

2023 ANNUAL REPORTS

OMBUDSOFFICER

1) Staff

2) Students

Table of contents

1) Ombudsofficer Staff

1.	Ombudsofficer Staff Introduction	3
2.	Legal frameworks and interpretation within the RU	3
3.	Visibility of the Ombudsofficer Staff	3
4.	Housing, support and registration	4
5.	Establishing contacts and working method	4
6.	Complaints	5
7.	Observations and findings	7
8.	Internal and external contacts	8
9.	Intentions for 2024	9

2) Ombudsofficer Students

1.	Ombudsofficer Students Introduction	11
2.	Legal frameworks and provisions within RU	11
3.	Visibility of the Ombudsofficer Students	11
4.	Accessibility of Ombudsofficer Students	11
5.	Establishing contacts and working method	12
6.	Background of complainants	13
7.	Observations and findings	14
8.	Internal and external contacts	15
9.	Intentions / Action plan for 2024	16

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

OMBUDSOFFICER

1) Staff

“To dare is to lose your balance for a moment,
not to dare is ultimately to lose yourself”

Sören Kierkegaard

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Drawn up by Nancy VIELLEVOIJE-GEERS & AUKJE VERSTEGEN

Contact

ADMINISTRATION OFFICE
Ombudsofficers Team
Postbus 9102 6500HC Nijmegen
E: Ombudsfunctionaris@RU.nl

1. Ombudsofficer Staff Introduction

This is the second annual report of the Ombudsofficer Staff.
The position was created on 1 January 2022 following an agreement in the 2019-2020 Labour Agreement (CLA) of Dutch Universities.

2023 was a busy year for Radboud University with respect to social safety. National media coverage of the topic, combined with concrete cases at Radboud University that made the news, caused a lot of unrest and also led to many complaints.

2. Legal frameworks and interpretation within the RU

The [Radboud University Ombudsofficer Regulations](#) were amended and adopted anew by the Executive Board on 28 February 2023.

The position of Ombudsofficer Staff encompasses 0.6 FTE and is functionally part of the Administration Office.

3. Visibility of the Ombudsofficer Staff

The general impression is that the Ombudsofficer Staff is by now well known among the staff, and that people know how to find her. Her frequent appearance on campus as the Ombudsofficer Staff, as well as taking part in faculty-level meetings, section meetings within the organisation, and meetings of the DEI Office, Honours Academy and Radboud Reflects on conflict management and social safety all helped improve her visibility in 2023. Interviews in VOX and other media also contributed to this development.

The visibility of the Ombudsofficer among supervisors and knowledge of how and when she can be appealed to and contribute are still lagging behind, despite the information provided to supervisors in the e-learning course.

4. Housing, support and registration

Since the spring of 2023, the Ombudsofficer Staff has had an office on campus in the Thomas van Aquinostraat 1 building.

Anyone who works for Radboud University can contact the Ombudsofficer Staff for an appointment. The Ombudsofficer Staff can be reached by telephone and email on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact details as well as a contact form can be found on the intranet. Requests for contact are processed immediately.

In 2023, the Ombudsofficer Staff had remote secretarial support. A registration system for complaints was still lacking in 2023, so the complaints were filed in the digital office environment of the mediation office of the Ombudsofficer Staff.

5. Establishing contacts and working method

The main focus of the Ombudsofficer's work this year has once again been advice and mediation.

During the year under review, the Ombudsofficer Staff held many interviews with complainants, the complainants' supervisors, the supervisors' superiors, supervisors with questions of their own, HR advisors, legal advisers of complainants, members of Representative Councils, etc.

In 2023, 111 individual complaints were processed. There were usually several interviews for each complaint, especially when personal mediation was involved.

In addition to the 111 individual reports, three teams of 7-10 people also reported to the Ombudsofficer Staff concerning a conflict with their supervisor. These teams are part of Radboud Services. If every complainant counts, this brings the total up to 136 reports.

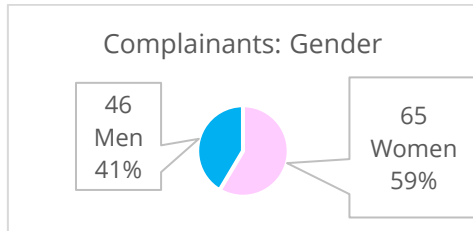
The Ombudsofficer Staff offered both solicited and unsolicited advice to supervisors. Advice to supervisors was aimed at de-escalation.

