

## The New(est) Kid on the Block: The Discursive Politics of Social Safety at Dutch Universities

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The implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies has become increasingly common across European universities (Bonjour/Van den Brink/Taartmans 2020; Essanhaji/van Reekum 2022). While so-called “Gender equality plans” are widely adopted, pushed by the European Commission (Rosa/Clavero 2021), the aftermath of the #MeToo movement has shown that gender-based violence remains a prevalent problem within universities (O’Connor et al. 2021). Other campaigns, such as #IchBinHanna in Germany (protesting precarious employment) and #PleaseDontStealMyWork in Denmark (unveiling normalised scientific misconduct), have raised awareness of the manifold manifestations of power abuse in science (Täuber 2024). In response, many universities have installed bureaucratic complaint procedures to handle instances of discrimination, as studied especially in the UK (Bull/Calvert-Lee/Page 2020).

In the Netherlands, the concept of “social safety” as a new and separate policy domain, alongside DEI, has gained rapid and widespread uptake in higher education. Media exposés of harassment, abuse, and a toxic academic culture (NRC Handelsblad 2019, 2024, 2025), a mapping of academic harassment (Naezer/van den Brink/Benschop 2019) and a policy report published by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW 2022) have been key drivers in social safety seemingly becoming unanimously endorsed and adopted by Dutch universities. While these developments have led to new policies, guidelines, and training programs, it remains unclear how the term social safety is actually understood and used by those who are tasked with implementing it. Against this backdrop, we ask three related questions: First, how do practitioners who work on social safety at Dutch universities define and make sense of social safety? Second, which problems, causes, and target groups are constructed in their accounts of social safety policy and practice? Third, how do they relate social safety to existing concepts and policies such as diversity, inclusion, and psychological safety?

To investigate these questions, we interviewed 15 social safety practitioners (i.e., administrative, human resources, DEI, or academic staff with social safety responsibilities) from eleven Dutch higher education institutions. Focusing on practitioners’ meanings is crucial because they occupy an intermediate position between formal policy and everyday university life. They translate abstract commitments into concrete procedures and are often the first point of contact for staff and students who experience harm. Their understandings of social safety shape which problems are named, which remain unspoken, and which solutions are seen as legitimate, thereby revealing the possibilities and limits of institutional change. Following Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo’s approach (2009, 10), we use “discursive politics” to refer to such

struggles over how key concepts are defined and used in specific contexts, and to the political effects these meanings have. In the literature, the discursive politics of gender equality (*ibid.*), as well as “diversity”, have been extensively studied (Ahmed 2007; Christensen/Muhr 2018). Recent interview-based research with Dutch university DEI practitioners suggests that “social safety” is already being used as a new equality term whose meaning is contested in practice and can operate as a depoliticised discursive container (Wegkamp/Bourabain 2025). Inspired by such work, this article explores which meanings the interviewed practitioners ascribe to the concept of social safety.

This article contributes to the growing discursive politics literature by focusing on the emergence of social safety as a new, widely endorsed yet ambiguously defined policy term in the Netherlands. Our study adds three main insights to this body of work. First, it shows how social safety functions as a “empty signifier” (Lombardo/Meier/Verloof 2009, 14) that gains traction because of its conceptual vagueness and emotional resonance. Second, we highlight the depoliticising effects of euphemistic language and the reluctance to name identities, power, and inequality explicitly. Third, we argue for re-anchoring social safety in intersectional frameworks and embodied experiences of marginality, drawing on psychological and critical diversity scholarship. Building on Diamond and Alley (2022), for example, we propose an alternative conceptualisation that may better realise the critical potential of social safety policy in Dutch higher education. Together, these contributions clarify how social safety both overlaps with and differs from established concepts such as “psychological safety” (Edmondson 2018) and diversity and ‘inclusion’ (Shore/Cleveland/Sanchez 2018), showing how language mediates both the promise and the limits of institutional change.

## Situating Our Study

### Social Safety in Dutch Academia

Since the 2010s, the term social safety has become increasingly prevalent in Dutch education and public institutions. This emergence followed growing societal awareness of misconduct, including sexual harassment and discrimination, catalysed by movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Extensive media coverage of inappropriate behavior, including harassment by professors (NRC 2019), abuse of power, manipulation, and cultures of fear (NRC 2024), pushed these issues to the forefront. Early media reports, however, rarely used the term social safety to describe such misconduct. Key reports by the Women Professors’ Network (LNVH) (Naezer/Van den Brink/Benschop 2019) and university unions (FNV/VAWO 2019) reframed these incidents as systemic rather than isolated. The FNV/VAWO report explicitly labelled academic workplaces unsafe, while the LNVH report emphasised the structural nature of academic harassment, that is, patterns of intense behavior