's definitions), but also alludes to the fact that specific types of harassment are common in scientific workplaces, especially: refusals of promotion, the denial of tasks or functions needed for promotion; unjustified authorships; subordinating people in assigning management and research tasks; making a person's work, ideas and expertise invisible; blocking access to spaces, documents, objects or information; labelling of people as incompetent; or the physical or financial destruction of a person's research project.

Building on these findings, Naezer et al. (2019) recommended increasing awareness of harassment in academia by breaking the silence; creating more adequate support structures than commonly in place; and working towards a culture of care.

The current report builds on these recommendations and examines the occurrence of harassment and discrimination at the University of Groningen (UG). The aim of this qualitative study is to shed light on employees' experiences of discrimination and harassment, and the impact such experiences have on victims. This report further provides an analysis of the effects of procedures that get put in place once a staff member reports discrimination or (scientific) harassment at the institution to be

able to comment on the University's complaint management support system for victims of (scientific) harassment. Before presenting the data, we give a short overview of the definitions of harassment and procedures currently in place at the University of Groningen.

### **The University of Groningen's Policy and Protocol for Unwanted Behaviour**

The University of Groningen works with a Code of Conduct in which its core values and the expected standards for behaviour are laid out. The code has a specific note on harassment and discrimination, with the following definitions (from University of Groningen, 2009):

*Sexual harassment: Any unwelcome sexual advance in the form of requests for sexual favours or other verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour (including the unsolicited sending or deliberate consultation of pornographic images or texts in a way that is visible to others, including via the internet).*

*Harassment: Conduct that aims to violate or results in the violation of the dignity of a person, creating a threatening, hostile, insulting, humiliating or offensive environment.*

*Aggression and violence: The deliberate verbal expression or use of physical force or power, or threat to use physical force or power, directed at an employee or student.*

*Discrimination: In any way making statements about, acting against or taking decisions about people that insult them by virtue of their race, religion, sex, creed and/or sexual orientation, or making any distinction on the basis of these aspects.*

*Bullying: The systematic, repeated psychological abuse of a colleague or fellow student by a person or group.*

Furthermore, the University of Groningen have specified that:

*Sexual harassment, aggression and violence, discrimination and bullying may take different forms:*

- *Subjecting a person to unwelcome behaviour is an explicit or implicit condition of that individual's employment or study*
- *Subjecting a person to unwelcome behaviour or the rejection of such behaviour forms the basis for decisions affecting that individual's employment or study*
- *The unwelcome behaviour aims to affect or does affect the individual's work or study performance, creating an intimidating, hostile or unpleasant work or study environment.*

[\(University of Groningen, 2009\)](#)

The University has several preventive policies in place for assuring that employees do not experience undesired behaviour, including making training available for managers, and having a confidential advisor whom employees can turn to if they experience unwanted behaviour. Yet, in recent years complaints of harassment have increased at the University of Groningen. The confidential advisor reports that 171 complaints about undesired behaviour were made in 2019 (up from 144 in 2018), 106 by female members of staff. While support staff delivered the most complaints, 43 of the 171 were made by academic staff. 69 of the 171 reports were made by internationals, and 42% of these concerned harassment and discrimination (Renker, 2020). It should be noted that the confidential advisor's role is to support and advise anyone who has experienced unwanted behaviour at the University of Groningen, and that the advisor is not in a position to take further action to intervene in any situations of harassment and discrimination. The advisor reports regularly on their work to the Board of the University.

The University has “diversity” as a core value in its current strategic plan, and states on its website that “diversity is an important aspect of academic success, and we embrace it by valuing and respecting the perspectives and contributions of all our staff and students, and stimulating a sense of connection in an inclusive academic community” ([University of Groningen, 2020](#)). There is a “Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer” at the University, but the mandate, role, and responsibility of this officer are not defined to the public.

Finally, there is a formal procedure that the University works with in instances of discrimination and harassment, and which is specified in the University’s Code of Conduct (University of Groningen, 2017): *“Staff who have complaints about bullying, sexual harassment, aggression, violence or discrimination can submit these to the Board of the University (see the Complaints Regulation). The Board of the University has set up an independent committee to deal with these formal complaints: the Complaints Committee for Sexual Harassment, Aggression, Violence and Discrimination (SIAGD).”*

On the University webpages victims are advised to make formal complaints to SIAGD Complaints Committee in cases where situations are not resolved. The SIAGD Committee is appointed by the Board of the University and is the only formal body that deals with these complaints. They conduct a formal investigation and report directly to the Board of the University about their findings. The number and nature of complaints to SIAGD are confidential.

## Methodology

### Participants

Throughout the autumn of 2019 and the entire year of 2020, we interviewed 26 current and former employees of the University of Groningen (22 women and 4 men; 23 internationals and 3 Dutch nationals; our sample included 9 Rosalind Franklin Fellows). All interviewees reported having experienced discrimination or harassment and were willing to be interviewed by members of the Diversity and Inclusion working group. We came into contact with potential interviewees through events organized by the Young Academy Groningen, word-of-mouth, and our personal networks. All but two of the interviewees are academic staff. One interviewee is a PhD student. The academic staff includes staff members on research contracts but is primarily made out of staff with teaching and research positions, from university lecturers to full professors. Most of our interviewees are, or were, tenured. Differently from the LNVH report, most of our research participants belong to minority groups based on nationality, ethnicity, gender or religion.

Those being interviewed did so based on self-selection. Participants do not form a random sample. They represent all faculties of the University, but two (Campus Fryslân and the University College), but this does not mean we can make statements about which types of staff, or which faculties, experience more, or less, discrimination or harassment. What we can say something about is the types of harassment and discrimination that staff members experience at our institution, what the effects are of these types on the individual, what happens to individuals when these incidents are reported, and what the perceived effects are on the academic community at our University. Finally, we can say something about how matters can be improved to make for a healthier work environment at the University of Groningen.

Because our recruitment system relied on word-of-mouth, our findings of employee experiences of harassment, discrimination, and complaint management give no accurate estimate of the frequency of such experiences at our institution. We have been in contact with victims of harassment and discrimination who felt too traumatized to sit through an interview, or who were too scared of

repercussions from sharing their experiences. Similar to the LNVH report (Naezer et al., 2019), the self-selection of participants meant that only people were interviewed who experienced what happened to them as discrimination and harassment. Further, it is possible that staff who were satisfied with how their complaints were handled would not come forward because they “have moved on” since. Consequently, in our sample, harassment and discrimination are either ongoing or have not yet come to a solution seen as sufficient to the victim. Our report can thus not offer insights from situations where the victim has felt rectified; neither can we offer the perspective from the people who are seen as the perpetrators and enablers of harassment and discrimination.

To align our investigation with that of previous work we have kept LNVH’s procedure to protect participants’ privacy by not including complete individual cases in the report. Where necessary, we have changed details in participants’ stories to make sure they stay anonymous.

## Procedure

The interviews were conducted face-to-face by one of the authors in a private office space, via the telephone, or via Skype. For all interviews, the following semi-structured interview guideline was used, with the following questions and prompts for details, in brackets:

- *What have you experienced? (what happened concretely, who was involved, in which context did the incidents happen?)*
- *How did you perceive what happened to you? (how did it affect you, your health, your career?)*
- *Which role did factors play like organizational culture in your case? (hierarchy, power, individualism, competitiveness)*
- *Which responses and support, of lack thereof, did you receive and by whom? (responses from bystanders, supervisors, HR, confidential advisor, or academic leaders; what were the reasons for you to perceive a response as adequate or inadequate?)*
- *Did you voice your experiences? (If so, which reactions did you receive and by whom? If not, what were your reasons for remaining silent?)*

Interviews that were audio-recorded with permission of the respondent, were transcribed online by a company that signed a non-disclosure agreement. Interviews that were not audio-recorded were transcribed by the authors based on written notes taken during the interview with the permission of the respondents. Interviews that were held in a language different than English, were translated by a translation bureau that signed a non-disclosure agreement.

The authors of this report independently coded and analysed the interviews, before coming to an agreement about the interpretation of the statements of the participants. All participants quoted in this report were presented with a concept version of the report, which they were asked to approve, and they were given the possibility to remove, or give feedback on their quotes. In response to this, some quotes were adjusted or removed, primarily because participants feared that these would make themselves or the perpetrator(s) and enabler(s) identifiable. All quotes in this report are presented with participants’ consent.

