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Annual Report Ombudsperson University of Groningen 2024

Transition Year and Observations

Work under the responsibility of Carolijn Winnubst (until June 1, 2024) and Marianne Dijkhuizen (from December 1, 2024)



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Foreword

In 2024, the Ombudsperson further consolidated her position within the University of Groningen (UG). The year was characterized by an increasing focus on social safety, prompted in part by social developments, internal signals and the structural implementation of the Social Safety Programme 2024-2027. This report accounts for the work of the Ombudsperson in 2024, with the aim of providing insight into signals received, interventions implemented and underlying trends.

Although I only started as the current Ombudsperson on December 1, 2024, this report has been prepared based on the work in the calendar year, carried out under the responsibility of my predecessor.

The strength of the Ombuds function lies in making visible what is going on under the surface, opening up conversations that get bogged down elsewhere, and reinforcing reflection rather than judgment. This report reflects that work.

Marianne Dijkhuizen

Chapter 1 - Introduction and mission statement

This report reviews the work of the Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen for the calendar year 2024. Carolijn Winnubst resigned her position as Ombudsperson on June 1, 2024. A search for a suitable successor was conducted from June through November 2024. Effective December 1, 2024, Marianne Dijkhuizen was appointed as interim Ombudsperson for two days per week, with the task of continuing the position, contributing to the strategic policy on social safety, and writing this annual report.

The annual report fulfills several purposes:

- It reports to the Executive Board, the University Council, the Local Council and the Supervisory Board.
- It identifies trends and patterns in reports from staff and students.
- It offers reflections and recommendations that contribute to the development of a healthy, safe and inclusive working and learning environment at the UG.

This report has been prepared by the interim Ombudsperson, based on careful analysis of available data, interviews with key officials within the university, and reflections on the position and method of operation of the position. It should be noted that the substantive casework on 2024 is not the responsibility of the current Ombudsperson and has been processed solely on the basis of numbers, categories and trends. The confidentiality of the reports is hereby guaranteed at all times.

Chapter 2 - The Ombuds function: independent and connecting

The Ombudsperson is an independent, neutral and confidential point of contact for employees and PhD candidates of the University of Groningen. The position is formally embedded in the Science Governance Code and is supported by the Guidelines for the Ombudsperson of Dutch Universities (VSNU/UNL, 2021).

The Ombudsperson focuses on signals of undesirable behaviour, perceived insecurity, deadlocked working relationships or structural obstacles within the organization. This concerns situations that are not (yet) dealt with within formal complaints procedures or legal frameworks, but where problematic dynamics, structural bottlenecks or signals of concern are present.

The Ombudsperson:

- **Acts independently** of the board, HR and management;
- **Offers a confidential and approachable listening ear**;
- **Provides advice on an individual level** to reporters on possible courses of action;
- **Makes trends and patterns visible** at the organizational level;
- **Advises the Executive Board**, solicited and unsolicited, on social safety and good employment practices.

The Ombudsperson explicitly does not investigate individuals and has no formal sanctioning authority. The added value lies in interpreting mechanisms, recognizing systemic bottlenecks and contributing to a reflective and learning organizational culture.

The way in which this role is defined leaves room for an individual professional approach. Within this framework, each Ombudsperson weighs the balance between casuistic support, signaling and policy advice. This professional space is essential to do justice to the context and complexity of the work.

What to expect - and especially what not to expect

The Ombudsperson of the University of Groningen is available to employees, PhD candidates and students who encounter tensions, stalled cooperation, perceived insecurity or structural obstacles in their work or study situation. The Ombudsperson is independently positioned within the university and functions outside the hierarchical lines of management, HR and educational structures. The position is neutral, confidential and aimed at promoting a socially safe, ethical and professional environment for everyone who is part of the academic community.

A careful, low-threshold approach is key for contact with the Ombudsperson. Reporting is done on a voluntary basis. The Ombudsperson does not take sides, does not pass judgment, and does not work toward a predetermined outcome. Instead, they look from different perspectives at what is going on, what interests are involved and where there is room for recovery, insight or structural improvement. In all cases reporters retain control over their story and what happens with the information.

An overview of the Ombudsperson's modus operandi is included in Appendix 1. This describes the phasing of ombuds work, the criteria for intervention and the formal principles of the function. The working method described is consistent with national professional practice.

The appendix also clarifies how the different roles an ombudsperson fulfills contribute to a broad frame of reference, in which reflection, review and independent judgment are central.

Signaling and (un)solicited advice

When signals from multiple reporters or repeated situations indicate structural bottlenecks, the Ombudsperson can provide feedback on these signals - anonymously - to relevant parties within the organization. The Ombudsperson can give both solicited and unsolicited advice to the Executive Board, but also to faculties, departments, HR, policy makers or managers. This advice is always independent, based on case histories, and intended to contribute to the learning ability of the organization. No judgment is passed on individuals; the aim is to reveal mechanisms, patterns or missing links in processes and cooperation.

Reporting and feedback

The Ombudsperson reports annually on her work in an anonymized annual report, which shares trends, themes and structural findings with the Executive Board and the broader university community. This report contains no personal data or traceable situations, and is intended to provide transparency about the signals that come in, and to support the university in policy development and prevention. In addition, interim feedback may also be provided when urgent or recurring signals warrant it.

Positioning within the social security structure

By 2024, the Ombudsperson has further consolidated her position as a system player and advisor at the macro level. From an independent role from the Executive Board, HR and management, the Ombudsperson emphatically acts as a mirror of the organization, paying attention to patterns, structural bottlenecks and the learning capacity of the university.

