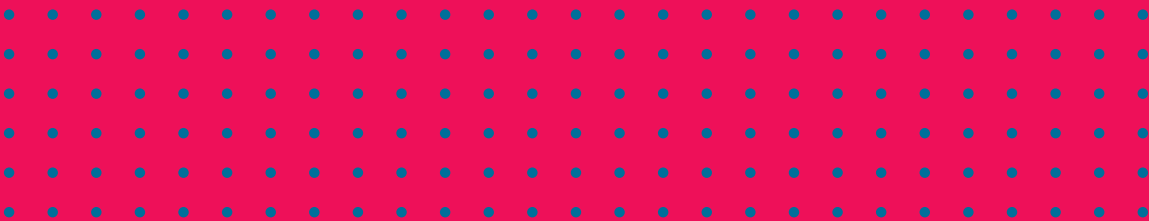


# **Social safety at Czech universities in the context of academic ethics**



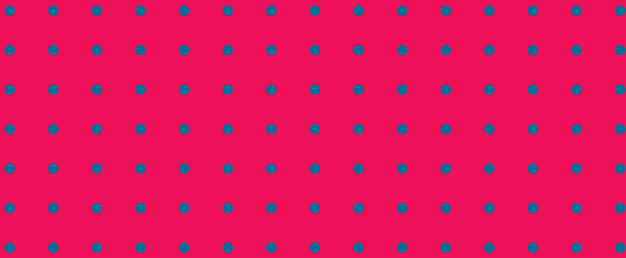
## **Recommendations for universities**


2022, Centralized development project  
of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports



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As a part of the centralized development project **Social safety at Czech Universities in the Context of Academic Ethics**, which was supported in 2022 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 26 Czech public universities met together. They dealt with strengthening institutional mechanisms that support a safe environment for education, research, and other activities of public universities. **“Social safety”** was selected as an overarching concept for a positive environment based on values such as openness, respect, collegiality, and equal opportunities. With respect to the project, the institutions first asked the question of how to achieve such an environment and what the examples of good practice are.



One of the results of the project is a study written by a team of authors from the Department of Politics and International Relations and the Department of Anthropology of the Faculty of Arts of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen – Ondřej Stulík, Sandra Štollová, Ladislav Toušek: **Social (un)safety at Czech Universities in the Context of Academic Ethics.**

In this work, the team discussed the concept of social safety, especially in the context of the university environment, and then carried out research based on key documents from the participating universities relating to social safety. A quantitative analysis and especially a qualitative analysis were carried out, and with their assistance, categories and codes

relating to social safety were identified. The team of authors then defined key areas and issues and suggested follow-up recommendations. The added value of the study also consists of concrete examples of good practice, which are based on interviews conducted with representatives from two selected public universities.

The following text is largely based on the above-mentioned article. However, it is supplemented with knowledge from the implementation team, which was obtained both during implementation of the project and from previous knowledge, either from their own experience or obtained thanks to the sharing of good practice from abroad.

# What is social safety?

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Social safety can be defined as an **ideal state of the environment in which the behaviour and actions of everyone present are naturally guided by the principles of collegiality, integrity, equality, respect, openness, and attention to others and where any form of unwanted behaviour, intimidation, aggression, bullying, or discrimination is considered unacceptable**, regardless of whether it involves students or employees.<sup>1</sup>

“Social safety” as an overarching concept or designation for a positive study or work environment has not yet been fully established in the environment of Czech higher education. However, in the European context, this has already been put into practice, most prominently in the Dutch academic environment, from which the above definition originates.

Social safety can, therefore, be perceived as a target **state that actors want to achieve through their policies in the higher education environment**, and it is based on the assumption that only an environment without the presence of social “danger” enables all of its members to develop their potential. An unpleasant environment (whether during studies or work) puts a considerable burden on everyone present and reduces the effectiveness of the entire institution.

In connection with this, it should always be remembered that the perception of social (un)safety is subjective. **Not all people perceive an undesirable state in the same way, so its assessment is subjective.** In other words, what is okay for one person may be unacceptable for someone else.

*1) Universiteiten van Nederland (2019). Statement sociale veiligheid binnen onze universiteiten: voor een veilige, open en respectvolle sector.*

## Actors

- » Ministry of Education
- » Universities and their units
- » Managers
- » Employees
- » Students

## Policies

- » Legislation
- » Institutions (bodies, persons)
- » Strategies

## Target state

- » Social safety

The actors who adopt the respective policies in the environment of higher education are primarily the **Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and institutions of higher education and their units**, usually by way of their bodies. **People in leadership positions, instructors, other employees, and students** are also important actors. All of these actors form the environment in which all other people co-exist.

