



university of
 groningen

Annual Report of the Ombudsperson

January – December 2023

25 April 2024



Foreword

Time flies. Having held the post of ombudsperson for more than 2.5 years, this annual report marks the second time that I have documented developments, tasks, and observations relating to the post.

The year 2023 was characterized by a more intense focus in the social debate — and thus also within the university — on acceptable (and unacceptable) behaviours and safe (and unsafe) learning and working environments. Faced with the polarization that people are currently so quick to grasp, I see it as my job to offer perspective on the complexity of situations. Unfortunately, the issue is never limited to the actual unacceptable behaviour, but also involves the system that perpetuates or, in some cases, even promotes certain behaviour. The necessity of further reflection on this point, including with regard to one's own behaviour, is apparently not yet particularly evident within academia.

I can now say that, partly due to an increasingly solid foundation, the organization has become increasingly accustomed to this specific addition to the support structure. Because of the efforts of many courageous employees and, fortunately, an increasing number of stalwart students who have come forward, as well as an increasing number of requests for advice from within the organization itself, the ombudsperson post is increasingly succeeding in making the distinctive contribution for which it was created. It has nevertheless not yet become natural to be regarded as a full discussion partner and thus to play a part in improving the working and learning environments for the many unique and passionate staff members and students of this wonderful university. Important steps have been and are being taken, however, thereby revealing an upward trend.

Carolijn Winnubst
Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen

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Section 1 Introduction and acknowledgements

With the publication of an annual report, the ombudsperson accounts for the work that has been performed. The first annual report covered a 16-month period: from the start of the post in September 2021 to December 2022. This second annual report covers the calendar year 2023.

Section 2 focuses on the developments of the ombudsperson post. Section 3 concentrates on the key figures of reports and the tasks resulting from them, as well as other tasks. As far as possible, these figures are accompanied by interpretations based primarily on facts. The final chapter contains several observations and recommendations that could help the university – as a learning organization – to set the right priorities.

Section 2 **Developments in the ombudsperson post**

This section focuses on the main developments in the ombudsperson post during the year under review.

Tasks

Since the start of the post in September 2021, efforts have been devoted to determining how the interventions available to the ombudsperson can best be applied to do justice to the interests of both individuals and the organization. The interventions are as follows: identification, charting, providing both solicited and unsolicited advice, conducting independent investigations, and serving as a co-client of investigation. These interventions centre on a safe learning and working climate. After 2.5 years, it can be said that the tasks of the ombudsperson have taken shape. This makes the continuous search for how to act considerably smoother.

It is worth mentioning that the basic principle and method of arriving at a written recommendation has been further developed. More than ever, the written recommendations are based on systemic thinking: the interrelationships between all parts form a single system of interaction and influence. In this view, reports do not constitute a separate entity, but a logical part of the system in all its facets. With the written recommendations that have been issued, the ombudsperson seeks to make an important contribution to the visibility and change of such complexity.

The current working method is as follows. Whenever a substantial number of similar reports are received, an analysis is prepared in close consultation with those filing the reports. This is initially discussed in confidence, in most cases, with the hierarchically senior supervisor. Following this, the alleged perpetrator(s) – and, possibly, other relevant stakeholders (e.g. an HR adviser or study advisor) – will be invited for an interview. The aim of these interviews is to reach a better understanding of the reported situation, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of the discussion partners. It thus involves more than establishing the truth. The latter interviews include discussing the analysis of the reports and listening to the stories, which are often diverse. In consultation with the discussion partners, the ombudsperson then prepares interview reports.

The advisory report includes the aforementioned analysis, interview reports, findings, and a recommendation. The confidential report is then sent to the previously informed hierarchically senior level, as well as to the alleged perpetrators, with a copy to the Board of the University. For reasons of confidentiality, no copy is sent to parties filing the reports, who are informed of the main conclusions by the ombudsperson. By analogy with Article 7.4 of the University of Groningen Ombudsperson Regulations (hereinafter: Regulations), the recommendation calls for substantiated written notification within four weeks concerning whether and, if so, how the advisory report will be followed up. The ombudsperson will then notify the parties filing the reports of any possible follow-up. The term ‘possible’ is used, as no binding recommendation will (or can) be given.

Definitive design of the ombudsperson post

The spring 2021 memorandum on the temporary design of the ombudsperson post at the University of Groningen refers to a definitive design of the post following an evaluation. To this end, the Board of the University received an evaluation report

from HR & Health in early June 2023, along with a written recommendation from the ombudsperson in early July 2023.

A policy advisory team comprising representatives from the departments of HR & Health, Education & Students, and Integrated Safety was established in November 2023. This team reviewed the aforementioned documents and wrote a draft recommendation, which was initially discussed with the ombudsperson and the Confidential Advisors. The draft recommendation has since been discussed in various bodies – including the consultative participation body – with the goal of taking a final decision before the summer of 2024. The ombudsperson is looking forward to this and hopes that the definitive design, including an adjusted set of regulations will bring calm to the sometimes-turbulent waters.

Accessibility/availability

Since September 2023, the ombudsperson has discontinued the walk-in consultations on Tuesday mornings and Wednesday afternoons. The main reason is the lack of time to actually keep these hours open. She has continued to hold walk-in consultations once every six to eight weeks at Campus Fryslân. By the end of 2024, she hopes to work with the relevant Faculty Board, the Faculty Council, HR, and the Confidential Advisor, who is also present in Leeuwarden on a regular basis to evaluate the consultation. The introductory interviews that the ombudsperson has conducted with sections, departments, institutes, or divisions across the university have also been discontinued. This was also due to lack of time, as well as to the fact that the ombudsperson post has grown out of the phase in which unfamiliarity breeds distrust. That said, the ombudsperson is always willing to make meaningful contributions to meetings, team retreats, or other consultations upon request.

Ombudsperson capacity

Despite the fact that the ombudsperson addresses exclusively issues that complement the current support structure, there are time constraints. When multiple similar reports appear to be structural in nature, therefore, it can take a long time before there is an opportunity to take up the issue. Even with other questions from within the organization, it is unfortunately not always possible to provide the desired diligence. In the aforementioned recommendation of early July 2023, the ombudsperson noted that the work is currently incident-driven. Conducting independent investigations on her own initiative has yet to materialize. For example, she would like to examine the way in which legal protection for students is organized, along with the working methods and policies on Appointment Advisory Committees in faculties and departments. The fact that this has yet to materialize is partly because the functioning of the structure of line and support within the university has yet to be optimized, with the result that reports are received that could actually have been prevented. It is also due in part to the size of the appointment (0.8 FTE) for more than 34,000 students and more than 5,600 staff members, which does not provide enough room for such investigations. The past 2.5 years have taught that more capacity is needed in order to achieve the helicopter view that makes this post eminently unique.

