

# Student Ombudsman VU

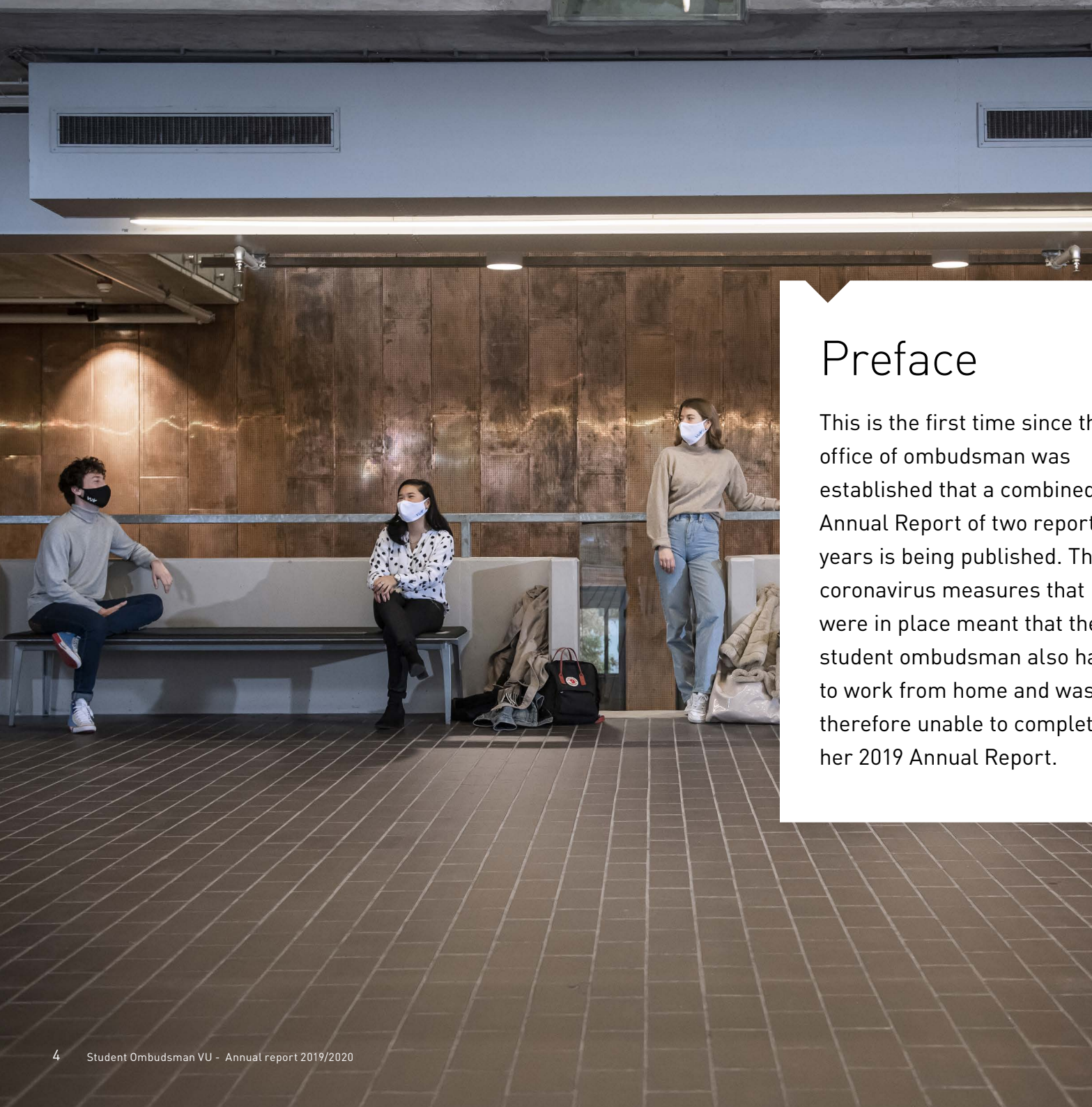
Annual report 2019/2020





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## Preface

This is the first time since the office of ombudsman was established that a combined Annual Report of two reporting years is being published. The coronavirus measures that were in place meant that the student ombudsman also had to work from home and was therefore unable to complete her 2019 Annual Report.

The pandemic also affected the number of complaints. More students contacted the student ombudsman in 2020 than in previous years. This was because, due to the coronavirus measures, all teaching and education had to be provided online and the workload for VU Amsterdam staff increased. This meant, for example, that more cases came before Examination Boards, which at times led to unrealistic response times. Students also complained about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly. In the end, all cases could be resolved through advice or ombudsman-led mediation and in both years no complaints were submitted to the student ombudsman for assessment.

I wish to thank the Executive Board and all the students who have approached me in my role as ombudsman. I am very grateful for the trust you have placed in me.