## Results

### The Nature of Harassment Found at the University of Groningen

All but one perpetrator were male, all but one perpetrator were Dutch, and in all described experiences, victims were lower in the organizational hierarchy and dependent on the perpetrator. Thus, the typical perpetrator was a male Dutch superior. In the interview transcripts there are two contexts of harassment and discrimination that occur particularly frequently. These concern power abuse or aggression from a direct superior; and harassment (exclusion, restriction, bullying) in a process of (applying for or being granted) a promotion. Below we further describe these types of experiences, with the help of quotes from our interviewees.

#### Power abuse by superiors

A particularly common type of harassment and discrimination in our interviews is bullying, discrimination and aggression by direct line managers, Heads of Departments, or other superiors who are members of Faculty Boards. 18 of the 26 interviewees reported experience of this. Discrimination or harassment in these instances can be based on personal identity, gender, nationality or religion. Many of these instances are clear examples of *abuse of power*, and 8 respondents identify *envy* as the driving force behind their superior's behaviour.

In initial stages respondents who report harassment by a superior experience *restrictions of academic freedom*, before a complaint is made, and the situation develops further. A shared experience among the respondents is that a manager displays micro-managing, and highly controlling, behaviour, often with fear mongering as a tactic. 9 interviewees report having been exposed to verbal intimidation and told they have to behave in a certain way if they do not wish to lose their job:

“He keeps reminding us on an almost weekly basis that our promotion depends on his evaluation. If we have a disagreement, he will say things like, “I will be negative in your R&O and your promotion depends on the R&O.” I experience a lot of micro-management kind of behaviour, very conservative style of leadership. That includes a lot of extreme power dynamics and controlling behaviour, ranging from insisting on a nine to five working environment without any justification. I was told that I need to report everything in my calendar where I am at any given time between nine and five.”

Another type of harassment from managers that is mentioned frequently (in 13 of the 26 cases) is that of verbal and physical aggression. Particularly loud shouting at employees and threatening physical behaviour, such as blocking employees' paths are reported, but also physical assaults, such as arm-grabbing and spitting.

“I was actually treated quite well when I wasn't performing. Here, they favour female colleagues who bow their head, perform below average, and pretend to be in need of help. Then, I scored a multi-million grant [...] and became the target of massive discrimination and bullying, unprofessional behaviour, and even physical attacks. When I would run into my department chair at work, he repeatedly grabbed me by the arm, pulled me in an office and verbally abused me, shouting, screaming, so much so that I once got asked by the secretary a few doors down whether I was okay. In reaction to my grant, I was told I had been disloyal, an upstart, and I was asked repeatedly how I could even dare to apply for such a grant.”

There are several (17) instances of discrimination from managers on the basis of gender that come forward from our interviews. Some of the subjects in our study report being discriminated against because they have a family, or upon return from maternity leave. This happens especially to female

international staff that lack a social network that can help take care of children. Female staff also report their physical appearance being held against them (their style of sitting, or their pregnancy) in work matters. Others report being criticised for not showing “soft” skills, such as not displaying expected feminine behaviour such as crying or openness about negative experiences. Furthermore, people report being reprimanded for not meeting a communication type that is expected by Dutch (male) superiors. Similarly, many interviewees (10 of the 26) note that they are only praised, or seen as humane, when they do. In the quote that follows here we see an example of a staff member feeling ostracised for not responding and behaving in a way that is expected from her by her managers:

“My line manager accused me of withdrawing, that if there is a discussion, and somehow someone becomes aggressive to me, instead of continuing the conversation, I prefer to withdraw, which I think is a kind of mature thing to do. And then he [my line manager] said that I was not social enough. I think it's a big emphasis, at least in my faculty, that you need to have a social gathering with colleagues, but maybe people have families, maybe people have other things to do in the evening. Not everyone has the time or the energy to do this social gathering. I can be cordial and collegial to everyone, but I cannot be obliged to have dinners with my colleagues. If I don't do that, then automatically I'm [accused of being] bad.”

A number of interviewees (17 of the 26) report racism being a widespread problem that is unacknowledged, and therefore not addressed, at the University of Groningen. When addressing racism, for instance because students complain, reporters are typically told they would not understand the Dutch type of humour. Particularly for international staff, this stands in contrast with their experiences of how universities abroad deal with racism.

“The one thing that I found really disturbing was related to racism. He [a professor] would say really, really offensive things about different groups of people in his classes, for instance referring to Chinese people as “yellow ants”, and eventually students complained. I think [in other academic environments I've worked in] there was a lot more awareness of how people dealt with racism in university campuses than there was in the Netherlands. So, a lot of these experiences, when I mentioned to friends who work in different countries, they just could not believe it. In the US, you would be out of a job at the end of the day, if you uttered such a [racist] thing in a university classroom. You would be afraid of getting sued, and there would be all sorts of repercussions.”

“I witnessed senior members of staff making comments about candidates that reflected really extreme, either racial or gender bias. I think by far the worst was the public lecture given by a candidate from Africa. At the end of the lecture, after he'd left the room, the comments circulating in the room were very much about how this person's pedagogical style was much too animated. They were using language which to me reflected racial bias against speaking and acting in a particular way that was not deemed to be normal or pedagogically acceptable. And, I mean, I've been in other public interviews where white male candidates had expressed the same degree of tone of voice, inflection, enthusiasm, and had not received that comment. The comment from people in the room was that our students couldn't possibly understand or learn from this person.”

In almost all cases where the respondent has experienced discrimination from the superior, that superior is white and Dutch, and overwhelmingly, in our interviews, they are male. Additionally, a large proportion of the managers (in 14 of the 26 interviews) are described as being local, i.e., from the University of Groningen, and lacking experience with international work environments and staff.

“The gender problem was completely trivialized in high-level management circles. There is a toxic masculinity here, which excludes queers and gays. I was the only non-Dutch at the high-level committees. I was never accepted as ‘an equal’.”

### **Harassment in the process of a promotion**

We now move on to reported discrimination or harassment in the process of pursuing a promotion or a permanent contract at the University. Interviewees report the perception of being held to different standards than their colleagues, the criteria for promotion changing unexpectedly, or the withholding of promotion without explanation. The discrimination (reported by 14 of the 26 respondents) is typically based on gender but is often aggravated by nationality or language.

“His [line manager’s] narrative is it’s difficult to arrange meetings with me. I was away [on a fellowship]. I was away, I came back. I proposed to meet even if I was ill. He said, “No, no,” because he was concerned about my health, so we postponed it. He put this as one of the reasons why I should not be promoted. So, this man [line manager], when I applied for promotion, he had to write the letter. Then the supervisor sees the letter was seven pages long, I think it was one and a half page about my performance as a scholar, as a teacher, as an administrator, saying wonderful things because there is nothing else to say. And then all the rest about how I was bad as a colleague in communication. And then the meeting ended, and after a week I was called by the dean. He told me that I didn’t get the promotion. They put the new criteria that were not present [earlier], the level of Dutch that was not present in my tenure track criteria. So, they added the new criteria out of the blue.”

Other frequently (by all 14 interviewees who reported having issues in the promotion process) reported examples of harassment and discrimination in the promotion process include line managers denying employees access to tasks that will help them gain promotion, or the unequal assigning of administrative tasks and teaching duties within Departments to decrease the chances of certain individuals to attain the experience needed for promotion.

“Younger female staff was unfairly burdened with teaching duties; I was often teaching double the load of my male colleagues.”

“[Managerial responsibilities are] a precondition for promotion. But I was not given any managerial responsibility. In my department, tasks are allocated in a secretive manner. And if you are an international assistant professor that comes here from abroad, you are not given the tasks that are needed for promotion. It took me a couple of years to understand that this is a strategy put in place by the head of the department to support the career development of his protégé and damage the others. In my department I am a second-class citizen. The Faculty Board declined my promotion because I lacked managerial experience.”

Half (13 of the 26) of the interviewees report that they experience that their academic contribution was belittled or made out to be insignificant by their managers so as to undermine their confidence in applying for promotion. These experiences map onto the categories of denigration and verbal intimidation reported by Naezer et al. (2019).

“What he does, to completely undermine our self-confidence, is to always side with the students. Then he is the great white knight, who comes riding and saves all of the poor students - especially when they’re female. He is a profound misogynist in that he treats women better than men, but only because he doesn’t take them seriously at all.”

