

How often are junior researchers at the Flemish universities victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace?

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Whenever an incident of inappropriate behavior within a university reaches the media, it is invariably followed by strong reactions. These reactions repeatedly point to abuses of power by professors, favoritism, cover-ups, the failure to impose appropriate sanctions, and shortcomings in reporting, follow-up, and communication systems. Public trust in universities' policies on inappropriate behavior appears to be low. This distrust, combined with fear of retaliation and negative consequences for future career prospects, creates significant barriers for many university employees to report inappropriate behavior. To what extent do universities constitute a high-risk environment for inappropriate behavior?

To date, there is a lack of data providing a sector-wide picture of the extent to which inappropriate behavior occurs in the workplace across the Flemish universities. In the following, we focus on one specific group of employees: junior researchers. Junior researchers are defined as researchers who have not yet obtained a PhD, nine out of ten of whom are pursuing PhD research. How often are they confronted with inappropriate behavior in the workplace? And are their experiences comparable to that of employees in other organizations and sectors across the Flemish labor market?

WHAT IS INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR?

The Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior (VMGOG) defines inappropriate behavior as follows: *"Inappropriate behavior is any behavior that makes you feel unsafe, whether physically or psychologically. Examples include bullying, sexual assault, unwanted sexual behavior, aggression, or abuse of power. It doesn't matter whether such behavior occurs offline or online: inappropriate behavior is never acceptable"* (VMGOG, n.d.). The reporting center identifies several examples, including physical or psychological violence, sexual violence, bullying and intimidation, discriminatory harassment, and abuse of power. At the same time, it emphasizes that these examples do not constitute an exhaustive list of forms of inappropriate behavior

and notes that some forms may occur in very subtle ways. The reporting center places particular emphasis on the individual's subjective assessment of behavior: behavior is considered inappropriate if it is experienced as such by the person involved. The intention of the person engaging in the behavior that is perceived as inappropriate is not relevant in this assessment.

Personal boundaries regarding inappropriate behavior are not arbitrary interpretations of reality. They are shaped by socialization processes, continually evolving social and cultural norms, as well as the institutional and organizational context in which particular behaviors occur. Junior researchers at the Flemish universities constitute a highly diverse population and operate within multiple, complex, and nested contexts: within the employee-student relationship with their supervisor or promotor, within a research team, a department, a faculty, and the university as a whole. The same behavior that is perceived as inappropriate under one supervisor or within one team may be considered acceptable in another team. Likewise, within a single team, the behavior may be experienced as inappropriate by one team member while not being perceived as such by another. In some cases, a behavior may be accepted when it originates from a supervisor but not when it comes from a colleague. In other cases, the acceptability of the same behavior by the same individual may change over time. For example, behavior by a promotor that is accepted during the early stages of a PhD trajectory may later be perceived as unacceptable, unwanted, or inappropriate as the doctoral process progresses. The extent to which cultural diversity in the university workplace influences perceptions of whether specific behaviors are normal, acceptable, or inappropriate remains unclear. Very little research has examined the cultural architecture of universities (see also Keashly, 2021). What is known, however, is that the proportion of international researchers in Flanders, as well as in many other OECD countries, is substantial. In Flanders, approximately one in two junior researchers is Belgian, nearly 20% come from another EU27 country, and close to 30% originate from outside Europe (see ECOOM-brief 51).

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Regardless of an individual's personal evaluation of whether a particular behavior is inappropriate, certain behaviors are considered inappropriate by society as a whole. Such behaviors are classified as offenses against the person and are punishable under criminal law. These include, among others, rape and indecent assault. Other forms of inappropriate behavior are prohibited under the Anti-Racism Act, the Anti-Discrimination Act, or the Gender Act. Regarding the work environment in general, the legal framework for employees is provided by the Well-being at Work Act, which has been in force since 1996 (FPS Employment, Labor and Social Dialogue, n.d.). For the Flemish universities and university colleges in particular, the Higher Education Codex also applies (Flanders - Education and Training, 2013), including important amendments introduced in December 2023 through the decree on inappropriate behavior in higher education (Flemish Government, 2023). The codex explicitly includes junior researchers. Not only university employees, but also externally funded researchers, PhD students, and volunteers may report inappropriate behavior through an internal reporting mechanism and are treated as staff members for the purposes of further case handling. In addition to Belgian and Flemish legislation, each university maintains its own employment regulations, guidelines, codes of conduct relating to integrity and inappropriate behavior, as well as reporting, restorative, and disciplinary procedures designed to prevent inappropriate behavior and respond effectively when it occurs.