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# General

## The office of student ombudsman

### Who is the service aimed at?

Anyone studying at VU Amsterdam may enlist the services of the student ombudsman. This also applies to external PhD students who do not have a contract of employment with VU Amsterdam<sup>1</sup>, VU students at the Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam (ACTA) and students at Amsterdam University College (AUC). No matter how meticulously procedures and policy are formulated, human error can never be entirely eliminated, and things may still go awry. This gives rise to complaints.

### What can the student ombudsman do?

In the first instance, a student can try to solve the problem independently, with advice from the student ombudsman. What is more, a student could first give the faculty or service department the opportunity to handle the complaint. When that option does not work or fails to produce a satisfactory response, the ombudsman is in a position to act.<sup>2</sup>She does not take sides

but works to form an objective view of the matter at hand in order to give advice, make a referral or arrive at a decision. The ombudsman checks whether the applicable regulations have been followed and whether procedures have been correctly implemented. All this is done to answer the question of whether or not the student has been treated properly and with all due respect. Complaints about general policy can therefore not be dealt with. Other avenues exist for this purpose, such as the Faculty Student Council, the University Student Council or the Programme Committee.

### Independent and neutral

As stated in the Student Ombudsman Regulations (*Regeling Studentenombudsman*), the ombudsman is an independent and neutral person with whom a student can discuss a problem or grievance about the university, the faculty, or a member of staff in an informal and confidential setting (a duty of confidentiality applies). The student ombudsman has the resources to investigate a complaint and the position to issue an official statement on the matter, and in this respect she differs from other officials whom students are able to consult.

### Purpose of the office

It is in the interest of both the students and the university that complaints are taken seriously, and the office of student ombudsman plays an important part in

this regard. Because the office of student ombudsman helps to ensure compliance with laws and regulations with respect to all students, it facilitates equal treatment of students and contributes to inclusiveness.

If a complaint is well-founded, the student ombudsman can formulate recommendations to resolve the case and to prevent recurrence in future. In some instances, the student ombudsman may also offer recommendations after a mediation process or in response to a report. Accordingly, some complaints lead to recommendations that help improve the quality of services, communication, regulations and procedures. The appointment of a student ombudsman is also intended to contribute to an atmosphere in which the university's staff treat students with the greatest consideration and respect, and in which grievances are transformed into points for improvement. The ombudsman's duties also involve monitoring recurring questions and complaints, and responding appropriately if the law is broken or regulations are flouted. The ombudsman then brings these facts to the attention of the relevant faculty or service department, or the Executive Board.

The student ombudsman discusses the situation annually, while protecting the anonymity of the students concerned, with Dr M.J.W.T. (Marcel) Nollen, a member of the Executive Board.

### Accessibility

Since the ombudsman cannot be reached during appointments, it is important that students are able to leave a voicemail message. For this reason, the student ombudsman forwards calls to her mobile phone in the event of her absence. She can also be reached using the mobile messaging service WhatsApp and by submitting a complaint form to a digital one-stop shop. Students can easily send a WhatsApp message from their mobile phone at no additional cost, and the student ombudsman can respond quickly. These services help lower the threshold associated with the position. An appointment can be made with the student ombudsman directly. She aims to respond to every student inquiry within a week.

### Other duties

Besides discussing matters with students, the ombudsman utilizes the 0.8 FTE currently available on a wide variety of tasks, such as<sup>3</sup> preliminary inquiries, consulting files, recording findings, and compiling interim and final reports. The student ombudsman personally takes care of registration and filing and of the distribution of the Annual Report.

1 PhD students who have an employment contract with VU Amsterdam are entitled to consult the staff ombudsman. The student ombudsman also fulfils this position, and her working hours have therefore been increased by 0.2 FTE.

2 The duties and responsibilities are set out in: Student Ombudsman Regulations <https://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/contact-info-and-route/departments/student-ombudsman-university/what-will-the-ombudsman-do.aspx>

3 This includes the assessment of competence and admissibility.

# Complaint procedure

## Authorized or unauthorized?

Most students submit their case to the ombudsman by email or WhatsApp. Even if they have already finished their studies, they are still entitled to do so, on the condition that the event to which the complaint relates occurred when those directly involved were studying at VU Amsterdam, and within one year of the event taking place.

In the first interview, the student ombudsman checks whether she is authorized to handle the complaint. For instance, the ombudsman cannot deal with complaints regarding inappropriate conduct,<sup>4</sup> as that is the job of the confidential counsellor. Nor can she deal with complaints that are still open to appeal or objection (Examination Appeals Board, Cobex).<sup>5</sup> However, in almost all of these cases, the exact nature of the problem can only be determined in discussion with the student concerned, along with the matter of whether the student ombudsman is able to deal with the complaint or a particular aspect of the complaint, as often applies when multiple issues are involved. In simpler cases, the response “not part of the ombudsman’s remit” may suffice.

