GENERAL VERSION OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

PSYCHOSOCIAL WORKLOAD AT DUTCH UNIVERSITIES

Research into the current state of affairs regarding work pressure and undesirable behaviour and how the 14 Dutch public universities deal with these psychosocial risks.

Psychosocial workload, consisting of work pressure and undesirable behaviour, has been a problem for university employees for a considerable time. Psychosocial workload can lead to serious health problems, absenteeism and occupational disability. Therefore, in 2020, the Netherlands Labour Authority requested the 14 public universities[1] to draw up action plans to reduce psychosocial workload. After reviewing these action plans in 2021, and also based on other studies, the Labour Authority concluded that their approach to prevent and reduce work pressure and undesirable behaviour was insufficient.[2] Moreover, employees at universities are more likely than those in other sectors to report that insufficient measures are being taken against work pressure and undesirable behaviour.[3]

Given these signals, the Labour Authority wants to gain more insight into how universities have made improvements in psychosocial working conditions since 2021 and their effectiveness in reducing psychosocial workload. This report addresses the current status of psychosocial workload in universities, as well as its underlying causes.

1. Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to uncover:
1. how universities meet the obligations under the Dutch Working Conditions Act (Arbeidsomstandighedenwet) when it comes to identifying the risks of work pressure and undesirable behaviour, as well as their policy cycle.
2. the experiences of employees concerning work pressure and undesirable behaviour.
3. the possible causes of work pressure and undesirable behaviour.

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[1] https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/wie-we-zijn
[2] Inspectie SZW (2021). *WOinActie report*.
[3] CBS/TNO (2023). National Working Conditions Survey 2022. Edited by the Netherlands Labour Authority.

4. the measures universities have implemented to prevent and reduce work pressure and undesirable behaviour, and which measures are considered effective.[4]
5. the actions universities have taken following the points of concern regarding work pressure and undesirable behaviour raised by the Labour Authority during the intervention in 2020/2021.[4]
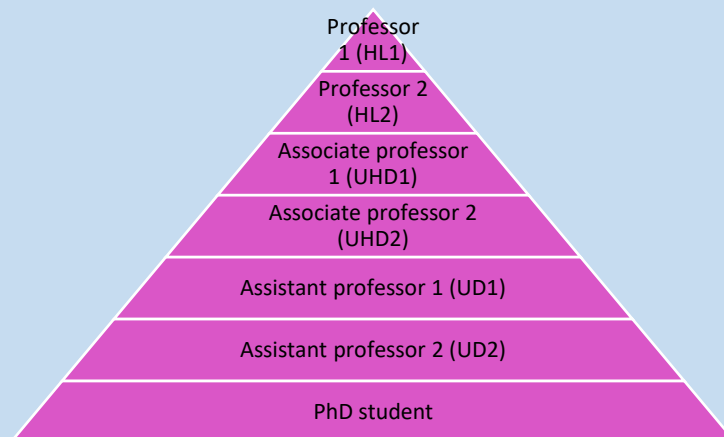
2. Approach

The Labour Authority visited 14 public universities in the Netherlands between June and August 2023, examined documentation related to health and safety policies and conducted semi-structured interviews. These interviews were held with various parties within the universities responsible for drawing up, implementing and monitoring health and safety policies on psychosocial workload.[5] The Labour Authority also conducted an online survey among all academic and teaching staff between September and November 2023. The survey was completed by more than 9,200 respondents, with an average response rate across all universities of 18% (given the large population of employees surveyed, this is likely to be an acceptable response rate[6]). The Labour Authority focused in this study exclusively on academic and teaching staff, not support and management staff.[7] The survey analyses examined average scores of all respondents collectively, as well as differences between groups based on aspects such as gender, nationality, position or university.

Academic positions within universities
All Dutch universities use the university job classification system, which describes all tasks and responsibilities for each position.[8] The university system is hierarchically ordered - see Figure 1. However, this figure is incomplete due to several profiles not fully, such as the position researcher or lecturer, which can be placed at different levels in the pyramid.

Figure 1. Academic positions

Professor 1 (HL1)
Professor 2 (HL2)
Associate professor 1 (UHD1)
Associate professor 2 (UHD2)
Assistant professor 1 (UD1)
Assistant professor 2 (UD2)
PhD student

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[4] Working conditions legislation and the work instructions of the Netherlands Labour Authority: Netherlands Labour Authority (2023). and Inspectie SZW (2020). *Work instruction on preventing and mitigating work stress caused by work pressure* and *Basic inspection module on internal undesirable behaviour.*
[5] Including HR departments, works councils and confidential advisers.
[6] See the 'Characteristics of survey respondents' section in the methodology of the full report https://www.nlarbeidsinspectie.nl/rapport-psa-universiteiten for a detailed explanation.
[7] See the methodology section of the full report for a detailed explanation.
[8] https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/functie-ordeningsysteem-ufo

3. Results

3.1. Universities shape their health and safety policy on psychosocial workload in various ways, but there is little insight into its underlying causes; an integrated approach is lacking and it is difficult to guarantee successful implementation within the organisation

The Working Conditions Act states that employers are obliged to implement policies and take measures to prevent and/or control the risks of psychosocial workload. A basic mandatory provision is that all employers must have a Risk Assessment and Evaluation (abbreviation in Dutch: RI&E) in place, including an action plan. The documentation submitted by the universities reveals that some universities have an overarching RI&E for the entire organisation, while others have a separate RI&E for each organisational unit (e.g. per faculty). Furthermore, the degree of completeness and quality of the RI&E's examined appears to vary widely. It was also frequently found that outdated and recent RI&E's were present within the same university (e.g. for different faculties/organisational units). Psychosocial workload is recognised as a risk in the RI&E's of almost all universities (11 out of 14). Twelve of the 14 universities have a written action plan, describing measures to prevent or reduce occupational risks.

The prevention and management of psychosocial workload risks should be cyclical in nature, the so-called PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act). This involves continuously identifying occupational risks, devising and implementing measures, evaluating their effectiveness and making adjustments based on this newly gained knowledge. There were indications that the PDCA cycle was entirely completed at two of the 14 universities. For the remaining 12 universities, this was unclear. There were indications that the cycle was either not entirely completed, or the components of the cycle seemed unrelated to each other. For instance, many universities have policies and measures on psychosocial workload, but they are often not specified in the risk assessment and evaluation and action plans. The RI&E therefore fails to provide a complete overview of measures taken regarding psychosocial workload, making it unclear whether appropriate measures have been taken for all risks. The PDCA cycle is therefore not properly embedded in the organisation.

Problem analyses that provide insight into the causes of psychosocial workload, as required by an in-depth investigation or in-depth risk assessment and evaluation, are regularly missing from the available policy documents.[9] Also, employee satisfaction surveys do not systematically question the underlying causes of psychosocial workload risks. Nor is there a systematic assessment of whether the intended measures are aligned with the underlying causes of the problems,. Furthermore, the effectiveness of measures taken is rarely evaluated. In short, universities have established many stand-alone policy processes and measures, however an integrated approach and evaluation is lacking. This makes it difficult to guarantee successful implementation within the organisation. Table 1 shows the extent to which each of the 14 universities complies with the above-mentioned health and safety policy provisions.

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[9] When psychosocial work pressure poses a risk to employees, the employer is obliged to investigate it through an in-depth investigation or in-depth risk assessment. Article 2.15, Working Conditions Decree.