Evaluation form

The provision of professional services requires the ability to provide feedback on them. In 2023, the ombudsperson initiated the use of an evaluation form. Created in

Google Forms, this form has recently been slightly revised, and it is sent through a link after the tasks on a given report have been completed. This allows the parties who filed the report to provide feedback anonymously.

Protocol

Article 6.3 of the Regulations establishes the power to gain access to necessary ICT systems or to request and inspect documents (including relevant information from the personnel file) that concern a matter to which a report relates. In 2023, a data protection impact assessment (DPIA) was drawn up with the independent Data Protection Officer (hereinafter: DPO), leading to a recommendation from the DPO to the Board of the University. Meanwhile, the ombudsperson has been working with the Chief Privacy Officer to draft a protocol to ensure that the aforementioned power meets the requirements imposed by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The ombudsperson assumes that this protocol can be adopted in 2024.

Registration system

The ombudsperson is hopeful that a professional software registry will be implemented before the end of 2024. Talks with providers are now underway. The idea is to purchase and use the system, with fully separated compartments, together with the Confidential Advisors. This will professionalize the work, as required, and ensure a more uniform method of registration.

Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education

Shortly after taking office, the ombudsperson became a member of the Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education (hereinafter: VOHO). In late 2023, she and four other members were appointed to the board, where she serves as chair. The VOHO Board aspires to raise the profile of the ombudsperson post in educational institutions in the broadest sense, thus also including academic hospitals.

Social safety

In mid-2023, the Social Safety programme proposal was prepared by the department of HR & Health, at the request of the Board of the University. This four-year programme, which involves a substantial amount of money, was adopted last December. The primary objective of this programme is to increase and sustainably embed social safety within the university for both staff and students. One way this will be done is by translating and operationalizing aspects of behaviour that contribute to social safety into personal leadership for both target groups. Another way will involve bringing clarity and uniformity to the structures and design of processes and systems to ensure social safety. The ombudsperson has observed that a number of the recommendations she issued in early July 2023 are reflected in the programme. She is positive about the focus established within the programme: promoting a culture of inclusion and respect. The same applies to the manner in which the university community will be involved in the implementation. This is because success is ultimately a responsibility that we all share. The ombudsperson will join the programme team on a regular basis for various reasons, including to contribute ideas.

Section 3 Tasks, reports, key figures, and interpretation

General

This section focuses on the tasks of the ombudsperson in 2023.

The tasks performed in addition to dealing with reports are the subjects of the first sub-section. Next, the 91 reports received during the reporting period are analysed in greater detail and, as far as possible, provided with further contextual information, based primarily on facts. The analysis was produced with due regard for confidentiality and privacy of the parties filing the reports, and it consists of two parts. The first part concerns reports from staff members, and the second part consists of reports from students.

Tasks

The tasks of the ombudsperson include consultations, structural or otherwise, aimed at both maintaining relationships and — where necessary, possible and desirable — information exchange, identification, and coordination. In 2023, consultations were held with:

Internal

- the Supervisory Board, members of the Board of the University, Faculty Board members, and heads of departments
- centralized and decentralized consultative participation bodies
- the Director of HR & Health, the Director of Education & Students, and other key actors within University Services (U.S.)
- staff welfare officers and occupational physicians
- the chief and members of the Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) team and faculty D&I officers
- confidential advisors (including those from the UMCG)
- the Dean and Board of Examiners for Dentistry & Medicine
- study advisors
- the head and policy advisor of the Integrated Safety department
- the head of General Legal Affairs (AJZ) and other legal experts
- the Data Protection Officer (DPO)
- the Dean and staff members of the Graduate School
- PhD counsellors
- the Groningen Graduate Interest Network (GRIN)
- various staff members from the Student Services Centre (SSC), including student counsellors and the student psychologist

External

- members and board members of VOHO
- members of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE), partly during a conference held in Prague in June 2023

Upon request, the ombudsperson contributed to the following in 2023:

- a staff retreat day for study advisors from the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE)
- a meeting on integrity for Master's students and PhD students organized by SOM, the research institute of the Faculty of Economics and Business

- a meeting for university complaints coordinators.

In addition, without being based on any report:

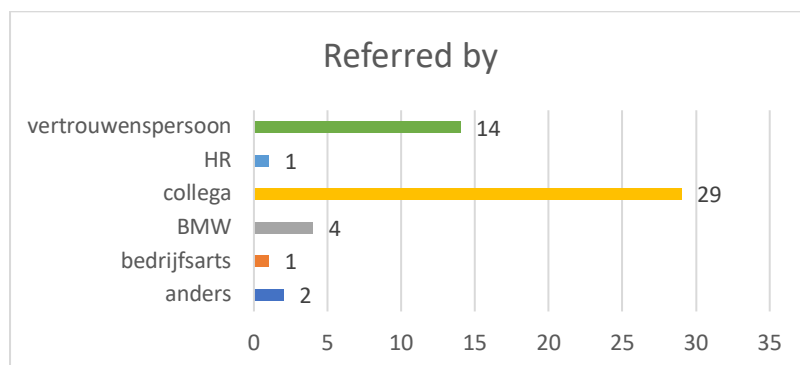
- provided advice upon request several times (no total recorded)
- facilitated discussions upon request, including for an association of students
- collaborated with the executive committee of the ACLO foundation (the Groningen student sports organization) on the content of disciplinary regulations

Reports from staff members

In the 2023 reporting year, 70 staff members filed reports. For convenience, in the following section, the term ‘staff member’ refers to a person who is/was employed by or performed work for the university under any title. This also includes external parties and all PhD students. ‘Staff members’ also include the medical professors and academic staff of the UMCG with whom the university has signed an ‘Academic Staff Agreement’. Based on a total of 5,687 staff members at the University of Groningen, this translates to a reporting rate of 1.21%.

Of the 70 staff members filing reports, 65 reported on their own experiences, and 4 were bystanders. Of these 70 staff members, 51 had been referred to the ombudsperson primarily by a colleague or the Confidential Advisor.

Bar Chart 1 provides an overview of the referring parties and number of referrals for the 51 staff members filing reports who had been referred to the ombudsperson. BMW stands for *bedrijfsmaatschappelijk werk*, the Staff Welfare team. ‘Confidential Advisor’ refers to the confidential advisor in accordance with Article 1 of the University of Groningen Confidential Advisor Regulations, and not the university’s ‘informal’ confidential advisors.