**Under a policy aimed at ensuring social safety**, one can imagine, for example, **legislation** (both generally binding legal regulations and the internal regulations of universities), **the establishment of institutions** (bodies, persons in positions), or **the adoption of strategies** (transnational, national, or at the level of a university or its units). Specific examples of policies could be as follows:

## Legislation

- » Code of Ethics
- » The Competitive Hiring Process Code
- » Rules of procedure for the Ethics Committee

## Institutions

- » Ethics Committee
- » Disciplinary Committee
- » Ombuds

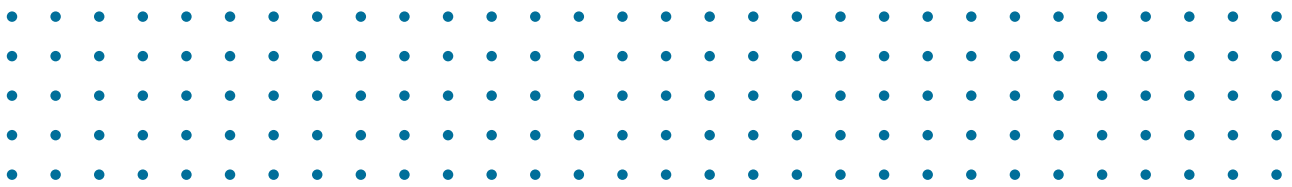
## Strategies

- » Strategic plan
- » Gender Equality Plan
- » HR Award Action Plan

Other important documents include **methodologies or descriptions of processes, analyses, and employee or student surveys**. They either serve as a basis for policies or build on and supplement these policies.

appointment of persons to certain positions or functions, is not enough in itself. The policy must be **constructed well** and **fully implemented**, i.e. it must work in practice and be sufficiently well-known in the environment.

In addition, the mere existence of these policies, whether in the form of documents, set processes, or the



# Examples of an undesirable state

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If we define social safety as an ideal target state, we are inferring that this state is somehow threatened or disturbed by something. Both students and employees

can encounter a wide range of negative phenomena that constitute **social danger**, for example:





In connection with these negative phenomena, it should be emphasized that **this list is by no means exhaustive**. These are just typical examples that can be encountered in an academic environment. It is important to stress once again that social danger is based on subjective experience. Thus, situations can easily occur that

are subjectively perceived as socially dangerous, but that do not fall into any of the known categories, perhaps also because they are difficult to identify with one specific term.

## Principles of social safety at Czech universities

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The analysis demonstrated that **universities are at different stages in terms of adopting social safety as a part of academic ethics in their policies**: some universities have basic policies in place, others only partly, and some still completely lack policies in this area. At the same time, those universities that implemented the European **Human Resources Strategy for**

**Researchers (HRS4R)** and received the HR Award and that conducted a gender audit and have an adopted **Gender Equality Plan** devoted significantly more attention to this area. In both cases, it led to greater interest in social safety with external motivation – European policy and European requirements.

# Recommendations for universities

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## General recommendations

- » **Systematic work in the area of social safety.** Implement comprehensive procedures and include the principles of social safety as a cross-sectoral policy in the university's strategies.
- » **Consistent use of terms.** Terms are used inconsistently in policies without clear definitions and agreement on their meaning – for example “gender”, “sex”, “sexual harassment”, etc. At the university level, define and establish what is understood by a specific term and what it means in the university environment. Only then will it be possible, for example, to place a specific example in the category of an undesirable phenomenon.
- » **Emphasis on the quality of policy implementation.** It is not enough to have a policy declared (i.e. on paper). Its functioning in practice must be verified, and the relevant groups within the university must be acquainted with it.
- » **Increasing awareness of the existence of policies.** Spread awareness, in particular, of existing bodies, responsible persons, and procedures for dealing with undesirable phenomena, either by including them in on-boarding manuals or training, by educating, or by bring them up at appropriate occasions.
- » **Introducing new policies as sensitively as possible.** Lead by example and clearly communicate their meaning so that they are not, if possible, perceived as controversial.
- » **Emphasis on prevention.** Try to prevent undesirable phenomena from occurring as much as possible, for example, by raising awareness about academic ethics, which also includes social safety, and by educating students and employees (typical situations, possible responses and solutions, unconscious prejudices, etc.).

» **Support for victims in resolving the situation and a timely response to the first signs of violating academic ethics.** Don't let the situation escalate. Do not try to hide problems or undesirable phenomena. On the contrary, proactively approach the solution of ethically problematic situations and offer victims possible solutions before the situation escalates.

» **Take no steps without the consent of the victim or reporting party.** Offer the opportunity to talk about the situation without the obligation of a formal resolution. Acquaint the person with the options for an official approach, but leave the decision up to them.

» **Clear and transparent communication of information.** Post in a convenient place who can be contacted, with what problems, and how. The vagueness and unavailability of this information can discourage someone from seeking out a solution. Practice also shows that people prefer to contact specific persons, not "boxes" where it is not clear who is behind them.