“Oftentimes, my suggestions or my questions about ‘why are we doing this and not that’ were met with responses that I felt were trying to belittle my intelligence or belittled my capacity to understand a particular issue.”

Finally, some interviewees report managers lying or manipulating events to justify not nominating the interviewee for promotion, or as a justification for not granting the promotion.

“So, they (the faculty board) were accusing me of literal fraud. Of course, I had looked at the students’ work online prior to grading them. Now, they said it is fraud because I didn't see the posters physically presented, and I said, in English, ‘The course coordinator assigned to the course did not hold one in-person meeting so I had to understand the rules of the course through the course guide. However, what you have written literally in the course guide does not imply a physical presentation’, and they also never apologized for that. The faculty board had discussed this accusation solely based on the report of the course coordinator before even approaching me (to possibly clear up the situation). That was quite a harsh accusation, that is a really harsh accusation which can destroy people’s careers.”

“I received the R&O form of my supervisor the night before the deadline at which I had to react to what he said in there. Every sentence was a lie. I spent the entire night correcting this.”

“Five days later I had still not received a response [to request of being promoted], and suddenly she [my supervisor] called me. I went to her, and she screamed at me for an hour about things I did not do well. I went to see all the people who supposedly complained about me. They had never had a conversation [with my supervisor].”

### **Other types of harassment**

In addition to harassment and bullying by direct line managers and scientific harassment in promotion processes, there are various other examples of harassment and discrimination that our interviews highlight. Several (15 of 26) individuals report being harassed or discriminated against by direct colleagues, or by fellow members of the Groningen academic community, due to their gender or nationality, or language background. Exclusion based on language is something that is brought up frequently by international staff, who experience problems taking part in faculty life because Dutch faculty members refuse to use English. Other interviewees report exclusion from opportunities at work due to their specific field of study, and, sadly, some female interviewees report instances of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual attention from male colleagues:

“This guy who was in the tenure track, he was established in the faculty. He started doing strange things, like coming to my room to tell me how pretty I was, or to send me messages on Facebook about the clothes that I was wearing this morning or something like that. Obviously, you don't know what to do and you feel like, he doesn't have boundaries or something. What is he thinking? What does he expect from me? So, I was just ignoring him. And I couldn't stand him, when he started saying, “Oh, I love that it's spring because now I can see more of your body” or “I love how that dress shapes your breasts”, these kinds of things. I stopped going [to work] on Fridays because many times he was coming to my room. [...] I started feeling like, I know this guy's never going to do anything. But at the same time, it's here. It's in your stomach. You feel it, you feel that you are not secure. So, I stopped going there.”

### **The Effects of Harassment on the University of Groningen Staff Members**

The descriptions of the effects that the experiences have on the individuals cover a broad basis. The responses reported in our interviews are those of being *helpless*, *marginalised*, *unsafe*, *silenced* and

*deceived*. The latter is particularly stated by Rosalind Franklin Fellows who often feel that the picture of the University that was presented to them upon hiring does not fit with reality.

“I would never have made it to the Full Professor position in Groningen, simply because of the constantly changing criteria, which means the ad for the RFFs [Rosalind Franklin Fellowships] is a lie. You are recruited with false promises; you leave your country for lies. It's only to the Department's advantage that you are subsidized for five years, and it doesn't cost them any money. The Fellowships only serve the prestige of the university. They think it's cool that they can retain extremely good scientists for five years for little money. I know other women who have been downgraded to a lower and cheaper position instead of the promised position.”

More than half (16 of 26) of the respondents talk about repercussions for their personal health, and some focus on the consequences the experiences have had on their productivity at work. Some even report being diagnosed with PTSD. It is clear from many of the interviews that the victims of harassment and discrimination suffer mental health problems in the aftermath, that in turn can lead to physical complaints: sleep deprivation, weight loss, poor general health conditions. These problems often lead to a loss of motivation and general low levels of productivity at work.

“It had a big impact on my sleep. I don't sleep. I had panic attacks, this kind of anxiety when it starts you have no way to control it. For three days in a row or even longer I was feeling like that, extremely anxious, and that did not let me sleep, or eat and consumed a lot of my energy, and this is definitely not healthy. The feeling that 70% of myself is already dead, and I have just 30% of myself that has to do all the work; it's exhausting.”

While these factors are catastrophic for the individual it would be fair to assume that they lead to a decrease of quality in education and research for the whole institution. Many of the respondents report worrying that their teaching is affected by their experiences at work, and agree that they are not using their full potential at work:

“I did my teaching and I remember thinking so clearly to myself, I can't believe I'm standing here teaching, because I feel so drained and I feel like a train just ran over me. I went out for dinner that night with a friend of mine, and I told her the story and as I was telling it, I just realized this is abuse, this is just being abusive.”

For many, the problems also lead to feelings of disillusionment and detachment from the institution, and, for some, to a departure from the University of Groningen altogether. In addition, respondents feel that they are deceiving students and have to protect them from the unsafe environment at the University:

“I am totally disillusioned. I just do my work because I need the money. But I let myself be seen here as little as possible. I feel like a sex worker selling something that doesn't exist. It's only a facade, it's all facades, with pretty flags and all the stands put up.”

“Every time I go to an open day, I feel terrible. When I see these young people coming in, they are 16, 17, 18, with their parents in tow. They have such hopeful faces and think, ‘ah yes, and now to university, we've got it in these wonderful academy buildings and old lecture theatres. That looks really authentic, and so on’. And I am standing there and have to obviously present my program to them as if it is the best one. And I'm standing there the whole time thinking, ‘man, if you knew what was coming for you’.”

## The Accounts of Reporting of Harassment at the University of Groningen

All but one of our 26 interviewees have sought support to help them address their experiences. They turned to various sources of potential support, such as managers, informal networks, and faculty councils, from places higher up in the hierarchy, such as Faculty Boards and deans, the confidential advisor, and from HR. None of the interviewees felt the support they received was adequate, in terms of how their complaint was managed, how they were treated, and the solutions that were presented. In general, those abusing their power, engaging in discrimination and scientific harassment, were protected by heads of departments and faculty boards. This means that most victims are revictimized by an extended circle of organizational members protecting the perpetrators, and enabling and supporting perpetrators' silencing, blaming, and retaliation against victims. This extended circle was exclusively Dutch, and involved women as well as men. Junior members of faculty interviewed here did not receive support from their superiors within the system, possibly related to the fact that the seniors are, without exception, the perpetrators. The processes put in place are different for every one of our respondents, but the experiences that many of the victims of discrimination and harassment share are laid out below.

A serious issue for our University, frequently raised in our interviews (in 14 of 26), is that people at the managerial level at the University of Groningen seem uninformed about what the correct procedures are in cases of harassment and discrimination. The victims, who are always subordinates in the power relationships they have with their perpetrators in our study, are frequently informed that they are in a 'conflict', rather than being recognised as victims. Generally, superiors seem unaware of what counts as discrimination and harassment, how they should support the victim, what types of reprimands can be put in place for the perpetrator, and how they can support, and retain, staff members who have become victim to such behaviour.

"After a second meeting I went to the dean who said 'I have great news. Your supervisor decided to put everything behind her, and you can start over completely'. And I said, 'Would you find it very strange if I said I can't do it?'. They didn't understand it. They didn't get it, that I would not bite the bullet and carry on. I first went to HR. They did not intervene. As a next step, I went to the dean, and I said 'I really want something to be done about this'. But then, what they wanted to do, was just 'Okay, we already spoke to your supervisor, and she is willing to forgive you'. I thought 'Hey, she was the one who shouted at me and not the other way around. She had nothing to forgive'. But I am blamed as much as my supervisor."

Another, commonly reported, issue (in 12 of the 26 interviews) is that while perpetrators have been known to display the harassing or discriminating behaviour for a long time, nobody seems to be able to change the situation. In turn, it seems unmanageable for the victim to do something about their harassment, and so they stay silent. *Conflict avoidance* is a prime factor in maintaining and perpetuating situations of harassment and discrimination, and also plays a dominant role in the inadequate response from management. Our accounts state that even managers steer away from holding professors accountable for power abuse, discrimination, and scientific harassment. Peaceful retirement of a professor is often prioritized over the psychological safety and career progress of young, predominantly female, and international scholars. When superiors decide to remove the victim from the unsafe situations, the consequences fall on the victim: they lose their colleagues, sometimes their teaching and even PhD supervision. A number (8 of 26) of interviewees reported that deans who actually tried to take action against abusive professors, were bullied away themselves.