Table 1. Overview of health and safety policy provisions compliance

	Psychosocial workload recognised as a risk in RI&E	In-depth research/ in-depth RI&E on psychosocial workload	Written action plan	PDCA cycle completed
University A	X	X	X	X
University B	√	X	√	X
University C	√	X	√	X
University D	√	X	√	X
University E	√	√	√	X
University F	√	X	√	X
University G	√	√	√	X
University H	√	X	√	X
University I	X	X	X	X
University J	X	X	√	X
University K	√	√	√	X
University L	√	√	√	√
University M	√	√	√	√
University N	√	X	√	X

Note. The universities are presented in random order

Despite the many actions and initiatives taken by HR departments, there seems to be no visible reduction in work pressure or undesirable behaviour. This could be explained by several patterns that the Labour Authority observed in most universities:

- Policy processes do not always lead to concrete action.
- Policies are made at a central level but implemented at a decentral level. HR professionals at the central level, on the one hand, and HR professionals and managers at the decentral level, on the other, do not always communicate well with each other and do not have the same information.
- There are power relationships that can hinder policy implementation, such as the significant influence that faculties have over their own prioritisation.
- The role of the direct manager, who can be the cause of work pressure and undesirable behaviour, but must also provide a solution to these problems.
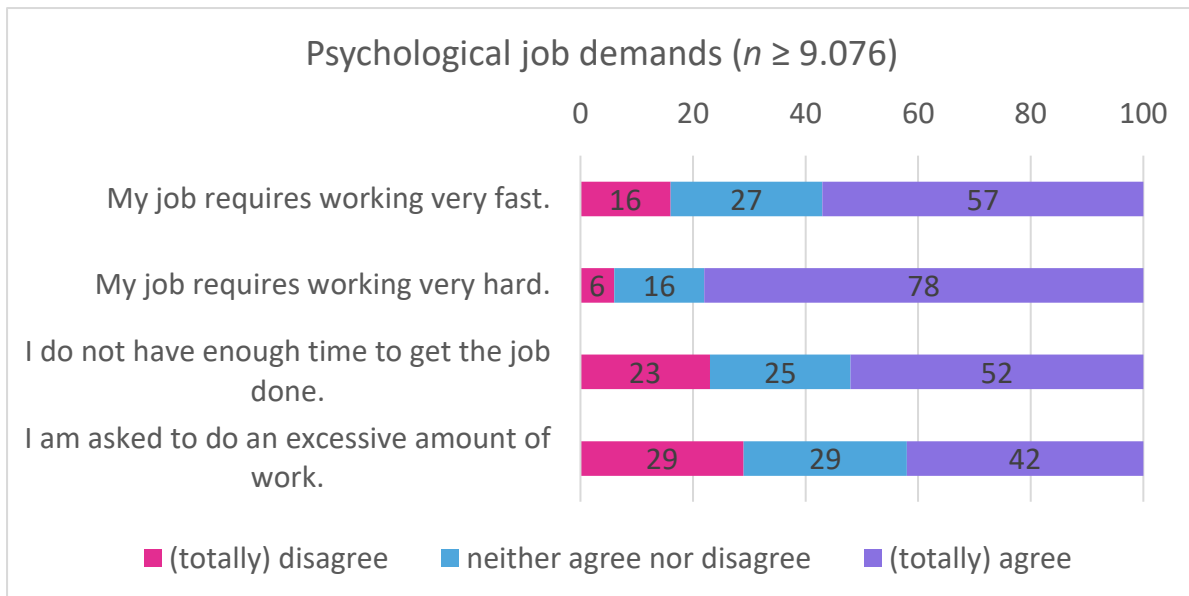
3.2. Work pressure and undesirable behaviour are experienced by many

Work pressure
High work pressure appears to be a persistent problem at all universities, based on the received documentation, interviews and online survey. This is recognised by all organisations. Both subjective measures of work pressure (such as psychological job demands, stress due to work pressure, and exhaustion), as well as more objective measures of work pressure (such as extra tasks and hours worked) were investigated in the online survey.

The majority of respondents reported having to work very fast (57%) and very hard (78%) and having too little time to complete work (52%; see Figure 2). Assistant professors and associate professors in particular experience these relatively high psychological job demands.
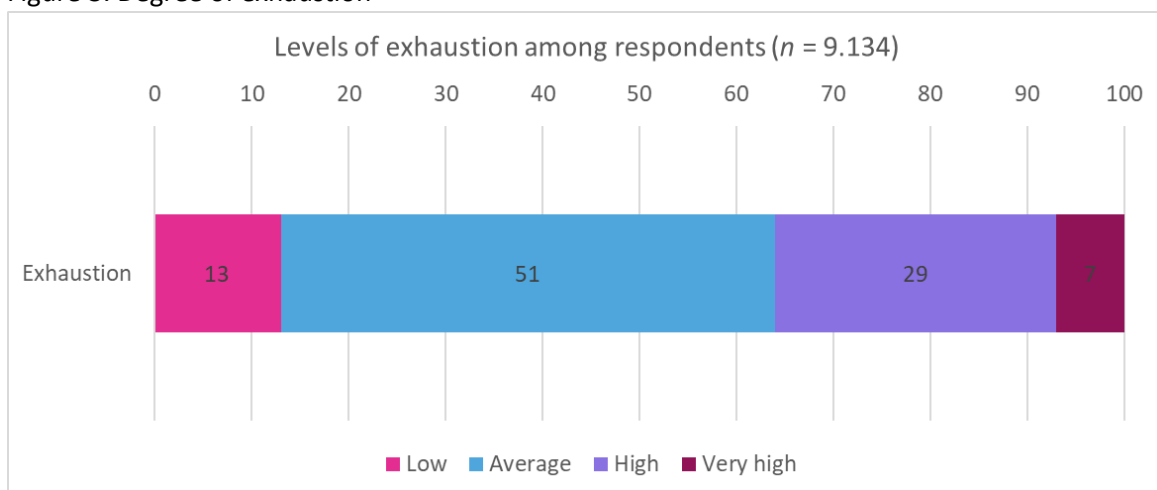
Figure 2. Psychological job demands

Psychological job demands (*n* ≥ 9.076)

Statement	(totally) disagree	neither agree nor disagree	(totally) agree
My job requires working very fast.	16	27	57
My job requires working very hard.	6	16	78
I do not have enough time to get the job done.	23	25	52
I am asked to do an excessive amount of work.	29	29	42

■ (totally) disagree   ■ neither agree nor disagree   ■ (totally) agree

In addition, 74% of respondents indicated to experience stress more than incidentally in the past two years due to work pressure. Again assistant professors and associate professors scored above average.

Moreover, 36% of respondents scored *high* to *very high* on emotional exhaustion (one of the main dimensions of burnout; see Figure 3). In particular, non-Dutch workers from outside the EU score higher on exhaustion compared to workers from the Netherlands and within the EU, putting this group at a higher risk of burnout.

Figure 3. Degree of exhaustion

Levels of exhaustion among respondents (*n* = 9.134)

	Low	Average	High	Very high
Exhaustion	13	51	29	7

■ Low   ■ Average   ■ High   ■ Very high

Additional tasks and hours worked
Additional tasks outside the job profile can also lead to work pressure. Respondents were asked to indicate their work tasks and responsibilities in the online survey. The list provided consisted of all tasks and responsibilities in the university job profiles. Tasks and responsibilities indicated on the list were compared with respondents' actual job profile and its corresponding tasks and responsibilities. Many respondents seem to perform several tasks that are not part of their assigned job

responsibilities and are above and beyond their current job profile. As shown in Figure 4, assistant and associate professors have, on average, 6 to 8 additional tasks that belong to hierarchically higher job profiles than the profile they are classified in. Assistant professors in particular are structurally burdened with more responsibilities and tasks than what they are appointed for, while they may not receive any extra reward for this. The number of additional tasks correlates with the experience of more psychological job demands and exhaustion.