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR MEASURED ON THE BASIS OF REGISTERED REPORTS

One way to gain insight into the extent to which inappropriate behavior occurs within universities is through the registration of reports of inappropriate behavior. However, prevalence estimates based on registration systems come with at least two important caveats. The first caveat is that a registered report is preceded by several steps. These include the inappropriate behavior itself, the decision-making process that may or may not lead to a willingness to report (and subsequently an intention to report) the specific behavior, and finally the actual report (see also ECOOM-briefs 56 through 58). Research has consistently shown that there is often a substantial gap between willingness and intention on the one hand, and between willingness/intention and actual reporting behavior on the other (e.g., Hoebel et al., 2022; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Trust also plays a crucial role in both the willingness to report and the act of reporting itself (e.g., Hoebel et al., 2022; Kröger et al., 2022; Netherlands Labour Authority, 2024; Schraudner et al., 2019). The phenomenon known as the "dark number" is well documented: a considerable share of inappropriate behavior goes unreported, particularly when criminal offenses are involved (see also ECOOM-briefs 55 through 58; Hoebel et al., 2022). As a result, estimating the prevalence of inappropriate behavior cannot rely exclusively on registered reports, as doing so risks significant underestimation. Fewer reports do not necessarily mean that less inappropriate behavior is taking place. A second caveat is that organizations differ in both the extent to which they record reports and the way they do so (see also VLIR, 2021). Some organizations register

only those reports that remain unresolved after minimal intervention, while others record every report received. Some organizations use a single standardized system across the entire institution, whereas more decentralized organizations may employ team-specific and/or location-specific systems. In addition, some organizations record only a limited number of variables, while others maintain extensive records that also provide insight into organizational risk factors. The consequence of these differences in registration systems is that comparisons between organizations, and sometimes even within organizations, are problematic. Moreover, once an organization modifies its registration system, its ability to monitor trends over time is compromised. Not all universities worldwide maintain registration systems for reports of inappropriate behavior. The Flemish universities do maintain such systems, although each institution follows its own approach. Some universities record all contacts, inquiries, discussions of concerns, and interactions with ombudspersons and confidential counselors, whether formal or informal and regardless of who raises the concern. Other universities register only the formal reports received through a central reporting office. Because of these differing registration practices, the figures reported by the Flemish universities vary widely in scale and cannot be meaningfully aggregated or directly compared (VLIR, 2022). As part of their commitment to strengthening policies on inappropriate behavior, the universities have acknowledged that their registration systems should be better aligned. Such harmonization would enhance the value of quantitative information in assessing the state of affairs regarding inappropriate behavior (VLIR, 2022). An analysis of annual reports (2018–2024) and university websites addressing inappropriate behavior at the five Flemish universities shows that reporting statistics are not presented consistently and that not all universities include this information. Yet the Charter on Inappropriate Behavior (VLIR, 2018) and the ten generic policy recommendations formulated alongside it explicitly recommend that institutions report, through their annual reports, on incidents and reports concerning (sexual) inappropriate behavior and violations of psychosocial well-being (VLIR, 2018). The decision not to publish figures on registered reports in publicly accessible reports may be legally motivated. Under legal requirements, an informal report may not be shared without the consent of the individual concerned. However, other considerations may also play a role, including discretion, institutional reputation, and recognition that available figures inevitably underestimate the true prevalence of inappropriate behavior because of the dark number phenomenon and because universities are unaware of incidents that are not reported through their internal reporting channels.

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR MEASURED ON THE BASIS OF SURVEY DATA

Survey research on inappropriate behavior within organizations produces prevalence estimates that vary depending on the sample used (convenience samples versus population surveys; representative versus non-representative), the measurement instruments employed (self-labeling approaches or multi-item behavioral checklists, such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire; Notelaers et al., 2018), the reference

period considered (ranging from “currently a victim” to “at any time during one’s career”), and the target population under study (see also Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Keashly, 2018, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Schraudner et al., 2019). Question wording and the terminology used also play a crucial role. There is no consensus regarding the conceptualization of “inappropriate behavior”, and the same applies to specific forms of inappropriate behavior (e.g., what constitutes unwanted sexual behavior?). A wide variety of terms are used, and these do not always refer consistently to the same reality. Instead, they often refer to partially overlapping or closely related phenomena (e.g., unwanted sexual behavior, sexual harassment, sexual touching, or sexually charged conversations). The use of different terms, survey questions, measurement instruments, data collection methods, and target populations means that prevalence estimates from different surveys generally cannot be compared directly, or at least not without considerable caution (see also Glowacz et al., 2024; Keashly, 2021; Schraudner et al., 2019). When examining the existing scientific literature on inappropriate behavior in universities, it becomes apparent that the topic has not yet been systematically explored and studied (see also Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Glowacz et al., 2024; Keashly, 2021). Most scientific research on inappropriate behavior in higher education focuses on students and specifically on unwanted sexual behavior (Keashly, 2021; UK Parliament, 2022). Most of these studies are conducted in Anglophone countries, where PhD students are typically classified as students and where PhD programs differ substantially from those in Europe (Levecque et al., 2017). A notable limitation is that PhD students are rarely treated as a distinct group in these studies. As a result, the findings are insufficiently detailed to provide insight into the prevalence of inappropriate behavior among PhD students or, by extension, into the risk factors that may be particularly relevant to them (see also ECOOM-brief 54). The limited number of studies that do focus on inappropriate behavior among PhD students generally do not aim to estimate prevalence or identify risk factors, are rarely representative, and are often restricted to specific faculties or disciplines (e.g., Yamada et al., 2014). Research on inappropriate behavior within university workplaces is also relatively limited and continues to be conducted primarily in Anglophone institutions (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Henning et al., 2017; Schraudner et al., 2019; Keashly, 2021). Existing studies tend to focus on specific disciplines, individual universities, or particular staff groups (e.g., professors), and generally cannot rely on representative data (see also Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Keashly, 2021; Levecque et al., 2017). More recently, studies have emerged in Europe, including in Wallonia (Glowacz et al., 2024), the Netherlands (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024), and Germany (Schraudner et al., 2019). These studies do provide prevalence estimates based on data intended to be representative. The Walloon and Dutch studies aim to provide a sector-wide overview of universities, whereas the German study was conducted across all research institutes of the Max Planck Society. At the European level, the UniSAFE project examines gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behavior in universities and research institutions across fifteen European countries (UniSAFE, n.d.). As with the literature on