The Confidential Advisor has a firmly established position as the first point of contact and as an individual supporter in cases of psychosocial problems and undesirable behaviour. The annual report of the Office Confidential Advisor shows that reporters usually maintain longer-term contact with the CA, focused on counseling and recovery.

Both functions are now structurally included in the Social Safety Programme 2024-2027. At the same time, there is still a lack of clarity about the division of roles in practice. This is also recognized within the programme, which includes role delineation, strengthening of the support structure and joint case intervention.

From 2025, regular peer review will take place between the Ombudsperson and the Confidential Advisor. In case of overlapping signals, mutual coordination will be sought, while respecting the confidentiality and independent position of both roles.

In short :

Reporters can contact the Ombudsperson for confidential reflection, independent interpretation of their situation, support in finding action perspectives, and - if appropriate - mediation or signaling. The Ombudsperson helps to clarify situations and thereby strengthens both the individual and the organization as a whole.

Finally

Anyone who turns to the Ombudsperson can count on a careful, independent and respectful approach. The function is not there to judge or sanction, but to provide focus, space and direction - both for the individual reporter and for the university as a whole.

Chapter 3 - Deepening and continuing in turbulent times

Retrospective 2024 - the Ombudsperson's filling of the position (Carolijn Winnubst)

In the reporting period 2024, the position of Ombudsperson was filled by Dr. Carolijn Winnubst. As the UG's first appointed Ombudsperson, she made an important contribution to the establishment and positioning of this function within the university.

Her approach was characterized by an analytical and case-oriented way of working, with attention to social safety, power relations and dysfunctional patterns in collaborations or structures. From concrete signals she mapped underlying mechanisms and formulated advice towards the departments involved and the Executive Board.

She performed the function from an inquisitive, reflective angle, using her independence to pinpoint bottlenecks. At the same time, she positioned herself as a system mirror with attention to structural learning processes. The approach in 2024 was firm, normative and focused on making responsibilities within the organization visible.

3.1 Strengthening positioning and anchoring

The year 2024 was dominated by the further positioning of the ombuds function within the social safety structure of the UG. Formal anchoring received a boost with the launch of the Social Safety Programme 2024–2027, in which the role of the Ombudsperson is structurally incorporated as part of the broader support network for staff, PhD candidates, and students.

In terms of content, this built on the insights gained from two evaluations carried out in mid-2023: a self-evaluation by the Ombudsperson and an administrative evaluation commissioned by the BoU. These reports emphasized the importance of a clear demarcation from other functions in the support structure, such as the confidential advisor, and the need for enhanced cooperation within the organization.

Although both evaluations contained concrete recommendations for improving and clarifying the job description, it was decided in consultation with the board and participation bodies not to implement these recommendations immediately. The reason was the national agreement that a sector-wide evaluation of the ombuds function would take place in 2024. In order to avoid duplicate changes to regulations and recruitment profiles, it was decided to continue the function on a temporary (interim) basis. This ensured continuity pending a possible national review.

This policy decision means that in 2024, the ombuds function will continue in practice mainly in its existing form, but with a view to gradually improving cooperation and positioning within the social safety structure of the UG.

3.2 Perspective of Carolijn Winnubst (UG Ombudsperson 2022-2024)

Carolijn Winnubst held the role of Ombudsperson during the pioneering phase of the function within the UG. As the first Ombudsperson, she positioned the function visibly and firmly, focusing on structural interpretation of social insecurity, institutional imbalance and the role of power relations within academic contexts.

Her approach was characterized by direct engagement with reporters, keen analysis of case histories, and naming underlying systemic patterns. Carolijn approached the Ombuds function as an ethical anchor point in the organization. She was alert to signals that pointed to structurally failing processes, and she used her independence to uncover situations in which people got stuck.

At the same time, she saw herself as part of a learning system: not to dispense justice, but to prompt reflection and improvement. Carolijn's work provides a solid foundation on which the function continues to develop.

3.3 Capacity and continuity

The ombuds function in 2024 was performed by one person with a position of 0.8 fte until June 1, when Carolijn Winnubst resigned her position. From January to the end of May 2024, a total of 44 reports were recorded under the responsibility of the Ombudsperson. With linear continuation, corrected for the reporting month of July, this amounts to approximately 97 reports. This constitutes a slight increase from 2023 (91 reports). During the following months, the position was temporarily vacant. As of December 1, 2024, the position was refilled with a capacity of 0.4 fte, in the person of the interim Ombudsman Officer. The limited capacity and the transition period put temporary pressure on the continuity of advising and signaling. At the same time, the complexity of reports is increasing, as is the need for structural follow-up. Over the course of 2025 the appropriate, necessary structural capacity will be determined, partly on the basis of the experiences with the reporting point, the cooperation within the support structure and intervention with, the confidential advisors, among others, for a future-proof design of the function.

3.4 Working form and method

In the years 2023 and 2024, the position was characterized by a crystallized working method in which systemic analyses and written opinions were central. Based on multiple related reports within organizational units, Ombudsperson Carolijn Winnubst issued extensive confidential reports focusing on deeper underlying patterns. She worked largely independently and at a distance from the organization, from her own office space outside university buildings. This physical separation supported her independent position and allowed her to formulate her reflections with some distance from the system.