Figure 4. Additional tasks performed above and beyond the job profile
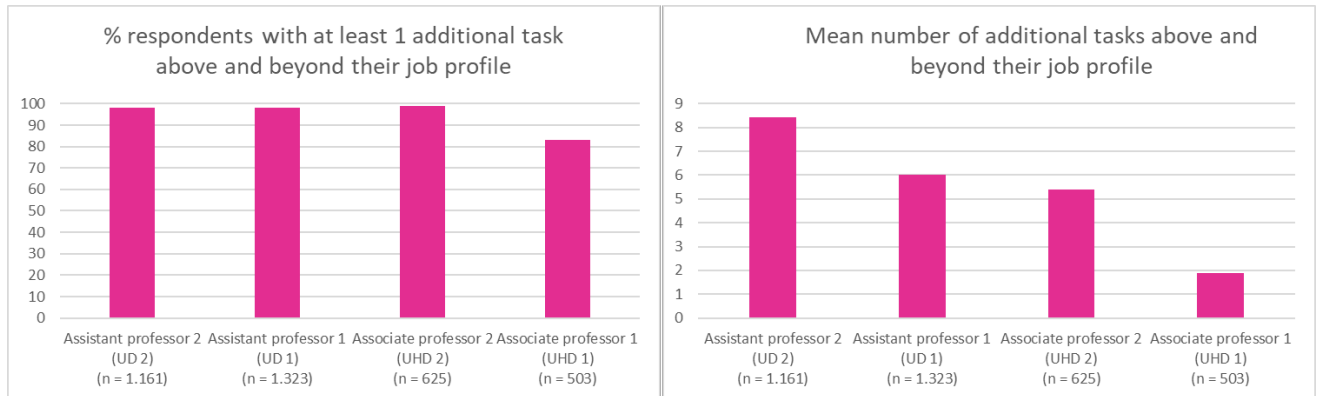
Furthermore, respondents reported working an average of 6 hours more per week than agreed to in their contract. Those in managerial positions work more overtime on average (on average 9 hours per week) and work an average of 4 hours more overtime than non-managerial staff.

Two key provisions in the Working Hours Act are that an employee aged 18 years and over may work a maximum of 60 hours per week and that an employee aged 18 years and over must have an uninterrupted rest period of 11 hours after a working day.[10] None of the universities had working time records, so there is no insight into the number of hours employees worked. However, in the online survey, 11% of respondents indicated they often or always work *more than* 60 hours a week, and 18% indicated they often or always have *less* than 11 hours of resting time between working days. In addition, almost half of the employees reported that they never or rarely get to take their annual statutory leave or continue to work while on leave. These figures show that a significant proportion of employees work during periods meant for rest and to psychologically distance themselves from work.

There is no evidence that some universities do markedly better in terms of perceived work pressure than others. However, there are a few universities that do slightly less well (see Figure 5).[11]

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[10] Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (2010). *The Working Hours Act. Information for employers and employees.*

[11] Nor do the universities differ when it comes to perceived psychological work pressure or exhaustion. The universities are presented here in no particular order.

Figure 5. Stress experienced due to work pressure broken down by university

% respondents that indicate to experience stress more than incidentally due to work pressure per university (*n* = 9.076)
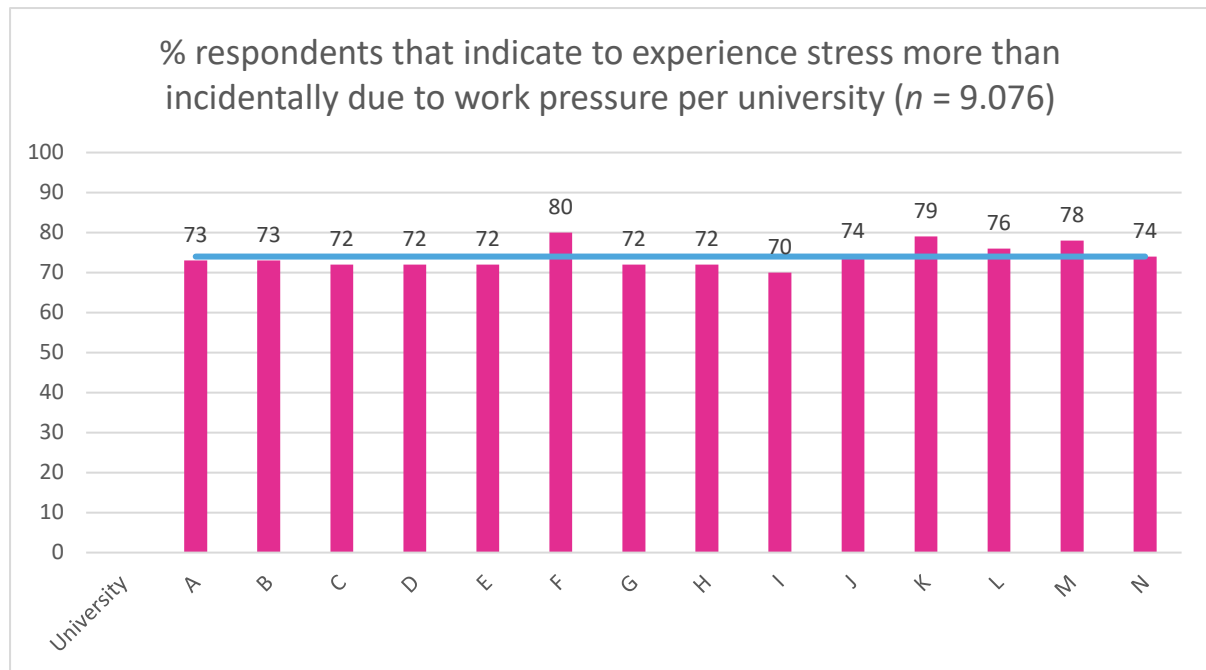
Undesirable behaviour

Besides work pressure, the extent to which academic and teaching staff face various forms of undesirable behaviour was also investigated. Forms of undesirable behaviour covered in the online survey were aggression and violence (e.g. verbal or physical aggression), sexual harassment (e.g. sexual comments, innuendos, or touching), bullying (e.g. social isolation or gossiping), discrimination and academic-related undesirable behaviour (harassment in the form of, for example, falsely claiming of authorship and failure to honour agreements made for promotion).

Of all respondents, 54% indicated they themselves had experienced undesirable behaviour in the past two years. 69% indicated they had seen at least one colleague experience undesirable behaviour. Bullying is the most common form of undesirable behaviour, with 39% of all respondents indicating they have experienced it themselves. Approximately 10% of respondents said they themselves had experienced aggression and violence at their university. A similar percentage applies to sexual harassment (see Figure 6).

Discrimination as a form of undesirable behaviour was questioned separately in the survey.[12] Of all respondents, 34% indicated they themselves had been discriminated against in the past two years. Discrimination based on gender or nationality were most common. For all forms of undesirable behaviour (including discrimination), the figures are higher when it comes to observing undesirable behaviour among colleagues.

The online survey also covered undesirable behaviour related to work within academia and the university (such as falsely claiming authorship). Of all respondents, 32% have experienced scientific undesirable behaviour themselves in the past two years. 43% observed a colleague dealing with academic-related undesirable behaviour. Notably, 26% of all respondents had experienced

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[12] See the methodology section and then 'Undesirable behaviour' in the full report for an explanation.

disregarded agreements (e.g. not adhering to agreed standards for a promotion). A further 13% reported cases of another person wrongfully claiming authorship.

Of all respondents, 7% said they had neither experienced undesirable behaviour themselves in the past two years nor seen it happening to a colleague.

