

Junior researcher and victim of inappropriate behavior at the Flemish universities: who is willing to officially report it?

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How many junior researchers at the Flemish universities become the victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and/or discrimination over the course of a single year? The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* provided an answer to that question: nearly 1 in 4, or an estimated 4138 junior researchers (ECOOM-brief 53). We also found answers to the questions of whether junior researchers know where to report inappropriate behavior and whether they are willing to do so: 2 in 5 junior researchers do not know where to report inappropriate behavior, and this applies to both victims and those who have been spared of experiencing inappropriate behavior in the workplace (ECOOM-brief 55). Victims were found to be significantly less willing to officially report inappropriate behavior. We described the decision-making process that precedes the willingness to report, and the many barriers that junior researchers may encounter in this process, in ECOOM-brief 56.

In this ECOOM-brief, we continue to focus on inappropriate behavior at the Flemish universities, but we do so by narrowing our focus with the question: "Who is willing to officially report?". We answer this question by examining whether the willingness to report differs significantly based on individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, and the work context. We also examined these characteristics in previous research, when we asked the questions "Who is most at risk of experiencing inappropriate behavior?" (ECOOM-brief 54) and "Who knows where they can report inappropriate behavior?" (ECOOM-brief 55). To gain insight into the willingness to report among junior researchers who are victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace, we adopted a dual approach in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*: on the one hand, through a hypothetical question about willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior, and on the other hand, by differentiating responses based on whether or not junior researchers had actually been victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past year.

CAPTURING THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT THROUGH A HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION: "IF YOU WERE THE VICTIM..."

"If you were the victim of inappropriate behavior, would you officially report it?" With this question, we surveyed all junior researchers at the Flemish universities in the *Survey of Junior Researchers* in 2023 to measure their willingness to report if they were to be victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace. This hypothetical question may trigger different responses in those who have been spared from inappropriate behavior and those who have actually been victims of it. For those who have never been victims of inappropriate behavior, the question activates that one puts him/herself in the position of someone who did experience it: it asks them to imagine a hypothetical situation and go through the decision-making process that may or may not lead to a willingness to report (see ECOOM-brief 56). For those who were victims of inappropriate behavior, the question may trigger memories of the incident or incidents the victim faced at the time. The experiences of inappropriate behavior at the time triggered a decision-making process, at that moment, which led to willingness or unwillingness to officially report. That decision-making process at the time was accompanied by emotions, choices, and possibly the gathering of information, insights, and experiences regarding reports and their follow-up by the organization (see ECOOM-brief 54; Patterson et al., 2009; Sax et al., 2021).

The hypothetical question regarding willingness to report if one were a victim makes it possible to identify the concerns of all junior researchers at the Flemish universities, regardless of whether they have already been victims. Studies on the willingness to report inappropriate behavior within organizations typically use a different approach: first, participants are asked whether they have been the victim of inappropriate behavior in the past, and then only those who were victims are asked whether they were willing to report the inappropriate behavior. This approach results in a blind spot of unknown magnitude.

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WILLINGNESS TO REPORT AMONG VICTIMS OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

Little is known about the extent to which and the ways in which a person's willingness to report changes when he or she actually becomes a victim of inappropriate behavior.

A study on sexual harassment at a German university shows that there is a significant difference between the willingness to report when one is not a victim and actually reporting when one is a victim (Hoebel et al., 2022; see also Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). The pattern in the study was clear: those who have not personally experienced inappropriate behavior are more likely to believe they would report it if they were to become a victim. However, once someone actually becomes a victim, the step toward actually reporting it often becomes too large. This was particularly the case with the most serious forms of sexual harassment, such as being pressured to perform sexual acts or rape. Among those who had not been victims of these forms of inappropriate behavior, 80% to 100% indicated that they would report it if they were to be victims. However, among those who had actually become victims, fewer than 15% actually reported the inappropriate behavior (Hoebel et al., 2022). We see a similar reporting rate in the UniSAFE project, an EU project aimed at better understanding gender-based violence and inappropriate behavior at universities: only 13% of victims of gender-based violence reported it (Lipinsky et al., 2022). Similarly, research on inappropriate behavior at the prestigious Max Planck Institute in Germany (Schraudner et al., 2019) yielded a comparable figure from the analysis: 13.8% of victims of sexual harassment actually reported the incident. Among victims of bullying, the reporting rate was higher: 35%. A recent study at Dutch universities revealed that only 17% of victims of inappropriate behavior actually made a report (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024).

