

Do junior researchers at the Flemish universities know where they can report inappropriate behavior in the workplace?

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In 2024, the Flemish universities collectively had nearly 30500 full-time equivalent staff members and more than 125000 students (Statistics Flanders, n.d., a and b). This exceeds the number of inhabitants in every Flemish center city—with the exception of Ghent and Antwerp. Within such large communities, inappropriate behavior is unfortunately inevitable. Moreover, at universities, the nature and organization of academic work make these institutions particularly vulnerable to inappropriate behavior: they are open environments where people depend on one another and must collaborate, and where the rules of interaction are not strictly defined. These intensive collaborative relationships often involve evaluations and unequal power dynamics, and staff members must simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another for scarce resources and positions. Within universities, junior researchers are particularly vulnerable to inappropriate behavior due to their position (see ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54; VLIR, 2024).

REPORTS OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR AS IMPORTANT SIGNALS FOR POLICY

Every incident of inappropriate behavior causes significant harm to the victim and their loved ones, and by extension to the team, the organization, and the entire sector (see also ECOOM-brief 54). Reports of inappropriate behavior—whether as a victim, a witness, or a perpetrator—are crucial for supporting victims, preventing new victims, and informing organizations about the pain points and blind spots that require attention. This attention must be part of both a preventive policy and an effective reactive policy regarding inappropriate behavior. That policy holds the key to strengthening or gaining employees' trust in their university. This is not only about the reporter's confidence that his or her story is truly being heard, but also about the confidence that the report is indeed taken seriously and that appropriate follow-up is being undertaken (see also Van Den Bossche et al., 2025). Reporting inappropriate behavior is a major step for many and usually requires

overcoming barriers. Without trust, there is little willingness to report, or the willingness to report depends on a multitude of conditions (see ECOOM-briefs 56 through 58).

WHERE CAN UNIVERSITY EMPLOYEES REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR?

For a long time, it was not always clear to university staff where they could report incidents of inappropriate behavior. Each university had its own specific approach and organization, typically developed organically, with its own university- and/or faculty-level reporting centers, its own reporting regulations, follow-up procedures, and record-keeping systems, and various individuals and officials to whom victims and witnesses of inappropriate behavior could report their experiences. This led not only to differences in approach and follow-up within and between universities, but also to ambiguities regarding the role and mandate of the individuals to whom incidents were reported: the immediate supervisor, a professor or other official available for reports a few hours a week, faculty staff with a defined mandate to act as accessible contact points, confidential advisors as described in the Welfare Act, internal or external prevention advisors on psychosocial aspects, etc.

This lack of clarity was exacerbated by differences in status between staff and students, and among different groups of staff. Depending on their status, different centers and procedures were available. For internally funded university employees, the framework was clear: they fall under the Workplace Well-being Act and thus under all the regulations and protections that come with it. For junior researchers who are not officially university employees but who do conduct their research there and may be enrolled as PhD students, the uncertainty was particularly great. The Workplace Well-being Act provided some guidance but no uniform answer. With the December 2023 decree on inappropriate behavior in higher education (Flemish Government, 2023), this ambiguity has been resolved, and the Higher Education

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Codex (n.d.) is inclusive: externally funded researchers, PhD students, and individuals working as volunteers at the university can also report inappropriate behavior to the university's internal reporting center and are treated as staff members for the purposes of further handling. For students who are confronted with inappropriate behavior, the Higher Education Codex now also specifically provides "student confidential advisors". In doing so, the Flemish government is following the advice of the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (2023). With its December 2023 decree on inappropriate behavior in higher education, the Flemish government ensures that everyone studying and working in higher education can now effectively utilize a specially trained confidential counselor and enjoy equal rights regarding follow-up, assistance, and protection.

