

Equal treatment – report on a study of the community at the University of Warsaw

Key points

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Introduction

This report presents the results of the second edition of a survey conducted among students and employees of the University of Warsaw, aimed at deepening knowledge about the perceived prevalence of various forms of unequal treatment.

The following research questions were asked:

1. What personal experiences of unequal treatment in the university environment do students and employees of the University of Warsaw have?
2. How do respondents perceive the prevalence of various forms of unequal treatment in the university environment?
3. What is the situational context of unequal treatment – who perpetrates it, who is most often affected by it, and in what circumstances does it occur?
4. What are the typical reactions of those around them to unequal treatment?
5. How are institutional norms and organisational culture perceived in the context of unequal treatment?
6. How does unequal treatment relate to the mental wellbeing, workplace wellbeing, stress and health of the respondents?
7. How do respondents perceive institutions that support victims of unequal treatment?

The group of respondents included 1,866 (57.8%) women, 1,136 (35.2%) men, 146 (4.5%) non-binary persons, 41 (1.3%) persons who entered other options themselves (e.g. agender, genderqueer) or declared that they refused to answer; 39 persons omitted the question.

As in the previous edition, the survey was organised by the University of Warsaw Equality Team in cooperation with the Centre for Research on Prejudice at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw and the Education Quality Evaluation Laboratory (PEJK) of the University of Warsaw.

The survey was part of the "Equality at the University of Warsaw 2024" project, aimed at developing a new Inclusive Gender Equality Plan for the University of Warsaw.

Prevalence of unequal treatment

Unequal treatment based on gender

As in the previous edition of the survey, the most widespread form of unequal treatment at the University of Warsaw proved to be verbal communication in the form of comments and jokes. These mainly concerned character traits stereotypically attributed to women and men and, secondarily, were statements with sexual undertones.

What is particularly worrying is that among the most frequently mentioned messages were those about non-binary and transgender people. This item was not included in the previous edition of the study. However, it seems that such statements are becoming a serious problem for the University of Warsaw community.

Unequal treatment based on other characteristics

The most frequently reported negative comments concerning characteristics other than gender that the respondents encountered in their units were negative comments about nationality or ethnic origin, mental health or neuroatypicality, and transgender status or gender expression.

It can be noted that in this question, once again, members of the LGBT+ minority were identified as the target of negative messages. The addition of new questions in this section of the survey therefore provided important information on forms of unequal treatment based on various characteristics of individuals in the UW community.

These questions should be included also in subsequent editions of the survey, as they draw attention to which groups are most vulnerable to everyday discrimination and, therefore, which groups may be most in need of protection in the context of functioning at the University of Warsaw. Additionally, consideration could be given to including transgender as a response option in the demographic question about gender.

Perpetrators, victims and the context of unequal treatment

Gender and cases of unequal treatment

The results of the 2024 survey show that men are still perceived as the most common perpetrators of unequal treatment and women are still most often identified as victims. For the first time, non-binary and other gendered individuals were also included, who, according to respondents, experience unequal treatment, and are less often perceived as perpetrators.

There remain slight differences in the perception of the gender of perpetrators among people working in administration, libraries and technical services, where men and women are identified as perpetrators with similar frequency. In view of the survey results, it is recommended that educational activities in the field of equal treatment, with particular emphasis on gender and identity diversity.

Other characteristics of perpetrators and experiencing unequal treatment

Analysis of the responses indicates that the perpetrators of unequal treatment are most often persons with Polish citizenship, often middle-aged or older, employed in scientific and research positions.

In turn, those experiencing this phenomenon were indicated as were mostly students, who are characterised by their young age. The results suggest that academic hierarchy and power relations are key factors influencing unequal treatment, but the problem also occurs within professional groups and in relations between students. This means that counteracting this phenomenon should include both regulations at the level of superior-subordinate relations and integration activities in groups of equal status.

The situational context of unequal treatment

Based on the results concerning the situational context of unequal treatment, it can be concluded that the places where unequal treatment occurs in the academic environment are strongly related to the daily activities of individual groups – students and doctoral students pointed to classrooms, librarians and administrative staff to the library and offices, and technical and teaching staff to staff rooms.

This suggests that the experience of unequal treatment is not perceived as a single incident, but as an element inherent in the everyday work and study environment.

