

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

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In 2023, ECOOM HR in R&D, commissioned by the Flemish government, conducted its five-yearly monitoring survey among all junior researchers at the Flemish universities. Approximately 9 out of 10 of these junior researchers are PhD students. Unlike the data that universities collect from their own employees, the *Survey of Junior Researchers* provides a sector-wide insight into the performance, well-being, and careers of junior researchers in Flanders. In the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, for the first time we asked some questions about inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

The responses we received to those questions already allowed us to determine how many junior researchers were victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace over the course of one year (ECOOM-brief 53). We have since also learned who is most at risk (ECOOM-brief 54), and further more we know to what extent junior researchers know where they can report inappropriate behavior (ECOOM-brief 55). Further analyses have also provided initial insights into the extent to which junior researchers are willing to officially report inappropriate behavior (ECOOM-brief 56). The willingness to report is preceded by an extensive decision-making process in which all sorts of barriers, resistance, and considerations play a role, often related to the role and position a victim occupies within an organization. That position of junior researchers is for various reasons vulnerable (see ECOOM-brief 54). In the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, we examined junior researchers' willingness to report from a dual perspective: as victims and as witnesses of inappropriate behavior. In the previous ECOOM-brief, we zoomed in on the willingness to report from the perspective of the victim. In particular we looked into which junior researchers were willing to make an official report and what role the condition of anonymity played in that decision (ECOOMbrief 57).

In this brief, we shift our perspective and zoom in on the willingness of witnesses to report. Just like reports of inappropriate behavior from victims, reports from witnesses offer important opportunities to restore performance, well-being, and relationships; to adjust structures, cultures, and processes within the organization; and to maintain or

regain employees' trust in their employer. Through their websites, the Flemish universities invite witnesses of inappropriate behavior to report incidents and to also react at the moment when they witness incidents. The *active bystanders* trainings (Latané & Darley, 1968) that are organized have a dual purpose. The first objective is at the individual level: the training aims to change bystanders' behavior from passive to active. The second objective is situated at the level of organizational culture: the training aims to bring about changes in prevailing views and attitudes that promote or enable inappropriate behavior (Fenton et al., 2016). It is unclear to what extent the training programs offered at the Flemish universities specifically take into account the vulnerable position of junior researchers within universities and the specific barriers they may experience in taking action.

One specific action that witnesses of inappropriate behavior in the workplace can take is to make an official report. There is often a significant gap between the willingness to make an official report and actually doing so. We already discussed this in greater detail in ECOOM-briefs 56 and 57. We note that there is little research that clearly captures the so-called *intention-behavior gap*, and research on this gap within university contexts is virtually non-existent. And the research that does exist is not detailed enough to provide insight into what is specifically happening within the group of junior researchers.

The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* does not rely on anecdotal evidence, but instead asked the following hypothetical question to all junior researchers at the Flemish universities: "If you were to witness inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?" With this question, we dive into the undercurrent of the Flemish universities. While the surface level of an organization concerns visible procedures and systems, formal rules, guidelines, and codes of conduct, the undercurrent consists of all the informal, often invisible aspects that—although difficult to measure—have a massive influence on how the organization actually functions. This involves culture, values, norms, beliefs, informal networks, patterns of collaboration, and interpersonal relationships. It also concerns the emotions, feelings, attitudes, and motivations of employees, as well as all the unspoken rules and implicit

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expectations regarding one another and management. Reports of inappropriate behavior by witnesses indicate that boundaries have been crossed, but they also demonstrate solidarity among employees, as well as trust and hope in the organization's ability to address it in an adequate and effective manner. Willingness to report is a necessary but insufficient condition for proceeding with an official report.

