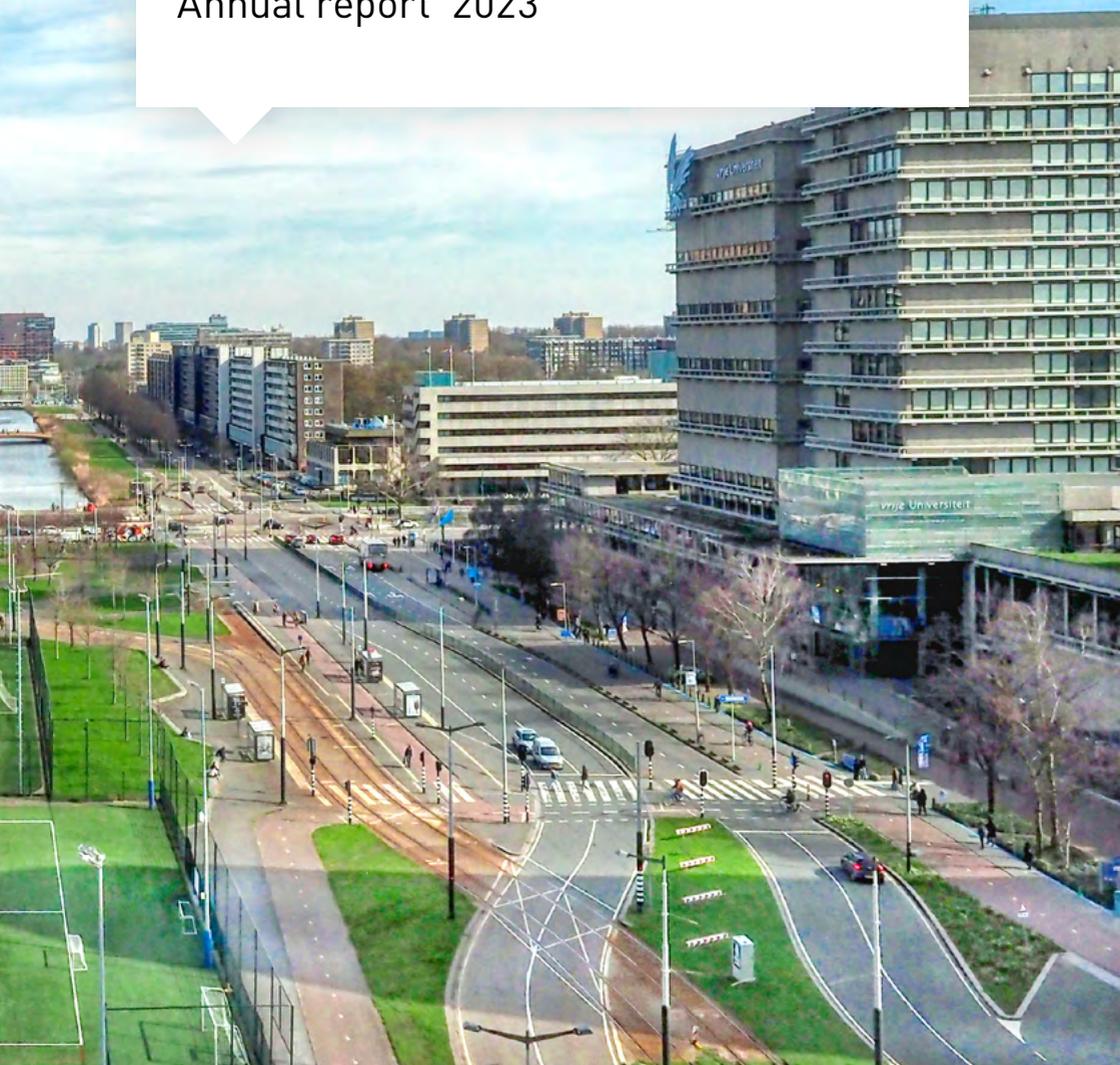


Staff ombudsman for staff VU

Annual report 2023





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Preface

In 2023, 37 cases concerning staff were submitted to the staff ombudsman. The ombudsman's office compiles an annual report because it is important for an organisation to know where staff complaints arise, and hopefully how to prevent them in future. The VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations state that: "The ombudsman shall publish annual reports of all activities performed. These reports will routinely contain details of the number of cases dealt with, together with an anonymised summary of each one."¹