At the request of one faculty's Executive Board, an internal investigation took place in July 2023 and was concluded with a report. In addition, some complaints were followed by an exploratory investigation, which did not, however, lead to action having to be taken by the management.

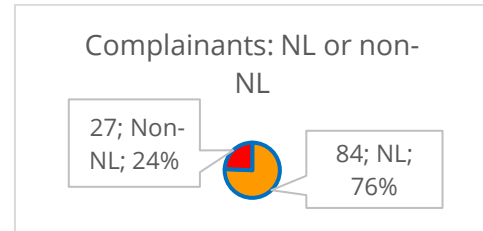
The Ombudsofficer was indirectly involved in two investigations commissioned externally by faculty Executive Boards. The content of reports of external investigations is not communicated to the Ombudsofficer Staff if the investigation focuses on a specific individual.

6. Complaints

Of the 111 individual complainants, 65 were women and 46 men.

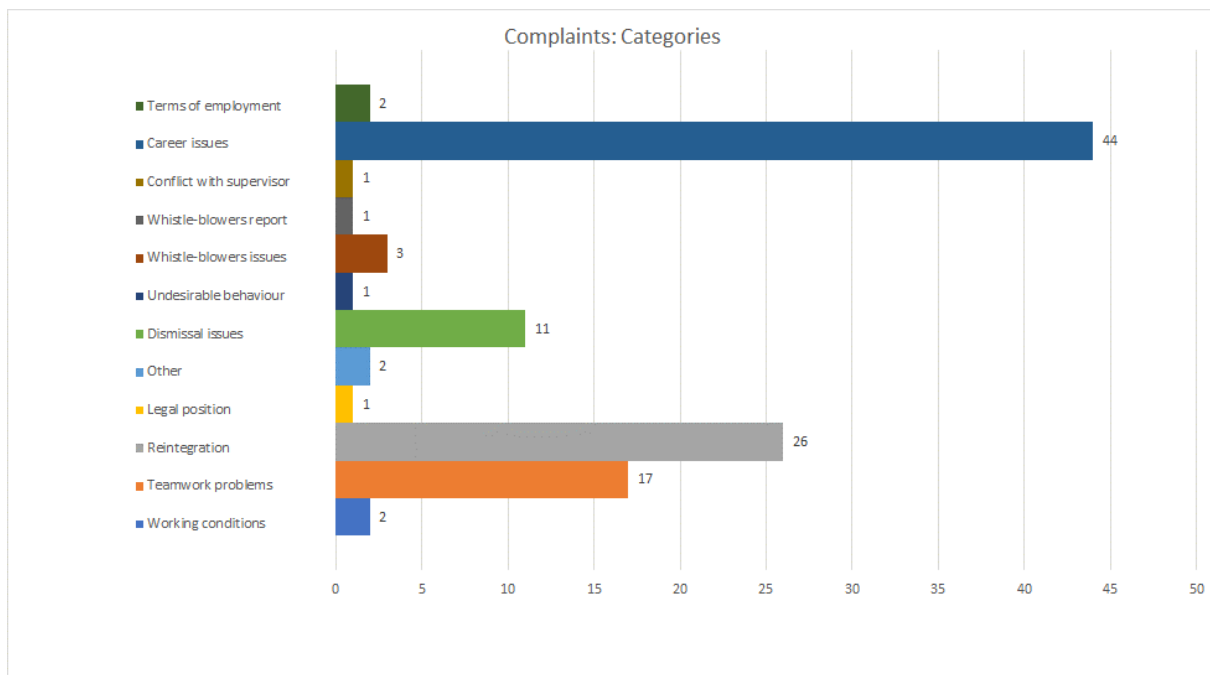


84 complainants were of Dutch origin, while 27 were not.



Of the 111 individual complaints, 12 were filed by PhD candidates.

Among complaint categories, we see outliers in conflicts with supervisors and teamwork problems. There were also a lot of career issues.