inappropriate behavior among university students, the available studies on university employees generally lack the level of detail required to develop a clear understanding of the prevalence of inappropriate behavior among junior researchers in general, and PhD students in particular. Only the Walloon and German studies provide a limited number of insights relating specifically to PhD students (see benchmarking section below). Within Flanders, no research currently provides a sector-wide picture of the extent to which inappropriate behavior occurs within university employment relationships. One notable exception is the study on academic bullying among staff at the five Flemish universities, conducted for the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) by Verhaeghe (2023). This study examines experiences occurring “during one’s work as a scientist”, but is affected by very low response rates at certain universities and among specific groups, including junior researchers and PhD students. An important source of information on workplace inappropriate behavior for universities is the periodic well-being survey that each Flemish university conducts in accordance with the Belgian Well-being at Work Act (FPS Employment, Labor and Social Dialogue, n.d.). Here too, universities adopt their own approaches when designing or outsourcing these surveys, making comparisons of prevalence estimates across institutions difficult or impossible. A review of publicly available information in university annual reports (2018–2024) and university websites addressing inappropriate behavior yields only general insights derived from well-being survey results and does not provide institution-wide prevalence estimates of inappropriate behavior. Nor is detailed information publicly available regarding the specific data collected through university well-being surveys. It is clear, however, that the results of these surveys are shared internally through a variety of channels. Universities differ in both the type of information communicated and the extent to which findings are presented in broad terms and general patterns. University websites also report on the actions and policy initiatives that institutions intend to undertake in response to the survey findings. In addition to well-being surveys, the Flemish universities conduct various other surveys in which one or more questions on inappropriate behavior may be included. These surveys may target a specific occupational group (e.g., PhD students), a particular department or faculty, or may be commissioned by a specific organizational unit within the university (e.g., Doctoral Schools). In some cases, they are organized by interest groups or conducted as part of a master’s thesis project. The decision to make findings from periodic well-being surveys public only to a limited extent, or only in very general terms, has important consequences and contributes to a fragmented picture of the issue. Among other things, it affects how university staff and the wider public perceive the prevalence of inappropriate behavior within universities, the extent to which universities possess an accurate evidence base for policy development, and the degree of transparency with which they communicate that evidence. These perceptions are closely linked to trust in universities’ ability to address inappropriate behavior effectively.

ASSESSMENT OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR THROUGH THE SURVEY OF JUNIOR RESEARCHERS 2023

In the following sections, we seek to answer the question of how often junior researchers at the Flemish universities become victims of inappropriate behavior in the workplace. To do so, we make use of the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*. The Survey of Junior Researchers is conducted every five years by ECOOM HR in R&D as commissioned by the Flemish government and targets all junior researchers at the five Flemish universities. For further details regarding data collection, respondents, and the topics covered in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, we refer readers to ECOOMbrief 51. In 2023, the survey included, for the first time, a limited number of questions on inappropriate behavior. The selection and wording of these questions were developed in consultation with the five Flemish universities. In the absence of an internationally validated standard measure for assessing the prevalence of inappropriate behavior in the workplace, it was decided to adopt a question format analogous to that used in the Flemish Workability Monitor 2023 conducted by the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders/Foundation for Innovation and Labour (SERV/Foundation, 2024a, 2024b). The specific question included in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* was: "In your workplace how often have you been victimized in the past 12 months when it comes to ...?", followed by five forms of inappropriate behavior: "physical violence", "sexual harassment", "bullying", "intimidation or threats", and "discrimination". For each type of inappropriate behavior, respondents could choose from five response categories: "never", "sometimes", "often", "always", and "I prefer not to say". This final response option was included to provide an initial indication of potential reluctance to disclose experiences of inappropriate behavior (see also ECOOM-briefs 56–58 on willingness to report). In contrast, the SERV/Foundation *Workability Monitor 2023* did not include questions on discrimination and did not offer the response option "I prefer not to say". The questions on workplace inappropriate behavior were presented at the end of the survey. At that stage, 3877 of the 4550 respondents who had participated in the survey were still completing the questionnaire. To what extent do these remaining 3877 respondents continue to provide a representative picture of the overall population of junior researchers at the Flemish universities? The answer to this question can be found in Appendix 1. In the following sections, we address four specific research questions:

1. *To what extent are junior researchers at the Flemish universities willing to indicate experiences of inappropriate behavior in the workplace?*
2. *How often are junior researchers at the Flemish universities victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination?*
3. *How often are junior researchers at the Flemish universities victims of multiple forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace?*
4. *Benchmarking: does inappropriate behavior occur more or less frequent among junior researchers at the Flemish universities compared to other groups, sectors, or contexts?*

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE JUNIOR RESEARCHERS AT THE FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES WILLING TO INDICATE EXPERIENCES OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE?