As of December 1, 2024, the position was again filled by an interim Ombudsperson for 0.4 fte. During this transitional period, efforts were made to get acquainted with faculties and departments, explore current needs and themes in the field, and transfer ongoing trajectories. The interim Ombudsperson is physically housed in the university structure, at a location shared with confidential advisors, company doctors and the company's social work department. This way, a different positioning was chosen: closer to the network of support functions and more accessible for informal coordination. In the first months, meetings were held with the HR management, the Diversity Office, the Social Safety programme management, confidential counsellors and staff from all faculties, including introductions to deans and boards. Coordination was sought with reporting structures, complaint procedures and supervisory functions. Based in part on these experiences, it will be considered in 2025 what structural capacity deployment and positioning is most appropriate in the long run for a future-proof design of the function.

3.5 Design and professionalization

In 2024, a central registration system in which the Ombudsperson and the Confidential Advisors of the Office Confidential Advisor can register their signals, each in their own secure environment, has been worked on. This system can only be accessed by these processors and is set up in accordance with the requirements of the AVG. In addition, a corresponding data processing protocol has been worked on in cooperation with the Data Protection Officer. For 2025, it is being investigated whether this system can also serve to register signals received at the central reporting point that is being set up by the university.

3.6 Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education (VOHO)

The connection to the national network of Ombudspersons in Higher Education was further strengthened in 2024. The Ombudsperson chaired the Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education (VOHO) until the end of November 2024 and in that role actively contributed to the national professionalization of the function. Under her chairmanship, efforts included the exchange of knowledge on reporting structures, digital registration systems, positioning of the function within institutions and the design of evaluation procedures. This national cooperation provides valuable guidance for the further development of the ombuds function within the UG. This relationship with VOHO is expected to continue in 2025.

3.7 Developments and transfer

In 2023 and 2024, Ombudsperson Carolijn Winnubst firmly positioned the function within the UG's support structure. First in this role, she set the line for embedding the ombuds function in the university's broader social safety net. From an independent workplace outside the university buildings, she worked carefully and at a distance from the daily structure. Her approach was characterized by confidentiality, systemic insight and the preparation of in-depth written opinions based on multiple connected signals. The focus was not on the incident, but on the pattern and underlying structure that asks for improvement. This approach contributed to a more reflective and structural way of dealing with signals of social insecurity.

She was also active at the national level as president of the Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education (VOHO), where she contributed to knowledge sharing on reporting structures and evaluation procedures, among other things. The accumulated expertise and connection to the national network form a valuable basis for the continuation of the position. In 2025, the UG will continue in the same vein, focusing on the sustainable anchoring of the function and further alignment within the existing reporting structure landscape.

Due to the nature of the function and the applicable AVG regulations, no substantive handover of individual reports or case histories was done in December 2024. Substantive follow-up of previously received signals was also out of the question: the complexity and confidentiality of ongoing processes make it impossible to form a careful and independent opinion about the situation or pattern without personal contact with reporters, or without current context. In addition, after several months, feedback or renewed contact with reporters without cause is no longer a matter of course. The transfer of the function took place through clearly and carefully prepared documents, in which the outgoing Ombudsperson gave an estimate of developments that might still be submitted to the successor, as well as an overview of relevant themes and points of attention within the organization.

3.8 Start of new Ombudsperson

On December 1, 2024, Marianne Dijkhuizen started as interim Ombudsperson. During the month of December, the emphasis was on getting to know the organization and building relationships with key persons. Discussions took place with deans, directors, HR and other stakeholders in the social safety network.

Signaling, interpretation and follow-up of reports will be continued in a structured manner from 2025. The developments that will be further elaborated from 2025 - including the establishment of a mandatory central reporting point in accordance with Mariette Hamer's recommendations - will be discussed further in the next annual report and in the 2025 outlook.

Chapter 4 - Statistics and Trends

4.1 Reports and Key Figures

In the period January through May 2024, a total of 44 reports were recorded under the responsibility of Ombudsperson Carolijn Winnubst. These reports were classified by origin (employees or students) and by subject matter.

The breakdown is as follows:

- Employees: 35 reports
- PhD candidates: 7 reports
- Students: 9 reports

Topics of reports included:

- **Work culture and leadership**, experienced problems in team structures or the management style;
- **Disrupted cooperation**, structural disruption of communication and tension in work relationships;
- **Treatment**, reports of not being taken seriously, being ignored or belittled;
- **Transgressive behaviour**, signals that indicate intimidating or inappropriate behaviour.
- **Unclear procedures**, questions and concerns about university regulations or decision-making.

In the year 2023, 91 reports were recorded, 61 of which came from employees, 9 from PhD candidates and 21 from students.

Although the reports are only based on the first five months of the year, this period shows a stable reporting average of 8/9 signals per month

Based on linear extrapolation, and taking into account the usual low reporting activity in the summer months of July and August, this would amount to a projection of approximately:

- 77 reports from employees
- 4 reports from PhD candidates
- 16 reports from students
- Total projection: about 97 reports in 11 active months.

It should be noted that no Ombudsperson was employed in the second half of 2024 and no reports were registered. The annual projection is therefore only intended to illustrate the trend in the first half of the year. The conclusion that the number of reports in 2024 would be stable or slightly increasing compared to 2023 is based on this calculation, but is not supported by actual records in the second half of the year.

4.2 Culture, Trends and General Guidance

The signals and reports of 2024 reflect structural tensions that were also visible earlier: a strong emphasis on academic performance, high workload, hierarchical relationships and insufficiently accessible internal help structures. In the first five months of 2024, we again saw that reporters often turn to the Ombudsperson at a late stage, which indicates thresholds in earlier escalation lines.