Figure 6. Type of undesirable behaviour, self-experienced and observed happening to a colleague

% type of undesirable behaviour (n = 9.140)

self-experienced   observed for a colleague
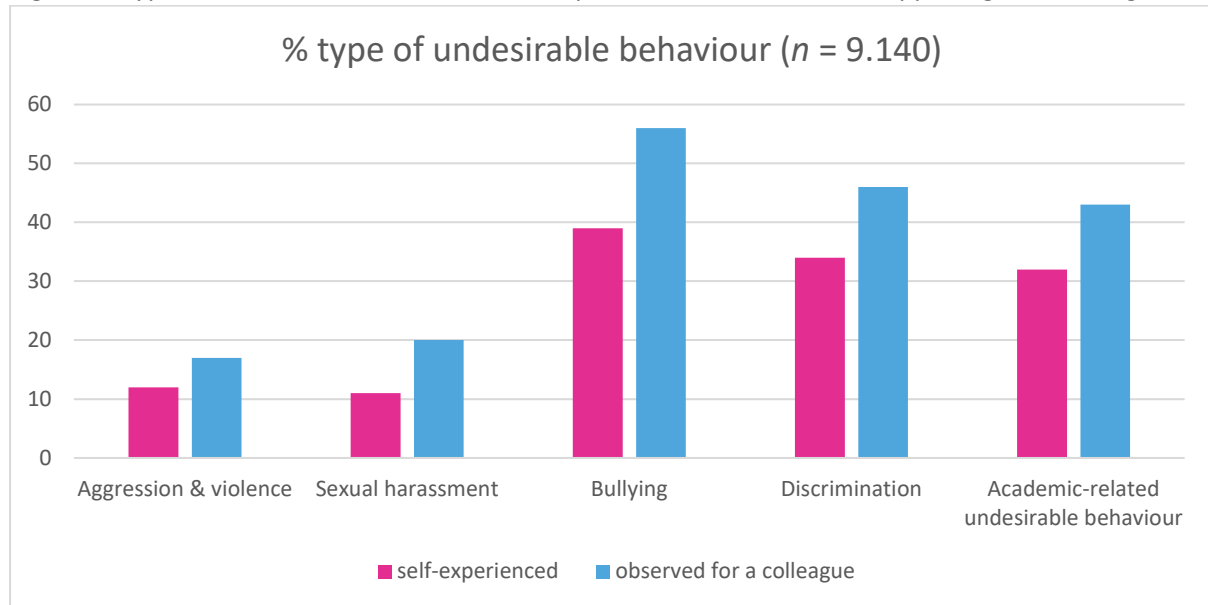
All forms of undesirable behaviour are experienced more often by women than men (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Self-experienced undesirable behaviour broken down by gender

Self-experienced undesirable behavior by gender (n = 8.826)

Woman   Man
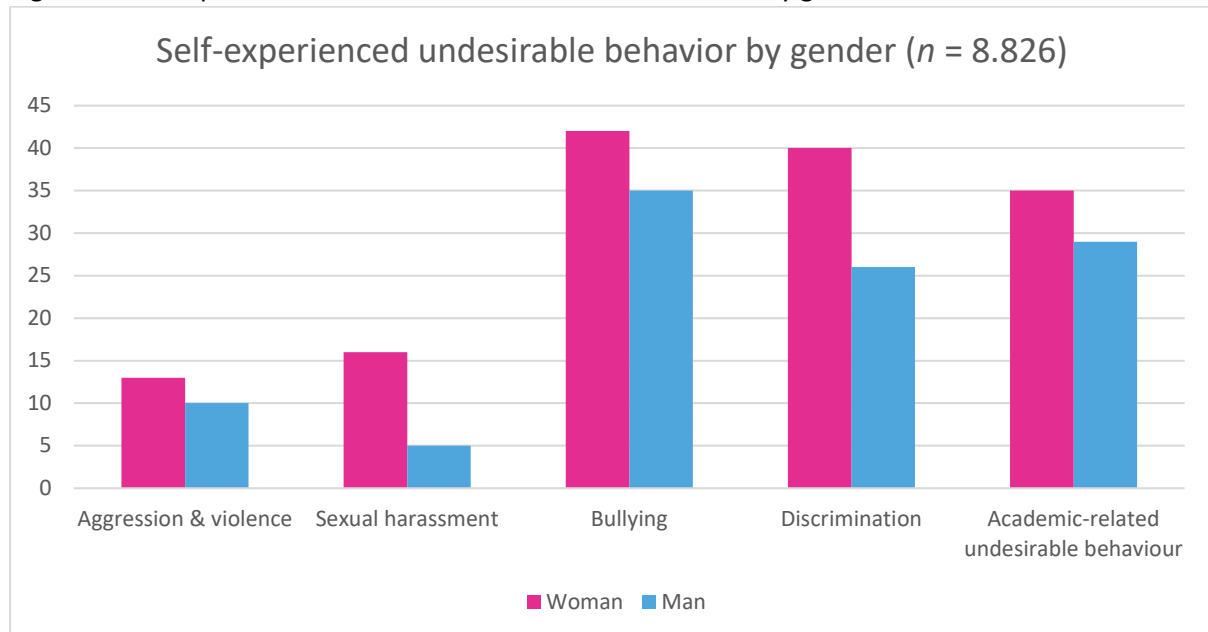
As with work pressure, assistant professors and associate professors experience undesirable behaviour relatively more often than respondents with other positions (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Self-experienced undesirable behaviour broken down by job position
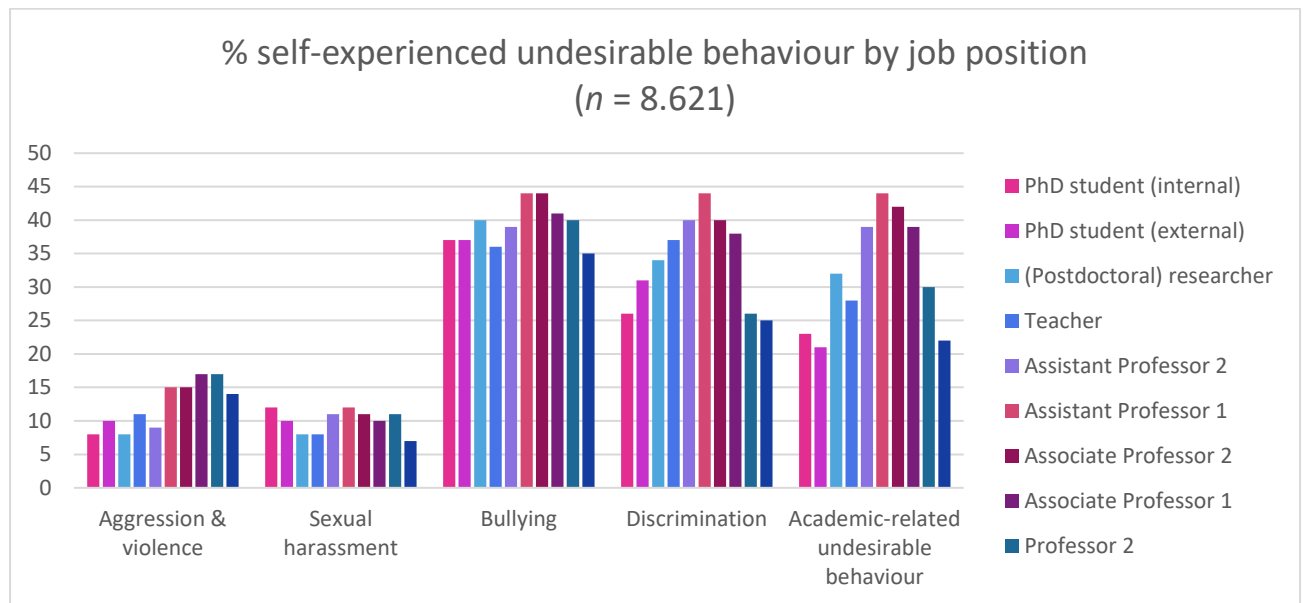
Again, there are no clear positive or negative differences between universities regarding undesirable behaviour (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Undesirable behaviour broken down by university
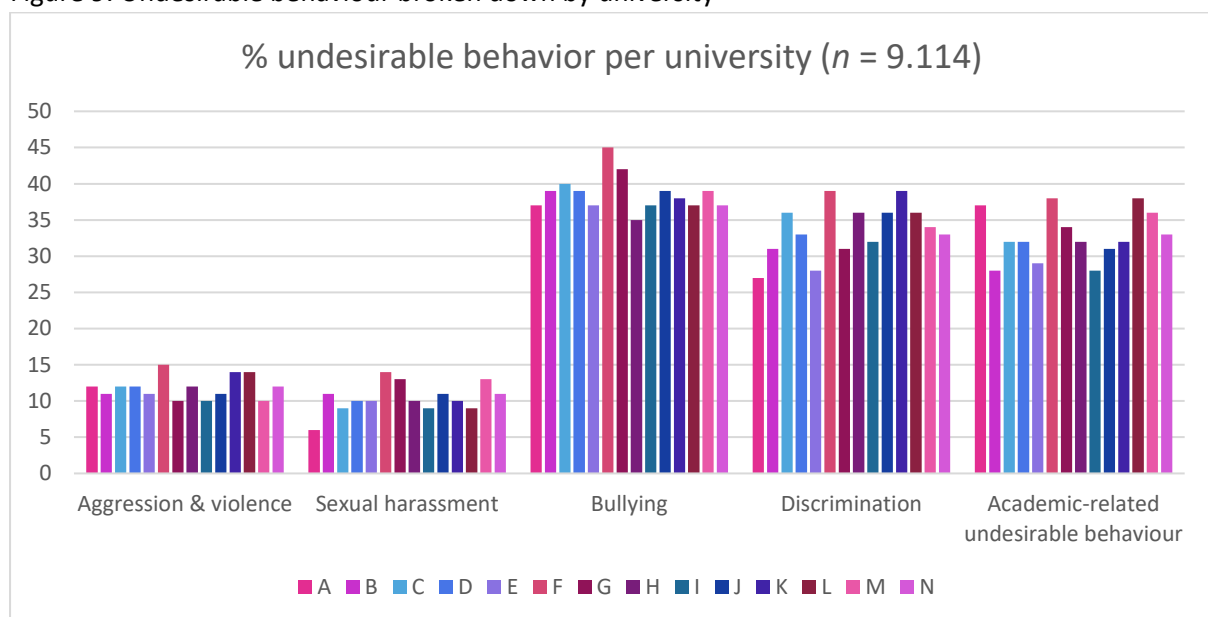
3.3. The main causes of work pressure are education and research funding, too many tasks, performance pressure, and ambition. The hierarchical structure and managers play a central role in undesirable behaviour.