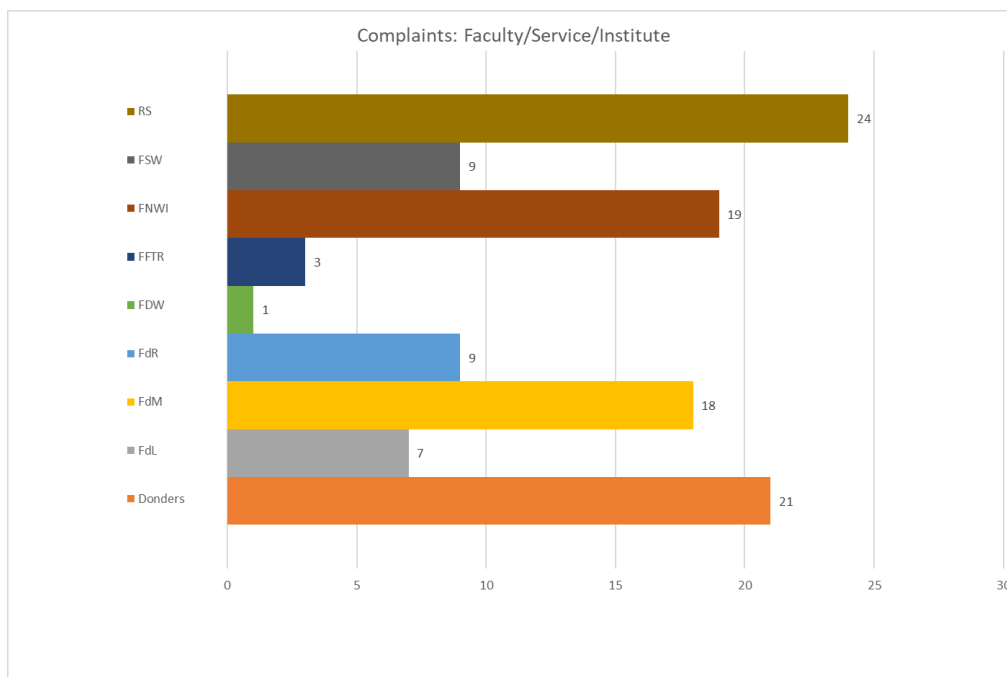
Labour conflicts with supervisors were diverse. They could concern leadership style, unmanageable workload, performance issues, clash of personalities, not feeling heard/seen/taken seriously, not being given enough support, privacy violations, or issues with supervision (of PhD candidates).

Teamwork problems involved tension between colleagues, or with employees from another department/service. They could involve a clash of characters, arguments, gossiping, and not always treating each other respectfully.

Mediation was deployed primarily in these two categories.

Career issues often involved a lack of clear procedures, informal commitments, and experienced dependence on a single person.

Most complaints came from the Donders Institute, the Nijmegen School of Management, the Faculty of Science, and Radboud Services.



Advice was given in 85 cases, and mediation offered in 20 cases.

In six cases, the information was simply taken note of, without further advice.

7. Observations and findings

- A lot of time, energy and funding is being invested in the Social Safety Plan (Prevent-Care-Cure), which articulates the Executive Board's promise to improve social safety. Employees who are currently in a socially unsafe situation or labour conflict do not feel that the principles of the plan are being put into practice in their case. They feel that there is a discrepancy between the promises on paper and practical implementation. They still do not feel heard. Attention to ongoing cases in light of the plan presented would help strengthen trust among employees.
- I see strained relations between the Works Council and the Executive Board and Representative Councils and Faculty Boards. This leads to delays in decision-making. However, countervailing power is required to achieve better and just decisions. Each section will have to become aware, from its own role, of the fact that what is needed is cooperation based on trust, and moving beyond the need to be proven right, in order to achieve good results in the interests of the organisation.
- The majority of complainants reporting to the Ombudsofficer Staff did not wish action to be taken in response to their complaint. The reason was that they feared for their position and/or employment. They were unlikely to cooperate even in an investigation, in light of how easy it is to trace complaints back to complainants due to the small team size. A change in organisational structure is needed in which dependence on one person is no longer the norm. Moreover, clear written rules, procedures and sanctions can help build trust in the organisation.
- I see that in rare cases, incidents leading to crisis situations within a faculty/business unit are evaluated with those involved. That is courageous and should be appreciated and encouraged. It is a really good way of implementing a learning organisation.
- Already in the early stages of an incident, it should be decided whether the focus lies on a labour conflict or on transgressive behaviour, and the intervention should be tailored accordingly. If the focus lies on teamwork problems, early deployment of mediation/process counselling can help prevent further escalation. HR can play a valuable role in this context.
- There is no conflict management system within the organisation in which labour conflicts, which are part and parcel of an organisation, can be resolved in close collaboration with the employees concerned. Employees should be given the opportunity to improve their conflict skills, while also being offered accessible help from a conflict professional/internal mediator.
- Supervisors and HR advisors could take a more proactive role by not waiting for complaints but instead actively connect with employees and get/stay connected to identify problems at an early stage and deploy interventions. As things are, employees who are experiencing problems are often unable to turn to their supervisor (lack of trust) or their HR advisor (not seen as impartial). This can quickly lead to escalation all the way up to the trade union and the media.