In ECOOM-brief 56, we found that 53.9% of junior researchers at the Flemish universities were willing to officially report inappropriate behavior they witnessed. For 27.6%, this would have to be done anonymously. Among 42.1% of junior researchers, there was doubt about whether or not to report, and 2.1% indicated that they would not report. Those who had personally experienced physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past year were found to be significantly less willing to report if they were to witness inappropriate behavior. In the following, we want to zoom in on the question: "Who is willing to official report as a witness?" We will examine whether there are differences in willingness to report based on individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, and the work context.

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 as witnesses. 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 targeting all junior researchers at the five Flemish universities. In 2023, there were 17838 such 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 several questions about inappropriate behavior (see also ECOOM-briefs 53 through 57). The questions were formulated in consultation with the five Flemish universities.

In this ECOOM-brief, we use the hypothetical question: "If you were to witness 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 to answer this question". For this question, 73 respondents indicated they would rather not answer, and 8 people left the question unanswered.

Concretely, we ask the following four research questions:

1. *Does the willingness to report if one were to witness inappropriate behavior vary depending on individual characteristics, such as gender and nationality?*
2. *Does the willingness to report if one were to witness 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 witness 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 witness 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 the appendix.

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

Table 1 first shows significant gender differences in willingness to report as a witness. 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 see that 55.7% of men and 52.8% of women are willing to make an official report of inappropriate behavior. We see that the extent to which anonymity is viewed as a necessary condition is fairly similar: 27.1% among men and 28.1% among women. In addition, we see that 28.6% of men and 24.7% of women are also willing to report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Looking next at the response option "I don't know if I would report it. It depends", we find 39.5% of men and 43.9% of women. Furthermore, we see that only a small proportion of junior researchers would not make an official report if they witnessed inappropriate behavior IN THE WORKPLACE. A complete lack of willingness to report is seen in 2.6% of men and 1.8% of women. Finally, we note that 2.2% of men and 1.5% of women preferred not to answer the question regarding their willingness to report as a witness. Table 1 not only shows significant gender differences in the willingness to report as a witness, but also significant differences by nationality. The sum of the percentages in response columns 1 and 2 is 50.2% for junior researchers with Belgian nationality, 57.5% for junior researchers with EU27 nationality, and 60.8% for their colleagues from outside the EU27. For about 1 in 4 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 just over 3 in 10. We note that 1 in 4 Belgians and junior researchers from outside the EU27 are willing to make an official report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Among international junior researchers from within the EU27, that proportion is slightly higher: 1 in 3 is willing to make a non-anonymous report.

Table 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to witness it: 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	27.1	28.6	39.5	2.6	2.2
Female	28.1	24.7	43.9	1.8	1.5
I use another term (§)	26.1	21.7	43.6	4.3	4.3
I prefer not to say (§)	18.4	23.7	50.0	0.0	7.9
Nationality ***					
Belgian	25.7	24.5	47.7	1.8	0.3
EU27	24.1	33.4	38.1	2.2	2.2
Non-EU27	35.0	25.8	30.5	2.8	5.9

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

** = p<0.01 *** =p<0.001

(§) = percentage calculated on N<50

If we then look at the response option "I don't know: it depends", we see that nearly half of Belgian junior researchers choose this option; among junior researchers from within the EU27, the figure is nearly 2 in 5, and among junior researchers from outside the EU27, it is nearly 3 in 10. These three groups show virtually no difference when it comes to the total unwillingness to report as a witness: the "no" response option varies by nationality from 1.8% to 2.8%. Finally, when we zoom in on the response option "I'd rather not answer this question", we see that only 0.3% of Belgian junior researchers use this option. Among international junior researchers, this happens slightly more often: 2.2% of those from within the EU27 and 5.9% of those from outside the EU27.

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IF ONE WERE TO WITNESS 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 examine whether the willingness to report as a witness of inappropriate behavior varies according to specific job and employment characteristics: whether or not one is involved in

education, whether or not one is pursuing a PhD, the phase of the PhD, the number of promotors, and the type of appointment.