When asked about experiences of inappropriate behavior in the workplace, junior researchers were also given the option to respond, "I prefer not to say". This response category captures a perceived barrier for indicating inappropriate behavior. It does not necessarily mean that inappropriate behavior has occurred, nor does it mean that it has not occurred. Such reluctance may stem from a variety of factors, including a personal difficulty in discussing experiences of inappropriate behavior with others, a tendency to suppress such experiences, insufficient trust in the anonymous processing of survey responses, or uncertainty about whether one's personal experience with a specific behavior is adequately captured by the term used in the survey question. Table 1 shows that only a very small number of junior researchers indicated that they preferred not to answer the question.

Table 1 also demonstrates that there was virtually no item nonresponse to the question on experiences of inappropriate behavior.

Table 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: response rate to the question on being a victim to five specific forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the past 12 months (N=3877)

	Item response: never, sometimes, often, or always #	Item response: I prefer not to say #	Item Nonresponse #
Physical violence	3868	3	6
Sexual harassment	3861	10	6
Bullying	3855	8	14
Intimidation or threats	3854	7	16
Discrimination	3848	16	13

HOW OFTEN ARE JUNIOR RESEARCHERS AT THE FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES VICTIMS OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, BULLYING, INTIMIDATION OR THREATS, OR DISCRIMINATION?

Table 2 shows that 0.6% of junior researchers experienced physical violence during the past 12 months. Half of these respondents reported experiencing physical violence "sometimes", while the other half indicated that it occurred "often" or "always". Regarding sexual harassment, 2.8% of junior researchers reported having been confronted with it in the workplace during the past 12 months. Almost all victims reported that this occurred "sometimes". A total of 9.1% of junior researchers indicated that they had been victims of workplace bullying during the previous year. For 7.0%, this occurred "sometimes", whereas 2.1% reported that the bullying occurred "often" or "always". A very similar pattern emerges for intimidation or threats: 9.6% of junior researchers experienced intimidation or threats during the past year. In most cases, this occurred "sometimes", but for 2.4% of respondents it

occurred “often” or “always”. Finally, with respect to discrimination, 14.5% of junior researchers reported having experienced discrimination during the year preceding the survey. For 11.1%, discrimination occurred “sometimes”, while 3.4% reported experiencing it “often” or “always”. In summary, while physical violence appears to be relatively uncommon and sexual harassment affects a non-negligible proportion of junior researchers, bullying, intimidation or threats, and discrimination appear to be more systematically embedded in the workplace experiences of junior researchers at the universities.

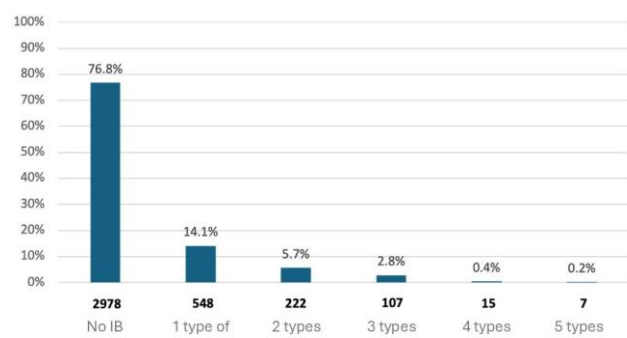
Table 2. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: frequency of being a victim to five specific forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the past 12 months (N=3877).

	Never	Some-times	Often	Always	Total some-times often always N
	%	%	%	%	
Physical violence	99.4	0.3	0.2	0.1	20
Sexual harassment	97.2	2.5	0.3	0.0	107
Bullying	90.9	7.0	1.6	0.5	352
Intimidation or threats	90.4	7.2	1.9	0.5	374
Discrimination	85.5	11.1	2.7	0.7	555

HOW OFTEN ARE JUNIOR RESEARCHERS AT THE FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES VICTIMS OF MULTIPLE FORMS OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE?

In some cases, junior researchers experience only one form of inappropriate behavior (IB), whereas in other cases their experiences may involve multiple forms. When all junior researchers at the Flemish universities are asked whether they have been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace during the 12 months preceding the survey, how many forms of inappropriate behavior do they indicate? Figure 1 shows that nearly one-quarter (23.2%) of all junior researchers indicated having been victims of one or more of the surveyed forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace. For 14.1%, this involved a single form of inappropriate behavior; for 5.7%, it involved two forms; and for 3.4%, it involved at least three forms of inappropriate behavior.

Figure 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: frequency of being a victim to physical Violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace during the past 12 months (N=3877)



Among junior researchers who reported having experienced at least one form of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the previous year, which form was reported most frequently? Table 3 shows that half of the junior researchers who experienced a single form of inappropriate behavior indicated discrimination. For approximately one in five junior researchers, the indicated behavior involved intimidation or threats, and for another one in five it involved bullying. Sexual harassment accounted for 7.7% of cases, while physical violence was reported by 0.4%.

Table 3 also shows that junior researchers who indicated a single form of inappropriate behavior predominantly selected the response category “sometimes”.