There are, however, other reasons why the student ombudsman may decide not to deal with a complaint, for example

because it is clear that the complaint is unfounded. In such cases, it is sufficient to explain to the student that the laws and regulations have been complied with.

## Recommendations

In some cases, students are able to resolve the issue on their own after talking to the student ombudsman, who is able to provide information about the relevant regulations, procedures, rights, obligations and options. Often, the student ombudsman will have to conduct a preliminary inquiry before being able to provide the required information. In that case, the other party is asked to respond and/or documents can be requested and verified if necessary. On matters relating to internal regulations, the student ombudsman may request advice from an educational lawyer at VU Amsterdam or a member of staff from Student & Educational Affairs (SOZ). At faculty level, for example, she seeks contact with an academic advisor, a Bachelor’s or Master’s coordinator, or the head of the Education Office. In all cases, it is important that a complaint is clearly monitored, as this generates information that contributes to finding a solution. And both the student and the organization often benefit more from finding a solution than from obtaining a statement that the complaint is well-founded.

<sup>4</sup> Accessibility: <https://vuweb.vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/safe-social-setting-on-campus>

<sup>5</sup> More information: <https://vuweb.vu.nl/en/student/student-life/complaint-objection-and-appeal>



## Referral

If another body has jurisdiction, the student ombudsman will refer the case. For instance, allegations of infringement of academic integrity should be reported to the confidential counsellor for Academic Integrity.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, issues concerning examinations or final degree assessments can be submitted to the Examination Board. Complaints about inappropriate conduct, such as discrimination, can be submitted to the confidential student counsellor.<sup>7</sup> The student

<sup>6</sup> For more information, go to: <https://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/contact-info-and-route/departments/confidential-counsellors/index.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> More information: <https://vuweb.vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/safe-social-setting-on-campus>

ombudsman also provides information about this. However, the system is configured in such a way as to ensure that students are referred to the right place as soon as possible.

## Ombudsman-led mediation

The student ombudsman aims to resolve problems through ombudsman-led mediation, which frequently leads to withdrawal of the complaint, and thus to restoring confidence in the faculty or department. The student ombudsman can act as an independent party. Free from affiliation with a degree programme, she can look for ways in which parties can find a common frame of reference and restore the relationship between student and



# Cases handled

## Cases in 2019

In 2019, 182 cases were submitted to the student ombudsman. In the cases over which the student ombudsman had no authority (22), the student was referred instead to the proper individual or agency, such as the confidential counsellor for students, the Examination Board or the Data Protection Officer because the complaint concerned a possible breach of privacy. In 2019, most complaints concerned alleged procedural anomalies, particularly concerning final degree assessments and examinations. Students are very attuned to following proper procedures, because they know that lapses in procedure can easily result in study delays.

It was notable that 21 others also contacted the student ombudsman to discuss a complaint or general question. These were students from other educational institutions (17), family members of students, partners or members of a student participation body. The student ombudsman is, of course, not authorized to deal with such complaints, but she can, for instance, refer these people to the appropriate official or, as in the case of a student participation body, make an attempt to mediate. After all, it is in the interest of all parties that a solution is reached.

## Cases in 2020

In 2020, 200 cases were submitted to the student ombudsman. This is an increase of 10-25% compared to the past years and was caused by the pandemic. Most of the complaints concerned exams taken online, in particular about technical problems that allegedly occurred. Many complaints were also submitted about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly (56). In a number of cases this was because of the coronavirus measures; procedures such as the marking period could not be observed for some cases and a session to review an exam also took place differently. Some graduation procedures and internship programmes were also delayed and the response times of Examination Boards were also exceeded. Students attach importance to the fact that procedures are carried out carefully to prevent study delays. In the cases over which the student ombudsman had no authority (16), the student was referred instead to the proper individual or agency, such as the confidential counsellor for students (7), the Examination Board or the Data Protection Officer because the complaint concerned a possible breach of privacy.

university staff. Ombudsman-led mediation is different from standard mediation in that it is an expedited process aimed at resolving the complaint in question. This type of mediation is a more pleasant and expedient option for all concerned, and faster and less taxing than a formal inquiry. If the preliminary inquiries give reason to do so, both parties will be invited to a three-way interview (involving and chaired by the student ombudsman) with the aim of resolving the complaint. However, the student ombudsman remains impartial throughout.

Ombudsman-led mediation is not always less labour-intensive for the student

ombudsman than a formal inquiry. Investigating the complaint, hearing the parties and bringing them together in the course of mediation often requires a number of sessions.