In Table 2, we first observe that junior researchers involved in education are slightly more willing to make a non-anonymous report and less willing to make an anonymous report compared to those not involved in education. We note 27.0% versus 25.1% and 26.0% versus 30.0%, respectively. Those who are involved in educational activities are slightly more likely to choose the response option "I don't know if I would report it. It depends": 43.7% versus 39.8%.

Table 2. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to witness it: breakdown by involvement in educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promotors, 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	26.0	27.0	43.7	1.9	1.4
No	30.0	25.1	39.8	2.4	2.7
PhD track n.s.					
Yes	27.6	26.2	42.2	2.1	1.9
No	26.0	29.1	43.3	0.8	0.8
PhD phase **					
Initiating	31.1	27.9	37.1	1.4	2.5
Executing	27.3	26.5	42.7	1.7	1.8
Finishing	26.7	25.4	41.7	3.8	2.4
Number of promotors n.s.					
One promotor	28.9	26.5	40.5	2.2	1.9
More than one promotor	27.1	26.2	42.7	2.1	1.9
Type of appointment ***					
Academic assistantship	26.0	27.3	43.4	2.5	0.8
Belgian scholarship	26.2	25.8	45.0	1.9	1.0
Foreign scholarship	44.3	18.9	28.1	3.8	4.9
Project funding	27.6	26.5	42.4	1.8	1.7
No university funding	29.8	28.2	34.7	2.4	4.9
Other/I don't know	21.8	28.0	43.6	2.3	4.3

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

n.s. = not significant ** = p<0.01 *** =p<0.001

Furthermore, we see no significant differences in willingness to report as a witness depending on whether or not one is in a PhD track or on the number of promotors in the PhD trajectory. However, we do observe

that willingness to report varies significantly depending on the phase of the PhD. If we add up the percentages in response columns 1 and 2, we find that 59.0% of PhD students in the initiating phase are willing to report as witnesses, 53.8% of those in the implementation phase, and 52.1% of those nearing completion. In the initiating phase of the PhD, we observe less doubt to report. In the finishing phase, we observe a slightly higher unwillingness to report: 3.8% compared to 1.4% and 1.7%. If we then examine willingness to report as a witness from the perspective of “appointment”, significant differences emerge here as well. When we add the percentages in response columns 1 and 2, we see the highest level of willingness to report among junior researchers with a foreign scholarship (63.2%) or without university funding (58.0%). If we zoom in on willingness to report anonymously, we see that this varies across the different groups from 21.8% (among those who do not know how the research is funded or indicate another funding source) to 44.3% (among researchers with a foreign scholarship). When we zoom in on those researchers who would also report if it cannot be done anonymously, we see percentages ranging from 18.9% (among researchers with a foreign scholarship) to 28.2% (among researchers without university funding). Researchers with a foreign scholarship clearly prefer to report anonymously if they were to witness inappropriate behavior. At the same time, we see the least doubt among them to report (28.1% instead of 34.7% to 45.0%). The most doubt about whether or not to report is seen among junior researchers with a Belgian scholarship (45.0%), other/I don't know (43.6%), and academic assistants (43.4%). Junior researchers with a personal foreign scholarship, an academic assistantship, or those not funded by the university are slightly more indicating that they would not officially report inappropriate behavior if they witnessed it. We note 3.8%, 2.5%, and 2.4%, respectively.

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

In Table 3, we focus on science cluster and university. When we distinguish junior researchers by scientific cluster, a broad categorization into STEM and non-STEM reveals no significant differences in willingness to report witnessing inappropriate behavior in the workplace. However, a more detailed breakdown into the six science clusters according to the VODS classification (ECOOM, n.d.) shows a different picture. When we add response columns 1 and 2, we see the highest willingness to report within the clusters of humanities and arts (61.9%), engineering and technology (55.2%), and natural sciences (55.1%). If we zoom in on junior researchers who are willing to report if they can do so anonymously, the proportion ranges from 26.0% within medical and health sciences to 30.8% within the humanities and arts. For 24% to 31% of junior researchers, anonymity is not a necessary condition for officially reporting inappropriate behavior as a witness. Furthermore, we see that junior researchers in medical and health sciences (47.0%), social sciences (44.0%), and agricultural, veterinary,

and food sciences (43.1%) are the ones with most doubt about whether they would officially report: it depends.