In November 2022, I reached retirement age, but I was reappointed as staff ombudsman with effect until 1 May 2024. This is the reason the roles of staff ombudsman and student ombudsman were split into two separate offices in November 2022.² After 17 years, I will be leaving VU Amsterdam as of 1 May. I wish to thank the Executive Board and all the staff who consulted me in all my years as ombudsman. I am very grateful for the trust you have placed in me.

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¹ <https://assets.vu.nl/d8b6f1f5-816c-005b-1dc1-e363dd7ce9a5/3965e16a-4dd0-4b1b-8302-8308ed960bc9/Regeling%20Ombudsman%20Personeel%20210630.pdf> Art. 16.

² As of 1 October 2022, the student ombudsman has been Ms P. (Pelin) Zenginoğlu.

General information

The office of staff ombudsman

Anyone employed by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has the right to enlist the services of the ombudsman. This includes staff on secondment, former employees and PhD candidates who have an employment contract with the university.³ No matter how meticulously procedures and policy are formulated, human error cannot be eliminated, and things may still go awry. This gives rise to complaints. An employee should of course first give the faculty or service department an opportunity to handle the complaint. Only when that option has proven unsuccessful or fails to produce a satisfactory response is it the staff ombudsman's turn to approach the matter.⁴ In the first instance, the staff member who has been advised by the ombudsman's office can, in many cases, try to solve the problem on their own. The ombudsman does not take sides in such discussions, but tries to form an objective view of the matter in order to advise accordingly. Advising basically consists of listing the options available for an individual case. The staff member can then decide which option to choose. The ombudsman is an impartial and neutral third party and not an employee representative, because in such a role the ombudsman would not be in a position to assess a complaint. The ombudsman checks

whether applicable regulations have been followed and whether procedures have been correctly performed. But she also looks at how communication took place. To achieve this, she begins by conducting an exploratory investigation. During this phase, interviews are conducted with the parties involved and the relevant regulations are scrutinised. All this is done with reference to the question of whether or not the staff member has been treated fairly and with the proper duty of care. Complaints about general policy cannot therefore be dealt with.⁵ Other avenues exist for this purpose, such as the faculty subcommittee of the central Staff Council or the Staff Council itself. Even though not authorised to handle these types of cases, the staff ombudsman still listens to the problems, discusses the possibilities and provides information. After all, it is important that there is a place in the organisation where these problems can also be addressed and where complainants can be referred to the correct organisational body. Experience has shown that complainants otherwise tend to send emails to a variety of staff, often to the wrong office, which is simply a frustrating waste of time that does nothing to resolve the problem at hand.

Duty of confidentiality

Any staff member can contact the ombudsman's office in strict confidence to discuss an issue. The ombudsman's office will only contact another party if it has explicit permission from the

employee to do so. This duty of confidentiality also applies to other staff involved in a case with the ombudsman's office.⁶

Purpose of the office

As stated in the VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations, the ombudsman is an independent and impartial officer with whom staff members can discuss a problem or grievance about the university, a faculty or another member of staff in an informal and confidential setting (as already mentioned, a duty of confidentiality applies). The ombudsman has the resources to investigate the complaint, and the power to issue an official statement on the matter, which differentiates this office from others staff members can consult with. It is in the interest of both employees and the university that complaints are taken seriously, and the office of ombudsman plays an important supporting role in this regard. If a complaint is well-founded, the ombudsman can formulate recommendations to resolve the case and to avoid repetition in future. In some instances, the ombudsman may also offer recommendations after a mediation process has taken place or in response to what the staff member reported. This could be a recommendation that helps the organisation improve the quality of its services, communications, regulations or procedures. The office of ombudsman is also tasked with helping to create an atmosphere where all VU staff are treated with civility, dignity and respect, as well as safeguarding compliance with laws and regulations. These duties facilitate the equal treatment of all employees and thus implicitly

