

## The first 100 days as Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen

### **De-escalate where possible, escalate where necessary**

I have been acting in the new position as Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen since September 2021. Through the introductory conversations, I have learned that people have high expectations and, at the same time, are unclear as to the potential contribution of this new position to a healthy and safe study and work environment. This seemed, therefore, to be an ideal moment to commit my first impressions to paper, to offer some insight into the main issues that I will be focusing on in the coming period, and to shed some light on what my role entails.

Over the past months, I have been given a warm welcome: through constructive meetings with various stakeholders, the often intensive discussions with people reporting incidents and with bystanders, and the recent move into an independent office space at 71 Oude Boteringestraat – a location that underlines the independence of this role.

As far as the main focus of my role is concerned, to contribute to a healthy and safe study and work environment, I have noticed several supportive initiatives at the University. For example, the appointment of a wellbeing officer for students, PhD counsellors, and crystal clear rules, such as the Zero Tolerance Statement. But these things alone do not create a safe and healthy environment. Real change only takes place when everyone is aware of their own role within that environment and adjusts their behaviour accordingly. And it is precisely for this reason that, in the coming period, I will be looking to increase this awareness and influence behaviour by holding up a mirror, identifying central themes, and providing solicited and unsolicited advice. By delving deeper into procedures, working methods, roles, and policies, I hope to gain a better understanding of which developments are conducive to the learning organization that the University wants to be.

I have yet to see any tangible interpretations of what a healthy and safe study and work environment will look like at the University of Groningen in 2030. What will students and staff see and experience differently then, and what practical steps will need to be taken to achieve this? I have thus far encountered the following aspects that contribute to a more detailed elaboration of this issue.

To begin with, there is considerable room for improvement in terms of the visibility of the existing support structure for social safety. Information for both staff and students is fragmented, disparate, incomplete, and hard to find. For instance, who can staff and students turn to? When and how can they do that? And what is the result? In the coming period, I will contribute towards the creation of an improved and accessible framework. I believe that input from the various bodies of the University is crucial in this respect.

I also believe that a uniform support structure and procedure, regardless of the faculty or department at which you work or study, is a key element of a well-defined vision of a healthy and safe learning and working environment. In the coming period, I will be participating in the dialogue regarding what is needed to achieve this.

I also have the impression that informal relationships play an important and sometimes even decisive role within the University's formal structures, which can lead to a lack of safety among dependent individuals. After all, if you do not know how things are done, and you are not or are unable to become part of the informal power structure, this can contribute to feelings of injustice, powerlessness, and loneliness. In the coming period, my focus will be on

revealing formal and informal dependency relationships and on proper and honest procedures in order to reduce the risk of a lack of safety.

Finally, in my understanding a clear distinction between labour law aspects and interpersonal relations is regularly lacking in the approach to certain situations, such as R&O interviews, appointment issues, and conflicts. Furthermore, staff members are often unaware of the role of the HR advisor in this regard. Is the HR advisor there to support the managers and/or do they also assume the role of safety enforcer in the workplace? It goes without saying that such issues can also result in a lack of safety. Although every issue is unique and, in that respect, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, in the coming period I look forward to collaborating with UG staff to determine how you can de-escalate without damaging mutual relationships, or at least by keeping the damage to a minimum. Ultimately, not everyone is able to communicate effectively in difficult situations, not to mention the fact that it is not a compulsory training component for managers within the University. In the coming period, I will continue to evaluate situations with those directly involved, and to advise on them.

In terms of de-escalating where necessary, the Ombudsperson can act as a discussion leader, a process facilitator, or a mediator. In the latter case, the Ombudsperson can mediate conflicts between students, between colleagues, and between employees and managers, with a goal of clarifying bottlenecks or contributing to their solution. In the coming period, I hope that I will be able to exercise this impartial and independent role more often, when requested to do so.

When I spot trends, unacceptable patterns, structural shortcomings, and other bottlenecks, I will escalate accordingly. I will do so by issuing a substantial recommendation accompanied by a careful analysis in order to remove, remedy, or prevent the aforementioned issues. My approach is based on procedural justice, by including the reporter/bystander in possible interventions on my part and, with permission, by also speaking to the accused.

With the above in mind, over the past few months I have spoken to more than 30 reporters of incidents/bystanders about situations which, to them, bordered on an unhealthy and unsafe environment. I will pursue this further in the coming period. Besides the option of contacting me by email or telephone to make an appointment ([link](#)), between March and July 2022 I will be holding walk-in hours on Tuesday mornings from 9 a.m. to 12 noon and on Wednesday afternoons from 1 to 4 p.m. To make it as easy as possible for individuals to get in touch with me, I will also be holding introductory sessions at departments and units in the coming period.

In early 2023, I will advise the Board of the University and the consultative participation bodies on the structural embedding of the role of Ombudsperson within the existing support structure. I intend to draft this advice in consultation with the confidential advisor and other stakeholders.

14 February 2022 — Carolijn Winnubst