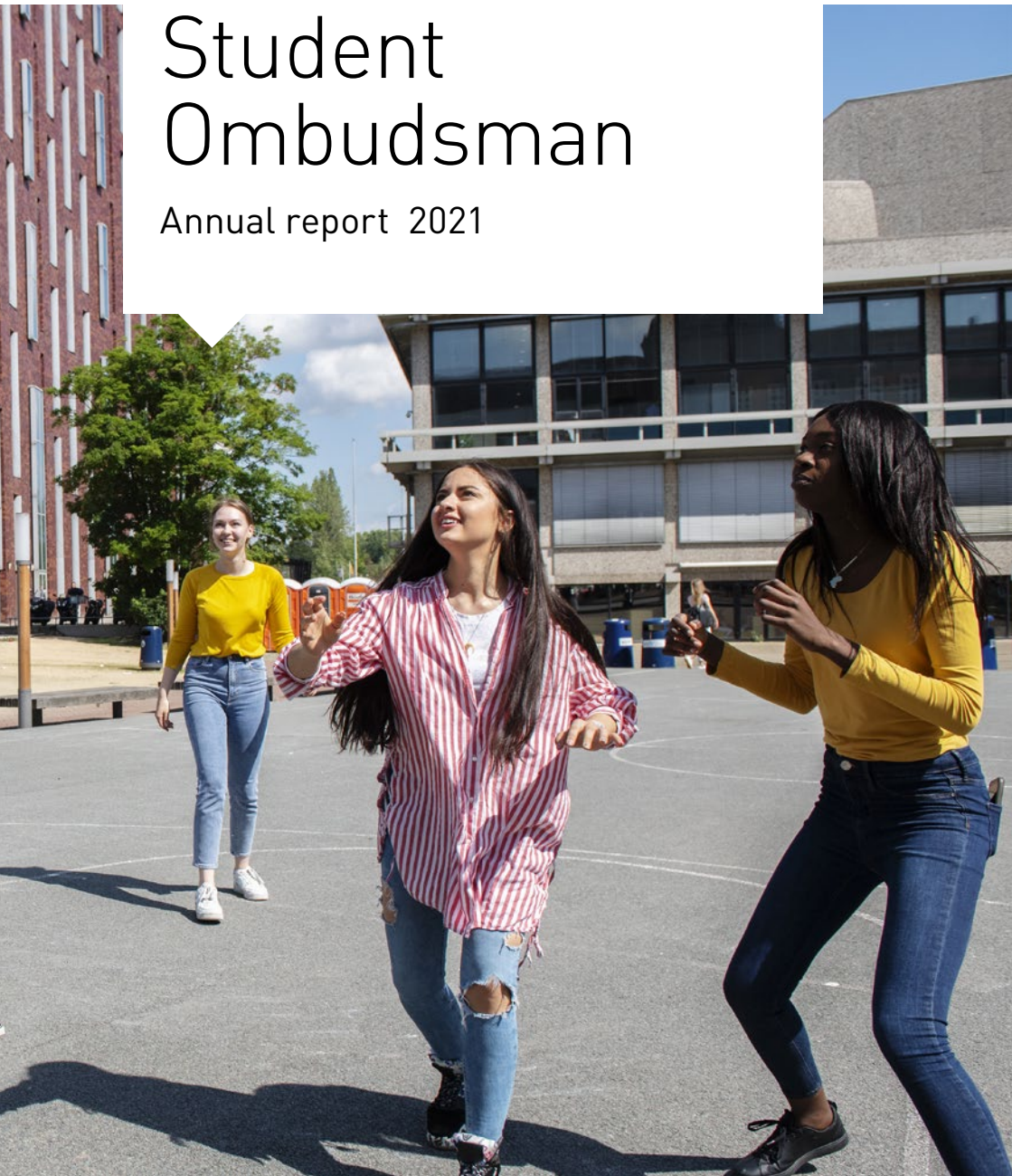


Student Ombudsman

Annual report 2021





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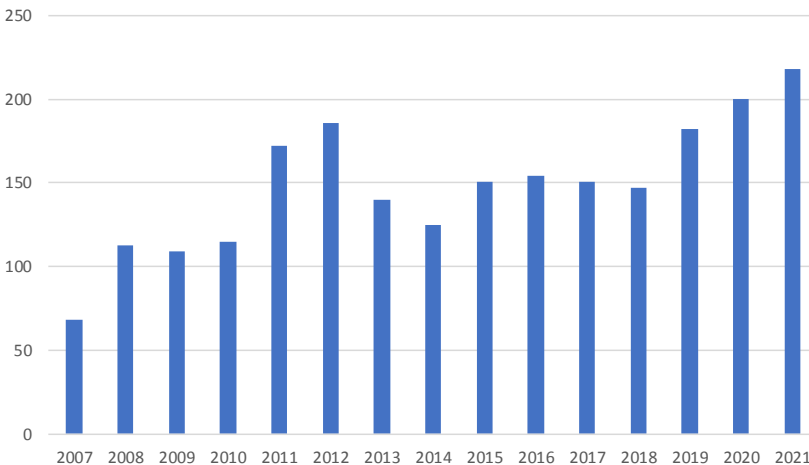
22 Example of a case

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Preface

More students contacted the student ombudsman in 2021 than in previous years. This was because, due to the coronavirus measures, teaching and education often 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 therefore complained most about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly. All the cases in 2021 were eventually resolved through advice or ombudsman-led mediation and no complaints were submitted to the student ombudsman for assessment.

The graph below shows the number of cases that students submitted to the student ombudsman per year since I took office in 2007. It is worth noting that in 2007 there were 19,204 students enrolled; in 2021 this was 30,659 students.





Acknowledgements

Thanks to VU Amsterdam, my book *Ombudswerk in het hoger onderwijs: een praktische wegwijzer* (Ombuds work in Higher Education: a practical guide) was published by VU University Press in September 2021.¹

I would also like to thank the Executive Board, and in particular Prof. V. (Vinod) Subramaniam, Rector Magnificus until September 2021, and Director Institutional Affairs, Ms L.C. (Laan) van Staalduinen, for making this publication possible. The international edition, also made possible by VU Amsterdam, will be published in 2022: *Ombuds work in higher education*.

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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1 Poesiat, L. (2021). *Ombudswerk in het hoger onderwijs: een praktische wegwijzer* (Ombuds work in Higher Education: a practical roadmap). Amsterdam, VU University Press. <https://www.vuuniversitypress.com/product/ombudswerk-in-het-hoger-onderwijs/>

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 Amsterdam², 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 student ombudsman is in a position to act.³ They do not take

sides but work to form an objective view of the matter at hand in order to give advice, make a referral or arrive at a decision. The student 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 student 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 they differ 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

2 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 their working hours have therefore been increased by 0.2 FTE.

3 The duties and responsibilities are set out in: *Student Ombudsman Regulations* (http://www.vu.nl/nl/Images/Regeling%20studentenombudsman%202010%20def_tcm9-152866.pdf).

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. This is also, for example, particularly important for students with disabilities. 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 flaunted. The ombudsman then brings these facts to the attention of the relevant faculty, service department, or the Executive Board. In this way, the student ombudsman contributes to a safe learning environment. 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 will forward calls to the mobile phone in the event of her absence. They can also be reached using the mobile messaging service WhatsApp and by submitting a complaint form to a digital one-stop shop.⁴ Students can easily send a WhatsApp message from their mobile phone at no additional cost, and the student ombudsman can respond quickly. Moreover, the student ombudsman is also available free of charge to students calling from abroad using the WhatsApp calling service. These services help lower the threshold associated with the position. An appointment can be made with the student ombudsman directly. The student ombudsman will aim to respond to every student inquiry within a week.