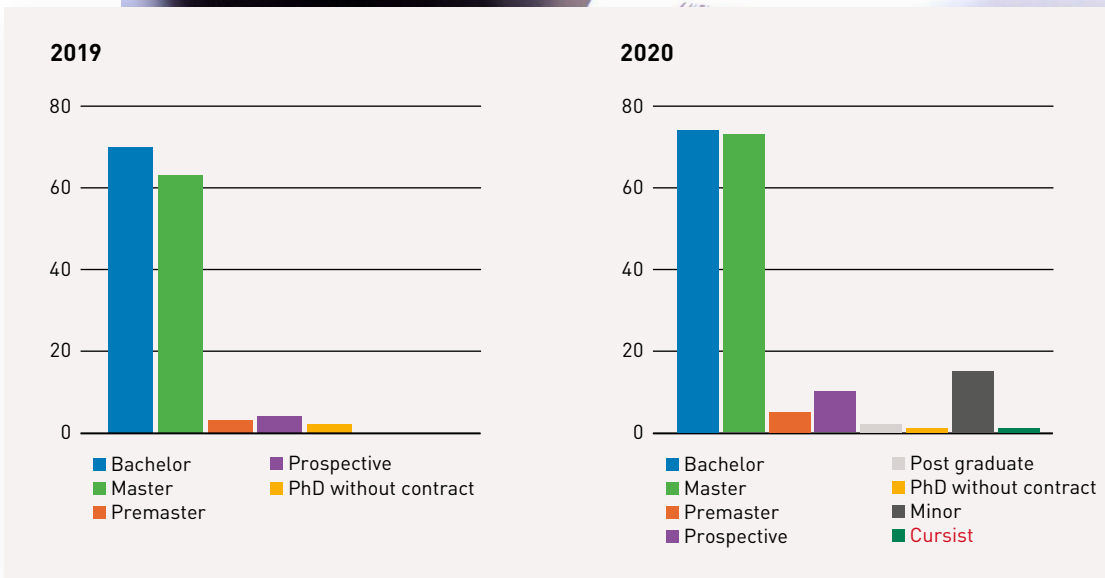
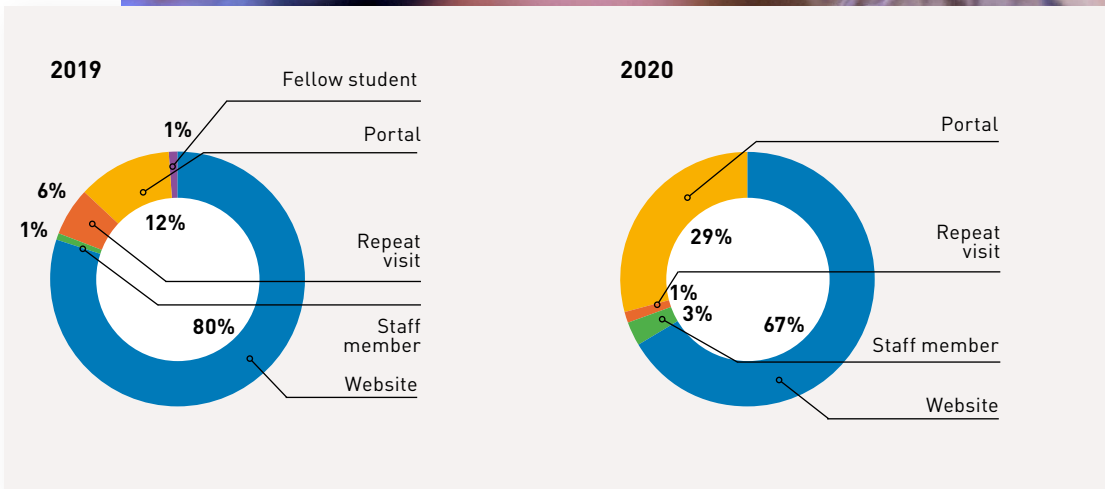
## Complaint investigation and assessment

If mediation is no longer possible, or if this intervention has failed to yield a result, a formal investigation of the complaint can be initiated at the request of the student. This will be followed by a decision from the student ombudsman, with possible recommendations to remedy the consequences of the problems and prevent recurrence.

The student ombudsman was also contacted more often because desks were closed. Students often shared what the impact of the coronavirus measures were on them personally and how difficult the situation was for them. In some cases, the student ombudsman referred students to a student counsellor, academic advisor or to a student psychologist.

Most students found their way to the student ombudsman by using the website or were referred by a member of staff. Students recorded as 'repeat visit' had previously consulted the student ombudsman on other issues.

No formal complaints were filed for assessment in 2019 or 2020. In such a case, provided that she is authorized under the terms of the regulations, the student ombudsman determines whether "the body or individual mentioned in the petition exhibited appropriate conduct in the circumstances that are the subject of the inquiry".<sup>8</sup> The ombudsman sends copies of her report with assessment "to the student, the body or individual cited in the petition, the Executive Board, and where appropriate, the head of the organizational unit in question".<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Idem N2 Art. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Idem N2 Art. 10:2.