contribute to inclusiveness across the institution. The ombudsman's duties also involve monitoring recurring questions and complaints, and responding appropriately if there are repeated infringements of laws or regulations. In such cases, the ombudsman will report these incidents to the Executive Board. In this way, the ombudsman contributes to the creation of a safe social working environment. At least twice a year, the ombudsman discusses the issues raised – while guaranteeing employee anonymity – with Executive Board member, Dr M.J.W.T. (Marcel) Nollen.

Scope and accessibility

The position of ombudsman is a 0.2 FTE appointment, but due to the caseload and training a colleague in the post of student ombudsman, it was performed at 0.3 FTE from January through 1 July. Besides discussing cases, the ombudsman devotes these hours to tasks such as preliminary inquiries, consulting files, recording findings, and compiling interim and final reports. The ombudsman's office also distributes its own Annual Report. Additionally, the ombudsman takes care of registration and archiving of cases. Since the job is part-time and the ombudsman cannot be reached during appointments, it is important that VU staff are able to leave a voicemail message. The ombudsman can also be reached using the mobile messaging service WhatsApp. These services help lower the threshold for accessing the position. An appointment can also be made by contacting the ombudsman personally.

³ PhD students who do not have an employment contract with VU Amsterdam can turn to the student ombudsman.

⁴ Duties and responsibilities of the office are set out in: *VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations*. Consulted at: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/ombudsman>

⁵ *VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(f)*.

⁶ *VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 14*.

Complaints procedure

Most employees submit their cases to the ombudsman by email. A primary condition is that the event to which the complaint relates did not occur more than one year prior to reporting.⁷ At the first interview, the ombudsman checks whether she is authorised to handle the complaint in question. For instance, the ombudsman cannot deal with complaints about inappropriate conduct – that is the job of the confidential counsellor at central or decentralised level.⁸ The role of the confidential counsellor is different from that of the ombudsman. Confidential counsellors advocate the interests of the complainant and provide counselling, while the ombudsman is always an impartial third party. This is because the ombudsman has to be able to assess a complaint. Sometimes an employee might feel that they are being treated unfairly because, for instance, a procedure was not carried out properly. This does not, however, make it a complaint about inappropriate conduct. The ombudsman's office is competent to handle these complaints. However, the ombudsman does not handle complaints for which there are alternative avenues open or cases for which there is still the possibility of filing an appeal or objection.⁹ An employee who has received

a decision about his or her legal status can, in some cases, lodge an objection.¹⁰ In many cases, however, the exact nature of the problem can only be determined in consultation with the staff member concerned. In some cases, the ombudsman will only be able to deal with one particular aspect of the complaint; this often applies when multiple issues are involved. In simpler complaints for which the ombudsman is not authorised, the note “not part of the ombudsman's remit” may suffice. There are, however, other reasons why the ombudsman may decide not to deal with a complaint, for example, because it is clear that the complaint is unfounded.¹¹ In such cases, it is sufficient to explain to the employee that laws and regulations have been complied with. In some cases, employees are able to resolve the issue on their own after talking to the ombudsman, who has been able to provide them with information about the relevant regulations, procedures, rights, obligations and options. It is then up to the employee to decide which option to choose.

Procedures for handling cases

Often, the ombudsman will have to perform a preliminary inquiry before being able to provide the required information



about the possibilities. In which case, the other party is asked to respond and documents can be requested and verified if necessary. The employee must agree to this beforehand. On matters relating to internal regulations, the ombudsman may request advice from a legal expert at VU Amsterdam or a member of staff from Human Resource Management (HRM). At the faculty level, for example, she will seek contact with a supervisor, HRM advisor or a member of the Faculty Board, if and when the complainant has agreed to this. In all cases, it is important that a complaint or problem is clearly outlined and defined, as this generates information that contributes to finding a solution.