Bar Chart 1

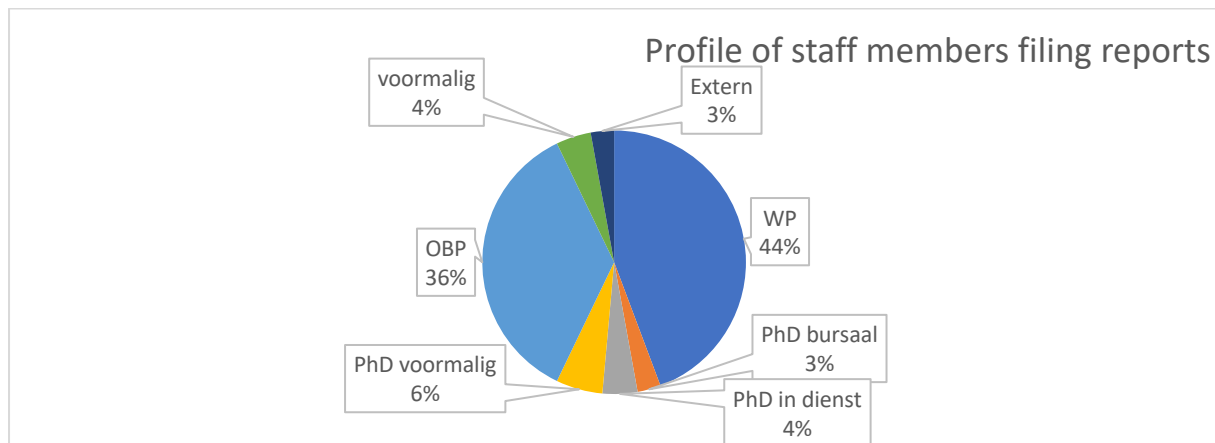
As in the previous year, Bar Chart 1 shows a high number of referrals from the Confidential Advisor, along with a large amount of informal advice from colleagues to file a report. This is often important to the ability to recognize the same issues within different units/amongst different individuals or other structural deficiencies or abuses within the organization.

The number of referrals from HR decreased by half compared to the previous year. The ombudsperson continues to marvel at the small number of referrals, as few as one in the year under review, as her experience is that HR advisors are often aware of reported situations. In consultation with the Director of HR & Health, it was recently

decided to explore ways to bring structural change to this situation without compromising confidentiality.

Of the total 70 staff members filing reports, 68 were women and 35 were men. No reports were received from non-binary people. In terms of background, 45 of those filing reports were Dutch and 25 were international, with 16 from the European Union and 9 from elsewhere.

A profile of staff members filing reports is presented in the Pie Chart 1 below. ‘PhD’ stands for PhD student. ‘WP’ stands for academic staff (*wetenschappelijk personeel*), and ‘OBP’ stands for support staff (*ondersteunend en beheerspersoneel*).

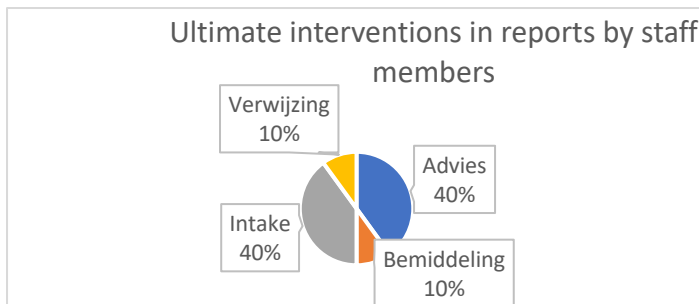


Pie Chart 1

Compared to the previous reporting period (8% over 16 months), the percentage of PhD students filing reports (13% over 12 months) has increased.

Each staff member filing a report is invited by the ombudsperson for an intake interview (online or in person), during which introductions are made and a listening ear is offered. This conversation explores what the person filing the report ideally expects from the report and what the ombudsperson can do in the situation. The intake also considers what the person filing the report has done to resolve the reported situation. In 2023, 40% of staff reports were limited to an intake interview, in some cases also due to lack of time. Where necessary, those reports will be followed up in 2024. In several cases, people filing reports indicated that they only wish for their experiences (which were often quite poignant) to be written down, for them to be noted. Some cases remained at an intake because there were not yet enough reports to recognize any apparent pattern. Eventually, after the intake interview, the tasks may result in a referral, written recommendation, mediation, or conducting a formal investigation.

Pie Chart 2 below provides an overview of the interventions that the ombudsperson ultimately carried out in connection with reports by staff members in the 2023 reporting year.



Pie Chart 2

In the reporting year 2023, the ombudsperson provided three written supplementary recommendations on components of the university. In these and previous advisory processes, the parties filing the reports prompting the interventions did not wish for their names to be disclosed, for fear of repercussions or other adverse consequences. This illustrates how difficult it is for those who file reports to rely on the protection provided by Article 8 of the regulations. Paper is patient, after all, and it is not always clear how one can demonstrate that adverse consequences actually have ensued.

The ombudsperson registers the nature of reports in six main categories, which are divided into a number of sub-categories. The registration is almost always performed in consultation with those filing the reports, with a focus on their own perceptions or experiences. Table 1 below provides an overview of the nature of all reports by staff members by category (and sub-category), again accompanied by the totals from 2023 and from September 2021 to the end of 2022. Given that some reports fall under multiple sub-categories, the total number of sub-categories combined exceeds the number of reports. A maximum of three categories (or sub-categories) is registered for each report.

	Nature of reports from staff members	Sub-category	Total 2023	Total Sept 2021/2022
1.	Unacceptable behaviour	harassment, sexual harassment	24	7
		aggression and violence	3	1
		discrimination	3	1
		bullying	3	2
		stalking	0	0
		unequal treatment	3	4
		<i>subtotal</i>		36
2	working conditions	employment conflict	0	1
		appraisal	2	3
		promotion	0	8
		unsafe working culture	46	75
		problematic working relationship	4	13
		other	9	0
		<i>subtotal</i>		61
3	Studying conditions	assessment	0	1
		supervision	1	1
		unsafe study environment	0	0
		other	0	0
		<i>subtotal</i>		1
4	Academic integrity		3	0
5	Application of rules and procedures		20	12
6.	Other		2	2
	TOTAL		123	131