"There is a long history in the specific institute of harassment and discrimination and conflicts in the past 12 years. And the problem was never solved, he was never confronted. But the problem was

solved by taking people out of the institute and hiring them in other places in the same faculty. So, kind of quick patches, putting the problem under the rock and keeping things unchanged. I said, 'I know that the system is broken and I don't think that I would be the one to fix the system'. And he [the dean] said, 'That's right. You're right about that. It's very difficult to bring in these changes, especially to confront a director or full professor. Because I would like people to leave in peace instead of conflict'."

"I addressed it [being pressured into making fraudulent claims by my promotor] with my daily supervisors and they were all like 'Oh, well, he's just, uh, he's just being enthusiastic'. And then I was asking them, but can you then talk with him because he doesn't respect my note and maybe he is more willing to listen to you, but my other promotor said, well, 'I have a good relationship with him. I don't want to talk with him because maybe, we'll damage the relationship we have, it can impact my career possibilities because, well, he is a former [higher university function]. He still has a good network'."

In general, the feeling shared by victims of harassment and discrimination is that HR does not sufficiently support them, but instead supports the decisions and wishes of seniors and management (Faculty Boards, Heads of Departments). HR is overwhelmingly perceived as incompetent, complicit with management, and even hostile towards employees (this latter is stated explicitly by half of the interviewees).

"At the end of my term, I offered HR an exit interview, which was declined. A senior representative of HR said very clearly that she works for the faculty management, not for the staff. This is the problem of the entire HR department. It is completely against the rules in organizations. Dutch women do not have a high level of reflection after 20 years in this system. The advice from one of the Senior Diversity Officers of HR to the Rosalind Franklin Fellows in my faculty: "You have to learn the structures, not work against the structures".

The exceptional cases in which interviewees described HR as positive, in terms of that they listened to them and tried to think along, their powerlessness vis-à-vis management rendered that sympathy inconsequential. Many victims of harassment and discrimination are advised against making formal complaints with SIAGD by their support networks.

"I tried HR twice. They'd say 'There's not much we can do'. I spoke to the head of HR in my faculty, I said, 'here are the documents, let it be known to other people how things are here'. After a while, they would say 'This is a personal issue, this has only happened to you, we have no other cases.'"

HR further appears to be supporting deans and managers in framing victims coming forward as offenders. As a consequence, victims of power abuse, discrimination, and harassment are regularly ordered to undergo coaching, developmental assessment, or mediation, as if they were the ones who have engaged in misconduct. The mediation is experienced as additional trauma by most victims forced to undergo it (reported to us by all interviewees who had experienced mediation, which were 6 of the 26).

"I don't think people put in complaints of being verbally attacked and being victims of aggression for no reason. People don't make up that shit. It was very emotional and it was very difficult for me. The mediation process, I mean, the mediator did his best. I was terrified of being in the same room as this person. It was a really, really difficult, super stressful experience for me. I wouldn't sleep properly the days before mediation. I'd cry after every single session, because I'd have to sit opposite and hear about how he felt like he was being a victim to my complaint, and how I'd taken advantage of the *MeToo* movement to make a point for myself."

Furthermore, some interviewees (5 of the 26) state that they feel the diversity and inclusion officers (or “diversity deans”) are merely window dressing, and that the zero-tolerance statement that was issued by the university has no real impact. There is a general feeling of frustration that while there is a confidential advisor at the University of Groningen, they have no real power and cannot hold anyone accountable for the trespasses that are being made. The confidential advisor is perceived as sympathetic, understanding, and relevant for victims’ perception that they are not alone with their experiences. However, they are not seen as having any power to intervene meaningfully in cases of power abuse, discrimination, and scientific harassment. Note that quotes concerning the confidential advisors in this investigation can refer to another person than the advisor currently in place.

“So yeah, HR was one big disappointment and once I realized that, I went to the confidential advisor. Personally, I find the confidential advisor a very competent person. But the confidential advisor was also very open towards me and said “Yes, you are intimidated and bullied in ways that you really should file a formal complaint. But I can tell you right now that if you do that, your situation will become worse”. So, I have not filed a formal complaint, so far.”

“I talked with the confidential advisor. It was good to talk with someone, but she couldn't really help me. She just gave me the confidence for this plan and to work that out via the graduate school. So that was good to have the support, and someone listening to your ideas or giving ideas back. So, in a way that was helpful, although not directly, but more rather indirectly.”

Finally, victims who file complaints typically are not presented with an adequate solution to their problem. Instead, they typically have to face serious retaliation (reported by 16 of the 26 interviewees), including the perpetrators ending the victims’ careers, taking away opportunities, discrediting the victim throughout the entire department or faculty, smear campaigns, blocking grants, and so on.

“My work computer was broken into. When I was away, someone would log in and copy my files. A USB stick not belonging to me was magically ‘found’ somewhere in the city filled with sensitive data of mine. I was threatened by my line manager with a smear campaign when I left, to hurt my reputation, but luckily so many people in the university (and other universities in my field) knew me and worked well with me, so they weren’t successful.”

“Because they couldn’t touch my research performance, they started a smear campaign against me on soft skills: ‘she’s not a team player, not collegial, no good communication’. They were using my students to turn against me. They were taking revenge in any possible way. What they do is very inhumane. First, they try to break your self-confidence. If you don’t break, they start lying. They blocked my grants, they isolated me from my colleagues, they deleted my employee page.”

An often-heard form of retaliation concerns the manipulation of R&O documents which depict the victim as lacking important competences or soft skills after they made a complaint, when no such accusations were made before a complaint was issued. In such cases, deans often side with the perpetrators rather than supporting the victim. Manipulation of the R&O process was reported by 14 of the 26 interviewees in this investigation.

“I raised a complaint against my line manager, and as a result I was the victim of retaliation in my last R&O. I didn’t sign it and I asked the Faculty Board to be assessed by someone else. They rejected my request and asked me to find a coach.”

Often (reported in 14 interviews), victims report that their perpetrators have been assisted in their retaliation by HR and the faculty board in question. An often-reported manner of blocking careers

concerns discrediting the victims' 'soft skills': because they have complained, they are framed as lacking communication skills, and because they have 'upset' the perpetrator – who often remains in full power and control of the victim's career – they are bad colleagues and lack 'unifying leadership'. 10 interviewees report being accused of not communicating well enough.

"I stated during the meeting, 'What's going on here is a gender bias'. To which HR replied, 'Gender bias? We don't think so.' She stopped the discussion and sided with the new dean. It was said [during my R&O], I can't do 'unifying leadership' [verbindend leiderschap], but I have been following the course. It is certainly not about 'unifying leadership', that is simply code for 'he's calling out our bullshit and we don't like it'. When people express criticism, they always say that the content is your business, but the form you choose is so divisive and creates conflicts. This is what they always say when you criticize your own organization."

Interviewees report that the retaliation they were confronted with was intended to silence other employees by clearly demonstrating to them that this is what they can expect should they decide to complain. A feeling of hopelessness is often reported by the victims in this regard. Victim blaming, victim silencing, and retaliation strongly operate towards maintaining the status quo and prevent any actual change towards a more inclusive and safe working environment.

"My co-workers say 'Yeah, I'm really not going to tell my supervisor there is something I'm unhappy about. I don't have the courage for that anymore after what they've done to you. I'm not going to say a word. Because I still have a very small hope that someday I'll get a contract here'. So, what they have done is create a complete fear culture and they sent a really strong signal to everyone that if you rebel against unfair treatment, this is what's going to happen to you"

Some victims were blatantly told that their career was over after filing a complaint about harassment and discrimination. Perpetrators are not being corrected by Faculty Boards and HR for such violations. Accordingly, a substantial number of interviewees felt forced to get legal aid.