Work pressure
Previous research shows that universities mainly point towards external causes for work pressure, such as funding for teaching and research. In 2021, the Labour Authority asked universities to (a) initiate dialogue with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science for causes outside the universities' sphere of influence and (b) gain insight into internal causes of work pressure that universities can influence themselves.[13]

Again, interviewees expressed the view that many causes of work pressure are external. This mainly concerns the effects of the education funding system when student numbers rise and fluctuate sharply. According to interviewees, fluctuations in the required teaching capacity are difficult to cope with because funding for education is delayed (partly when students graduate). This may create additional workload. Moreover, a good deal of external regulatory and accountability pressures is experienced. This pressure mostly concerns external stressors, such as accountability for research funding received or procedural and administrative actions to get and keep a teaching programme accredited. Finally, external research funding, which is highly competitive and has a low success rate, is also mentioned. In 2023, through the umbrella organisation *Universiteiten van Nederland* (Universities of the Netherlands), universities put forward proposals to make funding more future-proof. However, these proposals lack attention to work pressure.[14]

The documentation submitted does not show that universities have improved their insight into internal causes of work pressure. As mentioned, the available policy documents often lack a problem analysis, and causes of work pressure are not systematically covered in employee satisfaction surveys. It is true that education funding is partly based on student numbers that can fluctuate, but it also consists of a lump sum that is allocated to various organisational units according to an internal distribution model. The Labour Authority was not informed about of how internal distribution models could accommodate fluctuating student numbers.

Internal causes of work pressure that emerge from the interviews are performance pressure, the culture and ambition of universities and faculties, as well as individuals. On the other hand, survey respondents indicated that their perceived work pressure is mainly caused by factors such as too many tasks, performance pressure, and peaks in work pressure. Analyses show that all causes identified by respondents are significantly and positively related to perceived psychological job demands and exhaustion.

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[13] Inspectie SZW (2021). *WOinActie report.*
[14] The Minister of Education, Culture and Science initiated the 2022 *Toekomstverkenning Onderwijs en Wetenschap* (Education and Science Future Outlook), to which universities want to actively contribute through UNL. A Future Vision for University Education (2023) has therefore been offered through the UNL Werkgroep Sterken (Strengths Working Group). Among other things, this vision argues that the funding system should change from competitive funding to funding that promotes collaboration and profiling. Making transition funds available to enable systemic changes is also advocated. However, it is also indicated that previous committees have proposed changes to the funding system (such as the 2019 Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) and in 2010 the Veerman) Committee. None of these plans addresses work pressure.

Undesirable behaviour

The *hierarchical structure* and associated *power differences* are seen by employees as the main underlying cause of undesirable behaviour, according to both the interviews and the survey. This results in dependencies that can lead to long-term and structurally undesirable behaviour. Dependencies make it difficult for employees to raise undesirable behaviour because their own position may be at stake. *Work and performance pressures* are also cited as reasons for undesirable behaviour. Performance pressure can cause people to put their own interests ahead of those of others and to not be concerned about respectful interaction. Culture is also mentioned as an underlying cause of undesirable behaviour. Interviewees indicated that this is simply how it works at a university, that the culture in which one can discuss undesirable behaviour with others varies significantly from one organisational unit to another. They indicated that, in practice, this sometimes means that perpetrators of undesirable behaviour are tolerated, shielded, and allowed to carry on as usual and that there are no consequences attached to undesirable behaviour.

Respondents mainly attribute undesirable behaviour among academic and teaching staff to colleagues and supervisors (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Persons to whom undesirable behaviour is attributed
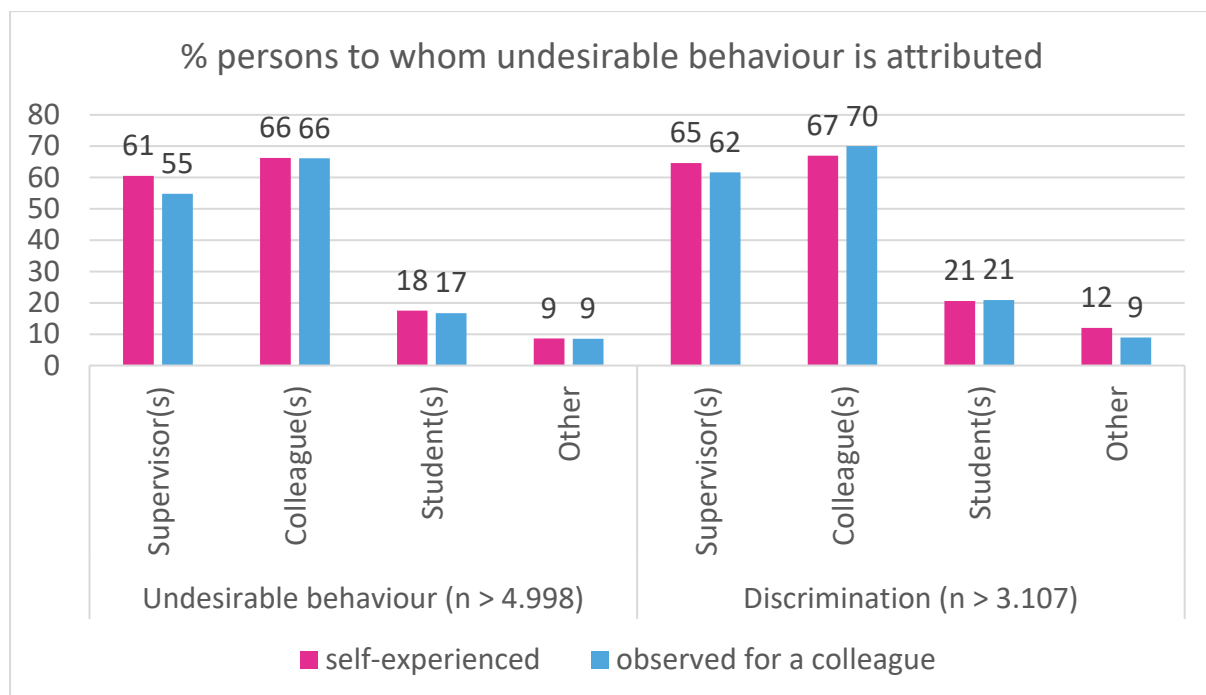
According to many interviewees, a cultural change is needed in which managers play a central role in shaping and monitoring the new culture. At the same time, interviewees also criticise the *current organisation and implementation of leadership positions*. In many cases, the implementation of health and safety policies now rests on the shoulders of managers within faculties (especially among deans and department chairs). As a result, much depends on how an individual manager interprets and subsequently shapes the policy, which can have a positive as well as a negative outcome. This is further reinforced by rotating leadership, the inability to prioritise leadership tasks alongside teaching and research tasks, and the (sometimes) lack of leadership qualities and intercultural competencies. Managers (in the past) have generally been selected based on subject matter expertise rather than on leadership skills. The interviews further revealed that managers sometimes