Table 3. Junior researchers at the Flemish universities who experienced one form of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the past 12 months, 2023: frequency of physical Violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination (N=548).

	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	Total %
Physical violence (§)	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.4
Sexual harassment	7.3	0.4	0.0	7.7
Bullying	17.7	1.7	0.2	19.6
Intimidation or threats	18.7	1.8	0.2	20.7
Discrimination	46.3	5.1	0.7	52.1

Note: (§) = N<50

And what about junior researchers who experienced multiple forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the year preceding the survey? Table 4 shows which forms most frequently co-occurred with others. Physical violence was typically accompanied by several other forms of inappropriate behavior. Among victims of sexual harassment, three out of five also indicated experiencing physical violence, bullying, intimidation or threats, and/or discrimination. Victims of bullying reported one or more additional forms of inappropriate behavior in seven out of ten cases. A similar pattern emerges among junior researchers who experienced intimidation or threats. Finally, regarding discrimination, we find that half of the junior researchers who reported experiences of discrimination also indicated experiences of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, or intimidation and threats. In other words, when inappropriate behavior occurs, it is often not limited to a single form but instead encompasses multiple forms of inappropriate behavior. The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* does not allow us to determine whether the experience of multiple forms of inappropriate behavior involves different perpetrators, or whether all forms of inappropriate behavior originate from the same individual.

Table 4. Junior researchers at the Flemish universities who experienced one or more forms of inappropriate behavior (IB) in the workplace during the past 12 months, 2023: frequency of the co-occurrence of multiple forms of inappropriate behavior (*) in the workplace (N=899).

	No other form of IB %	One additional form of IB %	Multiple forms of IB %
Physical violence (§)	10.0	10.0	80.0
Sexual harassment	39.3	29.9	30.8
Bullying	30.1	34.4	35.5
Intimidation or threats	30.2	37.1	32.7

Discrimination	51.3	27.0	21.7
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Note: * Only the following forms were included: physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, discrimination
(§) = N<50

BENCHMARKING: DOES INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR OCCUR MORE OR LESS FREQUENT AMONG JUNIOR RESEARCHERS AT THE FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES COMPARED TO ...?

Valid and reliable benchmarking requires that several criteria be met, including comparability, relevance, measurability, replicability, representativeness, and completeness. As noted in the introduction, there is currently limited research available that provides a reliable and representative picture of the extent to which inappropriate behavior occurs among junior researchers and PhD students at universities.

The BEHAVES study in higher education in Wallonia (Glowacz et al., 2024) and the study on workplace culture at the Max Planck institutes in Germany (Schraudner et al., 2019) do offer some insights relating to junior researchers and PhD students, but they employ measurement approaches that differ from those used in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*.

In the BEHAVES study, inappropriate behavior was measured using behavioral indicators (e.g., gossiping, exclusion, or discrimination as indicators of moral or psychological inappropriate behavior). Two questions were asked for each behavioral indicator: whether respondents had experienced it since starting employment at the institution and whether they had experienced it during the previous six months. Respondents who indicated exposure to at least one behavioral indicator were classified as victims. Since their appointment, between 53.5% and 62.7% of PhD students at Walloon universities indicated having experienced moral inappropriate behavior, between 4.2% and 4.9% indicated experiencing physical violence/cyberviolence, and between 14.1% and 17.7% reported unwanted sexual behavior (Glowacz et al., 2024).

The Max Planck study found that 11.8% of PhD students had experienced bullying at least sometimes, monthly, weekly, or daily during the previous 12 months (Schraudner et al., 2019). In this respect, PhD students did not differ significantly from postdoctoral researchers or professors. However, anyone wishing to compare the figures for PhD students at Max Planck with those for PhD students at the Flemish universities faces an important institutional difference: educational activities are largely absent within the Max Planck institutes (Schraudner et al., 2019). Previous research has shown that bullying experienced by academic and scientific staff often originates from students (Lampman et al., 2009; UCU, 2021; see also ECOOM-brief 54). Based on the scientific literature currently available on inappropriate behavior in universities, it is therefore not possible to determine whether junior researchers at the Flemish universities experience more or less inappropriate behavior than their counterparts at other universities, nor whether they experience more or less than postdoctoral researchers and professors in Flanders.

The wording of the questions in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* and the Flemish *Workability Monitor 2023* (SERV/Foundation, 2024a, 2024b) does, however, make it possible to compare junior researchers at the Flemish universities with highly educated peers in the Flemish labor market. The questions measuring being a victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation or threats were identical in both surveys, with the exception of an additional response category ("I prefer not to say") included in the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*. As discussed above, this additional response option was used only rarely.

The *Workability Monitor* is considered representative of the entire Flemish employee population (SERV/Foundation, 2024a, 2024b). Consequently, it includes employees who are, on average, older and less highly educated than junior researchers.

Table 5. Frequency of being a victim of specific sorms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace during the past 12 months: junior researchers at the Flemish universities (based on the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, N=3877) and highly educated employees of the same age in Flanders (based on the *Workability Monitor 2023*, N=2273).