## What faculty did the complaint pertain to?

Complaints relating to:	Registered students 2018 <sup>10</sup>	Cases in 2018	Registered students in 2019	Cases in 2019	Registered students in 2020	Cases in 2020
Sciences	7649	14	6989	23	8139	35
School of Business and Economics	4499	31	5081	31	5875	37
Humanities	1391	6	1441	15	1685	4
Medicine	2346	3	2347	5	2353	9
Religion and Theology	276	3	293	3	305	1
Behavioural and Movement Sciences	3315	27	3797	26	4078	9
Law	3228	8	3463	18	3916	27
Social Sciences	2384	5	2456	11	2808	16
Dentistry	460	3	453	2	454	5
Amsterdam University College	362	3	251	3	183	3
Support Services <sup>11</sup>	-	17	-	21	-	25
University administration	-	2	-	2	-	4
Non-VU students <sup>12</sup>	-	6	-	17	-	5
Consultations by staff members	-	1	-	1	-	4
Others (parents, Faculty Student Councils)	-	10	-	4	-	5
Not part of the ombudsman's remit	-	8	-	22	-	16
<b>Total</b>		<b>147</b>		<b>182</b>		<b>200</b>

<sup>10</sup> Acknowledgement for figures provided in October: Student Desk, Student & Educational Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Student and Educational Affairs, VU Amsterdam University Library, Marketing & Communication, Corporate Real Estate and Facilities, Finance & Audit, HRM, Occupational Health, Safety and Environment and Information Technology, the Administration Office.

<sup>12</sup> Students enrolled at other universities.

Students from the School of Business and Economics, the second largest faculty at VU Amsterdam, submitted the highest number of cases to the student ombudsman in 2019 and 2020. This mainly concerned procedural matters such as legal issues with regard to, for example, the

Academic and Examination Regulations and examinations and procedures observed, for instance, the marking period. Many of these complaints were deemed to be incidents, and the student ombudsman provided recommendations or mediation, leading to resolution.

The problems that reach the student ombudsman are those the student believes have not been properly addressed by the faculty or service department, or where attempts at resolution have led to a stalemate or escalation. <0.5% of all students consult the student ombudsman.

### Handling cases

The way a case is handled depends on the form in which it is submitted to the student ombudsman. For example, a question often leads to information or advice being given, although mediation may still follow at a later stage. In many cases, complaints were handled and resolved through mediation in 2019 and 2020. A mediation session can help identify the exact nature of a complaint – because it elicits a response from the other party – and can steer the complaint in a totally different direction and point the way to a solution. If the student feels that mediation has failed, a formal inquiry can be requested. This is then done in accordance with the procedure described in the Student Ombudsman Regulations.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/contact-info-and-route/departments/student-ombudsman-university/what-will-the-ombudsman-do.aspx>

A student can also report a problem to the student ombudsman. The ombudsman may then pass the report on to the faculty or service department in question.

### Nature of the cases in 2019 and 2020

#### Cases of 2019

Organization	2
Administration	3
Accessibility	16
Treatment	8
Communication	2
Information (incorrect or lacking)	21
Facilities/provisions	15
Procedures (e.g. right of inspection or marking period)	27
Financial	2
Education	
<i>educational guidance</i>	17
<i>educational quality</i>	3
<i>coordination (e.g. planning)</i>	7
Research	0
Examinations/final degree assessments	22
Legality (e.g. in connection with Academic and Examination Regulations)	12
Registration course/examination	5
Other	7



## Cases of 2020

Administrative	0
Accessibility	10
Treatment	13
Communication	2
Information (incorrect or lacking)	15
Facilities/provisions	8
Procedures (e.g. right of inspection or marking period)	56
Financial	3
Education	
<i>educational guidance</i>	32
<i>educational quality</i>	7
<i>coordination (e.g. planning)</i>	10
Research	0
Examinations/final degree assessments	47
Legality (e.g. in connection with Academic and Examination Regulations)	13
Registration e.g. course/examination	11
Other	8

A case can be about more than one problem area. That explains why there are more topics than cases handled. All matters reported, whether founded or unfounded, are registered. In the first instance, a student can try to solve the problem independently, with advice from the student ombudsman. The ombudsman investigates whether the applicable regulations have been followed and whether procedures have

been correctly implemented. All this is done to answer the question of whether or not the student has been treated properly and with due observance of regulations. In some cases, the student ombudsman referred the student to bodies such as the Examination Board or the Examination Appeals Board (Cobex). In other cases, it was sometimes sufficient to explain the regulations to the student, while sometimes it proved necessary for the ombudsman to intervene.

The category *Other* covers cases that could not be included elsewhere, such as complaints about privacy issues or about a problem in a study association or participation body. Although the student ombudsman is not authorized to handle such complaints, she can offer a sympathetic ear and discuss ways of ensuring that a problem does not escalate. This is in the interest of both the students and the university.