Responding to cases of unequal treatment

Frequency of responses to unequal treatment

The results of this section show that nearly one-third of respondents declared that they did not react to acts of unequal treatment, and only 7% always intervened. Although a significant proportion of respondents remain passive in the face of acts of unequal treatment, there has been a shift towards more frequent responses compared to 2019.

Students and doctoral students proved to be the most passive, which may be linked to their lower status and position in the university hierarchy, while those employed in academic and teaching positions were most likely to respond.

The results suggest that further strengthening of the culture of responding to unequal treatment is needed, especially by building a sense of agency among students and doctoral candidates, as well as supporting all groups in developing the skills and courage to intervene. This may include training in responding to unequal treatment, promoting good intervention practices, and developing easy, quick and non-threatening systemic forms of support that facilitate response.

Types of responses to unequal treatment

The most common reaction of people who tried to counteract unequal treatment was to discuss the incident with friends, people they study or work with, while such situations were rarely reported the relevant university institutions or outside the university.

Such a predominance of informal responses suggests that the respondents may have limited trust in institutional procedures. It is therefore worth developing measures that will facilitate reporting at the university level, increase the visibility and accessibility of formal channels, and build confidence that taking such a step can bring about real change.

Reasons for not responding to unequal treatment

Respondents who did not react to unequal treatment most often cited a lack of belief in the effectiveness of the reaction, fear, or considering the situation too trivial.

This suggests a need to strengthen the sense of agency and responsibility within the UW community through training, education and clear response procedures. It is also important to provide real support to those who report incidents and to ensure that the university's actions have visible effects in order to counteract feelings of powerlessness. The results suggest a need to further explore the reasons for the lack of response and to implement measures to support a sense of agency in such situations.

Supporting institutions

When it comes to support institutions and other sources of support in situations of unequal treatment at the University of Warsaw, most respondents indicated that they receive help primarily from relatives and friends at the university.

Institutional forms of assistance at the University of Warsaw were used relatively less frequently, with the Office for Persons with Disabilities, the Psychological Support Centre and the faculty authorities receiving the highest ratings.

About one-fifth of respondents did not seek any help, which may potentially indicate the existence of a group particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation. At the same time, nearly 20% of respondents indicated that they used psychological support outside the university.

Despite these difficulties, most respondents declared that they felt comfortable and at home at the University of Warsaw, which is an important institutional resource. Combining these results with those from previous sections, it appears that many people are unaware of institutional forms of assistance at the University of Warsaw, do not believe in them, or are afraid to use them.

It is worth further developing and strengthen institutional activities in order to increase the sense of security and agency of people experiencing unequal treatment at the University of Warsaw.

Unequal treatment and well-being

Summary of mental wellbeing measures

The results show a high percentage of long-term psychological difficulties and distress related to work or studies. This indicates a serious burden on the well-being of people associated with the University of Warsaw. In addition, these symptoms co-occur strongly and can be treated as general indicators of mental well-being.

Mental wellbeing and gender

Women at the University of Warsaw have lower levels of mental well-being compared to men. This disparity has remained virtually unchanged compared to the 2019 survey.

In the latest edition of the study, compared to the 2019 study, the intensity of work/study-related stress has increased significantly. Similar increases were observed for variables that may result from distress: negative psychological symptoms and low subjective assessment of one's own health.

Somewhat paradoxical in this context may seem the results indicating that the overall level of satisfaction was higher in 2024 than in 2019. However, it should be noted that when assessing their overall life satisfaction, the participants in the study may have taken into account a number of other factors unrelated to work. They may therefore have reported higher life satisfaction despite feeling worse than those who took part in the 2019 survey at the University of Warsaw.

The analysis also showed that the level of mental well-being at the University of Warsaw seems to be strongly related to status. For all the variables analysed, students scored lower than other groups at the University of Warsaw.

The differences between people with non-normative and normative gender categories

People with non-normative gender categories experienced lower mental well-being level than people with normative categories in both 2024 and 2019. The overall wellbeing of everyone has declined in recent years, which means that the wellbeing of gender non-conforming individuals has fallen to an even lower level. This points to the need to develop activities that support this group, including through visible inclusion strategies and access to dedicated forms of psychological support.

Level of loneliness and mental wellbeing indicators mental well-being

Although working or studying at the University of Warsaw in most cases involves a number of opportunities to meet people, as many as one third of the participants in this study declared that they feel lonely at the university. Loneliness seems to be a problem that affects all genders equally.