And both the employee and the organisation often benefit more from finding a solution than from obtaining a statement that the complaint is well-founded. Moreover, it is part of the ombudsman's mandate to always seek a solution.¹²

Advising

First and foremost, the ombudsman can give advice that helps an employee get started on seeking a solution. In most cases, this advice pertains to the procedure and any options the complainant might have for influencing it, if necessary. The complainant can, for example, raise the

⁷ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(b).

⁸ More information: <https://vu.nl/nl/medewerker/bemiddeling/vertrouwenspersonen-medewerkers-en-phd-s>

⁹ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(g).

¹⁰ For more information, see <https://vu.nl/en/employee/help-support-and-advice/dispute-settlement-scheme>

¹¹ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(c).

¹² VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 8.



matter themselves with the relevant party. If the complainant's discussion does not have the desired effect, he or she can contact the ombudsman again. The ombudsman can explicitly mention this option. The complainant will receive information from the ombudsman about laws, regulations and procedures. In some cases, this information enables complainants to discuss the matter with their supervisors. In addition, the ombudsman can discuss various scenarios with the complainant. What might the outcome be if the complainant chooses a particular approach? What does the employee hope to achieve? It is important that the complainant make the choice and not the ombudsman.

Referrals

If another body has jurisdiction, the ombudsman will refer the case. For

instance, allegations about the infringement of academic integrity are reported to the confidential counsellor for academic integrity. The ombudsman also provides information on this matter.¹³ The entire system is set up in such a way that members of staff are referred to the right place as soon as possible.

Ombudsman-led mediation

The ombudsman aims to resolve problems, frequently leading to the withdrawal of the problem or complaint, which can in itself also help to restore confidence. The ombudsman will act as an independent party. Because she is not affiliated with a faculty or service department, she can identify ways the parties can work together to solve the problem. In such cases, the ombudsman uses

¹³ Further information: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/academic-integrity>

shuttle diplomacy or sets up a three-way meeting at which the complaint can be resolved. This type of ombudsman-led mediation is an agreeable and effective option for all concerned, and faster and less taxing than a formal inquiry. This boils down to the ombudsman avoiding a formal complaint being filed that the ombudsman would have to assess. If the preliminary inquiries during ombudsman-led mediation give reason to do so, both parties will be invited to a three-way interview aimed at resolving the complaint, together with and chaired by the ombudsman who nonetheless remains impartial throughout. Fully fledged mediation is no less labour-intensive for the ombudsman than a formal inquiry. Investigating the complaint, hearing the parties and bringing them together for mediation often requires a number of sessions. Ombudsman-led mediation focuses on the complaint itself, making it a short-term strategy. It should be completed in one or two meetings, which makes it different from the fully fledged mediation process. The ombudsman facilitates and chairs the discussion without actively participating. This working method therefore differs from the mediation process, as mentioned previously. A mediation department for staff was set up in 2022 within VU Amsterdam's HRM&HSE (Human Resources & Occupational Health, Safety and Environment) department.¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://vu.nl/en/employee/help-support-and-advice/mediation-information>

Complaints assessment

If mediation is not or no longer possible, or if the mediation has failed to yield a result, a formal investigation of the complaint can be initiated at the request of the employee. This will be followed by a decision by the ombudsman and may, if the complaint is well-founded, lead to a recommendation to remedy the consequences of the problems and prevent its recurrence.

Staff incident reporting

The ombudsman's office has the mandate to "launch enquiries on its own initiative, whether or not following one or more staff reports, into broader trends of any systematic regulatory shortcomings or problematic patterns within the organisation".¹⁵

On receiving a report from a staff member, the ombudsman will refrain from making an assessment of the complaint. However, the ombudsman may share any findings because no formal complaint has been filed in such cases, but confidential discussions with the ombudsman did take place. The ombudsman will indicate, based on the office's monitoring role, that complaints exist at a specific location in the organisation. Of course, the ombudsman will do this in consultation with the staff members making the report. The purpose of staff incident reporting is therefore to notify us that there may be a pattern of problems that could ultimately jeopardise the teaching, research or business operations of the university.

