

## **Policy Note: Threats Against Scientists at Hasselt University**

V3

### **Introduction**

Hasselt University (UHasselt) places great importance on ensuring a safe and respectful working environment for all employees, including scientists. Scientists play a crucial role in the mission of the university, and it is therefore essential that they can carry out their research and teaching freely and without fear. Intimidation and threats against scientists are unacceptable and can have severe consequences for both the individuals involved and the university as a whole.

This policy note aims to define UHasselt's policy regarding threats against scientists. The note includes a definition of threats, an overview of the main collective and individual measures UHasselt can take to prevent and address threats, and guidelines for supporting victims of threats.

### **Definition of Threat**

A threat is defined as any form of action or communication intended to create fear, intimidation, or harm to a scientist, whether inside or outside the work context. This may include, among other things:

- Verbal threats
- Written threats
- Online intimidation
- Stalking
- Physical violence

### **Definition of Intimidation**

“Intimidation” refers to all implicit and/or explicit deliberate actions by internal and/or external individuals that consciously (can) hinder a scientist in the free execution of their academic duties, thereby infringing upon his/her academic freedom.

### **Target Group**

All UHasselt employees who are directly or indirectly involved in conducting scientific research and who may be specifically intimidated because of this role (e.g. ZAP, BAP, emeriti, doctoral students, policy functions, ATP...).

## **Related Domains**

- Policy on transgressive behaviour
- Policy on conflicts of interest
- Policy on diversity and inclusion
- Anti-discrimination legislation

## **Relevant Documents**

- Work regulations
- Integrity charter
- Policy Note on Transgressive Behaviour (GOG)
- Diversity and Integrity Policy Framework
- ZAP Regulations
- BAP Regulations
- ATP Regulations
- ...

## **Measures for the Prevention and Handling of Threats**

UHasselt can take a wide range of measures to prevent and address threats against scientists. These measures can be divided into collective and individual measures. A delegation from the steering group on ethics and integrity has developed a concrete proposal for measures that UHasselt can implement in the coming period to act preventively and curatively against threats to scientists.

# **1) Intimidation Within the Organization**

## **a) Individual Measures**

### **Reporting intimidation:**

- To one's direct supervisor
- Confidential counsellor
- External service for prevention and protection at work

### **Providing social support:**

- Supervisor provides social support to the employee
- Provision of support from a peer, buddy, or mentor

### **Performance reviews:**

- Performance reviews by the direct supervisor with the person(s) intimidating and, if applicable, the victim
- Adjustment discussions by the supervisor and possibly initiating a sanction procedure

## **b) Collective Measures**

### **Independent reporting point:**

- Establishment of an independent reporting point (outside the faculty) for reporting cases of intimidation by colleagues
- Optionally creating a decision tree indicating which reporting point a scientist should contact depending on the issue

### **Training:**

- Training supervisors to prevent (preventive), discuss (awareness-raising), and address (curative) intimidation by colleagues
- Training confidential counsellors and ombudspersons in handling workplace intimidation; informing scientists about which aspects of intimidation can be addressed with which internal persons

**Social support team:**

- Creation of a multidisciplinary social support team to assist a scientist who feels threatened (communication, legal, psychological, ...)

**Structure/culture:**

- Establishing a structure/culture with sufficient social control within hierarchical relationships (e.g. appointing multiple supervisors where possible). Social control includes: detection, signalling, and adjustment when intimidation is identified
- Clarifying the structure of reporting points

**Psychosocial risk analyses:**

- Having psychosocial risk analyses carried out by the external service for prevention and protection at work
- Surveying doctoral students after X months about their feelings and feedback regarding supervision and support
- Analysing employee dropout (e.g. doctoral students) via exit interviews

**Inclusion and diversity:**

- How to deal with colleagues/employees with certain psychological conditions (e.g. autism, narcissism, borderline, ...)
- Identifying a contact point for such issues
- Clear guidelines on what is and is not tolerated in interactions with colleagues/employees from other cultures (e.g. conduct toward women)
- Training on creating and maintaining psychological safety
- Launching a values campaign on integrity, respect, ...
- Ensuring clear definitions and knowledge in the area of diversity and inclusion among supervisors, safety personnel, the communications department, and the board

## **2) Intimidation Outside the Organization**

### **a) Individual Measures**

#### **Social support:**

- Support from the rector or vice-rector in cases of serious threats
- Guarantee of access to assistance services
- Support when participating in external activities
- Avoiding the isolation of the intimidated researcher
- Legal protection through involvement of a lawyer & UHasselt legal experts

### **b) Collective Measures**

#### **Training:**

- Training scientists and policy staff regarding digital and physical discussion forums
- Training supervisors to recognize, discuss, address, and where possible prevent intimidation through preventive measures

#### **Scenario planning and coordination:**

- Creating an incident response plan with contact persons, reporting points, forms, resources, ...
- Aligning the roles of the rector, DCM, confidential counsellors, ombudspersons, legal experts, deans, Securex, ...
- Coordination within VLIR regarding intimidation and its impact on the researcher and their academic freedom

#### **Support and protection:**

- Supporting and (legally) protecting scientists in case of harm caused by intimidation
- Offering sensitivity training regarding dealing with minority viewpoints, groups, stereotypes, ...

**Conclusion**

UHasselt takes threats against scientists very seriously. The university has implemented a wide range of measures to prevent and address threats and to support victims. UHasselt is committed to creating a safe and respectful working environment for all employees, allowing them to engage freely and without fear in their research and teaching.