ASSESSING WILLINGNESS TO REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR THROUGH THE SURVEY OF JUNIOR RESEARCHERS 2023

In the following, we examine the extent to which junior researchers at the Flemish universities are willing to officially report inappropriate behavior. To this end, we use the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, collected by ECOOM HR in RGD commissioned by the Flemish government. This five-yearly survey is consistently directed at all junior researchers at the five Flemish universities. In 2023, there were 17838 junior researchers. Approximately 9 out of 10 junior researchers are working on a PhD. For more details on the data collection, respondents, and topics, we refer to ECOOM-briefs 51 and 53.

In 2023, we asked for the first time a series of questions about inappropriate behavior (see ECOOM-briefs 53 through 58). The questions were formulated in consultation with the five Flemish universities. In the current ECOOM-brief, we use the hypothetical question: "If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?". The response options were "yes, but only in case I can report it anonymously", "yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously", "I don't know if I would report it. It depends", "no", and

"I prefer not answer this question". For this question, 76 respondents indicated they would rather not answer, and 11 respondents left the question completely unanswered.

Specifically, we asked the following four research questions:

1. *Does the willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior vary depending on individual characteristics, such as gender and nationality?*
2. *Does the willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior vary depending on job and employment characteristics, such as involvement in educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promotors, and type of appointment?*
3. *Does the willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior vary depending on characteristics of the work context, such as science cluster and university?*
4. *Does the willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior vary depending on actually being a victim in the past year? (analysis by individual characteristic, job or employment characteristic, and work context characteristic)*

To answer the fourth research question, we use the responses by junior researchers to the question regarding whether they have been a victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the 12 months prior to the survey. More specifically, we asked about physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination (see ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54). In answering question four, we examine general patterns: are victims with certain individual characteristics, job or employment characteristics, or in a particular work context more, less, or equally willing to report compared to those who were not victims? Readers seeking detailed analysis results for question four, can retrieve this in appendix.

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IF ONE WERE TO BE A VICTIM OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR VARY DEPENDING ON INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS GENDER AND NATIONALITY?

Table 1 shows the willingness of junior researchers to report inappropriate behavior if they were to be a victim, broken down by gender and nationality.

Table 1 first shows significant gender differences in the willingness to report as a victim. Since the number of respondents who identified their gender as "I use another term" and "I prefer not to say" is N=23 and N=38, respectively, the estimates for these groups are not very robust. For the sake of completeness, we have included the figures in the table. If we zoom in on the junior researchers who identified their gender as "male" or "female" and add up the percentages for both "yes" response options, we find 55.4% among men and 48.4% among women. We see that the extent to which anonymity is viewed as a necessary condition for reporting is fairly similar for men and women: slightly more than 1 in 5 is only willing to report if it can be done anonymously. The willingness to report even if it cannot be done anonymously is found in 1 in 3 men, while that proportion is 1 in 4 among women. The response

option chosen by nearly half of the female junior researchers was: "I don't know if I would report it. It depends". Among men, we note that 2 in 5 chose this response option. Furthermore, we see that the proportion of junior researchers who are not willing to report is 2.6% among men and 2.8% among women. The proportion of junior researchers who preferred not to answer the hypothetical question about willingness to report is 1.5% among women and 2.3% among men.

Table 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to be victims: breakdown by gender and nationality (N=3877)

	Yes, only if anonymous %	Yes, even if not anonymous %	I don't know if I would report it %	No %	I prefer not to answer this question %
Gender ***					
Male	22.3	33.1	39.7	2.6	2.3
Female	23.3	25.1	47.3	2.8	1.5
I use another term (§)	30.4	21.7	39.3	4.3	4.3
I prefer not to say (§)	10.5	28.9	42.1	5.3	13.2
Nationality ***					
Belgian	21.5	25.5	49.8	2.6	0.6
EU27	19.7	33.7	41.3	2.5	2.8
Non-EU27	28.7	32.0	30.7	3.5	5.1

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

*** =p<0.001

(§) = percentage calculated on N<50

When we examine junior researchers' willingness to report by nationality, we also observe a significant correlation here. The sum of the percentages in response columns 1 and 2 is 47.0% for junior researchers with Belgian nationality, 53.4% for junior researchers with EU27 nationality, and 60.7% for their colleagues from outside the EU27. For about 1 in 5 Belgians and junior researchers with EU27 nationality, anonymity is an essential condition for making an official report. Among junior researchers from outside the EU, we note that anonymity is an essential condition for 3 in 10. We note that 1 in 4 Belgians would make an official report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Among international junior researchers, 1 in 3 appears willing to make an official report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Looking next at the response option "I don't know. It depends" we see that half of Belgian junior researchers choose this option. This is significantly higher than among junior researchers from abroad: we note that 2 in 5 of those from within the EU27 and 3 in 10 of those from outside the EU27 would do so. Looking at the "no" response option, we see little variation by nationality (ranging from 2.5% to 3.5%). And for the response option "I prefer not to answer this question", we see that barely 0.6% of Belgians use this option. Among international junior researchers, this happens slightly more often: 2.8% of those from within the EU27 and 5.1% of those from outside the EU27.