The University of Groningen is a broad, internationally oriented university with over 37,000 students and approximately 6,000 employees. Given this size and social position in the city and region, as well as the importance of the university as an employer, educator and public institution, 44 reports registered over five months are numerically limited, but can be substantively significant. Experience shows that each report can symbolize broader undercurrents that are not always visible on the surface.

The city of Groningen is strongly intertwined with the university, which is a determining factor in the academic, economic and social climate of the region. This also asks of the institution to set an example in terms of social safety, transparency and good governance. It remains striking that employees know how to find the Ombuds function, while the willingness to report among students lags structurally. This picture is recognizable from previous years and means that in 2025, extra attention is needed in communication, findability and clarification of the role of the ombudsperson compared to other support staff, such as student advisors and confidential advisors.

The observation that reporters regularly indicate that they cannot talk about their issue in the line structure or lack confidence in existing procedures, underscores the importance of an independent Ombuds function. Moreover, a number of reports from 2024 showed a long-standing pattern of behaviour or attitudes that have not been structurally corrected, indicating gaps in responsible leadership or follow-up to earlier signals.

The coming year offers opportunities to work with partners within the UG, including HR, Social Safety Office, the BoU and the participation bodies, to jointly look at structural improvements in approach culture, leadership and support for reporters.

In that context, the Ombuds function provides an additional safeguard for prudent governance, with a unique perspective at the intersection of culture, trust and organizational development.

What these reports have in common is that they all stem from courage. The courage to say: things can be different, things must be better. These signals not only deserve a hearing, but also the prospect of action. The Ombuds function is there to think along with them - creatively, sharply and independently.

4.3 Investigations and Written Opinions

In 2024, the Ombudsperson drew up six written recommendations and reflective documents based on reports and signals received. These recommendations arose from signals about patterns or structural shortcomings within the organization, often in response to multiple reports on a single theme, organizational unit, or official.

These were almost exclusively situations involving repeated signals about social insecurity, inadequate reporting structures, or hierarchical vulnerability. In such cases, the Ombudsperson decided to conduct further analysis or reflection in the form of a written recommendation, with the aim of making the Executive Board, faculties or services aware of underlying mechanisms and achieving recovery and improvement.

These recommendations were shared with the relevant organizational units (such as faculties or management teams), the Executive Board and, where applicable, the managers concerned. All parties involved were heard in an appropriate manner prior to the formulation of an opinion (in accordance with the principle of hearing both sides), unless it was decided explicitly and with justification not to hear both sides – for example, when it concerns an exclusively systemic assessment without any personal judgment.

Confidentiality and carefulness

The content of these recommendations is strictly confidential. In accordance with the Regulations for the Ombudsperson of the UG (Articles 6 and 7), the content of the recommendations may not be made public or shared outside the circle of those to whom they are formally addressed. The identity of those who report issues is protected in all cases, and where necessary, the reports are anonymized to prevent traceability. In the university organization, there is broad recognition of the importance of confidentiality in the work of the Ombudsperson, partly to protect those who report incidents, those involved, and trust in the position.

All recommendations have been received by the Board of the University and/or the relevant faculties or organizational units. In line with Article 7.4 of the Regulations, written feedback on the follow-up has been requested in all cases. In a number of cases, this has led to organizational interventions or further follow-up by the board or management. Where possible, the Ombudsperson ensures that follow-up actually takes place, without assuming responsibility for implementation.

Future course of action

Experience has shown that writing recommendations is only effective if they fit within a broader administrative willingness to learn and change. It is therefore desirable that a structural process be set up in 2025 in which the follow-up of recommendations is monitored transparently within the broader Social Safety 2024–2027 programme. The Ombudsperson will continue to act independently, critically, and in a connecting manner.

Chapter 5 Progress, systemic power and political pressure

5.1 New registration system

In 2024, a start was made on the further professionalization of the registration of reports through the SuperOffice system. Both the Ombudsperson and the Office Confidential Advisor have their own separate registration system. There is no mutual access to the registered cases. All signals are recorded in a secure and AVG-compliant manner. The aim is to systematically keep track of numbers, nature and possible trends in reports, without compromising the confidentiality of individual cases and the autonomy of the separate functions.

The system was set up in consultation with the Data Protection Officer and is managed exclusively by the formally designated confidential officers, each within their own protected environment. It is expected that in 2025 this registration will be further integrated into the broader monitoring of social safety, partly in preparation for external inspections.

5.2 Developments from politics regarding social safety

At the national level, 2024 has once again drawn emphatic attention to social safety in higher education and science. The recommendations of the Hamer Committee, UNL's handouts, and the announced inspection visits by the Labor Inspection have led to heightened expectations regarding prevention, reporting structures, and follow-up of signals.

For the Ombudsperson, this means a strengthening of the role as an independent mirror, both towards organizational units and towards the Board. At the same time, an area of tension arises between confidentiality and the obligation to report. Within the UG, workable frameworks will be sought in 2025 in which this balance will be permanently secured.

5.3 Implementation of a reporting point at universities

Following Mariette Hamer's advice and the national policy framework, the UG has also decided to set up a central reporting point for social safety. In 2024, preparations began for this reporting point, which should be operational from mid-2025. The reporting point is intended to be a low-threshold point of entry for employees and students who wish to report transgressive behaviour, social insecurity or integrity issues.

The Ombudsperson is involved in the design and positioning of the reporting point, among other things to ensure coordination with existing facilities such as confidential advisors and complaints procedures. Explicit attention was asked for clear lines of information, unambiguous explanation of functions and confidentiality, and the prevention of 'reporting fatigue' among users.