are resistant towards cultural change. In addition, a lack of transparency is perceived when it comes to setting clear standards regarding undesirable behaviour by managers and how incidents and cases of misbehaviour are handled. In short, the combination of the centralised versus decentralised infrastructure of health and safety policies, the existing hierarchy, and the organisation/selection of managers can make universities vulnerable to the emergence and perpetuation of (structurally) undesirable behaviour.

3.4. Universities take many measures, but employees are aware of and use them only to a limited extent. Measures with a source approach are seen as the most efficient in tackling work pressure. Little is reported to confidential advisers, and official complaints are hardly ever submitted.

Measures
Universities are taking many initiatives and measures to manage psychosocial workload risks. More measures are taken to reduce work pressure (a total of 113 measures) than to combat undesirable behaviour (a total of 31 measures).

Measures against both work pressure and undesirable behaviour partly consist of a source approach where the stressor is removed from the work context (e.g. structural resources for additional staff). However, the majority of measures are targeted at the individual, by giving individuals resources to deal with the stressor (e.g. a time management course). Also, measures are almost never obligatory (such as leadership programmes or awareness training on undesirable behaviour).

On average, one-third of the measures are known to respondents. Respondents who indicated they were aware of a measure were then asked whether they had used it. In response, another third indicated they also had used these measures (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. The average percentage of respondents who indicated they were aware of measures and had used measures

Knowledge and use of measures to reduce work pressure — 76, 24, 70, 30

Knowledge and use of measures to reduce undesirable behaviour — 78, 32, 78, 28

Knowledge and use of measures specifically for supervisors — 63, 37, 71, 29

- No knowledge of measures
- Yes, knowledge of measures and made use of measures
- Yes, knowledge of measures, but did not use measures
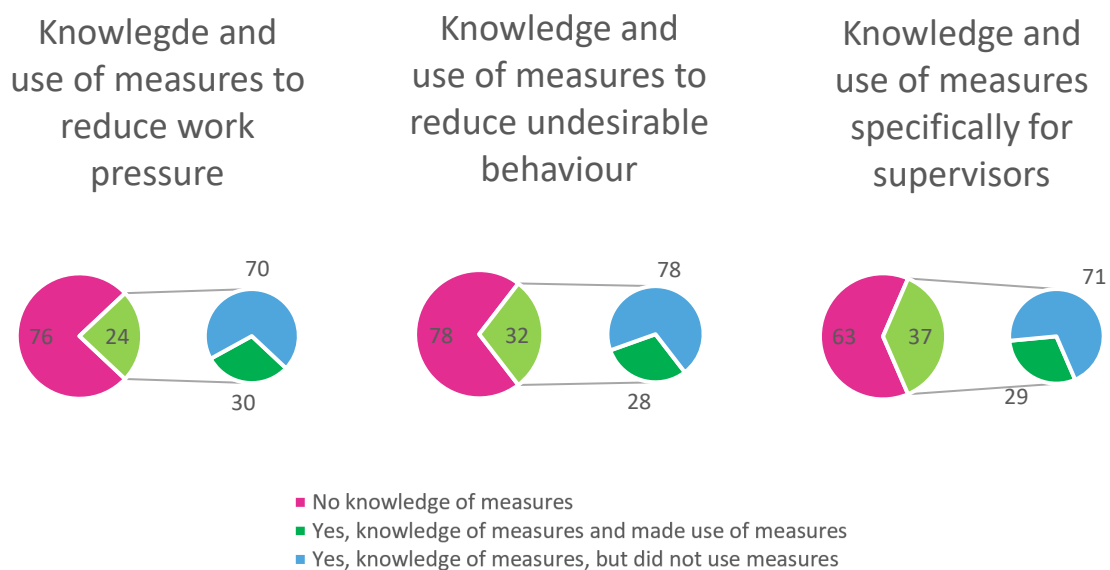
On average, the measures that were used by respondents are rated as neutral to somewhat effective. The measures assessed by respondents as most effective in combating work pressure relate to:

- reducing task load (less lecturing, less committee work, task reduction when tasks are new, re-use of course materials, broadening norm hours)
- obtaining additional staff and support (recruitment of new employees).

When it comes to preventing or reducing undesirable behaviour, employees consider *active bystander* training courses with the aim to give employees tools to combat undesirable behaviour as the most effective.

Recognition and Rewards programmes as a solution to work pressure?

Universities are at various stages of implementing the 'Recognition and Rewards' programme launched by the universities[15]. Despite much already being set in motion[16], the programme is not yet resulting in concrete changes in the workplace. A few universities have created career tracks based on different career profiles, but for most universities, recognition and rewards is mainly a topic of conversation during the annual performance review.

Norm hours for lecturing

Several universities have tried to identify norm hours for teaching or create a system for norms. No best practices seem to be emerging from this yet. This could be due to (1) the lack of objective standards for a wide variety of content and forms of education, (2) employees being reluctant to indicate how long they take to complete certain tasks, and (3) departments not sharing their systems with others out of fear of having to use a different system in the future.

Mindlab and active bystander training to reduce undesirable behaviour

There are two measures to reduce undesirable behaviour that are used by several universities. First, half of the universities have used a theatre performance (e.g. Mindlab) as a measure to address and reduce undesirable behaviour.[17] Secondly, there is a training that gives employees tools to raise and combat undesirable behaviour, known as active bystander training. On average, the effectiveness of both the theatre performance and active bystander training is rated between 'neutral' and 'somewhat effective'.

Confidential advisers

In recent years, most universities have set up a structure (or infrastructure) for questions, reports and complaints about undesirable behaviour. The organisation of confidential advisers and the reporting system varies widely among universities. The number of confidential advisers and where they are located (central and/or decentral) varies from university to university. There are universities with a coordinator or central reporting point where all reports come together for an overview of issues and as such universities can act on signals within the organisation. There are also universities where confidential advisers act individually and do not share information with each other because all the information provided to them is confidential. Without information sharing, there seems to be less visibility on where problems are occurring, and it is more difficult to pick up signals and act on them.

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[15] VNSU, NFU, KNAW, NWO, & ZonMw. (2019). *Room for everyone's talent. Towards a new balance in recognising and valuing scientists*.