Table 1

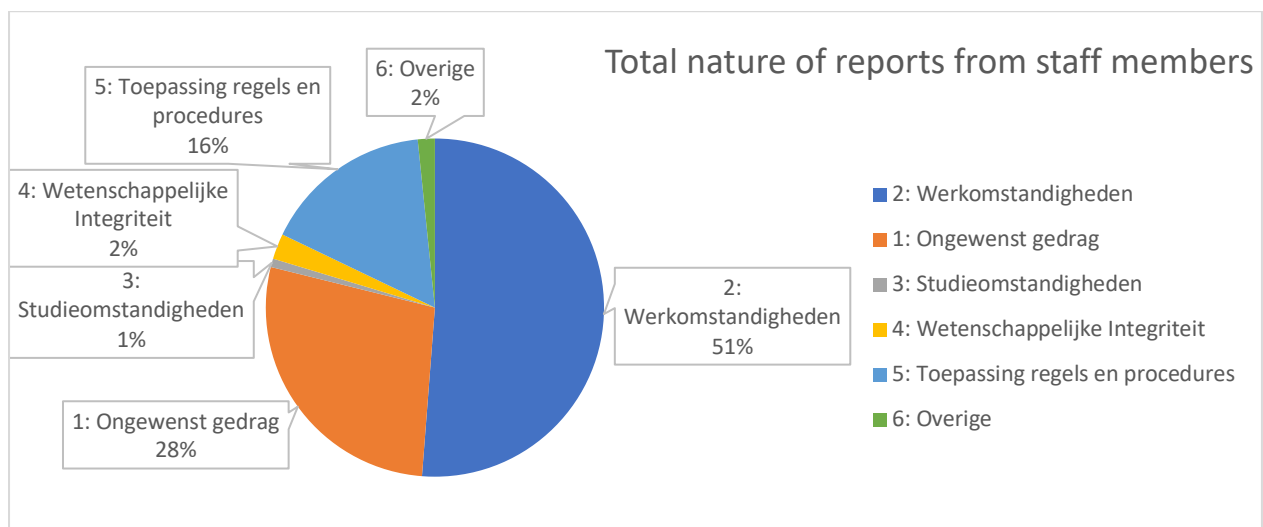
The category of ‘unsafe working culture’ was the most common again in 2023. Many people filing reports experience a working climate that lacks responsible leadership, decisiveness, transparent procedures, and proper expectation management. Such issues almost always involve relationships of dependency and situations in which power – in the perceptions of those filing the reports – has a negative effect on interactions between those filing reports and the other parties involved. In this reporting period as well, many reports have been made of far-escalated situations that have been going on for a long time and that are known to supervisors and the support structure, without any substantial change.

Remarkably, the number of reports of unacceptable behaviour, particularly within the sub-category of ‘(sexual) harassment’, increased significantly compared to the figures from the previous reporting period. This increase may be related to the spirit of the times, and it may also be an effect of the Social Safety campaign. This campaign, which started in mid-April last year, focused on learning how to identify unacceptable behaviour. Finally, greater awareness of the ombudsperson post amongst staff members may have led to an increase. In 2023, the ombudsperson did not receive any reports of sexual harassment. As written in the Confidential Advisor’s annual

report for 2022, harassment has to do with manipulation: frightening someone else by influencing another person's behaviour — at times unconsciously and at times deliberately. It is the case that some people are more sensitive to the impact of certain types of behaviour than other people are. Some may be incidental. For example, in 2023, some individuals filing reports indicated that they had been told, 'Above all, don't go to the ombudsperson'. Of the reports received, however, most appear to involve harassment of a structural nature. It often involves behaviour that cannot immediately be identified as transgressive, thus causing those filing reports to doubt themselves at first. This is also what makes the behaviour so difficult to discuss and to make it visible and demonstrable.

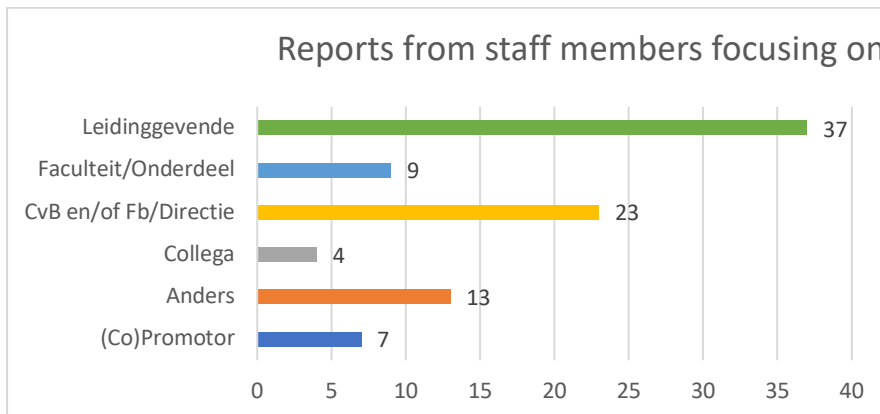
In 2023, a significantly higher number of reports concerned the 'Application of rules and procedures'. This category usually involves a lack of rules or, on the contrary, the application of certain rules or procedures (e.g. as manifested in double standards or conflicts of interest).

Pie Chart 3 below shows the nature of the reports, divided into the six main categories. In this reporting year as well, the workload experienced especially, but not exclusively, amongst academic staff was hardly ever explicitly mentioned as a reason for reporting. The continuing high workload appears to be accepted as a foregone conclusion.



Pie Chart 3

Bar Chart 2 provides an overview of the primary focus of the total 70 reports from staff members.



Bar Chart 2

As in the previous reporting period, the relatively high proportion of reports concerning ‘Supervisor’ (2023: 37, and Sept. 2021–2022: 40) and ‘Board of the University and/or Faculty Board/Management’ (2023: 23, and Sept. 2021–2022: 54) stands out. Of the 70 reports, 25 address two categories. In 13 cases, they concerned both the category ‘Board of the University and/or Faculty Board/Management’ and the category ‘Supervisor’. In these latter issues, it is often the case that the person filing the report calls on the next level of the hierarchy as well, having not been heard by the supervisor.

In the reports focusing (at least in part) on the category ‘Board of the University and/or Faculty Board/Management’, the ombudsperson notes that more reports mentioned ‘intimidation’ as the nature of the report than was the case in the previous reporting period. This reporting year, that figure was 21% for this category.

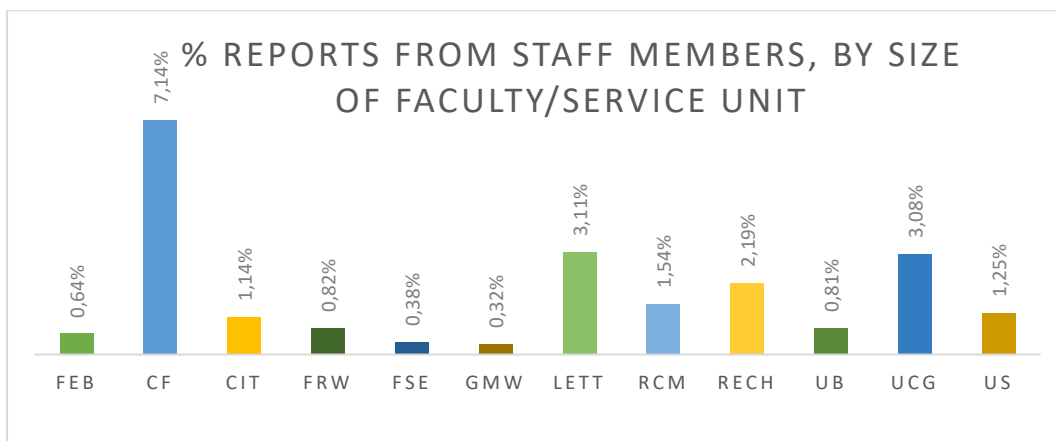
The increase in the number of reports focusing on supervisors/co-supervisors can be explained by the fact that there were more reports from PhD students in the current reporting year.