The latest version of the Higher Education Codex, together with the Charter on Inappropriate Behavior issued by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR, 2018), provides greater streamlining in the way universities organize themselves to address inappropriate behavior in a sustainable manner and to facilitate reporting. Although each Flemish university continues to maintain its own unique approach to reporting centers, regulations, and follow-up procedures, a number of general patterns have emerged. For example, on the website of every Flemish university, we see a description of their internal reporting center, and we clearly find what a reporter (victim, witness, or potentially the perpetrator) can or cannot expect from a confidential counselor. The distinction between a report and a complaint is also made clear. The former can, in accordance with the law, be made anonymously. The latter can never be anonymous. Both trigger different responses from the university. In the case of reports, it is essentially the reporter themselves who determines whether action is taken, unless multiple reports regarding the same person are received by the reporting center, or there is an imminent danger to other staff or students. The types of actions that can be taken in response to a report are more limited in terms of impact.

In addition to explaining how the internal reporting center works, each university also highlights the option of contacting external reporting centers. This primarily refers to the prevention advisor for psychosocial issues at the external Occupational Safety and Health Service with which the university collaborates. Each university also mentions the external "Flemish Reporting Centre for Transgressive Behaviour" (see below). Sometimes other reporting centers are also mentioned, such as UNIA, the Human Rights Institute, the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, the Sexual Violence Care Center, CAWs, 1712, or the Police. The reader can find the relevant university websites here (or via the full link in the reference list): for KULeuven: [Reporting Center for Inappropriate Behavior](#), for Ghent University: [Inappropriate Behavior and Discrimination: The Confidential Counselors Team is Here to Listen](#), for the University of Antwerp: [Inappropriate Behavior](#), for the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: [Reporting Inappropriate Behavior](#), and for Hasselt University: [Reporting Center for Inappropriate Behavior](#).

At the end of 2021, the Charter on Inappropriate Behavior issued by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR, 2018) was evaluated for the first time (VLIR, 2021). The Charter serves as a guideline for streamlining

existing procedures and aims to send a clear signal from the universities that inappropriate behavior is not tolerated and that reports and their follow-up are taken seriously. The evaluation of the charter led to the commitment to further strengthen policies regarding inappropriate behavior and to identify areas of action for a joint initiative (VLIR, 2022-b). The proposed actions are already partially in place at some universities, while others still have some way to go in certain areas. While some universities have a well-developed policy, others operate in a manner that is partly informal and not strictly codified in procedures (VLIR, 2022-b). A new evaluation of the charter and the actions of 2022 is currently underway.

FLEMISH REPORTING CENTER FOR TRANSGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

The efforts made by the Flemish universities in recent years in the areas of student well-being and inappropriate behavior do not prevent incidents of such behavior from regularly appearing in the media. The reactions that follow typically reflect a lack of confidence in the proper handling of the individuals and incidents involved, as well as perceptions of cover-ups and favoritism. This was certainly the case following the Pano report on abuse of power and inappropriate behavior at universities, broadcasted on VRT in March 2022 (Santens, 2022). In response to that report, the establishment of the Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior (VMGOG) gained momentum (Flemish Parliament, 2024).

The idea of an external reporting center for inappropriate behavior for university staff had already been around for a few years by then. During a hearing of the Parliamentary Committee on Education in November 2022, the then-chair of the VLIR stated that, based on the knowledge available at the time, universities did not yet consider it necessary to establish an external reporting center in 2018 because they first wanted to focus on strengthening their own internal approach to the prevention and remediation of inappropriate behavior. In their commitment to a strengthened policy on inappropriate behavior (VLIR, 2022-b), the universities take the position that creating an additional reporting center, across universities, would not substantially change the university community. And that there is evidence that too many options would cause victims more stress (VLIR, 2022-b).

On September 25, 2023, the "Flemish Reporting Centre for Transgressive Behaviour" was launched. It is intended for reporting inappropriate behavior in all contexts under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government, such as within universities (Agency for Justice and Law Enforcement, 2023). An external reporting center specifically for universities or higher education institutions was not considered timely, given the expectation that many external reporting centers would eventually have to be centralized again (Flemish Parliament – Education Committee, 2022). The new Flemish reporting center aims to be an accessible alternative for those who face too many or too large barriers to report inappropriate behavior to an internal reporting center. That accessibility is also reflected in the definition of inappropriate behavior used by the Flemish reporting center: *"any behavior that makes you feel unsafe, whether physical or psychological*