Other duties

Besides discussing matters with students, the ombudsman utilises the 0.8 FTE currently available on a wide variety of tasks, such as ⁵preliminary 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.

4 Complaints form: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/disputes-procedure>

5 This includes the assessment of competence and admissibility.

Complaint procedure

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.

Authorised or unauthorised?

Even if they have already finished their studies, students are still entitled to submit a complaint or make a report, 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 will determine whether she is authorised to handle the complaint. For instance, the student ombudsman cannot deal with complaints regarding inappropriate conduct,⁶ 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).⁷ 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 multiple issues are often involved. In simpler cases, the response "not part of the student ombudsman's remit" may suffice.

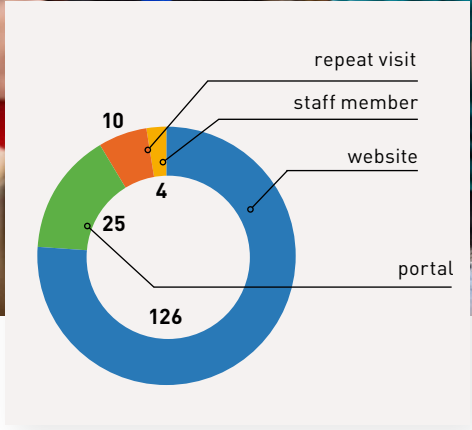
There are, however, other reasons why the student ombudsman may decide not to deal with a complaint because, for example, it is clear that the complaint is unfounded. In such cases, it is sufficient to explain to the student that the laws and regulations have been complied with.

Advice

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 will be asked to respond and/or documents can be requested and verified if necessary, if and when the student has agreed to this. 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 will seek 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

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

7 More information: <https://vu.nl/en/student/suggestions-and-complaints/complaint-appeal-and-objection>



recorded, as this generates information that contributes to finding a solution. And both the student and the organisation often benefit more from finding a solution than from obtaining a statement that the complaint was well-founded. The student ombudsman will then discuss the options with the student, who will then be able to make their own choice.

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.⁸ In many cases, issues concern-

ing 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.⁹ The student ombudsman will also provide information on 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 service department. The student ombudsman will act as an independent party. Because the

8 For more information, go to: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/academic-integrity-at-vu-vumcx>

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

ombudsman is free from affiliation with a degree programme, she can look to resolve the problem or bring parties together and look for ways in which parties can find a common frame of reference and restore the relationship between student and 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. The student ombudsman can also be the shuttle diplomat in mediation. 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 not or 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.

Report

Based on complaints or reports, the student ombudsman can also make a report to the Executive Board. This will pertain to greater trends of any systematic shortcomings in the regulations or problematic patterns in the organisation. "On receiving a report, the ombudsman will refrain from making an assessment of the complaint. However, they may share their *findings* because, in this case, no formal complaint was filed, but there were confidential discussions with the student ombudsman. The purpose of such a report is therefore to notify that there may be a pattern of problems that could ultimately jeopardise the education, research and business operations."¹⁰In 2021, the student ombudsman made one report to the Executive Board.

10 Poesiat (2021) note 1, p. 100.

Cases handled

In 2021, 218 cases were submitted to the student ombudsman. The majority of the complaints submitted were about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly (49). In a number of cases this was because of the coronavirus measures/pandemic; procedures such as the marking period could not be observed for some cases, and sessions to review an exam and graduation procedures also took place differently. Complaints from students about procedures that were allegedly not carried out correctly resulted in a report by the student ombudsman to the Executive Board in February.

In the cases in which the student ombudsman had partly no authority (52), the student was referred instead to the proper individual or agency, such as the

confidential counsellor for students (10), the Examination Board or the University Student Council if the complaint concerned general policy or the coronavirus policy. Furthermore, there were 15 cases in which the parents, friends or participatory bodies of students discussed a case with the student ombudsman. Even though the student ombudsman was authorised to handle in these cases, she listened, discussed options and in a few cases referred the matter.