For the individuals filing the reports, almost all of the situations reported have had an impact on commitment to the working group, department, institute, or cluster, as well as on job satisfaction and physical and mental condition. With few exceptions, those filing reports were consistently questioned about this during the current reporting year. The ombudsperson started to do this due to the impression that the magnitude of the impact is not always adequately recognized. Employees do not usually approach the ombudsperson immediately. In many cases, much has taken place before the contact, without resulting in improvement for those filing reports. Most of those filing reports have experienced irritation, frustration, helplessness, and despair. Several have reportedly fallen ill as a result, or are on the verge of breaking down. They often feel alone and not assisted by the hierarchical and support structure, and they often file reports because they wish for lessons to be learned from them.

People filing reports were asked to rate the impact of the reported situation on the aforementioned elements. Within this context, a score of 0 represents very high impact, and a score of 5 represents no impact. In 5 of the 70 reports received from staff members, these questions were not posed to the person filing the report. The

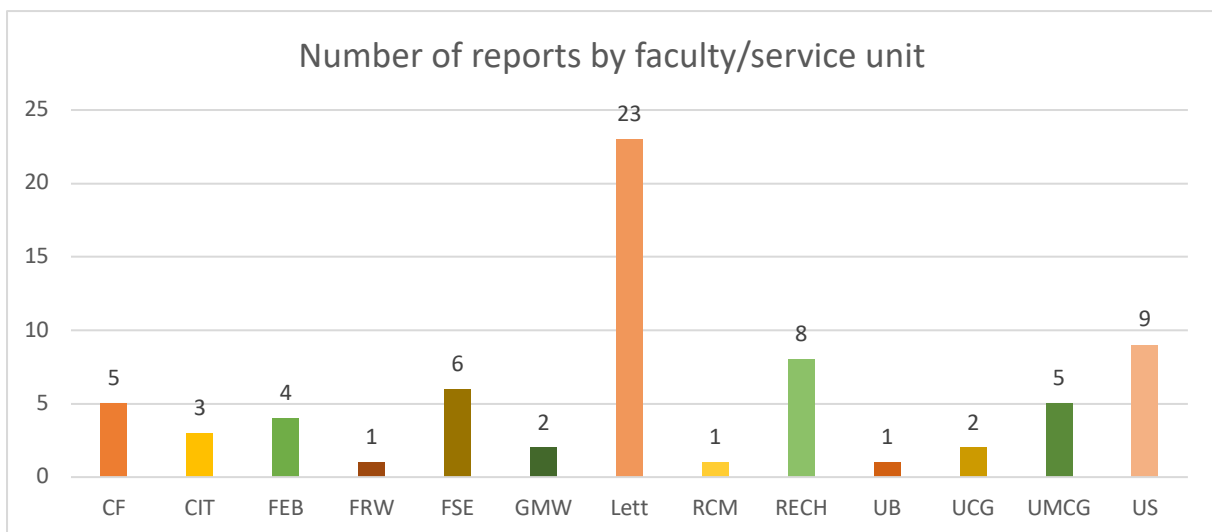
average rating assigned by 64 staff members (this question was not applicable to the filer of one report) to the impact of the reported situation on their commitment was 1.6. The average rating assigned by 64 staff members (this question was not applicable to two report filers) to the impact of the reported situation on their job satisfaction was 1.4. The average rating assigned by 64 staff members (this question was not applicable to two report filers) to the impact of the reported situation on their physical condition was 2.3. The average rating assigned by 65 staff members to the impact of the reported situation on their mental condition was 1.8. In the opinion of the ombudsperson, these low ratings speak volumes.

The reports from staff members concerned several different faculties and service units. Upon registration, the site on which the report focuses is retained. For most reports, this was the current or former workplace. Bar Chart 3 below shows the percentage of reports in relation to the size of the faculty/service unit. This does not include reports from the UMCG. This is because the number of medical (and other) professors and UMCG academic staff with whom the university has entered into an 'Academic Staff Agreement' is not tracked, such that no percentages can be calculated.



Bar Chart 3

Bar Chart 4 shows the number of reports from each faculty and service unit.



Bar Chart 4

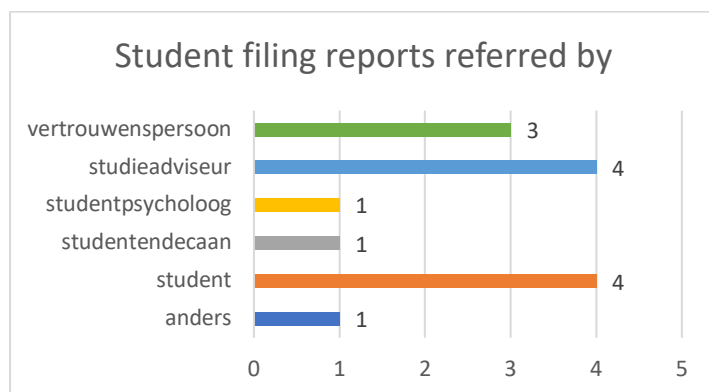
Fortunately, many things are going well within the university, and the ombudsperson almost exclusively sees cases in which things do not seem to be going well. The fact that, once again, few or no reports were received from some faculties or service units in 2023 does not automatically mean that there are no issues there. It is a truism that, even within organizational contexts, there are always conscious or unconscious behavioural (or other) patterns that can lead to hassles or problems. For managers, supervisors, colleagues, or as part of the support structure, it remains a challenge to cope with this as best one can.

Reports coming from the UMCG often concern issues that affect both University of Groningen staff members and other UMCG staff. All reports concern an unsafe working climate that is not being addressed. The ombudsperson urges the appointment of an ombudsperson specifically for the UMCG to serve as a safety net for situations in which reported issues cannot be solved within the existing hierarchical and/or support structure. One benefit of the ombudsperson post is that the process of issuing recommendations and conducting investigations can truly reveal structural abuses or deficiencies in the system, thereby sparking movement and, ultimately, effecting positive change.

Reports from students

During the 2023 calendar year, the ombudsperson received a total of 21 reports from students about their own experiences. Based on a total of 35,747 students, this translates to a reporting rate of 0.062%.

Of the 21 students filing reports, 14 had been referred to the ombudsperson primarily by the Confidential Advisor, study advisors, or fellow students. Bar Chart 5 provides an overview of the referring parties and number of referrals for the students filing reports. In this bar chart as well, 'Confidential Advisor' refers to the confidential advisor in accordance with Article 1 of the University of Groningen Confidential Advisor Regulations, and not the university's 'informal' confidential advisors.