For example, bullying, sexual assault, sexual harassment, aggression, or abuse of power. It doesn't matter whether it happens offline or online" (VMGOG, n.d.-a). Sometimes it's very clear that behavior crosses the line, such as in cases of rape or physical violence. But often, inappropriate behavior is very subtle (VMGOG, n.d.-b). Anyone who hesitates to report an incident because of "maybes" ("maybe it will happen just that one time, maybe it's normal, maybe it was an accident...") is encouraged by the reporting center to report it anyway. It explicitly states: "inappropriate behavior is about behavior that crosses a line for you: there are no 'maybes'". In this way, the reporting center seeks to counter the taboos, uncertainties, and fears that victims experience as barriers to seeking help (VMGOG, n.d.-c). Victims can turn to the center's staff for recognition, recovery, short-term therapeutic programs, legal advice and support, guidance, and follow-up with procedures within their own sector. Even those who are not victims themselves but have witnessed inappropriate behavior can contact the reporting center. Reports can be made anonymously and are confidential. Only if a reporting center staff member suspects that someone is in danger, the center is obligated to take further action (VMGOG, n.d.-a; Agency for Justice and Enforcement, 2023).

The new reporting center also plays a role in policy regarding inappropriate behavior. It collects general, anonymous data from every report it receives. This information is important for providing guidance to specific organizations or sectors, or to policymakers. In this way, the Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior addresses the issue in a systematic manner (VMGOG, n.d.-d).

An awareness-raising campaign about the Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior is already on the agenda of the Flemish Minister of Justice for 2025 (Flemish Parliament, 2025). The focus would be on both general publicity for the reporting center and more specific, targeted campaigns tailored to certain sectors. In its first year of operation, the reporting center received very few reports from higher education: 17 regarding colleges, 15 regarding universities, and 4 regarding PhD students (Flemish Parliament, 2024 and 2025). At the time of this writing, figures for the second year of operation are not yet available.

DATA ON INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR FROM THE SURVEY OF JUNIOR RESEARCHERS 2023

In the following, we examine the extent to which junior researchers at the five Flemish universities know where they can report inappropriate behavior. To this end, we use the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, collected by ECOOM HR in R&D on behalf of the Flemish government. This five-yearly survey is always directed at all junior researchers at the Flemish universities. In 2023, there were 17838 such researchers. For more details on the data collection, respondents, and topics covered, we refer to ECOOM-brief 51.

In the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, we included, for the first time, several questions about inappropriate behavior (see ECOOM-briefs 53 through 58). In the current ECOOM-brief, we focus on the responses junior researchers provided to the question: "Do you know where you can report inappropriate behaviors?". The response options were "yes,"

"no," and "I prefer not to answer this question". A total of 92 respondents selected this last option. We received no response from 10 respondents.

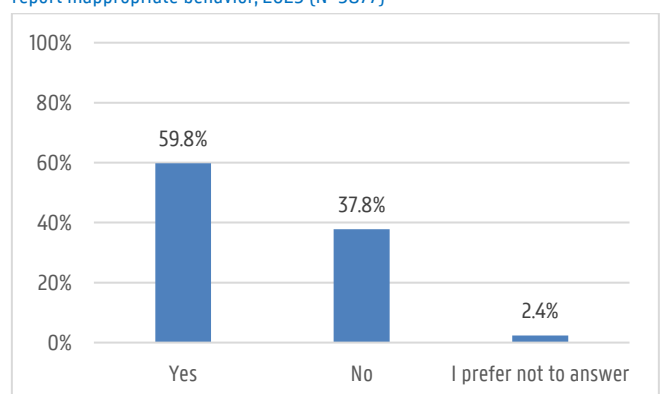
In what follows, we focus on five specific research questions:

1. To what extent do junior researchers at Flemish universities know where they can report inappropriate behavior?
2. Are there differences in knowing where to report based on personal experiences with inappropriate behavior?
3. Are there differences in knowing where to report based on individual characteristics, such as gender and nationality?
4. Are there differences in knowing where to report based on job and employment characteristics, such as involvement in educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promotor, and type of appointment?
5. Are there differences in knowing where to report based on characteristics of the work context, such as science cluster and university?