Table 3. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to witness it: 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	27.2	26.0	42.5	2.3	2.0
Non-STEM	28.1	26.8	41.7	1.7	1.7
Science cluster (2) *					
Natural sciences	28.7	26.4	40.9	1.6	2.4
Engineering and technology	27.1	28.1	39.2	2.8	2.8
Medical and health sciences	26.0	23.5	47.0	2.6	0.9
Agricultural, veterinary, and food sciences	28.5	26.0	43.1	0.8	1.6
Social sciences	27.1	25.4	44.0	1.9	1.6
Humanities and the arts	30.8	31.1	35.1	1.4	1.6
University ***					
KU Leuven	27.0	23.2	45.9	2.3	1.6
Ghent University	29.1	26.1	41.0	2.1	1.7
University of Antwerp	23.8	28.6	43.0	2.4	2.2
VUB	29.4	33.3	33.1	1.8	2.5
Hasselt University	28.3	23.9	44.9	0.0	2.9

Note. Significance based on the Chi² test

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

Junior researchers in medical and health sciences not only show the greatest doubt to make an official report, but also, along with those in engineering and technology, most frequently indicate that they would not file an official report if they witnessed inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

Finally, Table 3 also shows us how the willingness to report witnessing inappropriate behavior in the workplace varies significantly among universities. If we add up the percentages in response columns 1 and 2, we see that the willingness to report ranges from 50.2% at KU Leuven, 52.2% at Hasselt University, and 52.4% at the University of Antwerp, to 55.2% at Ghent University and 62.7% at the VUB. The willingness to report if it can be done anonymously ranges from 23.8% at the University of Antwerp to 29.4% at the VUB. The willingness to report, even if it cannot be done anonymously, ranges from 23.2% at KU Leuven to 33.3% at the VUB. Compared to their colleagues at other universities, junior researchers at the VUB are significantly less likely to choose the response option “I don't know if I would report it. It depends”. We note that 33.1% of junior researchers at the VUB are undecided. At the other universities, we observe percentages ranging from 41.0% to 45.9%.

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

Tables 1 through 3 show that the willingness to report inappropriate behavior witnessed 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 investigated characteristic (e.g., within the group of male junior researchers), whether the willingness to report differs significantly between those who have not become victims of inappropriate behavior in the past year and those who reported having been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past year (see ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54 for more details). Here, willingness to report was again measured by the hypothetical question: "If you were to witness inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?" We again considered the five response options. Detailed findings based on these five response options can be found in the appendix.

In Table 4, we only note whether and how the willingness to report differs between victims and non-victims. In the last column of Table 4, we see a lack of statistical significance or a downward arrow. 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 as a witness than junior researchers who were not victims within the concerning category (see also ECOOM-brief 56). We see in the last column of Table 4 that being a victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace is associated with a lower willingness to report as a witness only in specific groups of junior researchers. We observe this among men and women, among Belgian and European junior researchers, and among those who are not involved in educational activities. We observe the same pattern among PhD students, at every phase of their PhD research and when multiple promoters are involved in the PhD research. The same applies to project staff, both researchers in STEM and non-STEM fields, junior researchers in medical and health sciences, and those conducting their research at Ghent University. For all other groups, being victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the year prior to our survey does not appear to result in a lower willingness to report as a witness.

For more details, we refer the reader to the appendix.