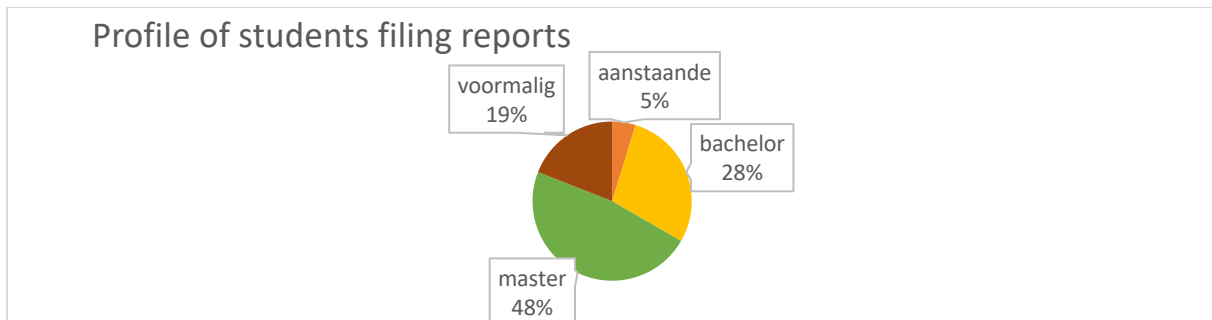


Bar Chart 5

As in the previous reporting period, the Confidential Advisor and the study advisors played an important role in referring students filing reports. The increase in the current reporting year stands out, with four informal recommendations from fellow students to file a report. Referral takes place once an apparent pattern or malpractice is recognized and/or the report transcends one's own role and/or when people run into a wall in their own positions.

Of the students filing reports, 13 were women and 8 were men. No reports were received from non-binary people. In terms of background, 9 of those filing reports were Dutch and 12 were 'International', with 6 from the European Union and 6 from elsewhere.

The study phases of the students filing reports are presented as percentages in Pie Chart 4.



Pie Chart 4

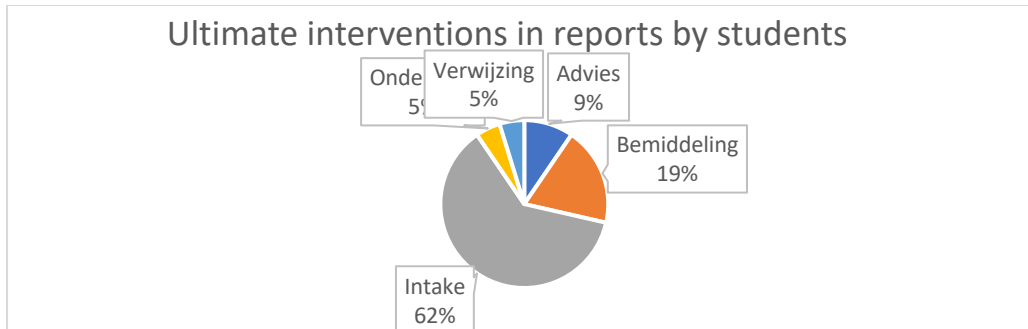
In this reporting period as well, nearly one fifth of all reports were from former students. Upon graduation, the relationship of dependency ends, thereby allowing space to report. In addition, one report was received from a student who had already applied but who had not yet registered. Although the formal authority of the ombudsperson does not extend to the aforementioned categories, the opportunity was provided to address them. The ombudsperson is confident that this omission will be rectified in the definitive design of the ombudsperson post, with amended regulations.

The previous report discussed the meaning of the ombudsperson post for students. In practice, this often differs from the meaning of the post for staff members. This experience has continued in the current reporting period. In general, students approach the ombudsperson when they become trapped in the complex and bureaucratic organization of the university despite the best intentions of the staff members concerned. In such cases, it is often observed that the support structure (e.g. student advisors, Confidential Advisor, student counsellors) has also reached the limit of its ability.

Each student filing a report is invited by the ombudsperson for an intake interview, online if requested, during which introductions are made and a listening ear is offered. This conversation explores what the person filing the report ideally expects from the report and what the ombudsperson can do in the situation. The intake also considers what the person filing the report has done to resolve the reported situation. Amongst student reporters, it is more common than it is amongst staff members to be made aware of opportunities that were not yet known. It is also more common for the issue to still be resolved after the intake interview. In addition, the ombudsperson is not yet authorized to intervene because the relationship of dependency still exists within the reported situation. In 2023, 62% of the reports were still limited to an intake interview, in some cases, also due to lack of time on the part of the ombudsperson. Where necessary, these reports will be followed up in 2024. Compared to the interventions deployed for staff members, reports for student were more often mediated (19% versus 10%). 'Mediation' refers to guidance by the ombudsperson of one or more conversations between the parties directly involved in

the issue. Mainly, this concerns issues that are often short-lived and have not yet escalated to excessive proportions. Eventually, after the intake interview, the tasks may result in a referral, written recommendation, mediation, or conducting a formal investigation.

Pie Chart 5 below provides an overview of the interventions that the ombudsperson ultimately carried out in reports by students in 2023.



Pie Chart 5

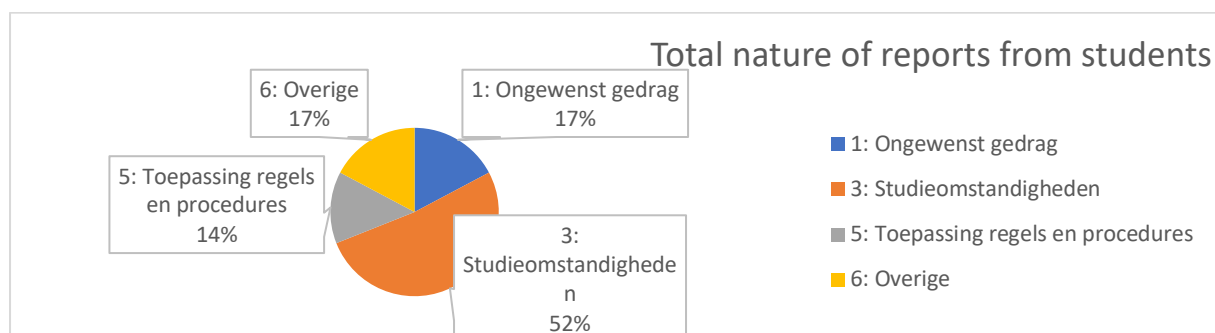
The intake forms for reports from staff members and from students are identical. Reports are registered in six main categories, which are in turn divided into a number of sub-categories. The registration is almost always performed in consultation with those filing the reports. Table 2 below provides an overview of the nature of all reports by category (and sub-category), accompanied by the totals from 2023 and from September 2021 to the end of 2022. Given that some reports fall under multiple sub-categories, the total number exceeds the number of reports from the sub-categories combined. A maximum of three categories (or sub-categories) is registered for each report.