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IF ONE WERE TO BE A VICTIM OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR VARY DEPENDING ON JOB AND EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, PHD TRACK, PHD PHASE, NUMBER OF PROMOTORS, AND TYPE OF APPOINTMENT?

In Table 2, we cross-tabulate the responses to the hypothetical question regarding willingness to report if one was to be a victim with various job and employment characteristics: whether or not the individual is involved in education, whether or not they are pursuing a PhD, the stage of their PhD track, the number of promoters for their PhD, and the type of appointment.

If we first look at involvement in education in Table 2, we see a slightly higher willingness to anonymously report inappropriate behavior among those who are not engaged in educational activities (25.7% vs. 21.0%). Junior researchers who are involved in teaching are slightly more likely to indicate that they do not know whether they would make an official report: it depends (46.5% vs. 40.3%).

Table 2 also examines willingness to report based on characteristics of the PhD program. First and foremost, we observe that there is no significant difference between those pursuing a PhD and those who are not. Within the group of PhD students, however, willingness to report does appear to vary significantly by stage of the PhD track: the later in the track, the more junior researchers are unwilling to report inappropriate behavior, and the more there are who prefer not to answer the survey question. In the finishing phase of the PhD track, the last two response columns total 8.0%. In the initiating phase of the PhD, this figure was 3.2%, and in the executing phase, 4.2%. When we then look at the number of promoters involved in a PhD program, we also observe a significant difference here: PhD students with a single promoter are more likely to indicate they are willing to make an official report when this cannot be done anonymously (30.0% vs. 27.9%), and they are also less hesitant about making a report (40.2% vs. 45.2%). At the same time, PhD students with a single promoter are also slightly more likely to select "no" (4.1% vs. 2.4%).

Finally, Table 2 also shows differences in willingness to report by type of appointment. When we add up the percentages in response columns 1 and 2, we see the highest level of willingness to report among junior researchers with a foreign scholarship or without university funding.

If we examine the extent to which anonymity is a sufficient condition for making an official report, we see that this varies across the different groups, ranging from 16.3% of those who selected "other/I don't know" to 37.5% of those whose research is funded by a foreign scholarship. The proportion of junior researchers who chose the response option "Yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously" ranges from 25.6% among junior researchers with a Belgian scholarship to 34.6% among those who selected "other/I don't know". We note the most doubt regarding reporting among junior researchers with a Belgian scholarship (45.4%), project staff (45.7%), and academic assistants (46.8%). Junior researchers with an academic assistantship or a scholarship from within or outside the country are slightly more likely to indicate that

they would not make an official report of inappropriate behavior: we note 2.9%, 3.6%, and 3.3%, respectively.

Table 2. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to be victims: breakdown by involvement in educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, , number of promotor, and type of appointment (N=3877)

	Yes, only if anonymous	Yes, even if not anonymous	I don't know if I would report it	No	I prefer not to answer this question
	%	%	%	%	%
Involved in educational activities ***					
Yes	21.0	28.3	46.5	2.5	1.7
No	25.7	28.5	40.3	3.2	2.3
PhD track n.s.					
Yes	22.7	28.4	44.1	2.8	2.0
No	25.4	28.6	44.4	0.8	0.8
PhD phase ***					
Initiating	23.6	30.7	42.5	1.6	1.6
Executing	21.8	28.5	45.5	2.4	1.8
Finishing	24.4	27.4	40.2	5.0	3.0
Number of promotor *					
One promotor	23.7	30.0	40.2	4.1	2.0
More than one promotor	22.5	27.9	45.2	2.4	2.0
Type of appointment ***					
Academic assistantship	21.0	28.3	46.8	2.9	1.0
Belgian scholarship	23.9	25.6	45.4	3.6	1.5
Foreign scholarship	37.5	27.7	27.7	3.3	3.8
Project funding	21.8	28.5	45.7	2.3	1.7
No university funding	24.1	33.9	35.5	2.4	4.1
Other/I don't know	16.3	34.6	42.1	2.3	4.7

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

n.s.=not significant * = p<0.05 ***=p<0.001

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IF ONE WERE TO BE A VICTIM OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR VARY DEPENDING ON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WORK CONTEXT, SUCH AS SCIENCE CLUSTER AND UNIVERSITY?