TO WHAT EXTENT DO JUNIOR RESEARCHERS AT FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES KNOW WHERE THEY CAN REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR?

Figure 1 shows how junior researchers responded to the question "Do you know where you can report inappropriate behaviors?": 59.8% of respondents answered "yes." For 37.8% of respondents, we recorded "no", while 2.4% of respondents explicitly stated that they would rather not answer this question. Nearly 2 in 5 junior researchers therefore do not know where to report inappropriate behavior.

Figure 1. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023 (N=3877)



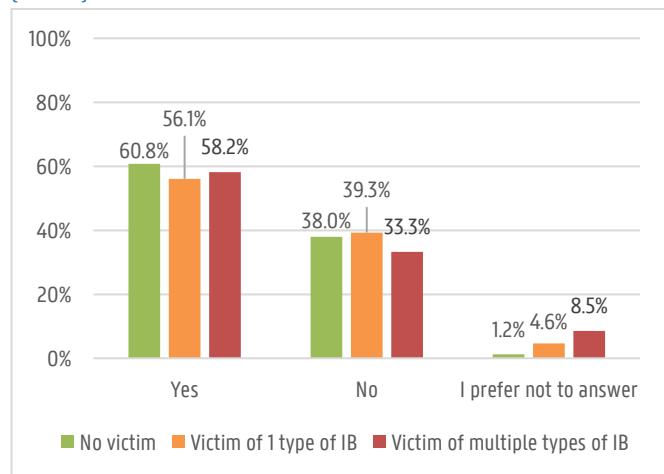
ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN KNOWING WHERE TO REPORT BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR?

In ECOOM-brief 53, we examined whether junior researchers at the Flemish universities had been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace during the year preceding the survey.

In Figure 2, we categorize junior researchers based on whether they have no experience, experience with one, or with multiple forms of

inappropriate behavior. Among junior researchers who have not been a victim of inappropriate behavior in the past year, 60.8% know where to report it, 38.0% do not know, and 1.2% prefer not to answer the question.

Figure 2. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023: breakdown by whether they have been victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past 12 months (N=3877)



Note. IB = inappropriate behavior in the workplace over the past 12 months, as indicated by five specific forms: physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination. Significance based on the Chi² -test, $p < 0.001$.

Among junior researchers who were confronted with one form of inappropriate behavior, the figures are 56.1%, 39.3%, and 4.6%, respectively. Among junior researchers who have experienced two or more forms of inappropriate behavior, 58.2% know where to report it, 33.3% do not know, and 8.5% prefer not to answer the question. A Chi² test suggests that the three groups differ from one another in their response to the question “Do you know where you can report inappropriate behavior?”. A more refined analysis based on adjusted residuals indicates that victims and non-victims do not differ significantly in the extent to which they know or do not know where to report inappropriate behavior. They do, however, differ significantly in another respect: victims are significantly more likely to indicate that they would rather not answer the question.

Table 1. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023: breakdown by whether they have been victims of specific forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past 12 months (N=3877)

	Yes	No	I prefer not to answer
	%	%	%
Sexual harassment (n.s.)			
No	59.8	38.0	2.2
Yes	64.5	31.8	3.7
Bullying ***			
No	60.0	38.2	1.8
Yes	58.2	34.4	7.4
Intimidation or threats ***			

No	59.9	38.3	1.8
Yes	59.3	33.7	7.0
Discrimination ***			
No	60.9	37.8	1.3
Yes	54.4	37.7	7.9

Note: Significance based on the Chi² test

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

Note: The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* also asked about experiences of physical violence. Due to the limited number of indicated incidents (N = 20), we have excluded this form of inappropriate behavior from the analysis.

What if we do not differentiate based on the number of types of inappropriate behavior, but rather on the specific type of inappropriate behavior experienced in the past year? Table 1 shows that the response patterns of victims of sexual harassment do not differ significantly from those who have not experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. When we look at bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination, we arrive at the same conclusion as in Figure 1: victims are just as likely—or just as unlikely—to know where they can report inappropriate behavior, but are more reluctant to answer the question.

ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN KNOWING WHERE TO REPORT BASED ON INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS GENDER AND NATIONALITY?

In Table 2, we examine the extent to which differences in the individual characteristics of junior researchers correlate with their knowledge of where they can report inappropriate behavior.

Table 2. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023: breakdown by gender and nationality (N=3877)

	Yes	No	I prefer not to answer this question
	%	%	%
Gender (n.s.)			
Male	58.6	38.6	2.8
Female	60.8	37.2	2.0
I use another term (§)	60.9	34.8	4.3
I prefer not to say (§)	52.6	39.5	7.9
Nationality ***			
Belgian	65.3	33.8	0.9
EU27	62.7	35.3	2.0
Non-EU27	42.8	50.4	6.8

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

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

(§) = percentage calculated on N < 50

When we look at gender, we do not find any significant differences. Because the number of respondents who indicated 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 found in the table. If we zoom in on the junior researchers who identified their gender as

"male" or "female", we see that the response pattern is similar: 3 out of 5 indicate they know where to report inappropriate behavior, 2 out of 5 do not know, and there are men and women who prefer not to answer the question.

When we look at nationality, it turns out that significantly fewer junior researchers from outside the EU27 know where to report inappropriate behavior: in this group, this applies to 2 out of 5 people. Junior researchers from outside the EU27 are also more likely to say they would rather not answer the question. Among junior researchers with Belgian nationality or a nationality within the EU27, 3 out of 5 researchers know where to go to report inappropriate behavior.

ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN KNOWING WHERE TO REPORT BASED ON JOB AND EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, PHD TRACK, PHD PHASE, NUMBER OF PROMOTORS, AND TYPE OF APPOINTMENT?

Table 3. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023: breakdown by involvement in educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promoters, and type of appointment (N=3877)

	Yes	No	I prefer not to answer this question
	%	%	%
Involved in educational activities ***			
Yes	64.1	33.9	2.0
No	52.9	44.2	2.9
PhD track *			
Yes	60.2	37.4	2.4
No	49.2	47.7	3.1
PhD phase ***			
Initiating	51.7	46.9	1.4
Executing	60.1	37.6	2.3
Finishing	66.5	30.0	3.5
Number of promoters (n.s.)			
One promoter	58.1	39.2	2.7
More than one promoter	60.4	37.3	2.3
Type of appointment ***			
Academic assistantship	66.8	31.5	1.7
Belgian scholarship	65.5	33.0	1.5
Foreign scholarship	39.5	55.1	5.4
Project funding	58.0	39.7	2.3
No university funding	56.4	39.5	4.1
Other/I don't know	53.1	43.1	3.8

Note: Significance based on the Chi²-test
n.s.=not significant, * = p<0.05, *** =p<0.001

If we focus on job and employment characteristics, Table 3 clearly shows that there are significant differences between those who are and those who are not involved in educational activities. We note here that

64.1% and 52.9% of junior researchers, respectively, know where to report inappropriate behavior.

There is also a significant difference between those pursuing a PhD and those who are not: among PhD students, 3 out of 5 know where to report inappropriate behavior, whereas among those not pursuing a PhD, the figure is 1 in 2. For PhD students, the stage of their studies also plays a role: the further along they are in their PhD program, the more participants know where to report inappropriate behavior. The number of promoters appears to play no role.

We also see significant differences when we look at the type of appointment. For instance, we find that academic assistants and researchers with a Belgian scholarship know best where to report inappropriate behavior. For these groups, the figures are 66.8% and 65.5%, respectively. Among project staff and junior researchers who indicate they are not funded by the university, we see slightly lower percentages: 58.0% and 56.4%. For those appointed through other funding sources, or who do not know the funding source, we note 53.1%. Finally, if we look at junior researchers with a foreign grant, we see that only 2 out of 5 know where to report inappropriate behavior, 55.1% do not know, and 5.4% prefer not to answer the question.

ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN KNOWING WHERE TO REPORT BASED ON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WORK CONTEXT, SUCH AS SCIENCE CLUSTER AND UNIVERSITY?