¹⁵ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 4.

What type of cases are submitted to the ombudsman?

Staff contact the ombudsman with a wide variety of problems and questions. When they do, they feel that they have not been treated properly and are feeling concerned. It should be noted that most cases are resolved in the unit, either with or without the assistance of an HRM advisor. However, if an employee has lost confidence in management, he or she will generally not wish to meet with an

HRM advisor. This is because staff tend to consider HRM advisors to be supportive of management and therefore liable to be biased. In such cases, staff will discuss their complaint or problem confidentially with the ombudsman. These cases include problems related to staff appointments or re-entry after illness. The ombudsman's office also receives questions from staff members

about their legal status, and about the way a supervisor or manager has responded to questions about their legal status. But there are also questions about whether the CAO (Collective Labour Agreement), leave entitlements and working hours have been properly enforced. PhD students report to the ombudsman if they have problems relating to the supervision of their dissertation or if they leave the PhD programme before finishing. Staff also approach the ombudsman with conflicts pertaining to job performance. However, the ombudsman's handling of a problem has its limitations, since the ombudsman is not permitted to interfere

with decisions concerning legal status or with decisions that are subject to an objection or appeals procedure.¹⁶ The ombudsman also does not comment on a staff member's performance, because she is unable to assess this in detail. Another reason for contacting the ombudsman could be if an employee experiences stress due to working overtime or a heavy workload, in which case the ombudsman can mediate so that communication is re-established. Sometimes problems around working collegially can become so heated that a staff member calls on the services of the ombudsman. These problems might include working with another staff member, but also problems between a staff member and a supervisor or between a full professor and a member of the Faculty Board. The ombudsman listens, clarifies matters using the relevant laws and regulations (if necessary), and discusses the options available. In some cases, explaining regulations may be sufficient. The ombudsman will, of course, refer the employee, if necessary. For example, if "an appeals procedure (or legal process, complaints procedure, or objection procedure) has been instigated (or completed) on behalf of the applicant or under the Statutes of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam that has not been used by the applicant or in which a ruling has already been made".¹⁷ This is the case, for example, when it concerns inappropriate conduct. The ombudsman will then refer the matter to the staff confidential counsellor.

¹⁶ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(f)(g).

¹⁷ VU Staff Ombudsman Regulations Art. 7(1)(g).



Cases handled

Cases handled in 2023

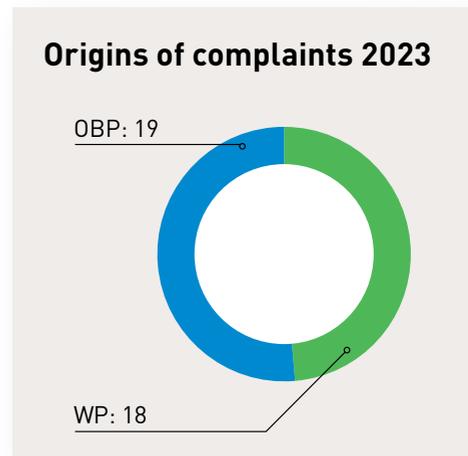
In 2023, 37 cases were submitted to the ombudsman, 11 by staff in central service departments. There was no evidence of parallels in the nature of the cases submitted; they were isolated incidents. In comparison with 2022, the number of cases submitted dropped by more than 10%. This may be due to the mediation pool that is deployed at VU Amsterdam. In six of the 37 cases, the ombudsman was not authorised to handle the complaint and the complainant was offered another means of recourse, such as a confidential counsellor for academic integrity or the Data Protection Officer. In three cases, multiple staff members discussed a single issue with the ombudsman; this was treated as one case. These issues were resolved through ombudsman-led mediation.