Chapter 6 - Reflection and roadmap for 2025

By 2024, the Ombuds function has visibly confirmed itself as a necessary, independent system player in the University of Groningen. The function is now widely recognized as a complementary link in the existing support structures and as a critical mirror of the university system. The independent position enables the Ombudsperson to make persistent patterns, dysfunctional structures and vulnerabilities in leadership visible with integrity and verifiability. This institutional recognition, which was partially under construction in earlier years, now seems to be permanently established. However, further operationalization of the delineation with other actors, especially the confidential advisors, is necessary.

The content of the reports shows a consistent line with previous years, with themes of hierarchy, workload, poor follow-up, cooperation and perceived insecurity taking center stage. The nature of the signals is structural, and the severity of the issues asks for firm interpretation and follow-up. Reporters often approach the Ombudsperson only when other routes do not provide sufficient confidence, indicating gaps in the escalation model. In this light, the Ombuds function is increasingly a structural link in early signaling and recovery, as well as a necessary signal provider for the organization as a whole.

The temporary interruption of the function between June and December 2024 shows that continuity is crucial. The pause of this position has resulted in missed alerts and delayed succession. The current interim filling of 0.4 fte has been carefully designed and provides necessary continuity for the position. At the same time, the nature and scope of the work show that a structural safeguard of at least 0.6 fte is necessary to effectively and sustainably carry out the Ombudsperson's tasks - such as case analysis, network cooperation and policy advice. This is consistent with the experience that the previous deployment of 0.8 fte also involved a relatively high workload.

At the national level, expectations around social safety are sharpening. Guidelines from the Hamer Committee, Universities of the Netherlands and VOHO, among others, are raising the bar for reporting structures, registration, monitoring and follow-up. The UG has already taken steps in this direction, including the implementation of a Social Safety Programme, setting up a central reporting point and developing a registration structure. At the same time, this asks for further policy choices: how does confidentiality relate to reporting obligations, who has what role, and how is procedural justice ensured?

The contribution of my predecessor, Dr. Carolijn Winnubst, deserves explicit recognition in this context. Her keen analyses as Ombudsperson were characterized by an in-depth look at social dynamics and power relations. In her annual reports, she repeatedly emphasized that social safety is not a product of rules, but of culture - "in the fiber, not in the rules." This observation remains relevant today: the signals from 2024 confirm that formal structures only work when they are supported by exemplary behaviour, accountability and sensitivity in practice. The recommendations of my predecessor on the importance of reflective leadership, transparent follow-up of signals and strengthening the sense of norms remain guiding.

A number of recommendations are relevant for further strengthening the ombuds function and social safety at the UG:

Firstly, it is recommended that the distinction between the Ombudsperson and the Confidential Advisor be made more explicit and accessible to staff, PhD candidates and students. This asks for

clear communication, easy-to-find information and clear references in reporting structures, so that people can better figure out where to go.

It is also important that the follow-up of written advice from the Ombudsperson stays structured and transparent. Agreements on this have already been made and shared with the Ombudsperson; however, it remains important to embed these agreements in the decision-making process and, where necessary, bring them to the attention of faculties and services. Clear reporting contributes to administrative accuracy and strengthens the effectiveness of the position.

Anonymous reports pose a particular challenge. As no explicit agreements have yet been made in this regard, it is recommended that in 2025 we explore together how the Executive Board can communicate and act in a careful and appropriate manner in response to anonymous reports. This will strengthen confidence in the reporting system, even when reporters choose to remain anonymous for understandable reasons.

The implementation of a central reporting point also asks for continued attention to coherence with existing functions, such as those of the Ombudsperson, the Confidential Advisors and other supporting actors. The purpose of a central infrastructure is to be able to receive signals in a more accessible, unambiguous and effective manner, without overlap or bureaucratic obstacles (“the purple crocodile”). By bundling signals that would otherwise come in through different channels, it is also easier to identify patterns or structural bottlenecks.

However, when setting up this reporting point, it is essential that the confidentiality of those reporting incidents is guaranteed. This means that confidentiality, secure storage, careful file creation and respect for the autonomy of the person reporting must be structurally built in. Without these safeguards, the effectiveness of the reporting point will be undermined and trust in the reporting structure will be compromised. It is therefore recommended that the expertise of the Ombudsperson and the Confidential Advisors be involved from the outset in the development of this reporting point, so that it is both functionally and carefully embedded within the broader social safety network.

Finally, it is recommended that social safety, leadership and accountability culture continue to be placed on the agenda as a coherent theme in training, assessment systems and managerial conversations. The signals continue to point to a need for room for recovery, recognition and transparency. The Ombuds function can continue to play a key role in this, provided it is firmly anchored and widely supported in the academic community.

The power of the Ombuds function lies in revealing what otherwise remains hidden beneath the surface. Not to influence every outcome, but to make processes fairer, relationships more balanced and structures more resilient. In an academic community that is constantly evolving, the Ombudsperson contributes to continuing to ask the right questions – precisely where there is friction. This requires structural embedding, room for reflection and a shared understanding that social safety is not an end point, but an ongoing mission.

Attachments (draft versions):

- Appendix 1: Working method Ombudsperson
- Appendix 2: Table of number of reports since 2022.
- Appendix 3: Reports by group
- Appendix 4: Reports by category

Footnote: It remains important to emphasize that statements about signals can only be made in a general and systemic sense. Content interpretation is done solely on the basis of recognizable patterns, not on individual case histories.