Excessive use of remote work may be related to feelings of loneliness. This study suggests that remote work is sometimes overused at the University of Warsaw. For about 40 per cent of people, remote contacts account for more than 25 per cent of all interactions within the University of Warsaw. At the same time, two-thirds of respondents stated that they prefer face-to-face contact.

Men reported more frequent face-to-face contact than women and people of other gender identities. At the same time, women reported a greater preference for remote meetings than men. It remains to be discussed is whether the difference in the form of contact is the result of preference (and if so, what is the reason for this preference), or whether the preference is shaped by the status quo (according to the principle of "if you don't have what you like, you like what you have") or necessity (e.g. care commitments).

The recommendation resulting from these data is to limit the excessive use of remote working and to actively support opportunities for face to-face meetings and relationship building, especially taking into account the needs of people who may choose remote work more often for structural or care reasons.

Loneliness and remote working versus mental wellbeing

In this study, loneliness was found to be a strong predictor of poorer mental well-being among people working or studying at the University of Warsaw. A relationship was also observed between frequent remote work and poorer mental wellbeing indicators. This relationship was particularly characteristic of individuals who, despite their aversion to remote work, hold most of their meetings with other University of Warsaw staff and students online.

Based on these results, it is worth limiting excessive isolation associated with online work and create conditions conducive to direct contact and integration. Particular attention should be paid to people who, despite their preference for stationary work, are forced to use remote work more often for organisational or personal reasons

Experiencing gender inequality and mental wellbeing

Regardless of whether the respondents themselves experienced unequal treatment themselves or had only witnessed it, the feeling that their workplace or place of study was violating equality standards was associated with poorer mental well-being.

Unfortunately, a cross-sectional correlational study does not allow us to determine the direction of causality. In other words, the data collected does not allow us to determine with certainty whether awareness of unequal treatment contributes to a decline in mental well-being. There are several other possible explanations for this correlation, which should probably be verified in future studies.

Summary and recommendations from the qualitative part

Based on the identified problems and experiences of the respondents, we have prepared a number of proposals and suggestions for actions that could improve the situation in the academic environment of the University of Warsaw.

Safe procedures

It is crucial to create effective, transparent and safe procedures for reporting cases of discrimination, symbolic violence and abuse – with 82 guarantee confidentiality and real protection against retaliation.

The visibility and accessibility of information about existing support institutions and procedures for reporting discrimination should be increased, e.g. through regular information campaigns, the inclusion of this content in introductory programmes for students and staff, and the creation of simple, easily accessible materials (e.g. infographics or step-by-step guides) explaining the entire process.

Training, support and flexibility

Respondents also pointed to the need for systematic, mandatory training for the entire academic community (staff, students and administration) on equality, anti-discrimination, inclusive communication and responding to violence and abuse.

An important element of the changes should also be the adaptation of work organisation and class planning to the needs of people combining academic responsibilities with their private lives, including ensuring greater flexibility and sensitivity to care issues. The need for access to professional psychological support and protection for people who report problems was also pointed out.

Combining the results of the open-ended questions with those of the closed-ended questions, it seems that many people are unaware of the possibilities or institutions that already exist at the University of Warsaw. Therefore, it would be important to provide better information, perhaps as part of compulsory training, about the existing possibilities. Of course, with greater awareness, the number of people seeking help would increase, and the university should also be prepared to support these institutions to avoid overburdening them.

Dialogue

In order to effectively implement equality policy and build a truly inclusive environment, it is necessary to take action to address concerns related to the marginalisation of certain communities, especially those who perceive equality measures as threatening their identity or status.

In response to voices claiming "reverse discrimination," it is worth ensuring that broad educational measures are taken to explain the meaning and purpose of equality policies and to

show that their essence is not to take away the rights of any group, but to equalise them. It is worth developing dialogue within the academic community, respecting different sensitivities and beliefs, and creating space for open, safe conversation about social and cultural changes.

It is also important that institutional language and actions are not perceived as exclusionary towards the so-called majority. It is worth referring to common values: dignity, respect and equal treatment of all members of the academic community, regardless of their identity, views or lifestyle.

Summary of the report and recommendations

In the second edition of the survey, conducted among students and employees of the University of Warsaw in 2024, 3,228 people took part. When comparing the results of both editions, it is worth remembering that in 2019, many more people took part, namely 10,907, mainly from the student body, which means that in the current survey, the percentage of people working at the University of Warsaw is higher than in the previous survey.