The ombudsman was able to handle many cases by means of advising, referrals or ombudsman-led mediation. One complaint for assessment was filed in 2023. This concerned a staff member in one of the central service departments and dealt with procedures. Four out of five aspects of the complaint were judged by the ombudsman to be well-founded. The ombudsman withheld judgment on one aspect of the complaint. In response to this case, the ombudsman made recommendations to the Executive Board in order to prevent

recurrence of such complaints in future. In November, the details of the report on this case were communicated by the ombudsman to a member of the Executive Board, Dr M.J.W.T. (Marcel) Nollen. The ombudsman also discussed the recommendations of the report with the director of HRM, with the head of Occupational Health, Safety and the Environment, and with a legal advisor of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. No possible systematic shortcomings in regulations or problematic patterns within the organisation were reported to the Executive Board by the ombudsman's office in 2023.

Origins of complaints

More cases were received by the ombudsman's office from support staff than from academic staff during this reporting year. No reason has yet been identified for this fact.



Faculties and service departments	Number of staff ¹	Cases in 2023
School of Business and Economics	684	2
Sciences	1899	9
Religion and Theology	119	2
Humanities	383	0
Behavioural and Human Movement Sciences	673	4
Law	396	2
Social Sciences	366	0
Medicine	nvt	0
Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam (ACTA) ²	nvt	nvt
Finance	113	0
HRM&HSE	121	0
Information Technology	251	1
Student & Educational Affairs	351	3
Administration Office; Office for University Relations and Fundraising	107	3
	97/22	0
University Library	98	0
Communications and Marketing	107	1
Corporate Real Estate and Facilities	208	1
Non-VU staff members		6
Not part of the ombudsman's remit		6
Total		37
Consultations by staff members		5

It is the number of cases that is counted and not the number of staff who contact the ombudsman for one and the same case. The proportion of staff who approach the ombudsman is <1%. Most cases were isolated incidents.

¹ Reference date December 2023. With thanks to HR Intelligence of the HRM&HSE service department.

² Terms and conditions of employment of the University of Amsterdam apply to all ACTA employees and thus employees of ACTA can address complaints to the University of Amsterdam ombudsperson. The VU Amsterdam ombudsman is not authorised to handle them.

Handling of cases

How a case is handled depends on the way a staff member presents a case to the ombudsman. In other words, questions often lead to information provision or advising in the first instance, although mediation may still follow at a later stage. Complaints are usually dealt with through ombudsman-led mediation. Most of the cases could be resolved within a week of intake through advising or ombudsman-led mediation. This means that we could prevent escalation, legal action and, in some cases, absence through illness. In response to the cases submitted to the ombudsman, recommendations are sometimes made to prevent complaints in future, which may be by providing information.

Incidentally, staff can report general wrongdoing or suspicions thereof to their supervisor or their supervisor's supervisor, and make use of the Whistleblower Regulations (Klokkenluidersregeling).¹⁸

¹⁸ Klokkenluidersregeling VU (Whistleblower Regulations): <https://vu.nl/en/employee/policy-and-organisation/whistleblowers-regulations>

Nature of the cases received

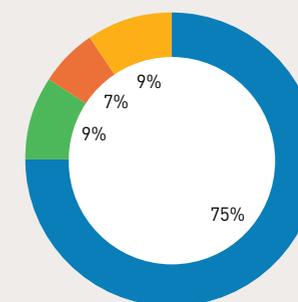
A case can touch on more than one problem area; this explains why there are more topics than cases handled. All matters reported, whether well-founded or unfounded, are registered.

Appointments	0
Treatment	8
Supervision of PhD students	3
Accessibility	0
Communication	3
Facilities/provisions	0
Financial	0
Performance and appraisals	3
Re-employment / internal mobility	1
Provision of information	2
Career development	0
Dismissal / termination of employment	5
Procedures	5
Legal issues	3
Vocational rehabilitation	2
Reorganisation	0
Working collegially	
Job applications	1
Style of management	4
Allocation of duties/workload	1
Other	3
Consultations	5



Handling time 2023

1 week 1-2 months
2-4 weeks > 2 months



Most of the complaints concerned questions on procedures and staff treatment. These included questions on procedures concerning contract termination and inappropriate conduct. In such cases, the ombudsman will explain the operative rules, mentioning the options available to the employee, or will initiate ombudsman-led mediation.