Table 2

	Nature of reports from students	Sub-category	Number 2023	Number Sept 2021/2022
1.	Unacceptable behaviour	harassment, sexual harassment	2	1
		aggression and violence	0	0
		discrimination	1	0
		bullying	2	0
		stalking	0	0
		unequal treatment	0	0
		<i>subtotal</i>		5
2.	Working conditions	employment conflict	0	0
		appraisal	0	0
		promotion	0	0
		unsafe working culture	0	0
		problematic working relationship	0	0
		other	0	0
		<i>subtotal</i>		0
3.	Studying conditions	assessment	3	4
		supervision	6	16
		unsafe study environment	6	3
		other	0	0
		<i>subtotal</i>		15
4.	Academic Integrity		0	0
5.	Application of rules and procedures		4	11
6.	Other		5	2
	TOTAL		29	40

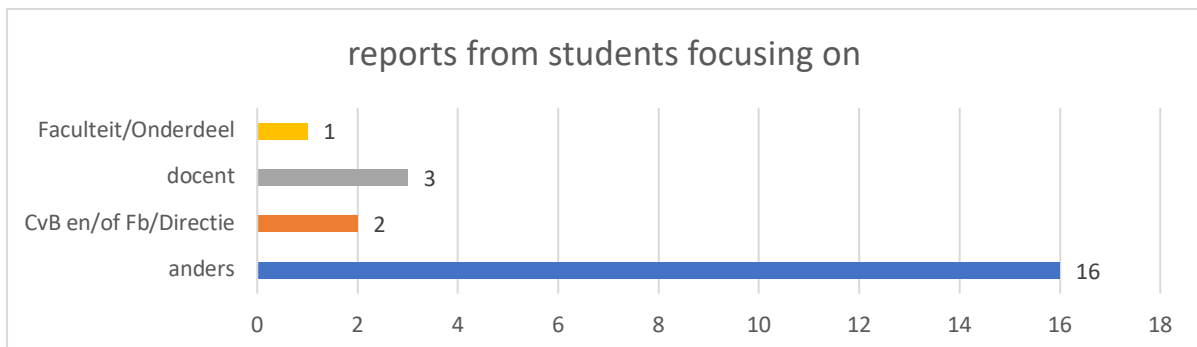
Compared to the previous reporting period, it is notable that the number of reports of unacceptable behaviour increased from one to five. The reports concerning the undesirable behaviours of 'bullying' and 'harassment' were not directed at university staff members. The category 'Other' may include reports about matters that must be arranged for registration or other obligations a student may face.

Pie Chart 6 below shows the nature of the reports divided into the six main categories.



Pie Chart 6

Bar Chart 6 below provides an overview of the primary focus of the total 21 reports from students. One of the 21 reports concerned two categories. The category 'Other' should be largely construed as involving a person on whom the student depends, or certain policies.

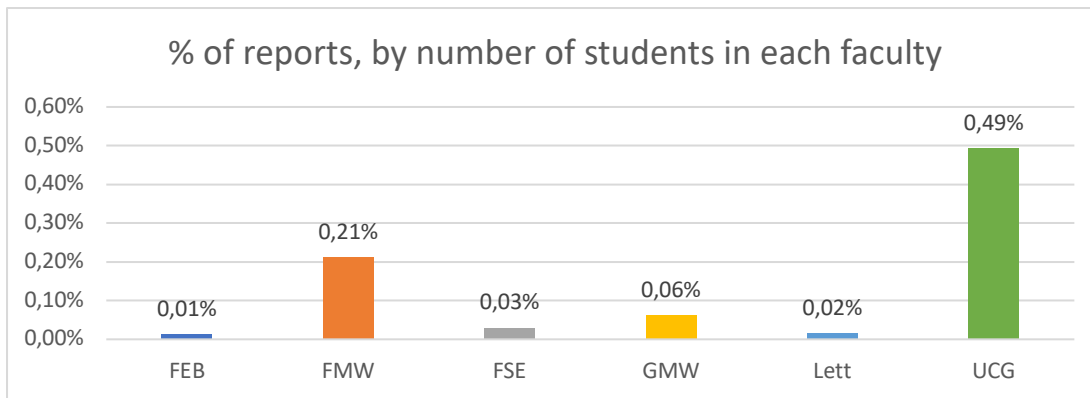


Bar Chart 6

As is the case for staff members, the situations reported by students almost always have (or have had) an impact on commitment to the faculty or the university, on study satisfaction, and on physical and mental condition. Albeit to a lesser extent, students also reported situations that were quite thorny, from which they said they could no longer sleep, experienced substantial stress, and were constantly worrying. With few exceptions, students filing reports were consistently questioned about this during the current reporting year. The ombudsperson considers it important to reveal the scope of the impact these issues have.

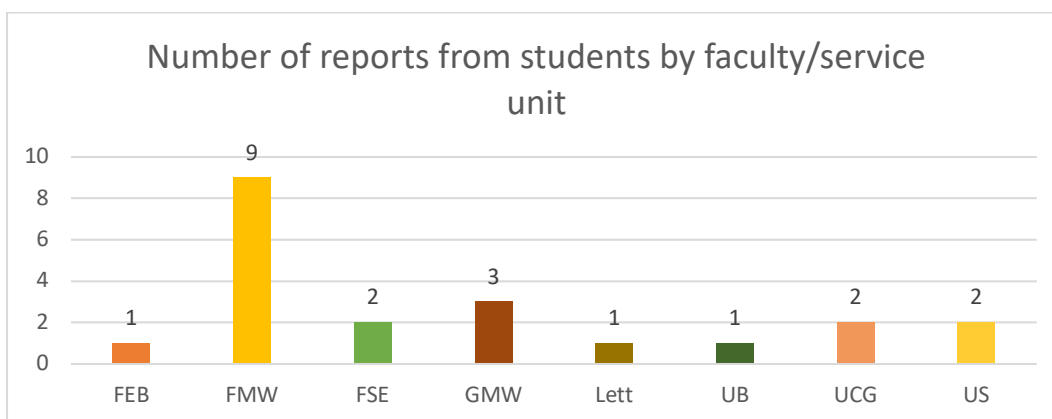
People filing reports were asked to rate the impact of the reported situation on the aforementioned elements. Within this context, a score of 0 represents very high impact, and a score of 5 represents no impact. In 3 of the 21 reports received from students, these questions were either not applicable or not asked. The average rating assigned by 18 students to the impact of the reported situation on their commitment was 1.6. One student revealed that the reported situation had actually increased commitment, as this student wished to prove otherwise. The average rating assigned by 17 students (this question was not applicable to the filer of one report) to the impact of the reported situation on their study satisfaction was 1.9. The average rating assigned by 18 students filing reports (this question was not applicable to the filer of one report) to the impact of the reported situation on their physical condition was 3. The average rating assigned by 18 individuals filing reports to the impact of the reported situation on their mental condition was 1.5.

The 21 reports from students concerned several different faculties and service units. Bar Chart 7 below shows the percentage of reports in relation to the number of students in the relevant faculty. This does not include the service units.



Bar Chart 7

Bar Chart 8 shows the number of reports from each faculty and service unit.



Bar Chart 8

The fact that, once again, few or no reports were received from some faculties or service units in 2023 does not automatically mean that there are no issues there. It may also have to do with the unfamiliarity of the ombudsperson post amongst students.