### **Interviewee Reflections on How the University of Groningen can Improve**

Many of the respondents in our investigation reflected upon what they would have liked to see from their organisation after reporting the problems they were experiencing. To questions concerning how the institution could deal with complaints about harassment and discrimination in a better way, the most frequently-suggested point (by 21 of the 26 interviewees) is that the institution should start by creating more acceptance of internationalisation and diversity in the first place. Interviewees suggest that staff members receive evidence-based training in how to deal with racism, as well as sexism, on the work floor, and that applying the principles learnt from such training is also enforced from higher up. Many respondents note that while managers use diversity and inclusion in strategic ways, they lack expertise in intercultural communication and display little motivation to work with, and engage with, employees from other cultures, religions and ethnicities. 14 of the 26 interviewees note that their manager lacks the skills to lead a multicultural, international, team.

"I would think that [the problem of harassment] is bigger here [in Groningen] because the place is less diverse or it has been increasingly diverse only in the past few years. So, harassment comes in the form of kind of a push back against internationalization or diversity and inclusion. Because it's perceived as a threat to a status quo. I have lived and worked in many other countries outside of the country where I was born. I never felt like a foreigner [...] I never had so many times in my life that I'm called international. I was always a colleague, nobody referred to me as an international woman. There is an obsession with titles here, which implies an obsession with power as well. So yeah, this is

definitely the very first context that I experience so much micro aggression, power dynamics, discrimination, exclusion, pushback against internationalization.”

“I think there is a particular mindset amongst the older male, white Dutch, senior faculty, where they probably have a bunch of unexamined, implicit assumptions about women or people of colour.”

Another returning complaint is that managers and heads of departments lack trust in their employees and therefore turn to micromanagement and a leadership style that uses fear and threats. The suggested solution to this would be to adhere to a style of management where there would be trust in staff’s capability.

Some interviewees point out that while there seem to be clear agreements in place at the institution, it is arbitrary whether or not people follow them. Interviewees suggest that you can get away with favouritism. Professors who are heads of departments and line managers at the same time have all the power over the individuals below them in the hierarchy.

“The others [professors] had an enormous amount of little crown princes, who became Associate Professor in no time and received many PhDs, while they performed little in terms of publications.”

A person who wants to be promoted is subject to the good will of these individuals. Nepotism is perceived as a major factor facilitating power abuse, discrimination, and scientific harassment, by 12 of the 26 interviewees.

“Many staff members are from fraternities, with which comes this protection of ‘their own kind’. Groningen is extremely ‘incestuous’, and only in Groningen is it taken as a compliment that someone has never been away from their department or faculty where they did their bachelor, masters and PhD. With this incestuous state comes the lack of any different perspective and point of view. Personally, I would never hire a person with such limited perspectives. Male colleagues who took 8-10 years to finish their PhD in Groningen are the potential new chair holders. You’d better fall in line and let them lift along on your publications. Other female colleagues had the same problems. They took their grants and went to much better universities than Groningen. The department wanted to promote one of their ‘crown princes’ to associate professor when I got my major grant. That led people to doubt his capabilities, which was then blamed on me. The male colleague is associate professor now, even though his performance is not more than average.”

Nepotism also seems to play a crucial role in the inadequacy of the present complaint management:

“I think it is a shame that I have a lot of colleagues who work very hard, who are passionate about their profession, who really do their very best. They all do very well. But by doing this and kicking me, the dean puts everyone in a very unfavourable light. Because people are going to say yes, at that faculty, being a professor has nothing to do with your performance. It has to do with whom you like and who likes you. It undermines those who are really serious about their work. And I find that very unfortunate.”

“The female PhD [who was sexually harassed] went to our dean. She talked with him privately. She went to the head of the graduate school. But they both had conversations again with this influential professor and he was protecting the male PhD. And in the end, she left. After her contract ended, she asked for an extension of three months because she had this situation for a year. In the end, she didn't get an extension for it, or any kind of acknowledgement that it happened. It was placed on her that it was her fault. And then at the same time, this same guy [the harasser] got a year extension without a reason, just because the professor told us, well, his research is so great, I give him the extra

year. So, I know everyone knew about it, and everyone was very angry about it, but still we couldn't bring about the change.”

Others point out that professors have too much power, and if they do something against the rules, they never suffer consequences because no one dares reprimand them. Line managers should not all be professors, and there should be more flexibility in the system: it should be easier to move departments, easier to change line managers, easier to get a second opinion on matters regarding promotion.

“Then I realized that it was this clear pattern, that these two guys, they have very much the same characteristics as my boss. They are just 20 years younger (and one of them was only his PhD student when he was younger), and you could very much see these were... I started to call them his crown princes because I was like, these guys can do whatever, it doesn't matter, and they will always be favoured by him. I mean, for me, it was very obvious that the dean didn't even go against my boss and the dean is also leaving now. It just showed the absolute power that my boss had and has, and I was told we can even go above the dean, but your boss has friends there too. It's too internal. This whole thing is incestuous.”

Another general point made, by nearly all of the interviewees, is that the pressures of academic life lead to work environments where people are run down and treat each other badly, with a lack of collegiality and support from others when things go wrong. Some recommend that the University spend more efforts decreasing internal competition to lower stress levels:

“I think it would be important for the university to realize how this is counterproductive for them, because they have an environment where people are not happy, where people are very stressed with a lot of competition among employees. I've never been in other universities like this before. Everyone was applying for either funds or ... here people feel ‘If I win a grant it's because you lose your own chance’. Five people applying for an ERC within one faculty, you know that maybe one will get it, and probably no one gets it; if you encourage this practice, you create a kind of internal competition, which is reflecting on the way that then people behave to each other. But the university should make sure that these irregularities don't happen.”

Finally, some interviewees point out that the protocols and rules in place when one does file a complaint about harassment and discrimination are not beneficial to the victim. There should be someone in place to support and speak for the victim, and the use of mediation should be reconsidered in cases where there is a case of harassment and discrimination. The role and function of the diversity officers is unclear – they should be granted power to change protocols and protect employees to a much larger degree than they are now able to.

“I think once you report, there should be someone that speaks for you so you don't have to speak again and again. I also think that the responsibility should not lie with the deans ultimately. Because for one, they have no training in what to do in these situations. For two, most of them are male and most of the people harassed are female. So, the comfort level, also the power distance, there needs to be someone separate, an Ombudswoman or true diversity officer that works on these issues and there needs to be a legal team there to look at what can and should be done.”

“There are several other female PhDs, who had similar incidents, and then, not only women, but also some male PhDs. And together, we wrote a letter to our faculty board, giving short anonymous summaries of the cases. Because what I noticed was a lack of protocols. I felt completely vulnerable and not protected by any kind of protocol in place to deal with this situation.”

## Discussion and Conclusions

The main conclusions from our interviews are that experiences of discrimination and harassment at the University of Groningen are severe, with power abuse, discrimination based on sex, nationality, religious affiliation, race, and other factors, as well as scientific sabotage taking place. Further, the impact of these experiences on victims is tremendous. The current way of managing complaints is experienced as inadequate in that it blames, silences, traumatizes, and retaliates against victims, thereby creating a culture of fear and hopelessness. Organizational and cultural factors that are identified as contributing both to discrimination and harassment, and to inadequate complaint management, include nepotism (internal hiring, 'crown princes'), conflict avoidance, and managers' attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. We find that victims seek support from various sources within the university, but that all of these sources either lack the will or the power to help these victims in meaningful ways. The victims interviewed here who are exposed to and complaining about discrimination and harassment are ultimately alone. Our findings replicate the findings presented in the 2019 LNVH report (Naezer et al., 2019). The identified experiences of harassment (scientific sabotage, sexual harassment, physical and verbal threats, denigration, exclusion, and not facilitating "special needs") are all present in our findings as well.

While the university has a multitude of rules and regulations in place to protect and help employees who experience discrimination and harassment, our findings demonstrate that complaints are typically managed in a way that re-victimizes reporters of misconduct. In fact, of those reporting misconduct, more than half of the respondents reported their experiences were being ridiculed, denied, and trivialized. Experiences of harassment and discrimination were commonly framed as unfortunate incidents that were in large part due to misunderstandings or to flaws in their personality or conduct. Victims were blamed and told off for upsetting their superiors by deans and HR advisors. Thus, in most cases when victims of harassment and discrimination reported misconduct, their reporting the misconduct was framed as inappropriate behaviour, which was then used to legitimize punishment for filing a complaint.