The handling time in 2023 was usually one week. In recent years, the ombudsman has noticed that more and more employees are interested in the ombudsman-led mediation process. The procedure used and the reason for choosing it is often related to the nature of the problem.

Findings and recommendations

In 2023, the ombudsman identified the following problem areas and discussed them with the faculty or service department in question, and with the Executive Board, where necessary. In some cases, the points raised are obvious ones, but particularly likely to give rise to complaints if neglected.

Annual interview

Some managers or supervisors who conduct annual interviews or job performance interviews invite another staff member, i.e. someone who is not a member of management, to take part in the interview. Such interviews, however, are supposed to be confidential. If this rule is not observed, it can lead to complaints. Following discussions with managers and supervisors, the ombudsman noted that they had not been properly informed that colleagues (who are not HR staff) are not allowed to participate in such interviews. Therefore, on the recommendation of the ombudsman, HR modified the online instructions. The website now states: "The annual interview is first and foremost a confidential discussion between the employee and his or her supervisor".¹⁹

Guidelines on inappropriate conduct for managers and supervisors

VU Amsterdam observes the VSNU Guidelines on inappropriate conduct for managers and supervisors. The ombudsman has noted based on staff incident reports that managers and supervisors are unaware of these guidelines, and that they are therefore not observed. It appears that it was difficult to find the guidelines on the website. Secondly, since these were not laid down by the Executive Board, they are frequently not regarded as regulations. Nonetheless, they contain a number of directives that should be seen as mandatory. The ombudsman recommends that these guidelines be followed in all cases. The Executive Board could consider making an incident reporting protocol or regulation in order to lay down how managers and supervisors should handle cases of inappropriate conduct. The guidelines are currently being revised by HR.

The ombudsman moreover recommends that, at the same time, a protocol should be laid down governing how managers and supervisors should deal with complex cases involving issues of social safety, even though these rarely occur. A case is considered complex if the nature of the alleged inappropriate conduct is serious, i.e.:

- it is experienced as having a significant impact within and/or outside the university community;
- it has led to filing a police report;
- it has seriously damaged the trust of staff and/or students;
- the case has received attention in the media.

This type of protocol could also include: how the process should be documented; which officer provides support; when scaling up is necessary; and when a crisis team should be set up; as well as how monitoring will take place and what kind of aftercare will be offered to staff who report incidents.

Awareness

Internal

To ensure that staff members are aware that the university has an ombudsman and what the ombudsman's role is, a university website is maintained in Dutch and in English. In addition, the ombudsman laid out the findings of the 2022 Annual Report to Executive Board member Dr M.J.W.T. (Marcel) Nollen and also to the Staff Council and a number of staff members. She also conducted introductory meetings with two PhD coordinators and the project leader for integrated social safety.

External

On request, the ombudsman also provides information about the office of ombudsman to those outside VU Amsterdam. In this context, she conducted discussions with the confidential counsellor of HAN University of Applied Sciences. On 27 June, she also provided information to Ms R. (Rina) Meyer, ombudsman of Stellenbosch University and legal counsel to the High Court of Cape Town, South Africa, who visited the VU ombudsman's office. The ombudsman also provided members of the central works council of the Dutch Research Council (NWO) with information about the ombudsman's office. In October, the ombudsman was interviewed by Ms E. (Erzsó) Alföldy of the weekly *Intermediar* about preventing inappropriate conduct.

¹⁹ <https://vu.nl/en/employee/annual-consultation/the-annual-consultation-for-supervisors> heading: Parties involved in the annual consultation

Professionalisation

Conference papers

The ombudsman gave an online lecture at the conference of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education organised by Charles University in Prague on 14 June entitled: “ENOHEpedia: a thesaurus for professionals for everyday and for the future.”