8. Internal and external contacts

At meetings with internal contacts, the Ombudsofficer Staff maintains her independent and impartial position.

Meetings are regularly held with key actors in the organisation: the Executive Board, Deans, the Director of Radboud Services, the Head of Internal Audit, Divisional Directors and representative bodies at central and decentralised levels (Representative Councils). Occasional meetings are also held with the Local Council.

In 2023, the Ombudsofficer Staff once again held regular meetings with the coordinators for confidential advisors for undesirable behaviour, and through them at case level with the other confidential advisors for undesirable behaviour, academic integrity, and whistle-blowing complaints.

The Ombudsofficer Staff liaised periodically with the Vice President of the Executive Board.

The Ombudsofficer Staff liaised periodically with the head of IAD, members of the DEI Office, and campus psychologists.

Regular contact took place with the HR Division staff.

At case level, contact was also made with the HR advisor of the relevant faculty or business unit.

The Ombudsofficer Staff participates in the Social Safety Platform, working among other things on an e-learning course on social safety for supervisors. She is also a member of the sounding board in an investigation by an external agency aimed at reviewing the support structure and social safety.

In this report year, contact was also made with:

1. DisABILITY and Accessibility Committee
2. RU Assistant Network
3. Advisory Committee on Social Safety and Inclusion FFTR
4. Donders Graduate School

A DPIA (Data Protection Information Assessment) took place with the aim of establishing a registration system for Ombudsofficers and confidential advisors. This was followed by a project aimed to realise the registration system. The Ombudsofficer Staff devoted a lot of time to this intensive project in 2023. The plan is to put the registration system into operation by mid-2024.

The Ombudsofficer Staff provided extensive input for the new web page of the Administration Office.

She also provided input for the 2024 employee survey questionnaire on social safety in October 2023.

The Ombudsofficer Staff is a member of the VOHO (Association of Ombudsofficers in Higher Education) and is part of a peer review group of Ombudsofficers from the universities of Maastricht, Eindhoven, and Twente, and the University of Amsterdam.

In terms of training, the Ombudsofficer Staff attended the 'Ombudsofficer in Broad Perspective' course from 13-17 March 2023 at Utrecht University, and VOHO study days on 19 January, 1 June, and 6 December 2023. She also attended the Ombudsofficer Symposium at Utrecht University on 3 November 2023.

In addition, she completed a training course on Complaint Investigation by Bezemer & Schubad on 17/18 April and 25 April 2023.

The Ombudsofficer Staff contributed to a UNL (Universities Netherlands) evaluation of the Ombudsofficer position at universities on 4 May and 30 November 2023.

The Ombudsofficer Staff served on the Appointment Advisory Committee for the Ombudsofficer Students and for a management assistant for both Ombudsofficers. Since 1 October 2023, there is also an Ombudsofficer for students. Where applicable, the Ombudsofficer Students was coached by the Ombudsofficer Staff.

9. Intentions for 2024

- Clearer delineation of the role of confidential advisors and the Ombudsofficer Staff.
- Clarifying the added value of a Ombudsofficer Staff, specifically to supervisors.
- Deploying more low-threshold preliminary investigations in cases involving multiple complaints to identify issues so that action plans can be formulated at short notice by the management.
- Be more accessible to support staff and staff of non-Dutch origin.

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

OMBUDSOFFICER 2) for students

Table of contents

2) Ombudsofficer Students

1.	Ombudsofficer Students Introduction.....	11
2.	Legal frameworks and provisions within RU.....	11
3.	Visibility of the Ombudsofficer Students.....	11
4.	Accessibility of Ombudsofficer Students.....	11
5.	Establishing contacts and working method	12
6.	Background of complainants.....	13
7.	Observations and findings	14
8.	Internal and external contacts.....	15
9.	Intentions / Action plan for 2024.....	16

1. Ombudsofficer Students Introduction

This is the first annual report of the Ombudsofficer Students.

Following the appointment of a Ombudsofficer Staff earlier on, a Ombudsofficer Students was also appointed as of 1 October 2023. Unlike the position of Ombudsofficer Staff, which partly arose in response to the CLA provisions, the Ombudsofficer Students position came into being at the request of the Student Council. The position encompasses 0.6 FTE and is functionally part of the Administration Office. This report therefore covers a relatively short period in 2023. This year's work has therefore focused on increasing visibility and making an inventory within Radboud University.