	Junior researchers In Flanders %	Highly educated (low type) in Flanders %
Physical violence	0.6	4.8
Sexual harassment	2.8	6.3
Bullying	9.1	4.5
Intimidation or threats	9.6	14.0

To arrive at a meaningful benchmark, we restrict the *Workability Monitor* sample to employees with a higher education degree (long-cycle higher education) and weigh the prevalence estimates for these employees so that their age distribution matches that of the junior researchers (see Appendix 2).

Table 5 compares the prevalence of inappropriate behavior among junior researchers at the Flemish universities, based on the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, with that among highly educated employees of the same age in the Flemish labor market, based on the *Workability Monitor 2023*. The corresponding prevalence rates are 0.6% versus 4.8% for physical violence, 2.8% versus 6.3% for sexual harassment, 9.1% versus 4.5% for bullying, and 9.6% versus 14.0% for intimidation or threats.

Compared with the population of highly educated employees of the same age in Flanders, junior researchers are therefore less likely to be victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, and intimidation or threats, but more likely to experience bullying.

DISCUSSION

Workplace inappropriate behavior not only has detrimental consequences for the performance and well-being of those directly affected, but also causes harm to colleagues, teams, and the broader organization (e.g., Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Javed et al., 2023; Levecque et al., 2017; Van Den Bossche et al., 2025). To date, however, research on the consequences of inappropriate behavior for teams,

work environments, and organizational culture within universities remains extremely limited (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Although inappropriate behavior within universities has not yet secured a prominent place on the Flemish or European research agenda, the issue has received considerable policy attention. In recent years, the Flemish universities have implemented a wide range of measures aimed at promoting the well-being of staff and students, including measures addressing inappropriate behavior. One result was the adoption of the VLIR Charter on Inappropriate Behavior in 2018 (VLIR, 2018).

According to VLIR, several characteristics make universities particularly vulnerable to inappropriate behavior (Flemish Parliament, 2022). Universities are open, learning-oriented environments characterized by intensive collaborative relationships and relatively few strictly defined social conventions. Examples include junior researchers working together toward shared research objectives, teaching students, or supervising master's theses. These intensive relationships often involve evaluation processes and unequal power relations, such as those between PhD students and their promotors. Moreover, individuals who collaborate closely at one moment may find themselves competing with one another at another moment for scarce research funding or academic positions.

The Flemish universities have committed themselves to developing a systematic and targeted policy on inappropriate behavior, encompassing both preventive measures and responsive interventions, including sanctions where appropriate (VLIR, 2022). Effective policy requires, among other things, reliable insight into the extent to which inappropriate behavior occurs within the institution.

To address this issue, the Flemish universities rely primarily on two sources of information: records of reported incidents of inappropriate behavior and findings from well-being surveys. Both types of sources have important limitations (see above). In practice, each Flemish university operates its own registration system and conducts its own survey initiatives (VLIR, 2021; 2022), making valid and reliable comparisons across universities difficult or impossible.

This ECOOM-brief provides, for the first time, a sector-wide overview of the extent to which physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and discrimination occur among junior researchers at the Flemish universities. In subsequent ECOOM-briefs, this sector-wide picture will be further expanded by examining which junior researchers are most at risk of experiencing inappropriate behavior, whether they know where such behavior can be reported, and whether they are willing to report it in practice (ECOOM-briefs 54–58).

Takeaways

First, the findings show that junior researchers at the Flemish universities are confronted with various forms of inappropriate behavior. The estimated annual prevalence rates are 0.6% for physical violence, 2.8% for sexual harassment, 9.1% for bullying, 9.6% for intimidation or threats, and 14.5% for discrimination. Extrapolating these sample-based estimates to the total population of junior researchers at the Flemish universities (N = 17838; see ECOOM-brief 51)

yields the following annual estimates: 107 victims of physical violence, 499 victims of sexual harassment, 1623 victims of bullying, 1712 victims of intimidation or threats, and 2587 victims of discrimination. Bullying, intimidation or threats, and discrimination thus appear to occur more systematically in the workplace experiences of junior researchers at universities.

Second, nearly one in four junior researchers (23.2%) at Flemish universities indicated having experienced physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace during the previous year. When extrapolated to the total population of junior researchers, this corresponds to approximately 4138 victims. For 14.1% of junior researchers, the experience involved a single form of inappropriate behavior; for 5.7%, it involved two forms; and for 3.4%, it involved three or more forms. In cases involving discrimination, no additional form of inappropriate behavior was indicated in approximately half of all cases. By contrast, in 60% to 90% of cases involving physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, or intimidation and threats, at least one additional form of inappropriate behavior was also mentioned.

Third, at this moment it is not possible to determine whether junior researchers at the Flemish universities experience inappropriate behavior more frequently than postdoctoral researchers and professors, or more frequently than junior researchers outside Flanders (see the benchmarking section above). However, based on the *Workability Monitor 2023*, we were able to establish that, compared to highly educated individuals of the same age in the Flemish labor market, junior researchers are less likely to experience physical violence, sexual harassment, and intimidation or threats, but are more likely to be exposed to bullying.