Retaliation took various forms, from forcing reporters of misconduct to undergo coaching to better themselves to forcing them through mediation with their – in all cases more powerful – perpetrators, which allows perpetrators to re-enact their harassment and intimidation in a setting protected by non-disclosure regulations. Mediation appeared an inappropriate instrument in all of the cases brought to us: while these cases were typically framed as being about 'conflict' between individuals, in reality they overwhelmingly concerned undesired behaviour by a powerful person towards a person in a dependent position. Thus, the level of conflict is between the powerful person's behaviour and the University's Code of conduct, rendering mediation an improper intervention.

Some respondents in this investigation report feeling forced to leave the University through the impossible work conditions with ongoing intimidation, bullying and threat. Some victims were blatantly told that their career was over after filing a complaint about harassment and discrimination. Threats to fire an employee because they have filed a complaint are in violation of the University's rules and regulations and in violation of Dutch (Working Conditions Act (*Arbowetgeving*), art. 2:15, art. 3:1, art. 3:2, art. 4; Civil Code (*Burgerlijk Wetboek*), 7:611, 7:658; General Equal Treatment Act; Article 1 of the constitution) and European (Labour) Law (Charter of Fundamental Rights, art. 31:1). Perpetrators are not being corrected by Faculty Boards and HR for such violations. Accordingly, a small number of the victims in this investigation have sought legal help in this situation. Here, too, the system disadvantages the victim, who has to privately pay for legal advice. On the other hand, the system benefits the perpetrators who can rely on the University's legal team with no costs involved.

The blaming of, and retaliation against, victims described above was reported by almost all of our respondents. This response by the institution to reporters of misconduct broadens the circle of perpetrators: besides the original perpetrator, HR advisors, colleagues, and deans have been reported as actively engaging in victim-blaming and retaliation. Reporters of harassment and discrimination at the University of Groningen thus experience betrayal by their institution, which is often experienced as severely traumatizing (Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014).

The consequences of such experiences are devastating for victims, with severe effects on their mental and physical health, with some of our interviewees unable to work as a direct result of the initial harassment and discrimination, and the subsequent retaliation. The effects on victims' careers are profound. Interviewees report being obstructed in their careers, denied promotions and passed over for career opportunities such as prizes, grants, and promotions. Our findings align with those in the most recent year report of the University's confidential advisor (in Veenstra 2020), that states "Promotion requirements change and/ or are adjusted during the process. Criteria for objectively determining whether someone is eligible for a promotion appear to be applied subjectively. It seems that this problem is RUG-wide and can no longer be dismissed as an individual problem but as a system problem."

Other interviewees, among them Rosalind Franklin Fellows, were forced to seek employment elsewhere because their working environment was too unsafe to function as an effective lecturer and researcher. The findings indicate that for some employees the University fails to provide a safe working environment psychologically, and sometimes also physically. Based on the people who came forward for this investigation it could be that women and non-Dutch staff are at a higher risk of encountering unequal treatment, harassment and intimidation, with non-Dutch women presenting a particularly vulnerable group. This would have implications also for the Rosalind Franklin Fellowship program, since employees hired through this scheme are predominantly from the most vulnerable groups identified here.

Frequently (in 18 of the 26 cases), harassment pertains to what Naezer et al. (2019) coined "scientific sabotage". Our findings offer potential insights into the underlying processes leading to women and non-Dutch academics lagging behind in rank and earnings (Bago d'Uva & Garcia-Gomez, 2020), since especially those at the intersections of these groups are particularly likely to be victims of scientific sabotage: they are denied promotion, confronted with ever changing criteria, belittled, intimidated, and made invisible. When they complain about being exposed to such treatment, they are being blamed, silenced, and retaliated against, often involving complicit parties within the University, such as Faculty Boards, deans, and HR.

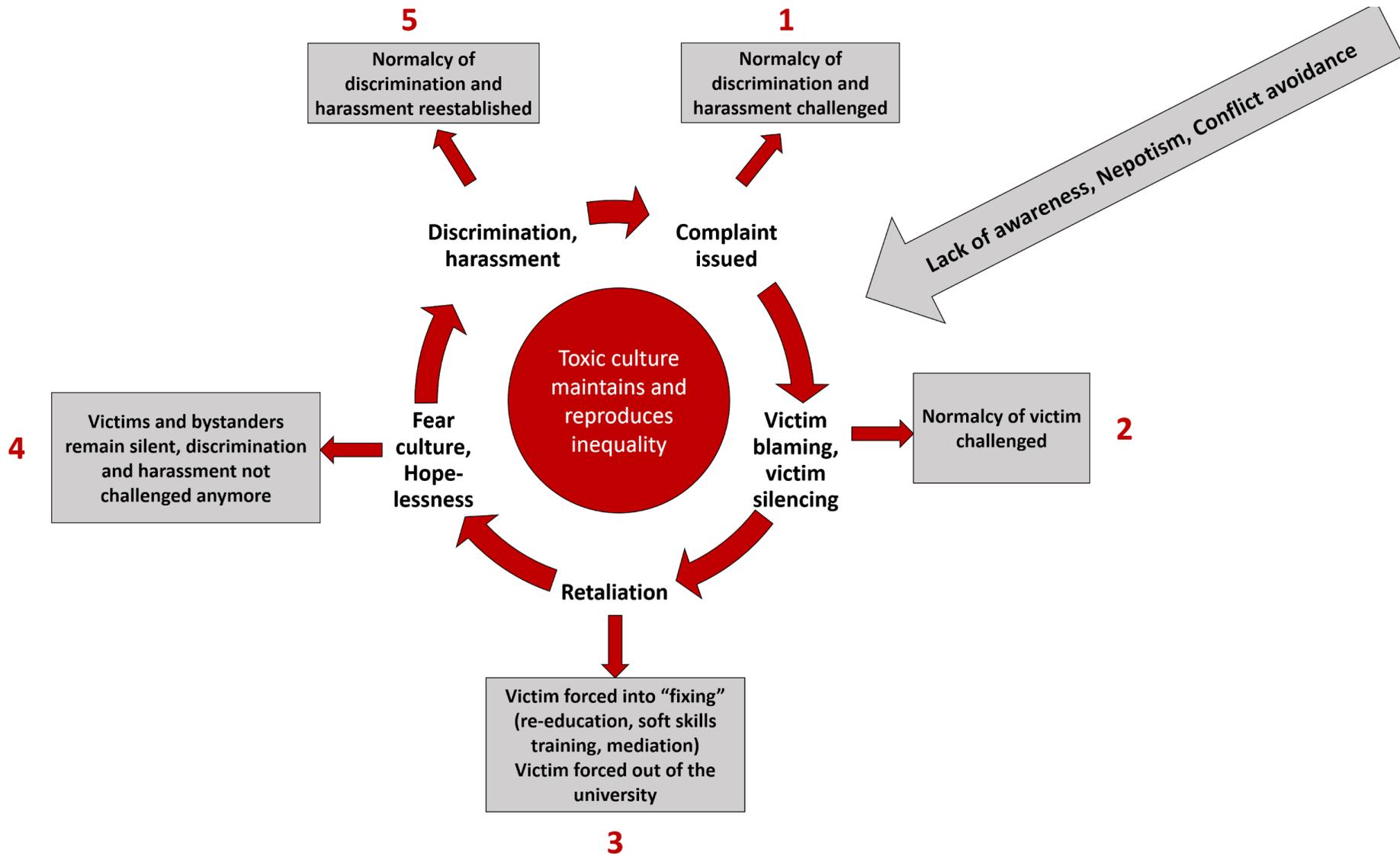
Experiences of harassment and discrimination reported by respondents are not only in conflict with the university's code of conduct, they are also in conflict with European and Dutch anti-discrimination legislation. The victims are overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, international women. The perpetrators are almost exclusively superiors; in most cases these are members of the majority population: (white) Dutch men, who hold the rank of professor.

Arguably, harassment and discrimination, as well as retaliation against reporters of this, negatively affect the entire organization. Witnessing perpetrators being protected and victims punished, instils a fear culture, which could leave victims and bystanders increasingly intimidated and hopeless. The experiences reported here of being blamed, silenced, and facing severe retaliatory action after complaining, all contribute to a fear culture that prevents others from speaking up. In light of this, it should be clear that the number of complaints inventoried by the confidential advisor could be

meaningless. It would be meaningful for the University to battle a fear culture and create more possibilities for victims to come forward with their complaints in protected environments.