In Table 3, we focus on two key characteristics of work organization: scientific cluster and universities.

We measure the scientific cluster to which the junior researchers' work belongs in two ways. When we approach scientific cluster using the broad distinction between "STEM and non-STEM", we observe no significant difference in Table 3. However, a more detailed breakdown into the six science clusters according to the VODS classification (ECCOM, n.d.) shows a different picture. When we add response columns 1 and 2, we see the highest willingness to report within the engineering

and technology cluster, the agricultural, veterinary and food sciences, and the humanities and arts cluster. If we zoom in on the proportion of researchers who are only willing to report if they can do so anonymously, this proportion ranges from 21.4% within the engineering and technology cluster to 29.3% within the agricultural, veterinary and food sciences cluster. Anonymity appears not to be an essential condition for approximately 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 junior researchers. Within the engineering and technology cluster and the humanities and arts cluster, we find the highest proportion of junior researchers for whom anonymity does not appear to be a necessary condition for making an official report (34.0% and 31.7%, respectively). We see that junior researchers in the natural sciences cluster (43.2%), the social sciences cluster (46.4%), and the medical and health sciences cluster (49.2%) are most likely to doubt about whether they would make an official report: it depends. Junior researchers in the medical and health sciences not only show the greatest doubt to make an official report, but also indicate more often than any other group of junior researchers that, as victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace, they would not make an official report.

Table 3. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to be victims: breakdown by science cluster and university (N=3877)

	Yes, only if anonymous	Yes, even if not anonymous	I don't know if I would report it	No	I prefer not to answer this question
	%	%	%	%	%
Science cluster (1) n.s.					
STEM	22.8	28.8	43.7	2.9	1.8
Non-STEM	22.8	27.7	44.8	2.5	2.2
Science cluster (2) ***					
Natural sciences	23.9	28.1	43.2	2.4	2.4
Engineering and technology	21.4	34.0	39.6	2.8	2.2
Medical and health sciences	22.3	23.8	49.2	3.8	0.9
Agricultural, veterinary, and food sciences	29.3	28.5	39.0	0.8	2.4
Social sciences	22.3	26.3	46.4	2.7	2.3
Humanities and the arts	24.6	31.7	40.2	1.6	1.9
University ***					
KU Leuven	23.0	27.0	45.4	2.9	1.7
Ghent University	22.4	27.3	45.9	2.5	1.9
University of Antwerp	21.6	27.1	46.7	2.4	2.2
VUB	25.1	36.8	32.4	3.3	2.4
Hasselt University	19.6	26.8	47.1	3.6	2.9

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

n.s.=not significant ***=p<0.001

Finally, Table 3 also examines whether there are differences among the five Flemish universities in the extent to which their junior researchers are willing to report inappropriate behavior if they were to become victims of it. This appears to be the case. The willingness to report, provided anonymity is guaranteed, ranges from 19.6% at Hasselt University to 25.1% at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. At the latter university, more junior researchers also indicate that they would make an official report even if it cannot be done anonymously: 36.8% compared to 26.8% to 27.3% at the other universities. Junior researchers at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel were also the least likely to choose the response option "I don't know if I would report it. It depends": 32.4% compared to 45.4% to 47.1% at the other universities.

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IF ONE WERE TO BE A VICTIM OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR VARY DEPENDING ON ACTUALLY BEING A VICTIM IN THE PAST YEAR? (ANALYSIS BY INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTIC, JOB OR EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTIC, AND WORK CONTEXT CHARACTERISTIC)

Tables 1 through 3 show that the willingness to report if one were to be a victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace varies significantly depending on specific individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, as well as the work context. In what follows, we narrow our focus by examining, within each category of every characteristic considered (e.g., within the group of male junior researchers), whether the willingness to report differs significantly between those who were not victims of inappropriate behavior in the past year and those who said that they have been a victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace (see ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54 for more details). Willingness to report was again measured using the hypothetical question: "If you were a victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?". We considered the same five response options. Detailed findings based on these five response options can be found in the appendix. In Table 4, we simply note whether and how the willingness to report differed between victims and non-victims. In the last column of Table 4, we almost exclusively observe downward arrows: this downward arrow indicates that junior researchers who were victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past year are significantly less willing to make an official report compared to junior researchers who were not victims within the relevant category (see also ECOOM-brief 56). Only for a limited number of groups we observe no significant difference in willingness to report between victims and non-victims. This is the case for those not pursuing a PhD and for those who are academic assistants or project staff, or who do not have a personal scholarship. We also note no difference in the willingness to report between victims and non-victims within the cluster of agricultural, veterinary and food sciences.