Policy Reflections

A first policy reflection concerns the prevalence estimates reported in this study. Prevalence rates derived from survey research vary depending on the sample used (e.g., representative versus non-representative samples), question wording, measurement instruments (self-labeling approaches versus behavioral checklists), reference periods (ranging from being a victim "at present" to "at any point in one's career"), and the target population under study. Given the limited degree of standardization in the scientific literature on the prevalence of inappropriate behavior, the present study adopted the survey questions used in the Flemish *Workability Monitor 2023*. Both data collections were designed to be representative (see also ECOOM-briefs 51 and 53).

The survey questions did not provide respondents with a definition of inappropriate behavior or of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and discrimination. Nor were respondents given examples based on specific behavioral indicators (e.g., flirting, sexually suggestive comments, rape). The wording of the questions and response categories also did not refer to the severity, intentionality, impact, or perpetrator(s) of the behavior. However, the response categories did capture the persistence of inappropriate

behavior, a characteristic that Keashly and Jagatic (2003) have linked to both its nature and impact.

The decision to use a self-labeling approach rather than multi-item behavioral checklists reflects the recognition that whether specific behaviors are perceived as inappropriate partly depends on the organizational and cultural context in which they occur (see also Schraudner et al., 2019). Within the population of junior researchers, there is considerable cultural diversity: approximately 20% of junior researchers at the Flemish universities come from another EU27 country, while around 30% originate from outside Europe (see ECOOMbrief 51). At present, relatively little research has examined the cultural dimensions of inappropriate behavior in university settings (see also Keashly, 2021). What research does show is that self-labeling surveys such as the one used in this study sometimes produce substantially lower prevalence estimates than surveys based on behavioral checklists (Keashly, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). If the same pattern holds in the Flemish context, the prevalence estimates reported in this ECOOM-brief should be regarded as conservative estimates of the occurrence of inappropriate behavior. A second policy reflection concerns the evidence base currently available to the Flemish universities and the Flemish government for developing policies on inappropriate behavior. Unlike many other regions, Flanders has legal and regulatory frameworks that require universities to collect data to support policy interventions. Universities gather information through the registration of reports (and, where applicable, formal complaints) and through periodic well-being surveys conducted under the Well-being at Work Act (FPS Employment, Labor and Social Dialogue, n.d.). At present, however, each Flemish university follows its own approach, preventing the development of a coherent sector-wide picture. This raises the question of whether both the universities and the Flemish government may be missing important opportunities to gain a clearer understanding of the factors that cause, facilitate, or sustain inappropriate behavior (see ECOOM-brief 54). Could alternative approaches help strengthen the scientific evidence base on which institutional and regional policies are built? Within this context, we bring forward three questions. First, would there be added value in creating a single interuniversity central registry for reports of inappropriate behavior? Naturally, such an initiative would have to operate within applicable legal constraints (see ECOOM-brief 55). As part of their commitment to strengthening policy in this area (VLIR, 2022), the universities have already identified the harmonization of reporting systems as an action point. A central registry would go one step further: it would not only ensure that the same types of data are recorded across all universities using identical structures and levels of detail but would also enable the rapid generation of a sector-wide overview. Maintaining such a registry over time would further allow the monitoring of trends in reporting behavior and the assessment of policy impacts at the sector level. Centralized registration would thus contribute not only to a more streamlined process, but also to greater transparency (see also below). Second, would there be added value in conducting a sector-wide well-being survey that includes questions on inappropriate behavior? Repeating such a survey over time would make

it possible to evaluate policy effectiveness: under what circumstances and at what points in time do policy measures produce intended or unintended effects? Third, would there be added value in organizing a comprehensive sector-wide study of inappropriate behavior at the Flemish universities? Such a study could combine the strengths of survey research with other methodological approaches, including consultations with key stakeholders, in-depth interviews, and focus groups (e.g., Baillien et al., 2009; Van Den Bossche et al., 2025). In conducting such research, special efforts should be made to include voices that are often absent or remain unheard. After all, individuals who choose not to participate in surveys, interviews, or focus groups also communicate something meaningful through their nonparticipation.

A third and final policy reflection concerns the transparency of the evidence base on which the Flemish universities build their policies regarding inappropriate behavior. At present, the findings derived from registered reports, well-being surveys, and audits are shared with the public only to a limited extent (see above). What might happen if a different approach were adopted, one characterized by full transparency, not only about findings but also about any shortcomings, limitations, and potential biases in the underlying data?

Such transparency would, of course, have to remain within legal boundaries and respect the rights and interests of all parties involved. Nevertheless, examples from Wallonia, the Netherlands, and the renowned Max Planck institutes in Germany demonstrate that a high degree of transparency is possible (Glowacz et al., 2024; Netherlands Labour Authority, 2024; Schraudner et al., 2019).

Transparent communication about organizational insights into inappropriate behavior sends an important signal to employees: it demonstrates that the institution values accurate information about staff experiences and underscores the importance of participation in building universities that are both excellent and healthy places to work. Indeed, who is better positioned than employees themselves to identify organizational challenges, indicate where they can assume responsibility, and point out where support from leadership is needed? Transparency regarding inappropriate behavior is a path with irreversible consequences. It shapes perceptions of the problem, creates expectations, and elicits responses. At the same time, it opens opportunities for dialogue between policymakers and staff, facilitates a more accurate understanding of what is actually taking place, and helps clarify who bears responsibility and who can take action.