The lack of consequences for perpetrators can furthermore be interpreted as management's approval of harassment and discrimination by bystanders. This could undermine staff perception of the University as a safe environment, which would be in conflict with academic freedom and integrity. The University of Groningen's innovative potential would also be diminished if minority members are more likely to be systematically undervalued and excluded. Particularly worrying, here, is the finding that many of the victims in this report are performing excellently in research, teaching, or conduct in general, and feel attacked because of their high achievements.

We depict a schematic of the uncovered processes on the next page, showing how the current processes maintain and reinforce a culture of inequality. These processes are exacerbated by lacking awareness, nepotism, and conflict avoidance.



Recent years saw policy making and campaigns to raise awareness for harassment and discrimination, as well as initiatives to increase diversity, inclusion, and psychological safety at the University of Groningen. Our findings demonstrate stark discrepancies between university policy and employees' actual experiences of inclusion and safety at their work. Concrete actionable recommendations can be derived from the identified discrepancies and from employees' experiences with harassment and discrimination, as well as with current complaint management. Hence, we call for a commitment from the University to act as a good employer by safeguarding inclusion and psychological safety of its employees and students. This requires holding the perpetrators accountable, rather than punishing the victims. We are of the opinion that the University of Groningen needs a concrete action plan to create a safe and inclusive working environment for all staff and students, and identify some concrete steps that can be taken towards adequate complaint management that does not re-traumatize the victims.

## Recommendations

Our report underscores the timeliness and urgency of national movements such as Rewards & Recognition, Everyone Professor, the launch of the National Action Plan, and the KNAW commission on Undesired Behaviour. University leadership tends to temper expectations by saying that the culture changes aspired by these movements take a long time. This report makes it clear that we do not have that time. As one of our respondents put it "The trivialization of suffering is grotesque. The perpetrators must be held accountable, not the victims." Immediate action is warranted to put a halt to the systematic injustice we find in our university, and to hold the perpetrators of power abuse, discrimination, scientific harassment, and bullying accountable. To support the University in this endeavour, we offer a number of concrete recommendations that can be implemented with immediate effect:

- Revise complaint procedures
- Disrupt the victim's dependency on the perpetrator and dismiss retaliatory action
- Hold Faculty Boards accountable
- Introduce inclusive academic leadership
- Make changes in HR to prioritize employees
- Do not coach and mediate with victims
- Create effective education for staff
- Gather expertise and monitor inclusivity through a task force
- Reconsider employee evaluation and promotion
- Flatten the hierarchy
- Avoid extensive internal hiring
- Avoid precarious employment

In sections below we substantiate these suggestions, and explain in detail why these are the specific changes that we think are important in the short and long term.

### Revise Complaint Procedures

On the website of the confidential advisor, the [route](#) to making a complaint is described, starting with:

*Staff are expected to take action if they suspect that rules and regulations and/or standards in this Code of Conduct on Integrity are violated. It is preferable to take the informal route in the first instance: talking to the person who has caused the problem and jointly arriving at a satisfactory solution.*

As we have seen, the person who has caused the problem is typically a person with power over the victim and whom the victim is dependent from. The possibility of arriving at an informal solution that satisfies the victim's need is therefore minimal. In addition, suggesting finding an informal solution makes the victim responsible for solving the issue, which is unjust, and it individualizes a problem that actually is a structural problem. The second step is described as follows:

*If this is not desirable or possible, the suspected irregularity can be discussed with the immediate manager. If these options are not suitable, a decision may be made to report the irregularity to a higher level within the organization, to the Faculty Board or to department management. If an employee needs help with making this consideration, he or she can talk to the HR advisor. An employee can also choose to discuss the situation confidentially with the confidential advisor (see Code of Conduct 6.2).*

Oftentimes, the perpetrator is the immediate manager, rendering also the second step ineffective. Our findings show that approaching the Faculty Board and HR will typically be ineffective and will likely instigate a process of victim blaming, silencing, and retaliatory action by these parties. The third and final step is described as follows:

*If the informal route is not appropriate or does not lead to a solution, it is possible to make a formal report of an integrity violation or to lodge a formal complaint in the event of unwanted behaviour (see Code of Conduct 6.3 and 6.4).*

Based on the findings reported here, this route has to be revised substantially, as it refers victims back to perpetrators and to parties complicit with perpetrators throughout the entire process. Based on the findings presented in this report, the last step should be presented as the first step. This should be implemented until widespread awareness among supervisors, managers, Heads of Departments, Faculty Boards, and deans about unconscious bias and what constitutes undesired behaviour can be assumed. Further, the university should install mandatory protocols that Faculty Boards have to adhere to when they receive complaints. It is unacceptable that victims' reports are simply being ignored or dismissed, as is currently the case.

### **Disrupt the Victim's Dependency on the Perpetrator & Dismiss Retaliatory Action**

In cases where the victim is dependent on the perpetrator, the victim's dependency should be disrupted immediately. Managers who a victim complains about, should lose formal responsibility for the victim. As a standard procedure, a neutral interim manager should be assigned, who has no stakes in the case. This could be the Ombudsperson or a person from another Faculty. Moreover, to reduce reliance on a single manager in general, an adequate and effective peer mentoring system needs to be put in place. Such a system can be made more effective by tying promotion of senior faculty to effective support and mentoring of junior faculty.

In the same vein, deans and Faculty Boards, managers and HR advisors who side with perpetrators to retaliate against employees filing complaints, should be held accountable. Evaluations of victims in whatever form (for instance in R&O documents) that are negative after a complaint has been issued, should be dealt with more carefully and should not serve as the only basis for further action. For instance, qualifying a victim as "lacking communication skills" because they complain, or because of the tone in which they complain (known as tone policing, Ritter & Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020) cannot be used as grounds for ordering them to undergo training to "fix" or "better" them, because this judgement qualifies as retaliatory action, especially if the victim has not been qualified as lacking communication skills *before* having complained.

Finally, victims who have to seek legal advice because they are exposed to discrimination, (scientific) harassment, and retaliatory actions such as threats to be fired, should be compensated financially by the University.

### **Hold Faculty Boards Accountable**

Faculty Boards who fail to deal with complaints about discrimination and (scientific) harassment in an appropriate way, should be held accountable. In our report we find that Faculty Boards have dismissed complaints without providing any objective proof for the complaint being unfounded. They side with the typically high-ranked perpetrator and dismiss the complaint purely by saying that the perpetrator is right and the victim is wrong. A diversity office, or ombudsperson, in each faculty could help by being there to support the victim, and moreover, by looking for patterns among complaints related to a particular faculty member.

Managers and Faculty Boards need to be held accountable for ensuring inclusive representation of minorities in their promotion decisions. Faculties who have a sub-standard representation of female and/or international staff in their higher ranks, despite these groups being sufficiently present in the lower ranks (thus, the pipeline is filled), have to give priority to promoting these employees.

### **Introduce Inclusive Academic Leadership**

Everyone aspiring responsibility for personnel has to demonstrate their capability and adherence to high standards of scientific integrity. Deans and Faculty Boards, as well as anyone with responsibility for lower-ranked personnel, have to be trained extensively in the following areas: what constitutes discrimination and harassment, how to deal with complaints adequately, how to support the victim adequately, how to prevent yourself from siding with the perpetrator, and so on. This training should be extensive and regularly refreshed. Personnel responsibility should be granted only to staff who have had extensive and repeated training in inclusive leadership, who are aware of unconscious bias, who are educated about what constitutes discrimination, harassment, and undesired behaviour, and who know how to competently manage complaints.

Educate managers, Faculty Boards, but also communications and media officers, to carefully balance visibility of all researchers. The accomplishments of women and/or non-Dutch employees can be made more visible within the University to create more recognition for the advancement of minoritized groups. Countering marginalisation and calling out all actions that contribute to marginalisation (such as making people invisible), presents an important task for all members of the organization jointly.

Stimulate and facilitate university-wide discussions about what is deemed appropriate and what is not.

A prime problem of incestuous hiring and promotion decisions is that they produce and reproduce nepotism and uphold a culture where power abuse, discrimination, and (scientific) harassment are seen as normal. Because these behaviours are normalized, victims complaining about them are seen as not normal and pushed out of the University, which in turn worsens the problem of internal hiring and nepotism, and perpetuates a toxic culture. Consequently, more formalized recruiting and promotion procedures have to be put in place, and compliance with those procedures must be monitored and enforced.