What faculty did the complaint pertain to?

Complaints relating to:	Registered students in 2019	Cases in 2019	Registered students in 2020	Cases in 2020	Registered students in 2021	Cases in 2021
Sciences	6,989	23	8,139	35	8,945	37
School of Business and Economics	5,081	31	5,875	37	5,320	27
Humanities	1,441	15	1,685	4	1,809	18
Medicine	2,347	5	2,353	9	2,471	6
Religion and Theology	293	3	305	1	279	2
Behavioural and Movement Sciences	3,797	26	4,078	9	4,122	9
Law	3,463	18	3,916	27	4,108	28
Social Sciences	2,456	11	2,808	16	3,015	6
Dentistry	453	2	454	5	446	5
Amsterdam University College	251	3	183	3	144	2
Support Services ¹¹	-	21	-	25	-	30
University administration	-	2	-	4	-	9
Non-VU students ¹²	-	17	-	5	-	5
Consultations by staff members	-	1	-	4	-	19
Others (parents, Faculty Student Councils)	-	4	-	5	-	15
Total		182		200		218
Not part of the student ombudsman's remit	-	22	-	16	-	16

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

12 Students enrolled at other universities.

Students from the Faculty of Science, VU Amsterdam's largest faculty, submitted the highest proportion of cases to the student ombudsman. This mainly concerned interim examinations with regard to, for example, the Academic and Examination Regulations on matters such as regarding procedures observed, for instance, the marking period. These were resolved by the student ombudsman through advice or mediation. Complaints about support services concerned issues such as enrolment (9), and facilities such as the availability of study areas and IT problems (8). The latter were caused by the transition to new IT operating systems at VU Amsterdam in 2021.

The problems that reach the student ombudsman are those that 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. Of all students, less than 0.5% consulted the student ombudsman.

Furthermore, more and more staff members are contacting the student ombudsman. These are usually cases in which staff members are interested in knowing whether a student can be referred to the student ombudsman. These issues are recorded in the category 'Consultations' (19).

Handling cases

The way in which a case is handled depends on the form in which it is submitted to the student ombudsman. A question will often lead to information or advice being given, although mediation may still follow at a later stage. In most cases, the complaints were resolved within a week of the advice or ombudsman-led mediation. No cases to be assessed were filed to the student ombudsman in 2021. If this had been the case, this would have been done in accordance with the procedure described in the *Student Ombudsman Regulations*.¹³ As part of the student ombudsman's monitoring role, she reported one case to the Executive Board in June.

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

13 <https://assets.vu.nl/d8b6f1f5-816c-005b-1dc1-e363dd7ce9a5/8520d91d-e6ac-44a8-97be-533686574584/Student%20Ombudsman%20Regulations%202010.pdf>

Nature of the cases

Administrative	0
Accessibility	10
Treatment	17
Communication	4
Information (incorrect or lacking)	21
Facilities/provisions	9
Procedures (e.g. right of inspection or marking period)	49
Financial	11
Teaching	
<i>educational guidance</i>	12
<i>quality of education</i>	6
<i>teaching coordination (e.g. planning)</i>	10
Research	0
Examinations	29
Legal issues (e.g. in connection with Academic and Examination Regulations)	12
Registration e.g. course/examination	12
Other	13
Consultations	19

A case can cover more than one problem area. That explains why there are more topics than handled cases. All matters reported, whether authorised or unauthorised, are registered. In the first instance, a student can try to solve the problem independently, with advice from the student ombudsman. The student ombudsman will investigate 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.

As already mentioned, the majority of the complaints submitted were about procedures that were allegedly carried out incorrectly (49).

If students complained about the accessibility of a supervisor/lecturer, the student ombudsman put their complaint before those in question (to be heard) and brought the parties together.