As shown in Bar Chart 7, the greatest number of reports were received from the Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMW). Many students filing reports were unable to effect a change in the reported situation despite the involvement of study advice, the Board of Examiners, and the Confidential Advisor. Most of the reports were from students in the Master's phase. This could be explained by the fact that medical students are in the most vulnerable position of their training at this stage, during which they are highly dependent on the programme management and/or trainer and/or affiliation coordinator/examiner. For fear of repercussions or other adverse effects, people do not dare to speak out, often even on the advice of a study advisor, assuming the latter is involved at all. In their experience, study advisors have repeatedly found that students often benefit more from 'sitting it out' than they do from 'bringing it up'. It is interesting to note that almost all of the students filing these reports differ in some way from the average medical student (e.g. because they had first followed a different study programme or because their background was not Dutch).

In one of these reports, the ombudsperson proceeded to conduct a formal investigation in accordance with Article 6.1 of the Regulations during the year under review.

In this reporting year, for the first time, services that students use (or should use) were reported: the University Library and University Services.

Section 4 Observations and recommendations

This final section presents a number of observations made by the ombudsperson that require attention within the framework of the learning organization. These issues are also partly reflected in the ombudsperson's recommendation of early July 2023 concerning the final design of the ombudsperson post.

One size fits all

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not suitable for a complex melting pot like that of a university. The ombudsperson often lacks customized thinking and action in the issues that come to her attention, despite the sincerest of intentions. This is at odds with being 'open to other perspectives', as formulated in the 2023 University of Groningen vision on leadership. This vision regards leadership as a role and identifies preconditions necessary for leadership development, including making it part of on-boarding and re-boarding, in addition to incorporating it into the staff assessment framework. The ombudsperson supports this vision but does not yet consider it easy to implement without an obligation. This is due to the high degree of autonomy within the university, including in terms of leadership. She stresses that leadership is a profession and that academics do not necessarily have a passion for leadership, but that they do have a passion for science. The ombudsperson also misses an openness to other perspectives and divergent possibilities/solutions on the part of staff/bodies other than supervisors (e.g. Boards of Examiners or examiners).

The consequence of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach is certainly felt intensely by international students and staff members, as well as by others, including people with disabilities or long-term illness and those who have found themselves in far-escalated situations. Creating awareness about this is essential.

The ombudsperson recommends greater investment in a more inclusive learning and working environment through better expectation management at recruitment or admission; a more thorough process of on-boarding; increasing intercultural skills for both Dutch nationals and international staff and students; structured reflection in this regard; providing better support for people with long-term illness; and investing greater effort in the prevention of issues. The latter means taking signals seriously and acting on them, enhancing the visibility and awareness of the support structure, and ensuring quicker referral to those who are able to provide a possible solution. With regard to leadership, the ombudsperson is interested to see the results that the Social Safety programme team (see also Section 1) aims to achieve in this area.

In the fabric, not in the rules

During this reporting period as well, the ombudsperson has witnessed several reports in which the behaviour of staff ranking higher in the hierarchy has crossed the boundaries of decency. Despite understanding that there are often many chess boards in play, it is crucial for socially safe learning and working environments to set a good example at those very positions. The intrinsic motivation to do so seems to be lacking in these reports. The limits that have been incorporated into rules, guidelines, or policies must obviously be followed. In many cases, however, this is lacking or leaves room for individual interpretation. The freedom of action of hierarchically higher-ranking colleagues sometimes entails a lack of freedom for hierarchically lower-ranking colleagues. In this regard, the ombudsperson regularly observes a lack of space for reflecting on one's own actions. It seems as if the question of whether one

would want to be treated in the same way if one were to be in the same position as the other person is not being asked. Fortunately, the practice of the ombudsperson has also yielded examples in which the right thing did happen.

To make the focus on social safety within the university successful, it will be necessary to raise awareness, to be able and allowed to call each other to account, and to ensure that inappropriate behaviour is actually subject to consequences, even at the level of hierarchically higher-ranking employees.

Computer says no

‘Computer says no’. This refers to an attitude that causes students and staff members who are experiencing issues or problems to be sent from pillar to post within the university. On several occasions, this attitude prompted the involvement of the ombudsperson. Instead of the organization ensuring optimal support, this places the responsibility on the students or staff members themselves. It should come as no surprise that this attitude is perceived as unconstructive and that it causes dissatisfaction, irritation, and frustration. The ombudsperson believes that this responsibility should be reversed, more than is currently the case. She advises the relevant officers/bodies (e.g. study advisors, Boards of Examiners, Education Offices, or supervisors) to do the following, as appropriate: (1) thoroughly consider which problem or issue the answer should contribute to resolving; (2) start seeking an answer internally with colleagues, (i.e. including with staff members from other faculties and/or service units); and (3) communicate this back to the staff member or student concerned. This approach increases the likelihood of achieving a satisfactory end result, whilst also placing the responsibility where it belongs. The ombudsperson is aware that this approach initially requires more time, and that such time is often lacking.

PhD students

PhD students constitute a vulnerable group, due to their dependence on their supervisors/co-supervisors. According to the ombudsperson, the increase in reports is due to the fact that, in a number of faculties (mostly smaller) the position of PhD counsellor has not yet been filled. In practice, this role is often performed alongside a staff member’s own position (e.g. professor/supervisor or Graduate School coordinator). This regularly results in ‘double hats’, confusion, and role blurring. In addition, in faculties that have appointed a formal PhD counsellor, the limits of the support provided are sometimes unclear. In her previously mentioned recommendation of early July 2023, therefore, the ombudsperson advised drafting regulations for PhD counsellors. These regulations should also ensure independence and confidentiality. The ombudsperson’s recommendation also concerned establishing a unified, university-wide PhD-counselling post with uniform registration and promotion of expertise.

Finally, the reports from PhD students reveal a noticeable absence of HR for scholarship students, as well as for those who have signed employment contracts with the university. In addition to the fact that the average PhD student does not know what HR stands for and what can be expected from this service unit, HR is also apparently absent during the on-boarding process or appointment.

Visibility, accessibility, and reinforcement of the support structure

The inadequate visibility and traceability of the support structure is noted in several places in this annual report. The ombudsperson therefore recommends making this issue a first priority in the Social Safety programme, so that the support structure will be more visible to both staff and students within the university's internal and external digital environment in 2024. This should include clear and uniform explanations of the aforementioned structure and a compact overview of the content and boundaries of the various auxiliary actors. Attention should also be drawn to these matters when on-boarding students and staff members. In this regard, the ombudsperson suggests considering increasing visibility by incorporating the various actors in the support structure under an umbrella body (e.g. the 'House of Safety or Integrity'). Finally, the ombudsperson considers it very important to prioritize the reinforcement of the support structure by focusing on greater mutual familiarity between the various actors, better information exchange, and structural targeted forms of consultation.