Appendix 1 - Working method Ombudsperson University of Groningen

FLOW CHART OMBUDS WORK PROCESS

1. REPORT / QUESTION / SIGNAL

- Exploratory interview
- Independent advice
- Referral or support
- If appropriate: mediation or reflective conversation

2. REVIEW OF JURISDICTION AND ADMISSIBILITY

- Yes → Conversation, intervention or further analysis
- No → Reference with justification and explanation.

3. INTERVENTION AND FOLLOW-UP

- Conversation with affected person(s), informal intervention
- Written feedback or advice
- Analysis of system factors or patterns

4. SIGNALING AND INVESTIGATION (IF APPLICABLE)

- In case of repeated or structural signals
- Independent reflective memorandum or advice to BoU or management
- Anonymized, without judgment about individuals

5. ANNUAL REPORTING

- Anonymized representation of trends and signals
- Feedback to Executive Board, HR and relevant forums
- Goal: Structural learning points, transparency and improvement of social safety

ROLE AND POSITION

The Ombudsperson of the University of Groningen is independent, impartial and works confidentially. Employees, PhD candidates and students can report directly to the Ombudsperson with questions, concerns or tensions about their working environment or collaboration. Together, we explore what is going on, what the reporting party's goals are, and which intervention route is most appropriate - from an exploratory interview to mediation or signaling to the Board.

The Ombudsperson is not a replacement for existing grievance procedures or HR channels, but fills a complementary and unique role as a reflective point of contact who can identify patterns at the organization-wide level. The position is outside the hierarchical structure and reports directly to the Executive Board.

Annually, the Ombudsperson issues an anonymous report on trends, risks and recommendations designed to support the university in strengthening social safety and good governance.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Marianne Dijkhuizen is an MfN Registered Mediator, complaint investigator and certified external Confidential Advisor (psychosocial workload and integrity). She is affiliated with the **Association of Ombudspersons in Higher Education (VOHO)** and participates in peer review, professional development and peer consultation with other ombudspersons in higher education.

Since January 1, 2024, she has served as Ombudsperson Employees at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. As of December 1, 2024, she was additionally appointed as Interim Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen. Previously, she held the ombuds position at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences. This combination of roles contributes to a broad and professional frame of reference and strengthens peer review and reflection on the performance of the office.

Appendix 2: Table of number of reports since 2022

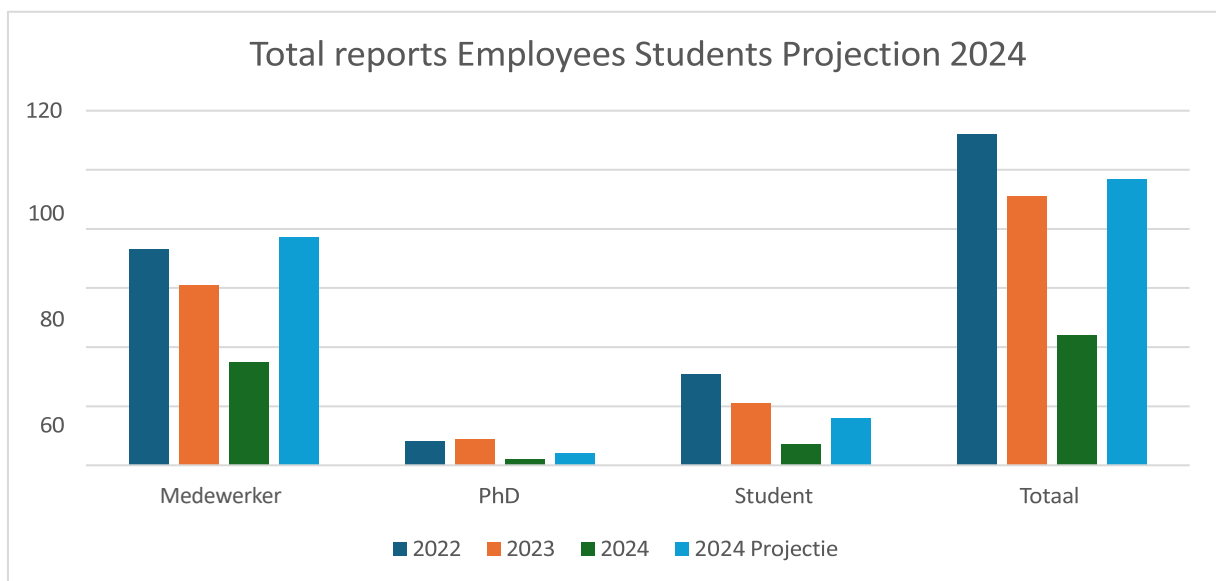
Year	Total Reports	Staff	PhDs	Students
2022	112	73 (65%)	8 (7%)	31 (28%)
2023	91	61 (67%)	9 (9%)	21 (23%)
2024	44	35	2	7
2024 Projection	97	77 (80%)	4 (4%)	16 (16%)

Analysis of reports 2022-2024

The table shows the number of reports registered with the Ombuds function at the University of Groningen since its inception. In 2022, 112 reports were received, in 2023 this number decreased to 91. Until May 2024, 44 reports were registered. In an adjusted projection - assuming 11 active months, with the summer month of July considered low in reports - this amounts to a projected annual volume of about **97 reports**. With this, 2024 shows a slight increase over 2023, but the total remains below the level of the first reporting year.

The shift in the ratio of employees to students is striking. In 2022 and 2023, on average, about 75% of reports came from employees and 25% from students. Based on the adjusted projection for 2024, about **80% of reports came from employees (77 reports), 4% from PhDs (4 reports) and 16% from students (16 reports)**. This trend may indicate a structurally higher willingness to report among employees, or a decreased findability and recognition of the Ombuds function among students.