When we examine the work context, Table 4 reveals significant differences across science cluster. When we distinguish between STEM and non-STEM disciplines, we see that junior researchers in STEM disciplines are less aware of where they can report inappropriate behavior: 57.0% compared to 65.2% among junior researchers in non-STEM disciplines. If we refine the categorization of science clusters, we see that knowing where to report inappropriate behavior is least common among junior researchers in the agricultural, veterinary and food sciences cluster (52.1%) and in the engineering and technology cluster (55.0%). In the medical and health sciences cluster, 56.9% of junior researchers indicate that they know where to report inappropriate behavior, while this figure rises to 61.0% in the natural sciences cluster. Looking at the social sciences, 63.0% know where to report inappropriate behavior, while the figure for the humanities and arts cluster is 71.2%.

Finally, Table 4 shows that there is no difference among Flemish universities in the extent to which their junior researchers know where to report inappropriate behavior.

Table 4. Knowledge among junior researchers in Flanders of where they can report inappropriate behavior, 2023: breakdown by science cluster and university (N=3877)

	Yes	No	I prefer not to answer this question
	%	%	%
Science cluster (1)***			

STEM	57.0	40.6	2.4
Non-STEM	65.2	32.5	2.3
Science cluster (2) ***			
Natural sciences	61.0	35.6	3.4
Engineering and technology	55.0	42.3	2.7
Medical and health sciences	56.9	41.7	1.4
Agricultural, veterinary and food sciences	52.1	45.5	2.4
Social sciences	63.0	34.6	2.4
Humanities and the arts	71.2	26.6	2.2
University (n.s.)			
KU Leuven	62.1	36.0	1.9
Ghent University	58.5	39.1	2.4
University of Antwerp	55.4	41.0	3.6
VUB	62.1	35.4	2.5
Hasselt University	59.0	39.6	1.4

Note: Significance based on the Chi² test
n.s.=not significant, *** =p<0.001

DISCUSSION

In 2018, the Flemish universities—together with the colleges—adopted a charter that serves as a guideline for their policies on inappropriate behavior (VLIR, 2018). The charter states that staff and students must be able to work in a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment. If boundaries are crossed, it must be possible to report this to an internal or external reporting center of one's choice. At the request of Minister Weyts, an evaluation of the charter's implementation and the current status within the Flemish universities was conducted by the VLIR Ad Hoc Working Group on Inappropriate Behavior at the end of 2021 (VLIR, 2021; 2022-b). The evaluation concludes that the universities have already begun implementation, but that policy needs further refining and additional steps are needed (VLIR, 2021; 2022-a; 2022-b). Specific areas of action were identified for a joint process. The proposed actions have already been partially implemented at some universities, while others still have some way to go in certain sub-areas (VLIR, 2022-b). Within the framework of the present ECOOM-brief, one specific action point stands out: "universities will raise awareness among their staff and students about existing reporting centers both within and outside the universities and ensure that they can make an informed choice of reporting center" (VLIR, 2022-a; 2022-b). It is also noted that regular renewal of campaigns is necessary, given the rapid turnover of junior staff members and students. Everyone new to the university community should receive the necessary information about preventing and reporting inappropriate behavior (VLIR, 2022-b). Is it the case in 2023 that staff (and students) at the Flemish universities do not know where to report inappropriate behavior? We asked this question via the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* to all junior researchers at the Flemish universities. The relevant question in the survey read as follows: "Do you know where you can report inappropriate behaviors?". The response options were: "yes," "no," or "I prefer not answer this question". This question did not distinguish between internal and external reporting centers. Based on the survey, we also cannot determine whether the junior researchers who indicate they know where to report inappropriate behavior actually possess accurate knowledge.

Takeaways

First, it appears that nearly 3 in 5 junior researchers at the Flemish universities know where they can report inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Does knowing where to report inappropriate behavior increase the likelihood of reporting when incidents occur? We answer this question in ECOOM-brief 56.

Second, it appears that those who were victims of inappropriate behavior in the past year are just as likely—or just as unlikely—to know where to report it as those who were not victims. Victims were more reluctant to indicate whether or not they know where to report inappropriate behavior.