2. Legal frameworks and provisions within RU

The duties and powers of the Ombudsofficer can be found in the [Radboud University Ombudsofficer Regulations](#).

3. Visibility of the Ombudsofficer Students

Since the position of Ombudsofficer Students was added to an already extensive landscape of student guidance and support, the challenge was to make it clear exactly what the position entails, when it is appropriate to contact the Ombudsofficer Students, and how this position differs from that of confidential advisors and complaint committees.

The Ombudsofficer held many introductory interviews over the past year, including an interview with the student magazine ANS. VOX indicated its intention to cover the topic at a later date. A plan has been drawn up with the communications department to increase the visibility of the Ombudsofficer Students on social media and the university website.

There is certainly still work to be done in this area, as it is not always clear to students who they can turn to for what.

4. Accessibility of Ombudsofficer Students

Anyone who studies at Radboud University can contact the Ombudsofficer Students by telephone or email ([contact form](#) or directly) to make an appointment.

The majority of appointments are made by email. An appointment can usually be made within five working days of initial contact.

Details regarding the Ombudsofficer Students can be found on the Radboud University website. (<https://www.ru.nl/studenten/services/begeleiding-advies-en-klachten/begeleiders/ombudsfunctionaris-studenten>).

During the year under review, the Ombudsofficer Students held a number of interviews with complainants, members of the Examining Boards, the boards of study associations, etc.

Since her appointment on 1 October 2023, four complaints have been handled. There were usually several interviews for each complaint, especially when personal mediation was involved.

In 2023, the Ombudsofficer Students had student secretarial support. There is as yet no registration system for complaints, so registration was done in the digital office of the Ombudsofficer Students.

5. Establishing contacts and working method

Location

Most of the interviews with complainants took place at the office of the Ombudsofficer Students. There were also instances when a complainant preferred to consult by telephone.

Confidentiality

An interview with a complainant begins by emphasising that the conversation is confidential and that the Ombudsofficer Students will not disclose anything that is discussed to third parties. The complainant then explains what led them to make an appointment.

The confidentiality obligation of the Ombudsofficer Students can be lifted only with the consent of the student concerned. This can happen, for example, if, at the end of the interview or after a number of interviews, the conclusion is reached that the matter should be brought to the attention of the faculty student counsellor, or that it is desirable for the matter to be discussed with a third party, such as the confidential advisor.

Independence

The Ombudsofficer Students is impartial. This means that the Ombudsofficer may express understanding of the complainant's situation, but does not necessarily share the complainant's point of view.

If a complainant seeks advice and/or personal mediation, another party is usually involved. In such cases – with the consent of the complainant – a hearing can take place with the other party if mediation is involved.

In mediation, the Ombudsofficer Students can act as moderator. If the complainant does not wish to have contact with the other party, mediation cannot take place.

Possible actions

The actions of the Ombudsofficer Students vary depending on the content of the complainant's story. The following actions can be distinguished: listening, providing information or advice, referral, investigation, and mediation in addressing the problem and de-escalating the conflict. A combination of the above is the rule rather than the exception.

Reporting line

The Ombudsofficer Students reports to the Executive Board and drafts an annual report of her activities.

6. Background of complainants

In all cases, the complainants were Radboud University students.

Inside/outside campus

Of the four complaints, two concerned an off-campus situation.

NL/ OTHER

Of the complainants, 3 individuals had Dutch nationality, and 1 had another nationality.

Faculty/Service

The table below shows where the complainants came from.

Faculty/Service/Institute	Number
Faculties	2
Study association	2
Total	4

Nature of problems and actions taken

The table below shows categories of problems with the corresponding numbers of complaints.

Category	Number
Undesirable behaviour within study association	1
Conflict with lecturer	1
Teamwork problems within study association	1
Discrimination	1
Total	4

Undesirable behaviour within study association

The complaint concerned the student association's flawed policies, and the way the board proceeded to impose sanctions following transgressive behaviour by a student.

Conflict with lecturer

In this case, the conflict related to how the student was supervised and assessed by their supervisor.

Teamwork problems within study association

This case involved a complainant who requested more background information from the board of the study association following decisions taken regarding transgressive behaviour by a member of the faculty student council.

Discrimination

The complainant felt discriminated against by the faculty and took the position that they were not eligible for certain facilities based on personal circumstances.