[16] For an overview of initiatives taken, see VNSU, NFU, KNAW, NWO, & ZonMw. (2019). *Room for everyone's talent. Towards a new balance in recognising and valuing scientists*. and Recognition and appreciation | NWO

[17] Mindlab theatre performance by Theatre Makers Radio Kootwijk

At five of the 14 universities, confidential advisers indicate that they have sufficient time and resources to provide thorough education on their role and create awareness of undesirable behaviour. Nonetheless, 82% of respondents know where to find information about the confidential advisers and how to reach them. In addition, more than 80% also indicated that they would use a confidential adviser if they felt it was necessary.

Reports and complaints
The annual reports of amongst others the confidential advisers show that all universities have received internal reports of excessive work pressure and/or undesirable behaviour. These reports usually concern some form of harassment (bullying, sexual harassment, verbal aggression). The survey shows that employees do not always report problems around work pressure and/or undesirable behaviour. About 25% of respondents who had reason to report (i.e., experienced work pressure or undesirable behaviour) did not do so because they felt unsafe or did not feel that reporting would change anything.

Of respondents who experienced work pressure or undesirable behaviour, 31% reported work pressure and 16% reported undesirable behaviour. These reports are most often made to managers (90%), but also to confidential advisers (20%) and HR staff (18%). Of all employees who acknowledged having made a report, 50% rated the handling of this report as satisfactory or very good and 50% as moderate or poor.

A report can result in an official complaint. Such a complaint is dealt with by a complaints committee where facts about the merits of the complaint are gathered, including adversarial proceedings. In 2022, a total of 11 official complaints were filed at four different universities, according to the annual reports of the confidential advisers/ombudsman. About 1% of reports thus result in an official complaint. The interviews revealed that officially filing a complaint is a very difficult process for the complainant, with potentially far-reaching negative consequences for both the complainant and the accused party. Both confidential advisers and works councils say they are unsatisfied with the current complaints system. Several reasons have been given for this. For instance, handling a complaint is mainly procedural and not focused on seeking solutions or improvements. Another reason cited is that complaint committees sometimes lack knowledge of academia or are too intertwined with it. Also, reporters and complainants are not or not sufficiently protected by universities. Universities, moreover, seem unwilling to disclose defendants or perpetrators and hide behind individual cases to remain anonymous instead of systematically addressing issues and actively learning from incidents. Given the high proportion of respondents who indicated that they had experienced work pressure and/or undesirable behaviour, as well as the percentage of reporters who rated the handling of their reports as inadequate, the explanation for the low number of official complaints seems to lie in the malfunctioning of the (informal) reporting structure.

3.5. Marginal follow-up of concerns stated in 2021 based on action plans

During a previous intervention in 2020, the Labour Authority asked all universities to draw up action plans - university plans on h9ow to prevent/reduce work pressure, undesirable behaviour/discrimination and working hours. These plans were then studied and analysed by the Labour Authority. The resulting report and individual feedback letters in 2021 identified several

areas of concern regarding these action plans.[18] Table 2 shows these previously identified areas of concern, along with the findings based on the documents, interviews and survey results studied in 2023.

Table 2: Issues of concern as formulated by the Labour Authority in 2021 and the findings of the current investigation in 2023.

NOTES: Alongside the findings, a traffic light model is presented in the last column to indicate the status of the stated concern. Green means a clear improvement in 2023 compared to 2021 based on the documentation, interviews and online survey. Orange indicates that there is partial improvement, but it remains an area of concern. Red indicates no or insufficient improvement observed compared to 2021.

Areas of concern identified in 2021 based on the Action Plans by universities	Findings in 2023 based on documentation, interviews and online survey results	
Work pressure		
1. Many of the universities' (proposed) measures are targeted at the individual rather than having a source approach.	There has been an increase in measures that address issues more structurally, such as an investment in additional staff and more support. The majority of measures still focus on the individual employee. These include, in particular, measures to make individuals more resilient to work pressure and undesirable behaviour.	🟠
2. There is no systematic examination of whether measures align with the underlying causes of problems. The PDCA cycle is not completed optimally.	Most universities have not taken action/measures based on a problem analysis. There was no clear evaluation of measures taken or any discussion of evaluations in the risk assessment and evaluation. In short, there is little evidence that universities complete a PDCA cycle. The plans and processes that do exist seem to be implemented independently.	🔴
3. The effect of training aimed at reducing work pressure is not measured and is not clear.	The impact of individual measures is tested little to not at all. Effects of individual measures cannot be tested through an employee satisfaction survey because a change over time in outcomes cannot be attributed to a specific individual measure.	🔴
4. It is not clear how much employees make use of available training programs.	Universities have little to no insight into whether employees use measures to reduce work pressure. The survey shows that, on average, about 30% of employees are aware of available measures, and of those who are aware, an average of 30% make use of them.	🔴
5. Universities cite underfunding, particularly insufficient grants to conduct proper research, as an underlying cause. The action plans have not led to further insight into causes within the universities' sphere of influence.	The employer cites underfunding as a cause of work pressure. The extent to which universities themselves have adjusted their internal allocation models has not been examined. Within the influencing possibilities of the universities themselves, there is no problem analysis in the available policy documents, nor are causes of work pressure and undesirable behaviour systematically questioned in employee satisfaction surveys. The current study also shows other underlying causes, such as structurally additional tasks above the employee job profile.	🔴
Working hours		
6. Universities have little insight in and pay little attention to actual hours worked by employees.	Universities still have little or no insight into how many hours their employees work and when they work. They also sometimes mistakenly think that the Dutch Working Hours Act (ATW) does not apply to them (in full).	🔴
7. The imbalance between valuing performance in the domain of lecturing versus research is a potential source of work pressure.	All universities are engaged in the Recognition and Rewards programme, an initiative of several umbrella organisations.[19] Universities are at various stages of thinking about and implementing this programme. It is not clear how different interpretations of the programme will impact reducing work pressure.	🟠
8. In employee satisfaction surveys of universities, there is little or no focus on working hours in relation to work pressure.	9 out of 14 universities ask for information on overtime in their employee satisfaction survey. The relationship between overtime and the experience of work pressure is barely made, if at all. The information on overtime in the employee satisfaction surveys did not lead to concrete actions.	🟠
Discrimination in the workplace		

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[18] Inspectie SZW (2021). *WOinActie report.*

[19] Recognition & Rewards programme - Recognition & Rewards (recognitionrewards.nl).