The relatively low proportion of student reports is not unique to the UG, but is consistent with national observations about the limited reach of Ombuds Services in the student landscape. This underlines the importance of targeted communication, better visibility of the reporting point, and closer alignment with student-focused functions such as student advisors, student deans and confidants. In 2025, explicit attention will be paid to this target group within the further development of the function.



Appendix 3: Reports by group (disaggregated)

The pie charts in appendix 3 and 4 provide a rough picture of the distribution of reports in 2024, broken down by job profile, nationality and type of report, among other things. In previous years, more in-depth analyses have been presented based on such overviews, describing trends and areas of concern by faculty, target group or theme.

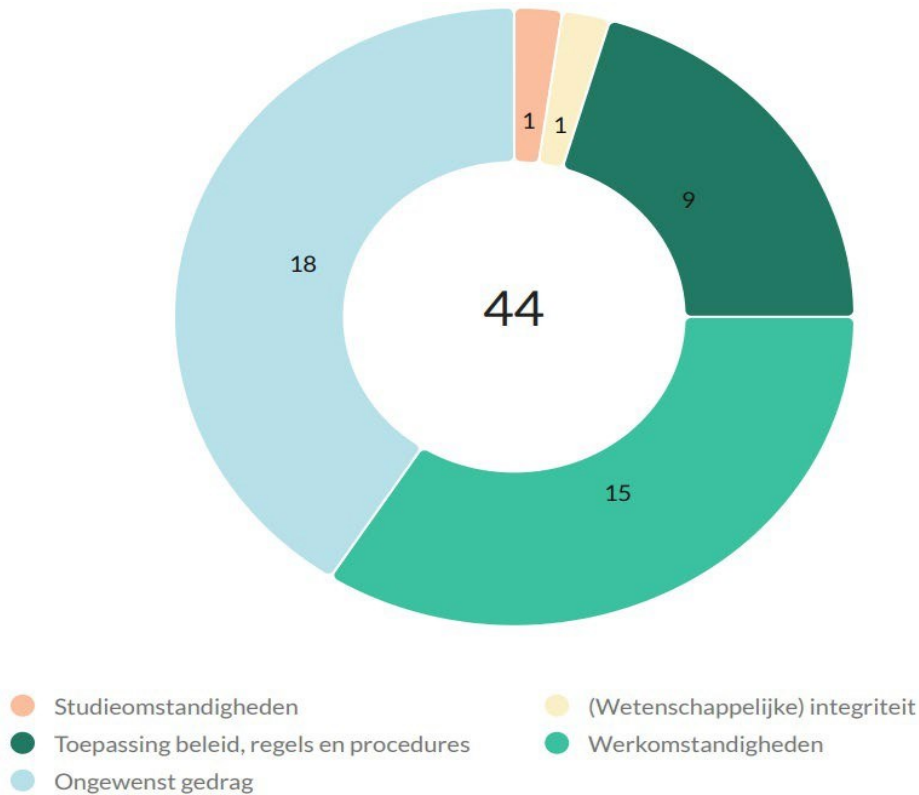
In 2024, the UG began using the SuperOffice system for recording reports. Although this system meets the requirements of confidentiality and data protection (AVG), it currently has limitations in the possibilities for systematic reporting. In addition, figures alone do not give a complete picture of the nature, severity and complexity of signals. Experience shows that thematic interpretation is reliable only when the context and content of the cases can also be taken into account. This is in line with the Ombudsperson's working method, in which signals are always interpreted carefully, nuanced and in context.

As in previous years, reports are rarely unambiguous. Many signals touch on several themes simultaneously. The thematic division thus provides direction, but not a conclusive characterization. Analysis always takes place in the substantive and organizational context of the signal.

It is important to note that the totals in this appendix cannot be compared one-to-one with the overviews in earlier tables. In the current registration, several characteristics or elements can be linked to one signal (for example, several roles, themes or contexts). This means that a signal can end up in more than one category. Therefore, the charts shown serve primarily as indicative overviews, not absolute counts.

In 2025, we will explore ways to further improve the registration and signaling function to enable substantive analysis without compromising confidentiality or independence of the function.

Total reports



Notes on 2024 figures:

The numbers in the charts show actual reports received through May 2024. An annualized projection was calculated for the annual report, assuming 11 active months (excluding July as a reporting month).