Table 4. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior if they were to witness it: break down by reports of 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
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	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	n.s.
Involved in educational activities	
Yes	n.s.
No	↓
PhD track	
Yes	↓
No	n.s.
PhD phase	
Initiating	↓
Executing	↓
Finishing	↓
Number of promoters	
One promotor	n.s.
More than one promotor	↓
Type of appointment	
Academic assistantship	n.s.
Belgian scholarship	n.s.
Foreign scholarship	n.s.
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	n.s.
Engineering and technology	n.s.
Medical and health sciences	↓
Agricultural, veterinary, and food sciences	n.s.
Social sciences	n.s.
Humanities and the arts	n.s.
University	
KU Leuven	n.s.
Ghent University	↓
University of Antwerp	n.s.
VUB	n.s.
Hasselt University	n.s.

Note: Significance based on the Chi² test

n.s.=not significant

↓ victims less willing to report than non-victims

(§) = calculation on N<50

DISCUSSION

"If you were to witness inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?" This and other questions regarding inappropriate behavior we asked all junior researchers at the Flemish universities with the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*. We already described an initial analysis of the answers junior researchers gave us to this question in ECOOM-brief 56. In those analyses, we found that 54% of junior researchers were willing to officially report inappropriate behavior if they were to witness it. This willingness to report as a witness is slightly higher than the willingness to report if they were to be a victim. We also found that the willingness to report is larger if junior researchers know where to report inappropriate behavior, but only among those who had not been victims themselves of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past year. Junior researchers who themselves had been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past year were found to be less willing to report, both as victims and as witnesses (see also ECOOM-brief 56).

In the current brief, we focused our attention on the willingness of junior researchers to report if one were to witness inappropriate behavior in the workplace. We examined whether this willingness to report varied according to individual characteristics, job and employment characteristics, and characteristics of the work context.

Takeaways

First, it appears that the willingness to report if one was to witness inappropriate behavior in the workplace varied significantly by gender, nationality, involvement in educational activities, PhD phase, type of appointment, science cluster, and university. There was no significant difference in willingness to report as a witness based on whether or not one was doing a PhD, or on the number of promotors in the PhD. The personal experience as a victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace was found to be associated with a lower willingness to report as a witness among certain groups of junior researchers. We observed this among men and women, among junior researchers from Belgium or the EU27, among junior researchers without educational activities, junior researchers in a PhD track, PhD candidates at every PhD phase, PhD students with multiple promotors, among project funded junior researchers, among junior researchers in STEM and non-STEM, among junior researchers in medical and health sciences (according to the VODS classification), and among junior researchers at Ghent University.

Second, it appears that the two response options "yes, but only in case I can report it anonymously" and "yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously" are most frequently selected by junior researchers with a foreign scholarship (63.2%), junior researchers at the VUB (62.7%), junior researchers in the humanities and arts (61.9%), and junior researchers with a non-EU27 nationality (60.8%). This greater willingness to report among those with a foreign scholarship, those from outside Europe, or those conducting research at the VUB was also found when we examined the willingness to report in case one was a victim of inappropriate behavior (see ECOOM-brief 57).

Third, certain groups of junior researchers appear to be more reluctant to officially report inappropriate behavior as a witness. We see this reluctance reflected primarily in the response option "I don't know if I would report it. It depends". For the 4 to 5 out of 10 junior researchers who chose this response option, the possibility of reporting anonymously appears to be an insufficient condition for proceeding with an official report. If we also look at the response option "no", we see that the proportion of junior researchers who chose this option varied from 0.0% to 3.8%, depending on the characteristic considered. The highest percentages of "no" responses are found among PhD students in the finishing phase of their PhD and among junior researchers with a foreign scholarship.