### Coronavirus-related cases

Complaints about general policy (seven in 2019, nine in 2020), such as the coronavirus policy, cannot be dealt with. Other avenues exist for this purpose, such as the Faculty Student Council, the University Student Council or the Programme Committee if the complaint concerns programme content. In 2020, 56 cases about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly were submitted to the student ombudsman. In some cases, this was caused by the fact that a number of degree programmes abandoned the uniform



academic calendar. Due to the coronavirus measures, for example, resits were scheduled on a different day than indicated in the calendar. Students complained that it was not clearly explained why this was necessary and that it jeopardized their own study schedule. In 2020, the marking period as set by the Executive Board in the Academic and Examination Regulations Model<sup>14</sup> was extended from 10 to 15 working days for a number of degree programmes as lecturers could not meet the deadline because of the heavy workload caused by providing education online.

Students said that because this deadline was not met, the date of the results of interim examinations was close to the date of resits. That would shorten their preparation time. But above all, students complained to the student ombudsman because the Academic and Examination Regulations were not observed. The student ombudsman also dealt with complaints about the occasional changes to the procedure for alleged fraud. This is described in the 'Rules and Guidelines for Examinations Boards'.<sup>15</sup> Part of the procedure is that students are given the oppor-

<sup>15</sup> [https://vunet.login.vu.nl/\\_layouts/SharePoint.Tridion.WebParts/download.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164-917595-16 par.20](https://vunet.login.vu.nl/_layouts/SharePoint.Tridion.WebParts/download.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164-917595-16 par.20).

14 Art.3.4

tunity by the Examination Board to explain their side of the issue in person. However, in some cases students were only able to respond in writing. In fact, students reported that Examination Boards did not always invite students to give their side of the story but did declare their examinations invalid. Failure to observe the procedure was caused by the large number of cases received by Examination Boards about online exams. Some students therefore appealed to the Examination Appeals Board (Cobex) in an attempt to still be heard. In a settlement interview between the Examination Board and the student, organized by Cobex, the right to a fair hearing finally took place. Because students do understand the situation that has resulted because of the coronavirus

measures, no complaints to assess these issues were submitted to the student ombudsman so far. She has, however, reported the matter to the Rector Magnificus, who is also the Chairperson of the consultation between the Chairs of the Examination Boards.

### Handling times

In 2020, the handling times were shorter than in 2019 and most cases could be completed within a week. This may have been due to the fact that a Zoom or phone appointment is quicker to set up than an in-person appointment on campus that requires the student to factor in travel time.

# Conclusions and recommendations

In 2019 and 2020, the student ombudsman identified the following problem areas and reported them to the faculty or service department in question, and the Executive Board, where necessary.

It is therefore recommended that uniform names be used university-wide for documents that have the same purpose. This facilitates findability.

### Provision of information

In 2019 and 2020, a total of 36 complaints about the provision of information were submitted to the student ombudsman. A number of these complaints concerned information that is actually available but which students cannot find because they are unaware of its existence. This applies, for example, to the way in which the graduation date is set. This is stated in the *Regulations for Issuing Degree Certificates*<sup>16</sup> but is not always referred to in graduation procedures. In order to fully inform students, reference could be made to prevailing regulations.

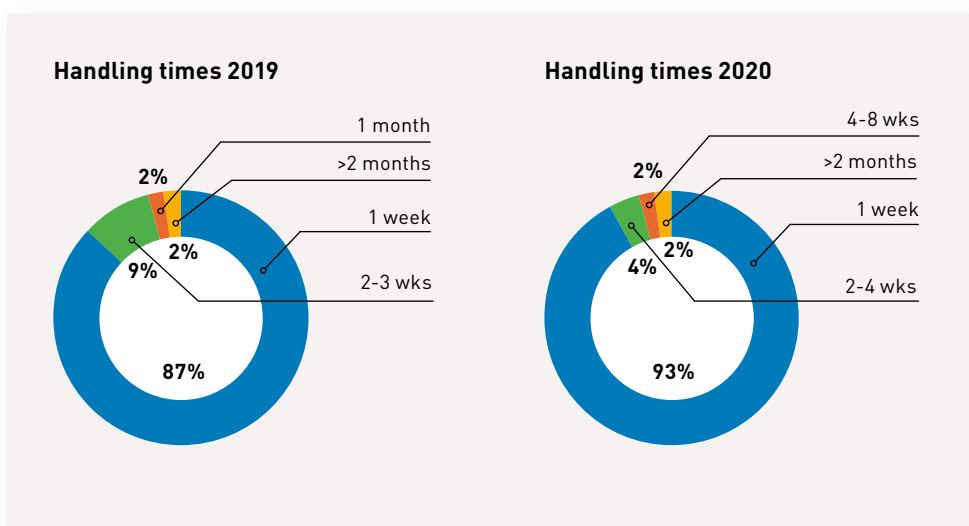
### Submitting a request

When a student submits a request to a staff member or to a committee, it turns out that this does not always result in a relevant answer for the student. In those cases, it appears that the student did not ask a clear question, which means that the staff member or committee does not know exactly what the student wants an answer to. It is therefore recommended that students submit a clear request and that staff members who refer them inform them of this.