Third, it appears that knowing where to report inappropriate behavior does not differ significantly by gender, the number of promotor in a PhD program, or by university. We do, however, observe significant differences based on nationality, involvement in educational activities, PhD track, phase of the PhD, type of appointment, and science cluster. Junior researchers from outside the EU27 and junior researchers with a foreign scholarship are the least likely to know where they can report inappropriate behavior. These two groups of junior researchers also frequently indicated that they would prefer not to answer the question. Furthermore, we also see that those not involved in teaching or PhD research, PhD students in the early stages of their research, and junior researchers in STEM clusters are the least aware of where they can report inappropriate behavior.

Policy Reflections

A key policy reflection relates to the VLIR action point aimed at raising awareness of universities' internal and external reporting centers (VLIR, 2022-b). Our findings underscore the importance of this action point. On average, nearly 2 in 5 junior researchers do not know where to report inappropriate behavior. Among specific groups, this figure rises to 3 in 5. Why do so many junior researchers indicate that they do not know where to report inappropriate behavior? Is it because they have not yet encountered inappropriate behavior and this information has not yet been relevant to them? Did they encounter it but 'making a report' wasn't something that was considered? Or did they consider it, but conclude that they actually lack sufficient information to know where they can truly turn? The figures we've recorded leave no room for doubt: an awareness campaign about where inappropriate behavior can be reported is by no means a luxury. Given the rapid turnover of junior researchers at universities, such a campaign should ideally be repeated regularly, an action point that is also prioritized within VLIR (VLIR, 2022-c). Universities can focus on a university-wide awareness campaign, but our findings indicate that certain groups would benefit from targeted campaigns. In particular, junior researchers from outside the EU27 and junior researchers who fund their research with a foreign scholarship are the least aware of where to report inappropriate behavior. In ECOOM-brief 54, we found that these two groups face significantly higher risks of bullying and discrimination: 1 in 10 was bullied and (nearly) 3 in 10 faced discrimination (see ECOOM-brief 54). The call to pay extra attention to international researchers is not new: the VLIR ad hoc Working Group on Inappropriate Behavior also concluded that it is

important to pay extra attention to international staff and students (VLIR, 2024).

A second policy consideration concerns VLIR's goal of ensuring that staff (and students) can make an informed choice about where to file a report (VLIR, 2022-a). All universities provide a great deal of information on their websites about what constitutes inappropriate behavior, where reports can be filed, what the rules and procedures are for filing a report, and what the difference is between a report and a complaint (VLIR, 2022-c). All this information belongs to what is known as the university's "surface level": the visible, formal aspects of the organization, including formal rules, codes, guidelines, and procedures intended to guide staff behavior. Clear and transparent information at the surface level regarding inappropriate behavior and the policies surrounding it is important for making an informed decision about whether or not to report to a reporting center, whether internal or external. However, this information is not the only information that employees take into account. At least as important, or perhaps even more decisive, is the information circulating in the undercurrent of universities regarding inappropriate behavior, the relevant policies, and the reporting centers. This undercurrent encompasses all the informal, often invisible aspects that have a massive influence on how the organization and its employees actually function. It involves culture, informal networks, interpersonal (power) dynamics, perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and motivations, as well as unspoken rules and implicit expectations regarding one another, the supervisor, and the employer. This undercurrent also includes employees' perceptions of what should happen "in theory," what happens "in practice," and any discrepancy they perceive between the two. Policies aimed at ensuring that employees (and students) can make an informed choice about where to report an incident benefit not only from providing clear information about reporting centers and procedures, but ideally also take into account the informal flow of information circulating about inappropriate behavior and the functioning of reporting centers. Reporting inappropriate behavior to a reporting center requires not only knowing where to turn but also having confidence in what will happen with that report (see also VLIR, 2021).

In the ECOOM-briefs that follow, we examine the decision-making process that junior researchers go through when confronted with inappropriate behavior. That decision-making process may or may not lead to specific actions, including formally reporting the inappropriate behavior. To what extent are junior researchers willing to do so? To what extent is anonymity important to them when reporting? Who is most willing to report, and from whom do we hear a resolute "no"? The reader will find the answers to these questions in ECOOM-briefs 56 through 58.

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