The ombudsman also presented a lecture on 19 October at the symposium *Social Safety: towards a restorative university*. This symposium was organised by the Faculty of Law, Restorative Justice at the KU Leuven and the Nederlands Studiecentrum Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving (Dutch Centre for Crime and Law Enforcement, NSCR).²⁰ The title of the lecture was: *Ombuds view on social safety*.

Publications

Experience and expertise gained in ombuds work led in 2022 to the publication of: *Ombuds work in higher education: a practical guide, a monograph about ombuds work for an international audience*.²¹ An e-book edition of *Ombuds work in higher education* appeared in 2023.²²

All these activities are aimed at disseminating information in order to bolster the visibility, image and accessibility of the ombudsman, but also to create stronger ties between different officers within the social assistance structure and thus improve its quality.

There is an intrinsic link between the effectiveness of the ombudsman and the quality of her work. Thus, for the ombudsman to continue to perform the job well, training and continuing professional development is necessary on an ongoing basis. This is why the ombudsman is a member of the Association of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (VOHO²³). Membership of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE²⁴) provides all manner of information on the most recent developments pertaining to the right of recourse, jurisprudence and working methods in the field of ombuds work.

Peer consultations with the ombuds offices of the University of Amsterdam, Delft University of Technology and the University of Groningen, as well as peer review sessions with international colleagues who are members of ENOHE, also took place during the reporting period. During these meetings, ideas and best practices were exchanged anonymously based on experience and expertise. The Vereniging voor Klachtrecht (Association for Right of Recourse, an initiative of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands) publishes a newsletter and organises symposiums, providing the ombudsman’s office with more information in this area of professionalisation. This association is committed to professionalising and further improving the internal

and external handling of complaints, developing the right of recourse and fostering the competencies required to deal with internal and external complaints. In order to stay thoroughly informed, the ombudsman maintains contacts with the Staff Council and is occasionally present during consultation meetings with the Executive Board. Furthermore, the staff ombudsman occasionally participates in discussions held by the university’s legal advisors and consults the head of the HRM&HSE service department at least once a year. Additionally, she attends the meetings of the confidential counsellors, which are held at least twice a year.

Social Safety Expert Team²⁵

The ombudsman has been a member of the VU Social Safety Expert Team since 2018. Within VU Amsterdam, there appears to be a need for such an expert team so that incident reports are not assessed and handled by a single officer. This facilitates an integrated approach to assessment and handling of complaints. Moreover, an expert team can gather and share relevant information, thus preventing the risk of unnecessary escalation by ensuring that help is available and damage to all concerned is limited. The team meets at least three times a year, and regularly participates in training activities.

21 <https://vuuniversitypress.com/product/ombuds-work-in-higher-education/>

22 *Ombuds Work in Higher Education* by Lies Poesiat | 9789086598908 | eBook | Kortext

23 <https://verenigingombudsmannenho.nl/>

24 <https://www.enohe.net/>

25 <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/safe-social-setting-on-campus>

20 <https://nscr.nl/>



Other internal and external contact

The ombudsman not only gathers information from various bodies, but in some cases also contributes to their deliberations. However, this is only possible on the condition that her autonomy will not be compromised, which limits the ombudsman's ability to participate in certain bodies.

At the request of management, she can, for example, discuss the options involved in a matter brought before her office (through consultations). But above all, the ombudsman is aware that she cannot advise on a case (e.g. on legal status) in a way that would allow her to become involved in the decision. The ombudsman's office would then lose its impartial standing.

Lastly, the ombudsman provided staff members with general information on the various complaint procedures at VU Amsterdam.

And lastly: complaint prevention

In addition to resolving complaints, the ombudsman also addressed the issue of complaint prevention at the express request of the Executive Board. The goal is naturally not just to provide the means of achieving a solution for a case, but also to prevent escalation and absence through illness.

As part of that prevention process, the ombudsman held consultations in order to share information on specific problem areas. These consultations took place with, for example, a head of department or the director of HRM.

Advising the organisation in response to issues submitted to the ombudsman's office is also aimed at preventing complaints about the same issues recurring in future.