### Document titles

It appears that programmes use different names for documents that have the same purpose, for example, the document thesis manual; this is also called thesis conditions, thesis guide and thesis regulations.

<sup>16</sup> [https://vunet.login.vu.nl/\\_layouts/SharePoint.Tridion.WebParts/download.aspx?cid=tc%3a165-937213-16 art.6](https://vunet.login.vu.nl/_layouts/SharePoint.Tridion.WebParts/download.aspx?cid=tc%3a165-937213-16 art.6).



# Publicity

To ensure that students are aware that the university has a student ombudsman and what the ombudsman's role is, a university website is maintained in Dutch and in English. Since the university welcomes new students each year, an introduction to various student organizations was given after the opening of the academic year. Students were introduced to the boards of student societies and associations and of the participatory bodies for students at the *Ontvangst van de rector* (Rector's Welcome) events. The events took place in 2019 at the Griffioen cultural centre.

The student ombudsman also presented the 2018 Annual Report not only to the Rector Magnificus but also to the University Student Council, the director of operations of the Faculty of Social Sciences, the decentral confidential counsellor of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and a number of employees.

In July 2019, the student ombudsman provided information about the office of student ombudsman to the internal auditor at VU Amsterdam. Furthermore, she also provided information to the Head of Department of the student desk<sup>17</sup> and to the new policy officer for Academic Integrity.<sup>18</sup> But she also conducted an interview with the newly appointed Data Protection Officer,<sup>19</sup> the new administrative secretary

17 April 2019.

18 May 2019.

19 December 2019.

of the Examination Appeals Board<sup>20</sup> and with the new educational lawyer.<sup>21</sup> In 2020, Student and Educational Affairs posted a bilingual help matrix for students online. The student ombudsman also provided information for this matrix.<sup>22</sup>

If required, the student ombudsman also provides information outside of VU Amsterdam. In September 2019, she conducted an interview with a student counsellor at the University of Twente in that context.

In July 2020, the student ombudsman provided information to the chair of the Landelijk Studenten Rechtsbureau (LSR, a national organization that helps students with legal problems) so that they could refer VU Amsterdam students to the student ombudsman.

At the request of NOS, the student ombudsman provided information to one of their investigative journalists about social safety of students and how the office of student ombudsman can contribute to that.

These activities were aimed at providing information in order to improve the visibility, image and accessibility of the student ombudsman.

20 October 2020

21 June 2020

22 More information: <https://vuweb.vu.nl/en/employee/bemiddeling/where-to-find-help-and-for-what>



# Professionalization

There is an intrinsic link between the effectiveness of the student ombudsman and the quality of her work. If she is to continue to perform the job well, training and continuing professional development is therefore necessary on an ongoing basis. This is why the student ombudsman is also a member, and indeed chairperson, of the Association of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (VOHO).<sup>23</sup> This involves taking part in general meetings every three months.

Membership of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE<sup>24</sup>)

23 <https://verenigingombudsmannenho.nl/>

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

and the American International Ombudsman Association provide all manner of information on the most recent developments in the field of complaint law and jurisprudence in the field of ombudsman work. The ombudsman was a member of the ENOHE steering committee until the summer of 2019. The ENOHE then changed from a consultative body to an association with a board.

The student ombudsman has been a member of the Undesirable Conduct Expert Team since 2018. This team is now called the Social Safety Expert Team<sup>25</sup>.

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

All members receive training sessions that are offered by the Corporate Real Estate and Facilities service department. In April 2019, the ombudsman attended a Youth Suicide Prevention training session and in May 2020 the Active Bystander training session. In addition, within this team the ombudsman received information about honour-related violence. Within VU Amsterdam, there appears to be a need for a Social Safety Expert Team, so that reports are not assessed and handled by a single official. This facilitates an integrated approach to assessment and handling. Meanwhile, an expert team can gather and share relevant information, thus preventing the risk of unnecessary escalation and limiting the damage. The team meets at least three times a year.

On 8 July 2019, the ombudsman attended the play #Metoo Academia about a situation with inappropriate conduct. The play was followed by a panel discussion.

Another initiative in 2019 and 2020 took the form of peer review events held during the VOHO general meetings and with the staff ombudsman from Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. During these meetings, ideas and best practices were exchanged based on experiences and expertise.

The Journal of Right of Recourse (Tijdschrift voor Klachtrecht) and symposiums of the Vereniging voor Klachtrecht (Association for Right of Recourse) provide the ombudsman with more information in this

field. This association is committed to professionalizing and further improving the internal and external handling of complaints, developing right of recourse and promoting the competencies required to deal with internal and external complaints.