As in the previous edition, the main objective of the survey was to deepen knowledge about the perceived prevalence of various forms of unequal treatment, but this time, not only gender was taken into account, but also national and ethnic origin, age, gender expression, neuroatypicality and the status of the respondent. This provided a more complete picture of discrimination in the university environment.

Prevalence of various forms of unequal treatment

The second edition of the study confirmed the previous conclusions from 2019 that the most common forms of unequal treatment at the University of Warsaw remain verbal and behavioural expressions and behaviours (comments, jokes, inappropriate remarks).

Once again, the most serious offences, such as sexual propositions or persistent attempts to make contact, were the least frequently reported, which is consistent with previous results. The survey was expanded to include questions about negative comments relating to various characteristics other than gender (including nationality, mental health and gender expression), with comments about ethnic origin proving to be the most frequently reported problem.

At the same time, the vast majority of respondents declared that they had not encountered comments about their socio-economic status, health or accent.

Persons committing and experiencing unequal treatment

With regard to perpetrators and victims, the trend from 2019 continues: men were more often identified as the initiators of discriminatory behaviour, and women as 85 experiencing unequal treatment.

However, the new data also takes into account persons of other genders (including non-binary persons) – this group was relatively rarely identified as perpetrators by the respondents, but more often appeared as victims.

The results of the study also indicate that the perpetrators of unequal treatment are most often Polish citizens, middle-aged or older, employed in scientific and research positions, while the main victims are mostly young students. At the same time, each academic group (including administrative, library and technical staff, teachers and doctoral students) most often perceives itself as the most affected, but also as perpetrators of discrimination.

Furthermore, hierarchy and power relations in the university environment have a significant impact on the scale and nature of the phenomenon, which points to the need for comprehensive preventive measures, especially in supervisor-subordinate relationships, but also in peer groups.

Response

In this year's edition of the survey, as in 2019, participants often pointed to a lack of response or rare responses to manifestations of unequal treatment, confirming the continuing problem of insufficient intervention by witnesses.

As was the case five years ago, reporting cases of discrimination to superiors or university institutions was rarely mentioned – a significant proportion of people still resorted to informal forms of support (e.g. talking to friends). A new feature of the current study was a more detailed analysis of responses by professional group, which revealed that students and doctoral students were the least likely to respond, while those working in research, technical, administrative positions and those employed on nonstandard contracts, such as commission contracts.

In both editions of the study, the key reasons for not responding were a lack of belief in the effectiveness of the action and fear of consequences. What emerges from a comparison of the two editions is therefore a continuing need to implement more effective support mechanisms and clear procedures that would encourage the reporting of cases of discrimination, especially among groups lower down in the university hierarchy.

Supporting institutions

Approximately one-third of respondents had experienced discrimination in the last four years, and, as in 2019, only less than 20% reported a lack of any support in difficult situations.

Most often, help was provided by loved ones (family, friends) and acquaintances from the university, which confirms the continuing predominance of informal sources of support. At the same time, satisfaction with the support provided by UW institutions (e.g. the Office for Persons with Disabilities or faculty authorities) was rated moderately high, as in the previous edition.

Nevertheless, relatively few people sought formal forms of assistance, which indicates a need to further strengthen the role of official procedures and encourage reporting of discrimination. Overall, a clear majority of respondents feel "at home" at the University of Warsaw and rate the

university's support positively, although, especially when looking at the open-ended responses, there is still room for improvement and further action.

Mental well-being and its relationship to unequal treatment

Compared to the 2019 survey, there was a noticeable increase in stress related to work and studies and an intensification of negative psychological symptoms, despite higher overall life satisfaction. Women had lower levels of mental well-being than men, and this difference has remained virtually unchanged since 2019.

Analyses showed a strong link between feelings of loneliness and lower well-being; a greater number of remote contacts had a negative impact on mental health, especially among those who preferred face-to-face meetings.

Although some of the adverse changes (e.g., increased stress and poorer self-rated health) intensified in 2024, positive ratings of overall life satisfaction may signal a greater role of non-university factors in shaping well-being. However, the strong link between unequal treatment (both experienced and observed) and poorer mental well-being remains significant.

Compared to 2019, this problem remains relevant, with no clear improvement in gender disparities, and people of non-normative gender categories still showing particularly low levels of well-being. As a result, further differentiated measures are needed to support specific groups in the academic environment, taking into account both gender issues and hierarchical relationships at work and in study.