» **Unable to use a standard procedure.** Focus also on situations in which it is not possible to turn to a direct superior or, for example, the guarantor of a study programme or the head of a department, because they are directly or indirectly involved in the undesirable situation. A good alternative would be to appoint an independent contact person outside the standard hierarchy (e.g. an ombuds) or a third party as an intermediary (e.g. someone from a counselling centre).

» **Protecting the victim and reporting party.** Make sure that reporting or trying to solve a problem does not work against them. Maintain discretion and anonymity where possible and appropriate.

» **Availability of services for all groups.** When offering counselling services, for example psychological counselling, take into consideration the entire university community (all students and employed persons).

## Specific recommendations

» **Transparent working conditions.** Pay full attention to all working conditions, such as recruitment, the most objective evaluation of employees, clear rules for career advancement, opportunities for further development, equal pay and the provision of benefits.

» **Communicating employment decisions as sensitively and as soon as possible** (for example, non-renewal of an employment contract, a reprimand, giving notice, etc.).

» **Specific language.** Ensure correct, inclusive, and balanced language in internal and external communication (towards applicants, students, graduates, candidates, employees,

and the public). Introduce this style of communication as naturally as possible by spreading awareness and leading by example, not with commands.

» **Taking care of well-being and work/study-life balance for employees and students.** Ensure that there is an adequate work/study load, allow flexibility in the event of (temporarily) caring for a close person or during stays abroad. Plan the times of regular and irregular events taking into account the personal lives of the people involved (e.g. evening meetings), allow flexible working hours where possible, or provide babysitting for some events.

» **Clearly defined competencies.**

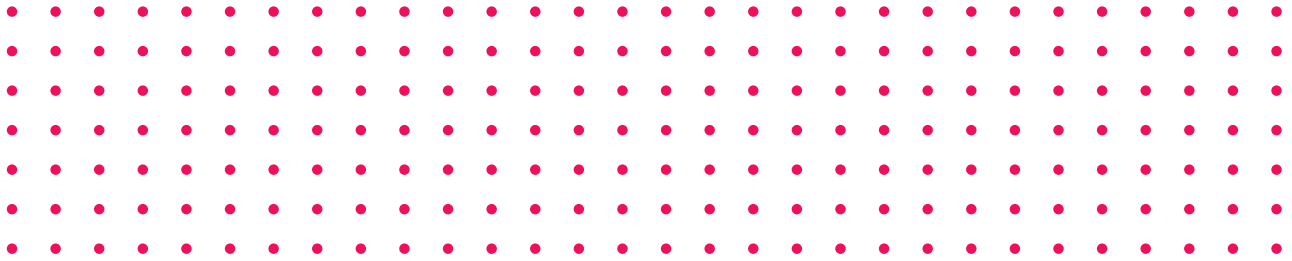
If bodies or an ombuds is established, clearly define the powers and scope in such a way that, if possible, there is no overlap with other bodies.

» **Education and well-being of persons who are responsible for the area (counselling centre, ombuds).**

These people can often suffer from frustration, the unclear results of their work, or demotivation, so attention must also be paid to “caring for the caregivers”. Provide them with the opportunity to further their education (model situations and procedures for problem solving, psychology, mediation, legal framework, etc.) and to connect with persons in a similar position, especially in the academic environment.

» **Power structure and the imbalance of relationships.**

Pay attention to and draw attention to any possible risk involving relationships between employees or employees and students, taking into account that there may be situations where there are conflicts of interest (typically, for example, testing, correcting written work, awarding scholarships, determining wages or bonuses, etc.). This can be unpleasant for the persons in the relationship (for example, regarding the possibility of terminating this relationship), but also for other students or employees who may have doubts about equal treatment.



# Conclusion

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The concept of social safety is useful for describing an ideal state even in the environment of Czech universities. In particular, its establishment would help with a more comprehensive perception of the entire area – which, among other things, is one of the fundamental recommendations that we have provided: to pay attention to the topic in all its breadth and context and to adopt it as cross-sectoral principles in the strategy as a part of all university activities.

Various actors influence the direction of universities towards a state of social safety with their policies. Among these policies, three basic building blocks play a role: legislation, institutions in the sense of bodies or functions, and strategies. The goal should be for everyone at universities to perceive their study and work environment as positive and to be able to devote their energy to developing their studies or work, thus maximizing their potential.

Universities in the Czech Republic are currently in very different phases, which is why opportunities to share their previous experience and good practice, such as with the Centralized Development Projects of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, are of great benefit. Thanks to this, the presented set of recommendations was created in 2022, which is applicable to every Czech public university and from which actors can draw inspiration for their policies in the area of social safety.