In order to stay thoroughly informed, the ombudsman maintains contacts with the university's Student Council. Furthermore, the ombudsman occasionally participates in the regular discussions held by the university's legal advisors and consults the university's head of legal affairs on a number of occasions throughout the year to learn about which laws and regulations are about to be introduced or amended. In 2019, she had several consultations with one of the privacy lawyers in the context of the new Privacy Perfect processing register under the new European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Twice a year, she attends the meetings of the student confidential counsellors. She consults with the Director of Student & Educational Affairs at least once a year to find out about developments in that area and to discuss potential improvements in the light of complaints.

## Other internal and external contacts

The student ombudsman not only gathers information from various bodies, but in some cases also contributes to the discussions that they hold. However, this is only possible on condition that her independence is not compromised, and this limits her participation in certain bodies. As mentioned, she does participate in the meetings of the Social Safety Expert Team and occasionally in the student counsellors' meetings.

In July 2019, the student ombudsman held consultations with the project leader regarding a project plan that is part of the *Multi-year programme for studying with a disability*.

Furthermore, the ombudsman provided general information about the various complaint procedures for students at VU Amsterdam, including to the head of Education Office of the Faculty of Law.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> February 2020.





# Examples of cases handled

The examples are anonymous and intended to shed light on the diversity of complaints, despite the constraints imposed by the strict anonymity. This means that more complex cases had to be excluded because they could easily be traced back to an individual or degree programme. Use of the personal pronoun *he* may or may not correspond with the gender of the person concerned. To further ensure the anonymity of the students and to avoid specifying their background, the terminology has been expressed in the most general of terms. Only the main outlines of the cases are described and no indication is given of the number of contact moments and the amount of time that had to be spent on a case.

## Case 1: Educational guidance

**Method:** advice

**Handling time:** 1 week

A Master's student contacted the student ombudsman because his/her thesis supervision did not go well. According to the student, the thesis supervisor had not given him enough instructions and these were not always very useful. As a result, the student had to contact the thesis supervisor frequently. The student said that this meant that all the hours he had been allocated for supervision were used up while he felt that he still needed super-

vision. The student said he had attempted to get more hours but the thesis supervisor would not agree to this. Intervention by the academic advisor also did not help. However, he told the student ombudsman that he had not yet contacted the thesis coordinator. The academic advisor had mentioned this option but he was unsure what the thesis coordinator would have been able to do for him and he didn't try to find out.

The student ombudsman informed the student about the *Master's thesis regulations*. These state that the thesis coordinator mediates in the event of a dispute. He could also have discussed the fact that he needed extra supervision hours with the thesis coordinator. The student indicated that he was not aware of this option and that he would contact the thesis coordinator before enlisting the help of the student ombudsman. A few days later, he let the student ombudsman know that the thesis coordinator had resolved the matter as far as he was concerned.

## Case 2: Provision of information

**Method: ombudsman-led mediation**

**Handling time: 1 week**

Just before the start of the academic year, a prospective Master's student complained to the student ombudsman that he had been misinformed. He discovered this when he could not register for subjects. So he then decided to first inquire at the student desk. Much to his surprise he was told that he could not be registered for the degree programme of his choice because he still had to pass an English language proficiency test. He says that he was not aware of this. According to the student, he had already contacted the admissions committee in April and the email he received from them stated that he was eligible for admission. In an Appendix it stated that the language proficiency test was mandatory but in VU Amsterdam's application portal the admissibility box was marked with a green tick. Also the screen where all conditions are listed, such as CV, passport photograph, etc., showed a green check mark next to the English language proficiency test. The student therefore said that he could not have known that he still had to pass the language proficiency test. He had just asked the admissions committee for a solution but they have 30 working days to respond while the academic year was about to start and he could not take any subjects. The student told the student ombudsman that he felt he was misinformed and misled by the information given on the application portal. He hoped that the

admissions committee would process his request as a matter of urgency but did not know how to request this.

Because of the urgency of the matter, the student ombudsman informed the administrative secretary of the admissions committee by telephone of the complaint and the student's question. The secretary promised to investigate the matter and to get back to the student as soon as possible. That same day the student received a decision from the admissions committee stating that a certain text in the application portal in VUnet could lead to confusion and that the admissions committee had therefore decided to accommodate the student's request. The student would be admitted on the condition that he passed the language proficiency test that would be held a few weeks later.

The student was happy with this solution and accepted the admissions committee's offer.

The student ombudsman then closed the file.

# Prevention

In addition to resolving complaints, the student ombudsman also addresses the issue of complaint prevention. To this end, the student ombudsman held several consultations with management, the Teaching Coordinator and the Examination Board to exchange information about problem areas.

Organizational advice in response to issues submitted to the ombudsman was also aimed at preventing complaints about the same issues in the future. Sometimes this concerned information on a procedure that was not readily available to students, and sometimes it concerned specific advice in relation to thesis supervision.