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 authorised 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, nine in 2021, such as the coronavirus policy and the resulting online lectures and examinations, could not be dealt with. Other avenues exist for this purpose, such as the Faculty Student Council, the University Student Council, a student union or the Programme Committee if the complaint concerns programme content.

According to staff members, the workload increased because of the coronavirus measures, which resulted in complaints from students about procedures allegedly being carried out incorrectly, for instance. In a number of cases, for example, the marking deadline was not met because of the high workload. The marking period as set by the Executive Board in the Academic and Examination Regulations Model (Art. 3.4) was extended from 10 to 15 working days by the Faculty Board for a number of degree programmes. This was why the student ombudsman informed the Rector Magnificus, who also chairs the consultation between the chairpersons of the Examination Boards, of this in February. 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.

In a number of cases, the students also complained about Examination Boards exceeding their response time. This caused students to become stressed because it would jeopardise their study schedule.

Moreover, there were a number of degree programmes that abandoned the standard academic calendar because of the coronavirus measures. In these cases, 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 jeopardised their own study schedule.

Some students also experienced problems

due to attendance requirements for some courses. They were unable to comply with these requirements because they were in quarantine or self-isolation or did not want to comply because they were afraid of getting Covid. This was also the case for physical attendance at examinations. The student ombudsman referred these students to the Examination Board.

A number of students also indicated how online teaching had affected them. They missed the contact with their supervisors, lecturers and professors and also, of course, with their fellow students. Because most contact was by way of email, the students experienced this as being very impersonal, particularly in times when personal contact is so important. This was especially true for international students. The student ombudsman listened and referred students to student support workers, to Student Well-Being¹⁴ and to the *Hart voor studenten* (Heart for students) website.¹⁵

Problems also arose because student/work placements could or could not go ahead due to coronavirus measures. The student ombudsman helped seek solutions and, where necessary, referred the students to student/work placement coordinators, academic advisors and Examination Boards.

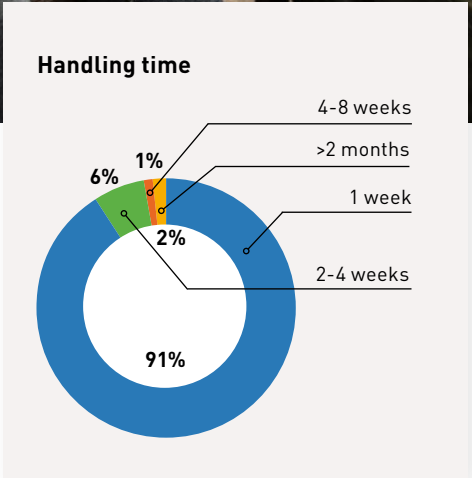
14 <https://vu.nl/en/student/student-wellbeing/student-wellbeing-point-panell>

15 <https://www.hartvoorstudenten.nl/>



Handling time

In 2021, the handling times were once more shorter than in previous years and most cases could be completed within a week. This may have been due to the fact that a Zoom/Teams 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

Step-by-step plan and timeline

Students wishing to take courses outside the curriculum or outside VU Amsterdam and wishing to have these courses count towards their degree programme are at times unaware of the time it takes for the courses to be approved by the Examination Board. In some cases, the students did not submit their request until the summer for a course they wished to take starting on 1 September. If the request is then inadvertently rejected by the Examination Board, it is already almost September. The student will then run out of time as an appeals procedure also takes time. It is therefore recommended that degree programmes make students aware of this and post a step-by-step plan with a timeline on the website, for instance, so that students know that they must submit their request on time.

Thesis supervision

If a student's study progress is not nominal and they wish to start a thesis or new thesis process in September, many degree programmes are unable to offer this as thesis supervision is not possible in these cases. These students can only receive supervision starting in the new calendar year. However, if students have completed all courses and have to wait six months without taking courses before starting the thesis process, they could submit a request to the programme administration to receive thesis supervision sooner. But few students are aware of this option. It may therefore be recommended that programmes include this option in their thesis manuals.