Transparency not only has the potential to strengthen employees' trust in institutional policies, but may also encourage greater openness among colleagues, making it easier to discuss inappropriate behavior in a constructive manner. Such a constructive approach, grounded in trust and open dialogue, is precisely what early-career researchers themselves call for from policymakers (Van Den Bossche, 2025). Transparency regarding the evidence base on which universities build their policies could play a crucial role in achieving this objective.

APPENDIX 1

The *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023 was completed, either fully or to a substantial extent, by 4550 junior researchers at the Flemish universities. The extent to which these respondents provide a representative picture of the overall population of junior researchers was examined in detail in ECOOM-brief 51.

Appendix Table 1. Characteristics of junior researchers in Flanders, 2023: comparison between all *Survey of Junior Researchers* (SJR) 2023 respondents and respondents who participated in the final module of inappropriate behavior.

	SJR 2023 Overall (N=4550)	SJR 2023 Participation in final module (N=3877)
	%	%
Gender		
Male	41.7	41.2
Female	56.3	57.2
I use another term	0.7	0.6
I prefer not to answer	1.3	1.0
Year of birth		
≤ 1990	19.2	18.7
1991-1994	26.4	25.6
1995-1997	35.1	35.7
≥ 1998	19.3	20.0
Nationality		
Belgian	59.0	60.8
EU27	16.9	16.7
Non-EU27	24.1	22.5
Science Cluster		
Natural sciences	16.6	16.6
Engineering and technology	23.9	23.2
Medical and health sciences	21.7	22.3
Agricultural, veterinary and food sciences	3.3	3.2
Social sciences	24.7	25.2
Humanities and the arts	9.8	9.5
STEM		
STEM	65.5	65.2
Non-STEM	34.5	34.8
University		
KU Leuven	37.8	36.5
Ghent University	31.8	31.4
University of Antwerp	15.3	15.2
VUB	11.6	13.3
Hasselt University	3.5	3.6

The questions on inappropriate behavior included in the *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023 were presented only in the final section of the questionnaire. To what extent do the 3877 respondents who were still actively participating in the survey at that stage continue to provide a representative picture of the total population of junior researchers at the Flemish universities? The answer can be found in Appendix Table 1.

The figures show that the percentage distributions for key characteristics such as gender, year of birth, nationality, scientific cluster, and university are virtually identical for the full group of 4550 respondents and for the 3877 respondents who completed the questions on inappropriate behavior. We may therefore conclude that, with respect to these basic characteristics, respondent attrition during the survey did not introduce meaningful bias into the analyses.

APPENDIX 2

The *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023 and the *Workability Monitor* 2023 use identical question wording to assess experiences of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation or threats. The same response categories are employed in both surveys, with the exception that the *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023 additionally included the response option "I prefer not to say". As noted earlier, this option was used only rarely (see Appendix Table 1).

Appendix Table 2. Unweighted and weighted prevalence of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation or threats in the workplace among highly educated employees in Flanders (based on *Workability Monitor* 2023, N=2273). Weighting to match the age distribution of the *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023.

	Unweighted prevalence %	Weighted prevalence %
Physical violence		
≤ 1990	2.5	0.4675
1991-1994	5.2	1.3312
1995-1997	2.9	1.0353
≥ 1998	9.8	1.9600
Total	3.0	4.7940 = 4.8%
Sexual harassment		
≤ 1990	2.0	0.3740
1991-1994	8.3	2.1248
1995-1997	5.1	1.8207
≥ 1998	9.8	1.9600
Total	3.0	6.2795 = 6.3%
Bullying		
≤ 1990	7.1	1.3277
1991-1994	6.6	1.6896
1995-1997	2.2	0.7854
≥ 1998	3.3	0.6600
Total	6.6	4.4627 = 4.5%
Intimidation or threats		
≤ 1990	14.8	2.7676
1991-1994	17.9	4.5824
1995-1997	14.0	4.9980
≥ 1998	8.2	1.6400
Total	14.9	13.9880 = 14.0%

Source: *Workability Monitor Employees* 2023 (SERV/Innovation & Labour Foundation)

The age distribution of junior researchers in the *Survey of Junior Researchers* 2023 differs from that of respondents in the *Workability Monitor* 2023. Junior researchers are generally younger and typically at the beginning of their careers, whereas respondents in the *Workability Monitor* 2023 are representative of the entire Flemish workforce and are therefore, on average, older. Meaningful benchmarking requires

comparing groups with similar age distributions, as age serves as an indicator of career stage. This necessitates weighting the prevalence estimates calculated from the *Workability Monitor* 2023 data for the Flemish workforce.

The weighting coefficients used to adjust the prevalence estimates were calculated for four age categories, based on year of birth: ≤1990, 1991–1994, 1995–1997, and ≥1998. Within the *Workability Monitor* 2023, the proportions of highly educated respondents (long-cycle higher education) in these age categories were 81.1%, 10.1%, 6.1%, and 2.7%, respectively. The corresponding proportions of junior researchers are reported in Appendix 1. This resulted in the following weighting coefficients: ×0.187 for respondents born in or before 1990, ×0.256 for those born between 1991 and 1994, ×0.357 for those born between 1995 and 1997, and ×0.200 for those born in or after 1998.

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