Table 4. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior (IB) if they were to be victims: breakdown by actually being a victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past 12 months (N=3877)

	In the past year in the workplace victim of IB vs. not a victim of IB
Gender	
Male	↓
Female	↓
I use another term (§)	n.s.
I prefer not to say (§)	n.s.
Nationality	
Belgian	↓
EU27	↓
Non-EU27	↓
Involved in educational activities	
Yes	↓
No	↓
PhD track	
Yes	↓
No	n.s.
PhD phase	
Initiating	↓
Executing	↓
Finishing	↓
Number of promotor	
One promotor	↓
More than one promotor	↓
Type of appointment	
Academic assistantship	↓
Belgian scholarship	↓
Foreign scholarship	↓
Project funding	↓
No university funding	n.s.
Other/I don't know	n.s.
Science cluster (1)	
STEM	↓
Non-STEM	↓
Science cluster (2)	
Natural sciences	↓
Engineering and technology	↓
Medical and health sciences	↓
Agricultural, veterinary and food sciences	n.s.
Social sciences	↓
Humanities and the arts	↓
University	
KU Leuven	↓
Ghent University	↓
University of Antwerp	↓

VUB Hasselt University	↓ ↓
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Note. Significance based on the Chi²-test

n.s.=not significant

↓ victims less willing to report than non-victims

(%) = percentage calculated on N<50

DISCUSSION

In 2023, ECOOM HR in R&D, commissioned by the Flemish government, conducted its five-yearly survey of all junior researchers at the Flemish universities. For the first time, the survey also included several questions regarding inappropriate behavior in the workplace (see ECOOM-briefs 53 through 58). Two of these questions explored the willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior, either if one was to be a victim or a witness. In ECOOM-brief 56, we shared initial general insights on this topic and also discussed in detail the decision-making process that precedes the willingness to report, as well as the barriers junior researchers may encounter in doing so. We found that junior researchers who had been victims of inappropriate behavior at work in the preceding year were significantly less willing to report compared to their colleagues who had been spared such behavior. Among those who had not experienced inappropriate behavior, we observed that knowing where to make an official report was associated with a significantly higher willingness to do so. This was not the case for victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace. In this brief, we delved deeper into the willingness to report inappropriate behavior experienced within university work relationships. To this end, we asked all junior researchers the following hypothetical question: "If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?". We examined whether the answer to this question differed significantly based on specific individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, and characteristics of the work context. We also examined whether there were significant differences depending on whether or not junior researchers had indicated that they had been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the preceding year.

Takeaways

First, it appears that several individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, and characteristics of the work context are significantly associated with the response to the question "If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?". We found significant differences in willingness to report based on gender, nationality, involvement in educational activities, PhD phase, number of promotors, type of appointment, science cluster, and university. We found no significant difference in willingness to report between those pursuing a PhD and those not pursuing a PhD. For nearly all characteristics considered, we found that the willingness to report is significantly lower among junior researchers who, in the past year, were victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation

or threats, or discrimination in the workplace. This was also the general pattern we found in ECOOM-brief 56.

Second, it appears that the combination of the response options "yes, but only in case I can report it anonymously" and "yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously" indicate the highest willingness to report among junior researchers with a foreign scholarship (65.2%), junior researchers at the VUB (61.9%), and junior researchers with a non-EU27 nationality (60.7%). To what extent do the groups "junior researchers with a foreign scholarship" and "junior researchers from outside the EU27" consist of the same individuals? Additional analyses (not shown) indicate that 9 out of 10 junior researchers with a foreign scholarship come from outside the EU27, but if we consider the total group of non-European junior researchers, we see that more than 4 out of 5 of them do not have a foreign scholarship. In other words: there is some overlap between the group "junior researchers with a foreign scholarship" and "junior researchers from outside the EU27," but that overlap is far from complete. The greater willingness to report that we observe among both junior researchers with a foreign scholarship and junior researchers from outside the EU27 stands out, given our previous ECOOM-briefs. In the previous briefs, we found that both groups not only reported significantly higher annual prevalences of inappropriate behavior (particularly in the context of workplace discrimination), but also that both groups were significantly less aware of where to report such behavior (see ECOOM-briefs 54 and 55). Furthermore, it appears that both groups are significantly more willing than their colleagues to make anonymous reports. It is important to note that the option to report inappropriate behavior anonymously is provided by all universities, in line with Belgian legislation. Filing a complaint anonymously is not possible (see ECOOM-brief 55). For 1 in 5 to 1 in 3 junior researchers, it turned out that, if they were to be victims of inappropriate behavior, anonymity is not a necessary condition for making an official report.

