

Summary Report on AMFI Social Safety Survey

This document is a summary of the full report (71 pp) on the *Student, former student, and staff investigation on perceived social safety in the Amsterdam Fashion Institute* that Bezemer & Schubad conducted in April, May and June 2021 on behalf of the Dean of the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.

Chapter I sets out the aspects of procedural accountability. It must be stressed that this is a perception survey of which fact finding is not the primary purpose. The purpose is to explore the (subjective) perceived social safety of the target groups: students, former students, and staff.

The investigation was carried out by conducting 109 semi-structured interviews with persons who volunteered to take part. The advantages (no one can say they were not heard & only persons who believe they have something to say are interviewed) and disadvantages (bias, only persons with strong opinions sign up) of voluntary participation are taken into consideration.

39 students and former students signed up. That is a very small number compared to the approximately 1,400 students who are currently enrolled at AMFI and the many thousands of former students. 70 out of 169 members of staff (employees & freelancers) signed up. That is a very large number. The representativeness of both numbers is discussed. In addition to signing up for an interview, members of the target groups were also given the opportunity to submit a written statement. 41 persons made use of that possibility.

All interviewees and other respondents were promised that their contributions would be anonymous and that third parties would not be able to trace back any information in the report to their person.

To assess social safety, this investigation uses the standards laid down in the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the branch-specific Occupational Health and Safety Catalogue, as well as the social safety standards adopted by AMFI and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. In addition, the pillars of *Psychological Safety in the Workplace* that Prof Amy Edmondson describes in her theories are also drawn upon.

Chapter II discusses the social safety perceived by students and former students during their studies at AMFI.

These experiences are dominantly negative to very negative. For example, 9 out of 39 state that they have been under professional treatment of a psychologist or other professional therapist to *cope* with the psychological damage sustained during their studies at AMFI, with several people mentioning PTSD. Furthermore, 15 of the 39 (not including the 9 in professional treatment) indicate that they suffer or have suffered from seriously damaged self-confidence, performance anxiety,

depression, suicidal thoughts, severe stress, social anxiety and the like as a result of their studies at AMFI.

The main sources of the absence of social safety mentioned are: an extremely high workload, the behaviour of some lecturers supposedly aimed at breaking students' self-esteem and confidence, the unpredictability and arbitrariness of some teachers, the lack of constructive feedback, teachers behaving more like members of the jury in a *contest* than as teachers, intimidation by some teachers, competition among students, and the perception of being enrolled in a disorganised school that finds itself in a state of ideological confusion.

Students and former students also indicate that many - but not all - of the negative experiences date from the past and that first signs of a more humane AMFI are beginning to appear.

The chapter concludes with 22 short statements, pieces of advice, from (former) students to the institute's management.

Chapter III discusses social safety, as perceived by the 70 members of staff who were interviewed.

Their experiences are dominantly negative and critical, albeit more nuanced than the experiences shared by students. Members of staff identify the following main sources of the absence of social safety: high workloads; the organisation being in a state of ideological confusion and chaos; the lack of direction, vision, and strategy; the perception of non-transparent, ad-hoc management practices; hypocritical window dressing; sharp divisions and cliquishness among faculty; and a lack of training and guidance. The vast majority of the 70 staff members interviewed state that they believe the criticism levelled at the organisation by students and former students to be justified.

The researchers highlight that, in addition to criticism, the first signs of faith and confidence in the renewal process that is currently underway can be detected.

The chapter concludes with 70 short statements, pieces of advice, given by members of staff to the institute's management.

Chapter IV tests the outcomes of Chapters II and III against the frame of reference introduced in chapter I. It is concluded that all standards are severely violated at AMFI, making it plausible that - for many at AMFI - the organisation is or was not only *perceived* as being socially unsafe, but actually is or was unsafe.

The representativeness of the survey is also analysed in this chapter. There can be no doubt that the perceptions of the interviewed population of the faculty is representative. Despite the relatively small number of students interviewed, their contributions are to be considered meaningful and representative given the fact that their criticisms were endorsed by the vast majority of the 70

members of staff and given the additional supporting evidence provided by some of AUAS's own quantitative measurements.

Other quantitative analyses, however, sketch substantially more nuanced pictures than the reality perceived by students and faculty. For example, the hard figures on student success rates and staff-absenteeism are many times more positive than evidenced by the output of the interviews. Similarly, scores on factors such as perceived safety and general satisfaction in the most recent National Student Survey paint a significantly more positive picture than the one emerging from the interviews. This difference may be attributed to the renewal process that has been initiated by the institute.

In this chapter, the researchers also identify factors that impede or hinder social safety in the study and/or work environment at AMFI and factors that facilitate or encourage social safety, concluding that the systems and culture with regard to reporting the perceived absence of social safety warrant improvement.

The concluding paragraph makes 14 recommendations to the institute's management.

1. Draw up a clear, broad-based, and unambiguous multi-year strategy for AMFI, resulting in stability and fostering safety and security.
2. Achieve transparency, coherence, consistency, and predictability in the behaviour of the management team. Avoid ad-hoc and incident-driven decision-making.
3. Put an end to so-called management by window dressing. Convey a message that lines up with reality and historical facts, even if these conflict with the institution's desired image.
4. Create a clear, broad-based, and unified vision of education and of students' professional future. In doing so, prevent tension and insecurity among students and faculty, partisanship and cliquishness among faculty, and gaps in the curriculum, which only serve to increase insecurity.
5. Give a powerful impulse to the educational innovation that is already underway. Erase all traces of the educational approach that targeted the crude demolition of students' self-esteem and confidence, that was characterised by unpredictability, arbitrariness, subjectivity, and favouritism, and that forced students to reflect on intimate and confidential details about their private lives and personal histories in public, partly prompted by profoundly intrusive questions from teachers.
6. Promote collaboration and team building among students rather than competition.
7. Bring workloads for students and faculty to an acceptable level. No one seems to have a problem with hard work, but many are uncomfortable with workloads that lead to exhaustion, burnouts, tension, and absenteeism.
8. Bring some peace and quiet to the organisation. Calm it down. Ensure clear and above all final decision-making so that each decision taken does not always trigger a new debate. Be clear about the duties, powers, and responsibilities of coordinators in particular.
9. Create clarity about the position of AMFI as part of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.

10. Do not take for granted that AMFI is inclusive and diverse in every way. Prevent students and staff from feeling excluded and/or discriminated against for various reasons (ethnicity, wealth, background, character).
11. Create a culture in which seeking help is not seen as a sign of weakness. Make sure that help is findable and reliable.
12. Work to create a culture in which it is clear what behaviour is expected of an AMFI-teacher and in which behaviour that deviates from these standards is not accepted and normalised, but addressed and tackled; a culture in which people are called to account when necessary.
13. Improve coaching and mentoring of new teachers and work on the continuing education and coaching of incumbent teachers. Critically evaluate the hiring policy that results in the high number of former students among faculty.
14. As managers, do not only consider necessary changes in the structure, systems, and culture of the organisation, but also pay full attention to the concrete composition of the AMFI workforce and to individual case histories.

The report closes with the observation that the first steps leading to improvement have been taken. The first positive signs are there to be noticed.

Rotterdam
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