Policy reflections

As an initial policy reflection, we emphasize the importance of gaining insight into the extent to which university staff directly or indirectly witness inappropriate behavior in the workplace, as well as their thoughts, experiences, and reactions to it. Scientific research focusing on witnesses of inappropriate behavior within the university context is scarce, and what does exist is not detailed enough to draw conclusions about junior researchers and PhD students. Neither does the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* let us know how many junior researchers and PhD students at the Flemish universities have directly or indirectly witnessed inappropriate behavior. Recent research by the Netherlands Labor Authority (2024) shows that a significant proportion of academic staff at the 14 Dutch universities have witnessed inappropriate behavior: in the past two years, 56% saw a colleague being bullied, 46% witnessed discrimination, 1 in 5 witnessed sexual harassment, and 1 in 5 saw a colleague become victim to aggression and violence. This concerns a significant proportion of employees who not only see the negative effects of inappropriate behavior on the victim but may also experience negative effects themselves, particularly on their own performance and well-being. Research shows that witnesses of inappropriate behavior can have a fundamental influence on the inappropriate behavior, both in a constructive and destructive way (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Paull et al., 2012). In a constructive way, colleagues can be a source of understanding and support (Glowacz et al., 2014; Lewis, 2003; Keashly, 2021). In both constructive and destructive ways, colleagues can be a source of potential intervention (Keashly & Neuman, 2018). Such intervention may further escalate the unsafe situation, but it can also defuse it and lead to more structural and sustainable solutions. In organizations where problem-solving relies heavily on informal support and "a good talk" with a colleague or promotor, it is important for policy to understand the extent to which such informal channels are relied upon in daily practice and what the positive and negative consequences of this are. These consequences can manifest not only in desired or undesired behavioral patterns regarding collaboration and solidarity, trust, and feelings of safety, but they also shape perceptions of what happens in the university workplace. This perception also encompasses any potential discrepancy between "what happens" and what, according to policy and codes of conduct and integrity, "should

happen" or "is desirable". This perception not only influences the response to the specific inappropriate behavior one witnesses but, together with the perceptions and reactions of others, becomes an integral part of a university's undercurrent. This undercurrent consists of all the informal aspects within the organization, and these have a massive influence on how the organization actually functions. It involves culture, informal networks, interpersonal relationships, emotions, attitudes, and all the unspoken rules and implicit expectations regarding one another and management. Any *evidence-based* policy that aims to be effective must have insight into both the surface level and the undercurrent of the organization.

A second policy reflection concerns the generation of insights into inappropriate behavior and the willingness to report such behavior among specific groups. Our analyses show that junior researchers from outside the EU27 and junior researchers with a foreign scholarship exhibit distinct patterns. Within the Flemish universities, 3 in 10 junior researchers come from outside the EU27, and nearly 18% of them are employed through a foreign scholarship. In previous ECOOM-briefs, we found that these junior researchers are more likely than their colleagues to become victims of bullying and discrimination. Regarding discrimination, the figures ranged from 1 in 4 to 3 in 10 (ECOOM-brief 54). At the same time, we found that these researchers were the least knowledgeable of where to report inappropriate behavior: only 4 in 10 knew where to report, while the average for other groups of junior researchers was 6 in 10 (ECOOM-brief 55). The higher rate of being victims and the limited knowledge of where to report inappropriate behavior appear to go hand in hand with a greater willingness to report inappropriate behavior—both as victims (ECOOM-brief 57) and as witnesses, for junior researchers from outside the EU27 and junior researchers with a foreign scholarship. In a previous brief, we already offered policy reflections on this topic (ECOOM-brief 57). Here, we further emphasize that gaining insight into the experiences of international junior researchers with inappropriate behavior, and the way in which they and the Flemish universities deal with it, is an integral part of Flanders' attractiveness as a knowledge region for international collaboration and investment. We briefly addressed the question of whether inappropriate behavior occurs more frequently at the Flemish universities compared to universities in other regions in ECOOM-brief 53.