Third, it appears that certain groups of junior researchers are more reluctant to officially report inappropriate behavior. For them, anonymity is not a sufficient condition for making an official report. In the *Survey of Junior Researchers*, this reluctance is reflected in the response options "I don't know if I would report it. It depends" and "no". The response option "I don't know if I would report it" is selected by 4 to 5 out of 10 junior researchers in most of the groups considered. The highest percentages are found among Belgian junior researchers, junior researchers in medical and health sciences, and women. The lowest percentages are found among junior researchers with a foreign scholarship, junior researchers from outside the EU27, and junior researchers at the VUB. In these last three groups, 3 out of 10 junior researchers chose the response option "I don't know if I would report it". If we also look at the "no" response option, the percentages across the groups range from 0.8% to 5.3%. The highest percentages are found among junior researchers who prefer not to answer the question about their gender and among PhD students in the finishing phase of their PhD.

Policy reflections

An initial policy reflection concerns the finding that junior researchers from outside the EU27 and junior researchers with a foreign scholarship exhibit a significantly different response pattern than their colleagues. In summary: they are more frequently victims of inappropriate behavior (ECCOOM-brief 54), show a greater willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior, but at the same time are less aware of where to report (ECCOOM-brief 55). For those who were actually victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past year, anonymity appears to be an important condition for reporting. How do the differences found between Belgian and international researchers, as well as within the group of international researchers, translate into the policies of the Flemish universities? To what extent is that policy sufficiently differentiated and capable of addressing the (potentially) different needs and barriers experienced by national and international junior researchers? In the Charter on Inappropriate Behavior of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (2018) and in the “Commitment to a Strengthened Policy on Inappropriate Behavior at Flemish Universities” (VLIR, 2022), we found no explicit mention or action points regarding this. However, a few suggestions emerged during a Learning Network event within the VLIR: a well-thought-out welcome policy, a well-thought-out language policy, and a platform to collect policy input and feedback from international staff and students (VLIR, 2024). If we look specifically at junior researchers, we see that approximately 1 in 2 junior researchers at universities in Flanders comes from abroad. Gaining insight into the cultural architecture of inappropriate behavior at universities is an *absolute must* for effective policy (see also ECCOOM-briefs 53 and 54). In this regard, three questions are crucial to ask. One: to what extent does a cultural diversity of interpretive frameworks cause the same situation or behavior to be perceived as inappropriate by one person but not by another? Two: are international researchers confronted with different situations and forms of inappropriate behavior? And three: is the decision-making process regarding the willingness to report inappropriate behavior, and the perceived barriers (such as stigmatization, knowledge, and interpretation of procedures), significantly different for international researchers? (See also ECCOOM-briefs 53, 54, and 56 in this regard).

A second policy reflection concerns the finding that PhD students in the finishing phase of their PhD are the least likely to report, and this is even more true for those who have been victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past year. In ECCOOM-brief 53, we noted that PhD students are increasingly likely to be victims of bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination as they progress through the various stages of their PhD program. In the finishing phase of the PhD, the prevalence rates are 13.3%, 14.5%, and 19.0%, respectively. Why are researchers in the final phase of their PhD less willing to report? The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* did not ask about reasons for being willing or unwilling to report, so we can only speculate. There are, however, some obvious explanations (see also ECCOOM-brief 56). For instance, it may be that PhD students who are nearing the completion of their PhD have no room for the uncertainty, time investment, and potential stress that come with making a report. If their promotor is