Publicity

Internal

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. This is why the student ombudsman provided information to a staff member of the Marketing & Communications Department on the new VUweb. As the university welcomes new students each year, an introduction to various student organisations was given after the opening of the academic year. Furthermore, the student ombudsman further explained the *2019-2020 Annual Report* to Executive Board member Dr. M.J.W.T. (Marcel) Nollen and also to the University Student Council and a number of staff members. She also conducted an introductory meeting with the newly appointed Data Protection Officer, a new student counsellor and with the head of Student Well-Being of the Student and Educational Affairs Department.

External

On request, the student ombudsman also provides information about the office of ombudsman outside of VU Amsterdam. In this context, for example, discussions were held with the new ombudsman of the University of Amsterdam, and also with the Social Safety coordinators of the University of Amsterdam, Delft University of

Technology (TU Delft) and Erasmus University Rotterdam. The student ombudsman also provided information to Stenden University of Applied Sciences and the University of Groningen.

Lectures

The student ombudsman gave a lecture to the members of the German network of ombudsmen entitled *Social media and the ombuds practice* on 9 June.

On 19 November, the student ombudsman delivered a lecture for the webinar of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education: *Social Media, Ombuds Offices and Confidentiality: Friends or Foes?* The theme of her lecture was: *Social Media and Ombuds work: Risks and Benefits*.¹⁶

Publication

Experience and expertise gained by the student ombudsman in ombuds work resulted in the book *Ombudswerk in het hoger onderwijs: een praktische wegwijzer* (Ombuds work in Higher Education: a practical guide), which was published in 2021.¹⁷ The publication was made possible by the Administration Office and the Executive Board and was published by VU University

16 <https://www.enohe.net/2021/11/social-media-ombuds-offices-and-confidentiality-friends-or-foes-enohe-webinar/>

17 <https://www.vuuniversitypress.com/product/ombudswerk-in-het-hoger-onderwijs/>



Press. The student ombudsman addresses the implementation and importance of the office of ombudsman in the book. The everyday practice of a student ombudsman (m/f/x) is also discussed. The book is not only relevant for ombudsmen, but also for administrators, policy staff and any potential users of an ombudsman and was therefore widely distributed within VU Amsterdam.

Following the publication of the book, the student ombudsman gave interviews to ScienceGuide¹⁸, an information platform, Ad Valvas (VU Amsterdam's newspaper)¹⁹

and to Zestor (labour market and training fund for higher professional education).²⁰ The international edition, also made possible by VU Amsterdam, will be published in 2022: *Ombuds work in higher education*.

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

18 <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2021/09/houding-student-als-consument-vraagt-om-studentenombudsman/>

19 <https://www.advalvas.vu.nl/verhalen/er-hangt-nu-een-prijkaartje-aan-de-problemen-van-studenten>

20 <https://zestor.nl/studentenombudsman-draagt-bij-aan-veilig-werk-en-studieklimaat>

Professionalisation

There is an intrinsic link between the effectiveness of the student ombudsman and the quality of their work. If they are 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 chair, of the Association of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (VOHO²¹). This involves taking part in general meetings every three months. On 4 November 2021, the student ombudsman stepped down as chair at the end of the term of appointment. She was appointed honorary member by the association for her accomplishments for VOHO. Membership of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE²²) and the American International Ombudsman Association provide all manner of information on the most recent developments in the field of the right of recourse and jurisprudence in the field of ombudsman work. Peer supervision meetings also took place in 2021. During these meetings, ideas and best practices were exchanged based on experiences and expertise.

The Vereniging voor Klachtrecht (Association for Right of Recourse, an initiative by the National Student Ombudsman) publishes a newsletter and organises symposiums, providing the student ombudsman with more information in this field. This association is committed to professionalis-

ing and further improving the internal and external handling of complaints, developing the right of recourse and promoting the competencies required to deal with internal and external complaints.