A third and final policy reflection concerns the efforts that the Flemish universities are already making, and those that are specifically targeting witnesses of inappropriate behavior. All universities provide information on their websites about where not only victims but also witnesses of inappropriate behavior can turn to. The message consistently emphasizes the same value: inappropriate behavior has no place in the institution. And witnesses can act as a kind of ambassador for this value. Each university makes it clear that witnesses can also report anonymously, thereby attempting to lower or remove any barriers. It is unclear whether witnesses who find their way to the websites ultimately feel enough trust to actually make a report and how universities could further strengthen this trust through their websites. In addition to providing information via websites, universities

are also committed to *active bystander* trainings, which serve a dual purpose: encouraging individuals to take action in cases of inappropriate behavior and fostering a cultural shift so that is clear which values, norms, and behaviors are expected, and which behaviors will not be tolerated. *Active bystander* trainings are offered at many universities, and the same applies to trainings on research integrity. According to Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), research on *active bystander* training within universities is scarce. In addition to offering training sessions and workshops, a more alternative approach is sometimes chosen: for instance, half of the universities in the Netherlands recently opted for Mindlab, a theatre performance that helps open up discussion about inappropriate behavior at universities (<https://tmrk.nl/voorstellingen/mindlab/>) (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). The question that arises regarding *active bystander* trainings and other initiatives is that of their impact. Is there any insight into the extent to which these trainings and other initiatives achieve their intended goals? And are they sufficiently tailored to junior researchers, who, due to their particularly vulnerable position, may face more or different barriers? (see also Horbach et al., 2020; Schraudner et al., 2019).

Finally, the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* has already provided considerable insights—through four questions—into the extent to which and the ways in which inappropriate behavior in the workplace affects the lives of junior researchers at the Flemish universities. However, this has only scratched the surface. More research is needed—both survey-based and qualitative—using a richer set of questions to explore more deeply and broadly how inappropriate behavior is experienced, how it is responded to, and how it impacts various aspects of junior researchers' performance, well-being, and careers. Ideally, this should be conducted in the same manner at all Flemish universities, so that a sector-wide *evidence base* is established and we can optimally learn from each other's *good practices*.

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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.*
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APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. All junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023: willingness to report inappropriate behavior (IB) if they were to witness it: breakdown by gender, nationality, educational activities, PhD track, PhD phase, number of promotors, 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 to witness 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	27.9	30.0	38.1	2.1	1.9	↓
	Victim	24.2	23.1	45.1	4.7	2.9	
Female	Non-victim	28.7	24.8	44.1	1.4	1.0	↓
	Victim	26.5	24.0	43.9	2.8	2.8	
I use another term	Non-victim	20.0	26.7	46.6	0.0	6.7	n.s.
	Victim (§)	37.5	12.5	37.5	12.5	0.0	
I prefer not to say	Non-victim	16.7	29.2	45.8	0.0	8.3	n.s.
	Victim (§)	23.1	15.4	53.8	0.0	7.7	
Nationality							
Belgian	Non-victim	26.4	25.0	46.8	1.5	0.3	↓
	Victim	22.7	22.2	51.7	3.2	0.2	
EU27	Non-victim	23.9	36.4	36.7	1.3	1.7	↓
	Victim	24.4	25.6	42.8	4.2	3.0	
Non-EU27	Non-victim	37.8	26.5	28.0	2.5	5.2	n.s.
	Victim	31.4	23.9	34.5	3.4	6.8	
Involved in educational activities							
Yes	Non-victim	26.4	27.4	43.6	1.6	1.0	n.s.
	Victim	25.4	25.5	44.4	2.7	2.0	
No	Non-victim	31.2	26.6	38.3	1.7	2.2	↓
	Victim	26.3	20.2	44.6	4.6	4.3	
PhD track							
Yes	Non-victim	28.4	27.1	41.3	1.7	1.5	↓
	Victim	25.5	23.4	44.6	3.5	3.0	
No	Non-victim	23.1	28.8	46.1	1.0	1.0	n.s.
	Victim (§)	40.9	27.3	31.8	0.0	0.0	