9.	There is insufficient assessment of the 12 legal grounds for discrimination and subsequently, grounds that should form part of an approach to counter discrimination.	In the employee satisfaction survey, 13 of 14 universities asked whether employees experienced discrimination. Three Universities asked about the specific grounds of discrimination. In other words, universities usually have information on whether discrimination is occurring, but only three universities have insight into the 12 legal grounds of discrimination.	🔴
10.	There is insufficient focus on adequately identifying occupational risks due to discrimination. Thus, underlying risk-increasing (organisational and/or personnel) factors are not adequately identified.	As mentioned above, problem analyses of underlying causes are lacking in the available policy documents, and causes of discrimination are not systematically covered in employee satisfaction surveys. There is no insight into risk-increasing factors as for instance identified in the Delphi study by the Labour Authority.[20]	🔴
11.	In contrast to work pressure, employee surveys (including employee satisfaction surveys) focus much less on discrimination. Also, the follow-up of employee surveys is not always clear. Nor is it always clear what specific measures will be taken.	All universities now ask questions about undesirable behaviour in the employee satisfaction survey. None of the employee satisfaction surveys ask about the causes of undesirable behaviour. At three universities, questions about who caused the undesirable behaviour (e.g., the supervisor, a colleague or a student) are asked. As mentioned above, all universities ask about perceived discrimination, but only three universities also have insight into the 12 legal grounds of discrimination.	🟡
12.	Regarding discrimination, the PDCA cycle is not or is insufficiently completed; 'the cycle is not fully completed' and is not recognised as such at most universities. As a result, the effects of measures concerning discrimination, for example, are unclear.	There was evidence of full completion of the PDCA cycle at two universities. However, these PDCA cycles related to work pressure, not undesirable behaviour or discrimination.	🟡
13.	The responsibilities and competencies for addressing discrimination are not always clearly defined. For example, who is responsible for coordinating and processing reports and signals following complaints and interpreting and refining the reports and signals with background information?	All universities now have a confidential advisor, an ombudsperson, and sometimes an additional infrastructure where employees can report discrimination. The majority of respondents indicated they had received education and information about the confidential adviser and knew where to go for a complaint or to report undesirable behaviour.	🟢
14.	The organisation of aftercare for victims of discrimination and sexual harassment does not seem to be sufficiently well organised. There is no visible focus on this in most universities' documentation.	There is still little to no documentation on aftercare for victims of undesirable behaviour. The current study reveals that about a quarter of respondents indicate they do not want to report because they consider it unsafe or do not believe in its effectiveness. Half of the employees who did report are dissatisfied with the handling of the report and aftercare.	🔴
15.	The involvement of employee representation in the issue of discrimination is not demonstrably structured.	No research has been conducted into this.	
16.	Information and education are mostly voluntary, and continuous attention to this issue remains necessary.	Participation in programs against undesirable behaviour is still almost always voluntary.	🔴
17.	Sometimes, there are many (policy) documents on discrimination, but the status and coherence between documents and actions are unclear.	Many documents state something about undesirable behaviour, and many different parties are involved in policy and implementation. The status and consistency between documents and actions are not clear.	🔴

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[20] Netherlands Labour Authority (2022). *Delphi study on risk factors and measures against internal undesirable behaviour.*

It can be concluded that universities have not adequately followed up on the 2021 action plans and identified areas of concern, as most of them still apply in 2023. That includes not following the PDCA cycle optimally, not adequately identifying causes of psychosocial workload and not having an insight into working hours. The Labour Authority expects university Executive Boards to take action on all the above orange and red areas of concern.

In addition, some areas of concern from 2021 have been made more insightful through the current study, such as the specific grounds of discrimination faced by scientific and teaching staff. In addition to the above addressed areas of concern on psychosocial workload policies in table 2, several additional areas of concern were identified based on the current study:

- Ensure an integrated and uniform approach to policy processes (risk assessment and evaluation, employee satisfaction surveys, policy documents) in all organisational units.
- For each action taken to prevent or reduce psychosocial workload, go through the full PDCA cycle, in which the evaluation of measures play an important role.
- Ensure that underlying causes of work pressure and undesirable behaviour are systematically identified, especially those within the university's sphere of influence, and translate this into concrete measures that address these causes.
- The Working Hours Act applies to a large proportion of university employees. Therefore, ensure that there is insight into working hours, provide adequate rest and recuperation opportunities for employees, and actively monitor this.
- Continue to proactively draw employees' attention to available measures against work pressure and undesirable behaviour.
- Evaluate why the formal (and informal) reporting and complaint system is not used and/or not effective for reporting undesirable behaviour.
- Focus on measures aimed primarily at improving working conditions rather than lifestyle.

It is now a up to the universities to move forward with these outcomes and comply with the law. The Labour Authority works from the perspective that most employers are willing and able to comply with the law. The Labour Authority offers a perspective for action to promote employers' compliance with the Working Conditions Act. For example, by stating points of concern[21] and providing knowledge[22] so that employers can take (preventive) measures more easily. However, this intervention strategy by the Labour Authority is not free of obligation. If employers ultimately fail to show improvements, a demand compliance will be issued, possible followed by a fine.[23] The latter is not applicable in the context of this study, but the current study will be followed up by an inspection project in 2025.

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[21] Inspectie SZW (2021). *WOinActie report*
[22] Netherlands Labour Authority (2022). *Delphi study on risk factors and measures against internal undesirable behaviour.*
[23] Netherlands Labour Authority (2023). *Annual plan 2024.*

4. Perspective for action

Based on the Labour Authority's current research results, it can be concluded that work pressure and undesirable behaviour are persistent problems among teaching and scientific staff at the 14 Dutch public universities. This calls for measures that require various actors to take action. The responsibility for a healthy working environment lies primarily with employers. In the case of universities, the Executive Boards bear the ultimate responsibility for a well functioning health and safety policy.[24] Based on this responsibility and the findings of this study, the university Boards should take the lead in initiating improvements, directing them accordingly and actively seeking accountability from faculties/professors.

The current study offers insight into possible causes of the observed work pressure and undesirable behaviour. In addition to the areas of concern already mentioned above, the Labour Authority provides additional perspective for university administrations based on the current research findings and observed patterns:

- There is often central management and decentralised implementation of policies and measures on work pressure and undesirable behaviour. Central HR policies are not always implemented within faculties, and the ownership of psychosocial workload policy development and implementation is unclear. Measures do not always align well with policy, and HR at the central level is not always aware of what is happening at the decentralised level. Ensure that central HR policies are implemented and evaluated at the decentralised level, and create alignment and ownership on formulating and implementing psychosocial workload policies.
- Universities experience the method of funding combined with fluctuating student numbers as problematic. In anticipation of changes in funding, explore options for coping with fluctuating student numbers within your own institution.
- Many employees perform additional tasks that are not part of their job profiles. This creates additional work pressure. Ensure that job/remuneration and task load align with the job profiles laid down in the collective agreement. Also, look into whether requirements for selection procedures and/or internal promotions align with job classification system profiles (UFO profiles).
- Many employees experience undesirable behaviour. Undesirable behaviour emerges as a structural problem that cannot be treated as an individual or stand-alone case or incident.[25] Actively propagate this and work towards an adequate approach to prevent and reduce undesirable behaviour that is transparent, clear and structural.[26-27]
- Complaints about work pressure and undesirable behaviour are rarely submitted, while psychosocial workload problems are considerable. Half of the respondents rated the handling of their report as inadequate, and some of the respondents indicated they did not feel safe enough to report. Review how informal reporting procedures can better meet employees' needs with complaints about work pressure and undesirable behaviour.

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[24] Employees of medical faculties are not always included in the university's workforce, but in the university medical centre. In these cases, the university medical centre and not the university is the employer.
[25] Essanhaji, commissioned by the Social Fund for the Knowledge Sector (2022). *The possibility (and impossibility) of submitting complaints.*
[26] Netherlands Labour Authority (2022). *Delphi study on risk factors and measures of internal undesirable behaviour.*
[27] KNAW (2022). *Social safety in Dutch science. From paper to practice.*

Consider whether other, more approachable yet independent and safe, ways would be more effective in making the reporting system function better.

- Managers play a key role in both the problem as well as the solution of/for work pressure and undesirable behaviour. Continue to develop high-quality leadership and make sure it is not free of obligation.

Besides Executive Boards, other actors also have a role to play. This includes policymakers, sector associations, works councils and individual employees. The following are areas for improvement that the Labour Authority intends to actively bring to the attention to those parties.

- Ongoing initiatives on (a) education and research funding and (b) social safety still pay little attention to work pressure and undesirable behaviour and their underlying causes. Consider how these themes can be integrated into current and future plans and initiatives in this area.[28]
- Dependencies play an important role in the problem of undesirable behaviour. Consider possible adjustments to the existing dependencies so that these negative impacts are mitigated and use proposals made for this purpose.[29]-[30]

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[28] Examples include the Future Outlook on Education and Science (2022) and UNL Working Group-Sterken *A Future Vision for University Education* (2023), or the *Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation* (2019) and the Committee *Veerman* (2010).

[29] Advisory Committee on Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2022). *Advice and Recommendations following the advisory report Social Safety in Dutch Science - From paper to practice*.

[30] First steps to this end are described, for example, by The Young Academy (2023). *Everyone's a professor!*