Actions taken

Actions taken	Number
Advice	2
Personal mediation	2
Total	4

In several cases, the parties initially envisaged a mediated conversation. However, in response to parties applying the required caucus, the other party decided to not go through with the mediation. Help was limited to advising on how to deal with each other in the future. As a result, only one mediated conversation took place. This conversation was pleasant for all parties and they were able to move forward with each other.

In another case, the complainant decided to refrain from mediation for fear of possible consequences for their future career, since the case involved a person with considerable prestige. As a result, the complainant decided not to follow up on any solution, as they did not see the proposed solutions as viable. The complainant subsequently met with a confidential advisor for students.

It is also notable that in a number of cases, complainants followed several pathways in an attempt to find a solution to their situation. This may have to do with complainants not knowing their way around well enough or, on the contrary, represent an effort to increase their chances of success. Complainants sometimes tried to establish 1-on-1 communication lines and agreements outside formal avenues with people who were not always authorised to do so. This is counterproductive and leads to great confusion for the staff involved.

7. Observations and findings

It is hard to find a main thread based on four complaints. However, the following did stand out:

- Of the four complaints, two involved off-campus situations in the context of a study association. Although legally the Ombudsofficer Regulations do not apply to such complaints, the Ombudsofficer nevertheless chose to offer mediation in these situations. On the one hand, because the nature of the complaint was very much in line with the theme of social safety and the work of the Ombudsofficer, and on the other hand, because there seems to be a great need among study associations for guidance, frameworks and steering on policy regarding social safety. In addition, mediation can generally do more good than harm, partly because of its voluntary nature. There have been cases in which Radboud University also had to take responsibility, even if the incident occurred off-campus. A customised approach is essential in this context, and it is therefore recommended that such cases be included in the Ombudsofficer Regulations, to be handled at the discretion of the Ombudsofficer.
- While the website briefly explains the difference between the Ombudsofficer and the confidential advisor, it also states that it does not matter whether you go to the Ombudsofficer or the confidential advisor with a complaint. Nevertheless the confidential advisor is much more on the front line compared to the Ombudsofficer, who has a more signalling role in identifying potential structural problems in student policy and/or its implementation, and in case of bottlenecks and abuses at the university, based on the reports/complaints submitted to the Ombudsofficer. As a result, the Ombudsofficer sometimes ends up having to refer the complainant to the confidential advisor after all, and the complainant has to tell their story too often.

8. Internal and external contacts

At meetings with internal contacts, the Ombudsofficer Students maintains her independent and impartial position. Meetings were held with key actors in the organisation: the Executive Board, student counsellors, the Head of Internal Audit, and the Student Council. The Ombudsofficer Students held regular consultations with the coordinator of confidential advisors for undesirable behaviour, and through her at case level with the other confidential advisors for students. The Ombudsofficer Students liaised periodically with the Vice President of the Executive Board and SLIM (Student Life and International Mobility).

Regular contact took place with staff such as the Policy Officer for Student Affairs, and the Senior Policy Officer for Social Safety, Diversity & Inclusion. At case level, where necessary to resolve a case, contact was also sought with the Faculty Secretary, Examining Board, or student counsellor of the relevant faculty.

Contact was also made with:

- Rob Vaessen, Head of Student Affairs
- Student psychologists and confidential advisors for students
- RSO (secretaries consultation)

The Ombudsofficer Students is a member of the VOHO (Association of Ombudsofficers in Higher Education), the ENEHO (European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education), and is part of a peer review group of Ombudsofficers from other universities and universities of applied sciences.

The Ombudsofficer Students also participated in a survey by UNL (Universities of the Netherlands) on Social Safety at universities; this included input on the role of Ombudsofficer Students.

9. Intentions / Action plan for 2024

Social safety plan

The survey by Governance & Integrity and the resulting plan of action will possibly have implications for the working method of the Ombudsofficer Students. These are decisions to be taken by the Executive Board. The Ombudsofficer Students will be involved in the guidance group.

Housing

The office of the Ombudsofficer Students will probably move to Mercator I during 2024. This location was chosen in consultation with the confidential advisors and campus psychologists to make it easier to find each other and create more physical space for having confidential conversations.

Visibility

Attention will continue to be devoted to making the Ombudsofficer more visible for students in various ways: an interview with VOX, social media, taking part in social safety dialogue sessions, and thematic meetings on social safety at all faculties. Also from within the organisation, attention will continue to be devoted to the presence of the Ombudsofficer Students.

Code of conduct for students

It is important to continue to emphasise the need for establishing a code of conduct for students.