involved in the inappropriate behavior, they may also be reluctant to report it because they depend on that promotor not only for successfully completing their PhD but also for contract renewals, letters of recommendation, or opening doors to the next phase of their career. Another possible explanation is that PhD students in the final phase of their program may have decided for themselves that, after completing their PhD, they want to leave the university, and the inappropriate behavior, behind. The question arises as to what extent the Flemish universities are aware of the reasons why PhD students are increasingly confronted with inappropriate behavior in the successive phases of their PhD (see ECCOOM-brief 54)? And what decision-making process do PhD students go through—in specific phases of their PhD—to decide whether or not to take specific actions (see also ECCOOM-brief 56)? These actions can vary widely, ranging from directly confronting the perpetrator, seeking formal or informal help, reporting or filing a complaint, to socially isolating oneself or leaving the university (see ECCOOM-brief 56). From ECCOOM-briefs 19 and 20, we learn that 1 in 8 PhD students thinks about quitting their PhD several times a month, a week, or even daily, and the reasons for this are diverse. One approach universities sometimes use to gather information about their operations and potential reasons for (early) turnover, is through exit surveys or exit interviews. It is well known that exit surveys and exit interviews provide a selective picture of reality, unless the participants are representative, but that is rarely the case. For a policy on inappropriate behavior informed by exit surveys and exit interviews (see also Van Den Bossche et al., 2025), gaining insight into who does and does not participate in such surveys or interviews can be more informative than what is actually reported in the survey or interviews. A third policy reflection concerns the greater willingness to officially report among junior researchers at VUB. This is reflected not only in less doubt to report, but also in a greater willingness to report even if this cannot be done anonymously. The greater willingness to report at VUB cannot be explained by more instances of inappropriate behavior or greater awareness of where to report. After all, in ECCOOM-briefs 54 and 55, we noted that the five Flemish universities did not differ from one another in these areas. Why are junior researchers at VUB more willing to report inappropriate behavior? Based on the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* and publicly available information on the policies regarding inappropriate behavior at the Flemish universities, we must leave this question unanswered. However, our finding calls on the Flemish universities to further optimize the sharing of information about their policies and interventions not only with one another but also with staff and the broader public. This not only helps universities learn from each other's best practices, but also allows their own staff and the broader public to base their perceptions on more than just their own experiences, hearsay, and incidents reported in the media (see also ECCOOM-brief 53).

To date, scientific research on the willingness of academics to report and take action in cases of inappropriate behavior has been extremely scarce. The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* provided us with initial insights into the willingness of junior researchers at the Flemish universities to officially report inappropriate behavior. In the current

ECOOM-brief, we examined their willingness to report from the perspective of the victim. But what if junior researchers are not confronted with inappropriate behavior as victims, but as witnesses? The reader will find the answer to this question in the following brief.

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Disclaimer: This ECOOM-brief reports findings of scientific research conducted by ECOOM HR in R&D. Analyses and interpretations are the responsibility of the authors. They are not formal policy positions of the Flemish Government and Flemish authorities.

APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior (IB) if they were to be victims: breakdown by gender, nationality, educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promoters, type of appointment, science cluster, and university (total N=3877, total number of victims N=899).

	Victim of IB in the past 12 months?	If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?					Victim versus Non-victim
		Yes, only if anonymous	Yes, even if not anonymous	I don't know if I would report it, it depends	No	I prefer not to answer this question	
		%	%	%	%	%	
Gender							
Male	Non-victim	21.9	35.6	38.7	1.8	2.0	↓
	Victim	24.5	20.2	46.3	6.1	2.9	
Female	Non-victim	23.7	26.9	47.3	1.3	0.8	↓
	Victim	22.3	19.8	47.8	6.8	3.3	
I use another term	Non-victim	33.3	20.0	40.0	0.0	6.7	n.s
	Victim (§)	25.0	25.0	37.5	12.5	0.0	
I prefer not to say	Non-victim	8.3	33.3	45.9	4.2	8.3	n.s
	Victim (§)	15.4	23.1	30.7	7.7	23.1	
Nationality							
Belgian	Non-victim	21.5	27.0	49.8	1.4	0.3	↓
	Victim	21.5	18.8	49.9	8.0	1.8	
EU27	Non-victim	20.7	37.7	38.4	1.1	2.1	↓
	Victim	16.7	22.0	51.1	6.0	4.2	
Non-EU27	Non-victim	29.2	37.6	26.0	2.5	4.7	↓
	Victim	28.7	20.5	40.2	5.1	5.5	
Involved in educational activities							
Yes	Non-victim	20.9	30.5	46.4	1.1	1.1	↓
	Victim	21.4	20.3	47.8	7.2	3.3	
No	Non-victim	25.9	31.3	38.6	2.3	1.9	↓
	Victim	25.4	19.7	45.3	5.8	3.8	
PhD track							
Yes	Non-victim	22.9	30.8	43.3	1.6	1.4	↓
	Victim	22.2	20.1	47.4	6.8	3.5	
No	Non-victim	20.4	30.1	47.5	1.0	1.0	n.s.
	Victim	50.0	18.2	31.8	0.0	0.0	