In order to stay thoroughly informed, the student ombudsman maintains contacts with the University Student Council and is occasionally present during the consultation meetings with the Executive Board. Furthermore, the student ombudsman occasionally participates in the discussions held by the university's legal advisors and consults the head of the Student & Educational Affairs service department at least once a year.

Additionally, the student ombudsman attends the meetings of the confidential counsellors, which are held at least twice a year. The student ombudsman also frequently consults the educational lawyer. In 2021, the student ombudsman also participated in meetings of the university ombudsmen. Social safety was addressed on several occasions during these meetings.

Social Safety Expert Team²³

The student 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 to deal with undesirable conduct, so that reports are not assessed and handled

21 <https://verenigingstudentenombudsmannenho.nl/>

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

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

by a single official. This facilitates an integrated approach to assessment and handling. On the other hand, an expert team can gather and share relevant information, thus preventing the risk of unnecessary escalation, ensuring that help is available and limiting the damage. The team meets at least three times a year. One of the meetings focussed on problems and the position of PhD students. The members of the team are also provided with training courses. The student ombudsman frequently meets with the director of the VU Social Safety Expert Team.

Training

The student ombudsman attended the *Racism & Discrimination* training session given by Mrs A. (Amrita) Das (Faculty of Social Sciences), which was organised by the Corporate Real Estate and Facilities service department for members of the VU Social Safety Expert Team.

She also attended the training: *Signaleren en response bij seksuele intimidatie* (Spotting and responding to sexual harassment), by sexologist Mr R. (Robert) Hubers for members of the VU Social Safety Expert Team.

On November 18, the student ombudsman attended the afternoon conference organised by the Association for Right of Recourse and the National Ombudsman on *Goed communiceren bij klachtbehandeling* (Communicating well in complaint procedures) by emeritus professor of Communication and Information Sciences of the University of Groningen, Prof. C. (Carel) Jansen.

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 the condition that their independence is not compromised, and this limits their participation in certain bodies. As mentioned, they do participate in the meetings of the Social Safety Expert Team and occasionally in the student counselors' meetings.

Furthermore, the student ombudsman provided general information about the various complaint procedures for students to VU Amsterdam staff members.

Example of a case

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 (m/f/x). 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: Provision of information

Method: ombudsman-led mediation

Handling time: 1 week

A Master's student contacted the student ombudsman because when he arrived at the lecture hall he read a notification on Canvas that the course would not be given that academic year. A further explanation was not provided. The student was extremely surprised that the minor he had chosen was cancelled so abruptly just before the start of the course and brought the matter to the student ombudsman. The student ombudsman sent the complaint, with the consent of the student, to the head of faculty's Education Office. The student ombudsman was told that there was no lecturer available for the course. Because no major students had enrolled for the course and only one minor student, it was decided to cancel the course. This was conveyed through Canvas just before the start of the course. The programme office regrets that this was an unpleasant surprise for the student. The lecturer who had taught the course in previous years subsequently offered to teach the course to this student by way of a tutorial. The student was happy with this response and the student ombudsman was able to close the case.

Prevention

In addition to resolving complaints, the student ombudsman also addresses 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. Organisational 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 at times it concerned specific advice in relation to thesis supervision or the provision of information.

The ombudsman held discussions with the University of Amsterdam's director of Social Safety, the VSNU (Association of Universities in the Netherlands, now called Universities of the Netherlands) and SoFoKles (Social Fund for the Knowledge Sector) on options and focal points in policy to increase social safety at universities. In October, the student ombudsman sent the focal points based on the ombuds practice to the confidential counsellors of VU Amsterdam and SoFoKles. These will be included in the 2022 recommendations of the confidential counsellors to the Executive Board and by SoFoKles to the Universities of the Netherlands.