	Victim of IB in the past 12 months?	If you were to witness 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	31.6	28.5	36.9	1.5	1.5	↓
	Victim	29.4	23.5	37.7	1.2	8.2	
Executing	Non-victim	27.9	27.0	42.3	1.5	1.3	↓
	Victim	25.5	24.7	44.2	2.6	3.0	
Finishing	Non-victim	28.0	27.1	39.7	2.7	2.5	↓
	Victim	23.8	22.1	46.4	6.1	1.6	
Number of promotor							
One promotor	Non-victim	30.1	27.5	39.0	1.9	1.5	n.s.
	Victim	26.2	23.4	44.3	3.3	2.8	
More than one promotor	Non-victim	27.7	27.0	42.2	1.6	1.5	↓
	Victim	25.7	23.5	44.4	3.5	2.9	
Type of appointment							
Academic assistantship	Non-victim	25.5	27.8	43.3	2.6	0.8	n.s.
	Victim	28.1	25.2	43.8	2.2	0.7	
Belgian scholarship	Non-victim	26.6	26.9	44.6	1.4	0.5	n.s.
	Victim	25.0	22.5	47.4	3.8	1.3	
Foreign scholarship	Non-victim	47.7	21.1	24.2	3.9	3.1	n.s.
	Victim	37.5	12.5	37.5	3.6	8.9	
Project funding	Non-victim	28.3	27.2	41.8	1.2	1.5	↓
	Victim	25.1	24.0	45.0	3.8	2.1	
No university funding	Non-victim	32.4	28.8	32.3	2.4	4.1	n.s.
	Victim	25.4	28.2	36.6	2.8	7.0	
Other/I don't know	Non-victim	23.2	28.8	43.0	2.0	3.0	n.s.
	Victim	16.9	25.4	45.8	3.4	8.5	
Science cluster (1)							
STEM	Non-victim	28.0	26.7	41.8	1.9	1.6	↓
	Victim	24.9	23.7	44.9	3.5	3.0	
Non-STEM	Non-victim	28.5	27.9	41.1	1.2	1.3	↓
	Victim	27.2	23.2	43.4	3.4	2.8	

	Victim of IB in the past 12 months?	If you were to witness 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	27.6	27.6	41.5	1.2	2.1	n.s.
	Victim	31.8	21.9	41.1	2.6	2.6	
Engineering and technology	Non-victim	27.3	29.2	38.6	2.6	2.3	n.s.
	Victim	28.1	23.2	40.6	3.8	4.3	
Medical and health sciences	Non-victim	29.1	23.3	45.3	2.0	0.3	↓
	Victim	16.3	25.4	52.1	3.8	2.4	
Agricultural, veterinary, and food sciences	Non-victim	27.7	26.6	43.6	0.0	2.1	n.s.
	Victim (§)	31.0	24.1	41.5	3.4	0.0	
Social sciences	Non-victim	27.2	26.6	43.5	1.5	1.2	n.s.
	Victim	27.3	21.2	45.5	3.0	3.0	
Humanities and the arts	Non-victim	31.9	31.5	34.8	0.4	1.4	n.s.
	Victim	27.2	28.3	38.0	4.3	2.2	
University							
KULeuven	Non-victim	27.8	24.0	45.2	1.9	1.1	n.s.
	Victim	25.1	20.8	48.0	3.8	2.3	
Ghent University	Non-victim	29.3	27.4	40.4	1.6	1.3	↓
	Victim	28.6	21.4	43.1	3.8	3.1	
University of Antwerp	Non-victim	25.5	27.7	42.8	1.8	2.2	n.s.
	Victim	18.1	31.2	44.9	3.6	2.2	
VUB	Non-victim	29.9	34.9	31.8	1.6	1.8	n.s.
	Victim	29.3	26.8	36.6	2.4	4.9	
Hasselt University	Non-victim	28.0	24.3	45.8	0.0	1.9	n.s.
	Victim (§)	30.0	23.3	43.4	0.0	3.3	

Note: ↓ victims less willing to report than non-victims. Victim = any junior researcher who indicated 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