	Victim of IB in the past 12 months?	If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?					Victim versus Non-victim
		Yes, only if anonymous	Yes, even if not anonymous	I don't know if I would report it, it depends	No	I prefer not to answer this question	
		%	%	%	%	%	
PhD phase							
Initiating	Non-victim	24.0	32.1	41.7	1.1	1.1	↓
	Victim	21.2	22.4	48.2	3.5	4.7	
Executing	Non-victim	21.7	31.1	44.4	1.5	1.3	↓
	Victim	22.3	19.6	49.4	5.5	3.2	
Finishing	Non-victim	25.1	30.1	40.0	2.3	2.5	↓
	Victim	23.0	20.9	41.7	10.7	3.7	
Number of promotor							
One promotor	Non-victim	22.9	32.3	41.0	2.2	1.6	↓
	Victim	26.6	22.0	38.8	9.8	2.8	
More than one promotor	Non-victim	22.8	30.3	44.3	1.3	1.3	↓
	Victim	21.8	19.4	49.5	5.7	3.6	
Type of appointment							
Academic assistantship	Non-victim	20.2	31.5	46.7	1.3	0.3	↓
	Victim	23.7	18.5	47.4	7.4	3.0	
Belgian scholarship	Non-victim	24.1	27.3	46.5	1.5	0.6	↓
	Victim	23.8	19.6	43.3	10.4	2.9	
Foreign scholarship	Non-victim	41.7	33.1	19.7	3.1	2.4	↓
	Victim	28.6	14.3	46.4	3.6	7.1	
Project funding	Non-victim	21.7	30.7	45.3	1.0	1.3	↓
	Victim	21.9	19.5	49.1	6.8	2.7	
No university funding	Non-victim	24.1	36.0	32.9	2.9	4.1	n.s.
	Victim	25.4	28.2	42.2	0.0	4.2	
Other/I don't know	Non-victim	16.7	37.9	38.4	3.0	4.0	n.s.
	Victim	15.3	23.7	54.2	0.0	6.8	
Science cluster (1)							
STEM	Non-victim	22.5	31.3	43.0	1.7	1.5	↓
	Victim	23.9	20.2	46.5	7.0	2.4	
Non-STEM	Non-victim	23.3	29.9	44.3	1.3	1.2	↓
	Victim	21.4	19.8	47.3	6.2	5.3	

	Victim of IB in the past 12 months?	If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?					Victim versus Non-victim
		Yes, only if anonymous	Yes, even if not anonymous	I don't know if I would report it, it depends	No	I prefer not to answer this question	
		%	%	%	%	%	
Science cluster (2)							
Natural sciences	Non-victim	22.0	29.9	45.0	1.0	2.1	↓
	Victim	29.8	21.9	39.1	6.6	2.6	
Engineering and technology	Non-victim	21.5	36.4	38.4	2.0	1.7	↓
	Victim	22.2	23.8	44.3	5.9	3.8	
Medical and health sciences	Non-victim	23.6	26.5	47.3	2.0	0.6	↓
	Victim	18.7	16.7	54.6	8.6	1.4	
Agricultural, veterinary and food sciences	Non-victim	25.5	33.0	38.3	0.0	3.2	n.s.
	Victim (§)	41.4	13.8	41.4	3.4	0.0	
Social sciences	Non-victim	23.2	27.8	46.3	1.5	1.2	↓
	Victim	19.5	20.3	48.1	6.5	5.6	
Humanities and the arts	Non-victim	23.6	35.6	39.0	0.7	1.1	↓
	Victim	26.1	18.5	45.7	5.4	4.3	
University							
KU Leuven	Non-victim	22.6	28.9	45.7	1.7	1.1	↓
	Victim	24.3	20.8	45.4	6.6	2.9	
Ghent University	Non-victim	22.0	29.8	45.3	1.6	1.3	↓
	Victim	24.0	17.6	49.3	5.3	3.8	
University of Antwerp	Non-victim	22.6	28.5	45.6	1.3	2.0	↓
	Victim	18.1	22.5	51.4	5.1	2.9	
VUB	Non-victim	25.5	41.3	30.0	1.6	1.6	↓
	Victim	25.2	22.0	39.0	8.9	4.9	
Hasselt University	Non-victim	22.4	30.8	44.9	0.0	1.9	↓
	Victim (§)	10.0	13.3	56.7	16.7	3.3	

Note. ↓ victims less willing to report than non-victims.

Victim = any junior researcher who reported having been a victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past year.

(§) = percentage calculated on N<50