### **Make changes in HR**

Our respondents perceived HR overwhelmingly as incompetent, complicit with management, and even hostile towards employees. It seems fair to say that HR could make small changes which would

have a relatively big effect on the organisation's ability to deal with harassment and discrimination. HR advisors' should be given more education about discrimination, harassment, psychological safety and complaint management. HR advisors need to be better trained and more experienced with navigating the complex power dynamics and political stakes within the University.

HR should stop "fixing" employees who complain about systemic disadvantage. The system needs to be changed, and it does not change by coaching those disadvantaged by it. HR has to be trained to recognize and dismiss methods of victim blaming and victim silencing typically engaged in by perpetrators, such as ghosting, gaslighting, and tone policing.

We further get the impression that HR advisors' own dependency on Faculty Boards leads to them being easily pressured into supporting victim blaming, silencing, and retaliatory action against victims. The Board of the University can consider making senior HR advisors with the appropriate expertise and training who have greater independence from the Faculties responsible for complaint management. Alternatively, the ombudsperson or external adviser might be a better suited candidate for dealing with complaints competently and without the constraints resulting from personal dependency. Importantly, such individuals could keep track of "minor" complaints as they occur, so that they are able to catch patterns where a supervisor has repeated problems with their students or subordinates.

### **Do not Coach and Mediate with Victims**

In general, the University needs to offer victims of harassment, discrimination and power abuse adequate support by protecting them, not by re-educating and "fixing" them. Upon receiving complaints about undesired behaviour, consider coaching and training for the perpetrator, not for the victim.

Mediation can be experienced as extremely unsafe situations for reporters of harassment, discrimination and misconduct (cf. Tallodi, 2019). Mediation is an inappropriate intervention when the perpetrator is in a position of power and the victim is dependent on them. Mediation re-traumatizes the victim because it constitutes an institutionally sanctioned space for perpetrators to further threaten and abuse their victim, this time protected by non-disclosure regulations. Interviewees also report mediation being abused to force them into conforming with an abusive supervisor: every time the victim disagrees with their supervisor, he will label the disagreement a breach of contract warranting mediation. Hence, victims' willingness to participate in mediation should be abolished as a criterion for assessing their goodwill as employees. Mediation after a complaint about discrimination, (scientific harassment), and undesired behaviour has been made should be seen as what it really is: a re-traumatizing instrument of further harassment, victim blaming, silencing, and retaliation.

### **Create Effective Education for Staff**

It is our opinion that many of the cases showcased in this report could have had very different outcomes if the knowledge about what constitutes harassment, bullying and discrimination had been clearer on the work floor. Staff and students should be trained and educated about their rights and responsibilities. They should be made aware of the processes and mechanisms reported here, in order to protect themselves and take appropriate action if exposed to discrimination, harassment, and other forms of undesired behaviour. Staff and students have to be trained to recognize and counteract methods of victim blaming and victim silencing typically engaged in by perpetrators, such as ghosting, gaslighting, and tone policing (see, e.g., Ahern, 2018).

We further recommend that bystander training be given widely and made mandatory for all staff. Bystander training can help to create a culture in which poor behaviour is not tolerated and therefore has a lower chance to escalate. These bystander trainings should also include information about where bystanders can seek help or advice so they do not become targets themselves.

### **Gather Expertise and Monitor Inclusivity through a Task Force**

The crucial positions within the university for filing complaints, signalling problems, getting support and advocating for policy, have to be filled with experts on the topics of diversity, inclusion, psychological safety, and complaint management. These experts are preferably independent from the University. Exit interviews should be obligatory and should be the responsibility of an Ombuds team. Together with the Confidential advisor, the Ombuds team should keep data on who files complaints about what exactly, and report this back in a year report.

Data about career trajectories should be continuously monitored and reviewed by the ombudsperson, possibly in collaboration with a diversity officer. The questions these reviewers should answer include: If the system was working fairly, where should that person be now? If the person is not there yet, what are the reasons?

While our findings cannot provide estimates regarding the prevalence of discrimination and (scientific) harassment at the University, the employee survey ('medewerkeronderzoek') shows that nearly 1 in 6 employee has experienced unwanted behaviour on the workfloor. With the number of precarious contracts on the rise, and those in these positions hesitant to file complaints, it is likely that our report only shows a tip of the iceberg when it comes to social unsafety at the University of Groningen. A constructive development from this report would be the *creation of a task force* to create an overview of the problem at the institution. Questions that such a task force can answer are whether certain Faculties experience more problems than others, what the relationship is between the increase in work pressure and the prevalence of harassment, and what the best practices are, i.e. what are the experiences of victims of harassment and discrimination who feel vindicated at the University?

### **Reconsider Employee Evaluation and Promotion**

Promotion decisions should not only be contingent on criteria that are outside of the employees' control. By this we mean that if e.g. *managerial experience* can only be granted by a superior, it cannot be a promotion criterion. One solution might be to hold the superior - or other gatekeepers - accountable for enabling employees to fulfil such criteria. Such criteria could also be accompanied by lists of alternative activities showing the skill or quality. Furthermore, promotion decisions cannot be contingent on criteria that are culturally biased. For instance, the current notion of "collegiality" penalizes a style of working that is more distant than is common in Dutch culture. Many respondents observe that "soft skills" are used to force them into compliance with superiors' wishes, and are thus a vehicle for power abuse. "Soft skills" are also commonly used to retaliate against victims who complained, by framing the filing of a complaint as indicative for "communication problems", "lack of self-reflection" or "lack of unifying leadership". Instead, collegiality should be judged by more concrete examples of helping, such as giving advice to another person's students, helping them writing a grant, or sharing lab materials or lab space.

Finally, formative assessment plans should be agreed upon together with employees, managers, and HR. SMART and objectifiable criteria for promotion will be put on paper. This can be tied to current efforts associated with the Rewards & Recognition program.

## Flatten the Hierarchy

A point needs to be made about the status of full professors at our institution, as well as elsewhere in the Netherlands. Professors often find themselves in an untouchable position. They are rarely held accountable for any misconduct, because no one wants to reprimand a full professor. The Board of the University, ministers and other relevant stakeholders have to consider this very carefully, because the lack of accountability prevents meaningful progress.

In general, managers need to be held accountable for employees' development. If managers cannot show that all employees, including those from underrepresented groups, have access to the same resources, they cannot hold employees on the same standards. For instance, if female and/ or international staff are disproportionately burdened with teaching obligations, they cannot be held to the same publication standards as their male and/or Dutch colleagues with less teaching obligations. The primary aim should be to grant every employee the same resources in a non-discriminatory manner. This also requires transparency: for every employee, it should be transparent how much s/he teaches and why.

Measures such as *ius promovendi* for every UHD or UD will decrease the dependency of employees on their superiors, and should thus be enforced university-wide.

Discretionary power needs to be minimized. Criteria such as "needs to be a good researcher *in the opinion of the dean*" are unacceptable from a professional and integrity point of view. Such addendums give unwarranted space for power abuse, discrimination, retaliation and coercion and should be banned from all decision-making protocols that affect employees' careers. Similarly, Tenure Track criteria such as "contributes to a positive atmosphere in the Faculty or department" constitute a prime tool to suppress criticism and enforce fear, silence, and conformity - none of which are conducive of a healthy academic environment.

## Avoid Extensive Internal Hiring

The recruitment and promotion of people from within the University should be brought down to a minimum, as it compromises academic freedom, independent scientific practice, and recruitment and retention of the best personnel. We find that internal hiring is a risk factor in perpetuating and reproducing an organizational culture in which discrimination, (scientific) harassment, and the preferential treatment of 'crown princes' and 'protégés' is normalized. Internal hiring promotes nepotism, which plays a crucial role in victim blaming, silencing, and retaliation, too. If internal hiring processes take place, we recommend that the direct supervisor of the candidate should not be a member of the hiring committee or at least not be involved in the evaluation of "their candidate".

## Avoid precarious employment

Our report shows that while everyone at the University can become victim of discrimination, scientific harassment an undesired behaviour, those in precarious employment positions may be less likely to complain out of fear of losing their employment. They hence are most vulnerable to power abuse by their superiors, and need particular protection. We advocate for a system of Higher Education that reduces precarious employment to the minimum of what is absolutely necessary (for example, having a one-year temporary term as is already fairly common in applied universities in the Netherlands).

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