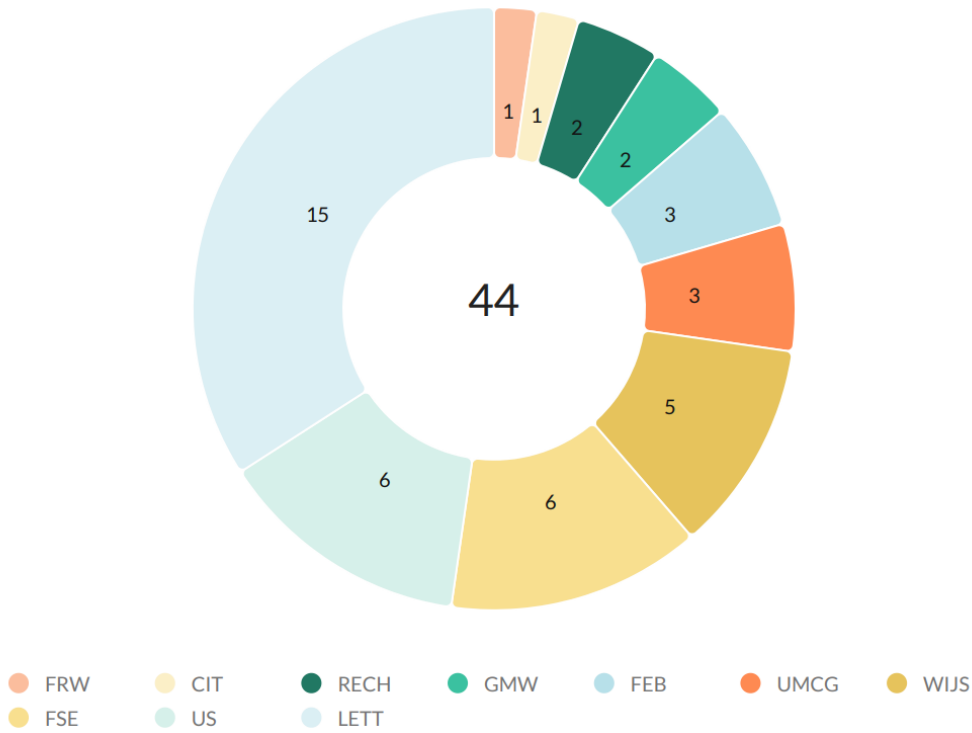
Projection formula: $\text{Number through May} = (\text{Number}) \div 5 \times 11 = \text{Projection: } 97 \text{ reports } 2024$

The chart shows the thematic breakdown of the 44 reports registered with the Ombudsperson in 2024 through May. The largest category, consisting of 18 reports, falls within the broader domain of **undesirable behaviour**. In both 2022 (31 reports) and 2023 (36 reports), reports of (sexual) harassment constituted the largest share within this category. Moreover, the 2023 annual report identified this type of report as a troubling, structural development within the university.

This pattern continues in 2024 as well. Reporters report behavior that was perceived as intimidating, controlling or psychologically stressful, often in situations with a clear relationship of authority. As in previous years, these are reports from both staff and PhD candidates, involving long-term tensions or repeated experiences. Some of these signals previously remained out of sight in formal structures.

The remaining reports concern working conditions (15), application of policies, rules and procedures (9), and incidental study conditions (1) and (scientific) integrity (1). This distribution is consistent with the thematic distribution in 2022 and 2023, in which working conditions and procedural ambiguity also emerged as recurring concerns.

Reports by faculty or department



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 97\ notifications\ 2024$

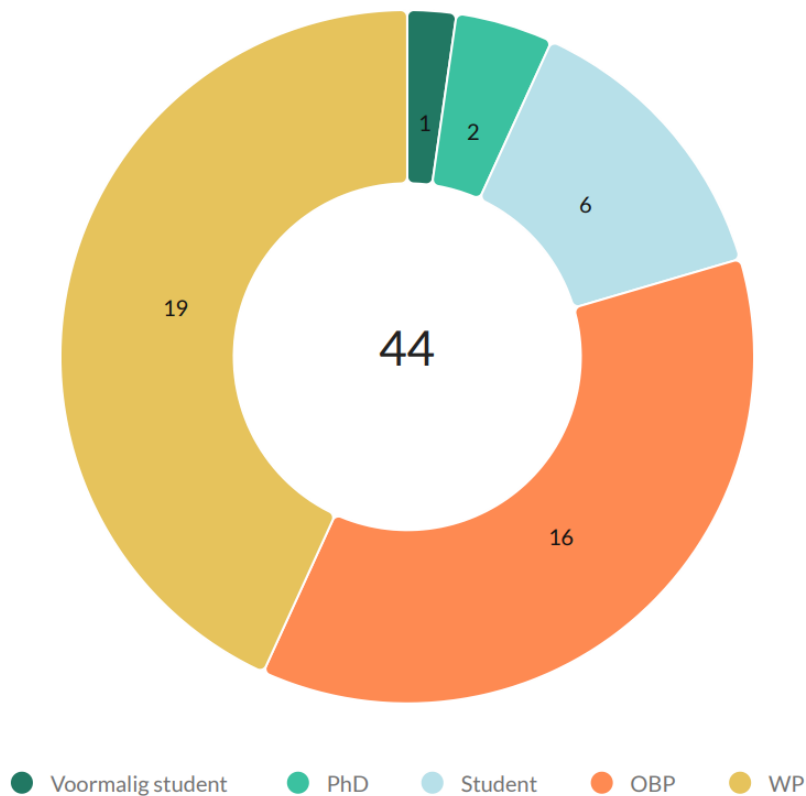
The graph shows the distribution of the 44 reports registered in 2024 by faculty or department. It is notable that, as in 2022 and 2023, a significant proportion of reports came from the Faculty of Arts (LETT), with 15 reports. Given the size of this faculty, this is a recurring pattern also noted in previous annual reports. In 2022 it led to a separate advice, and in 2023 it pointed to a combination of factors such as culture, structure and previous drastic situations having a lasting impact

Other faculties from which multiple reports originated in 2024 are FSE, US and Philosophy (6 each), followed by UMCG and FEB (3 each). Faculties GMW and Law (RECH)) accounted for 2 reports, while FSS (FRW) and CIT each occurred once in the registration. The distribution largely corresponds to the distribution in 2023, which also received reports from almost all parts of the organization

As in previous years, reporting figures by faculty or department should be interpreted with caution. They say something about willingness to report and familiarity with the position, but do not provide a direct assessment of the work or learning climate. Some reporters choose not to mention a faculty or have a position that transcends several organizational units.

The graph is indicative of the distribution across the university. Further analysis requires knowledge of the nature, background and context of the reports.

Reports broken down by profile



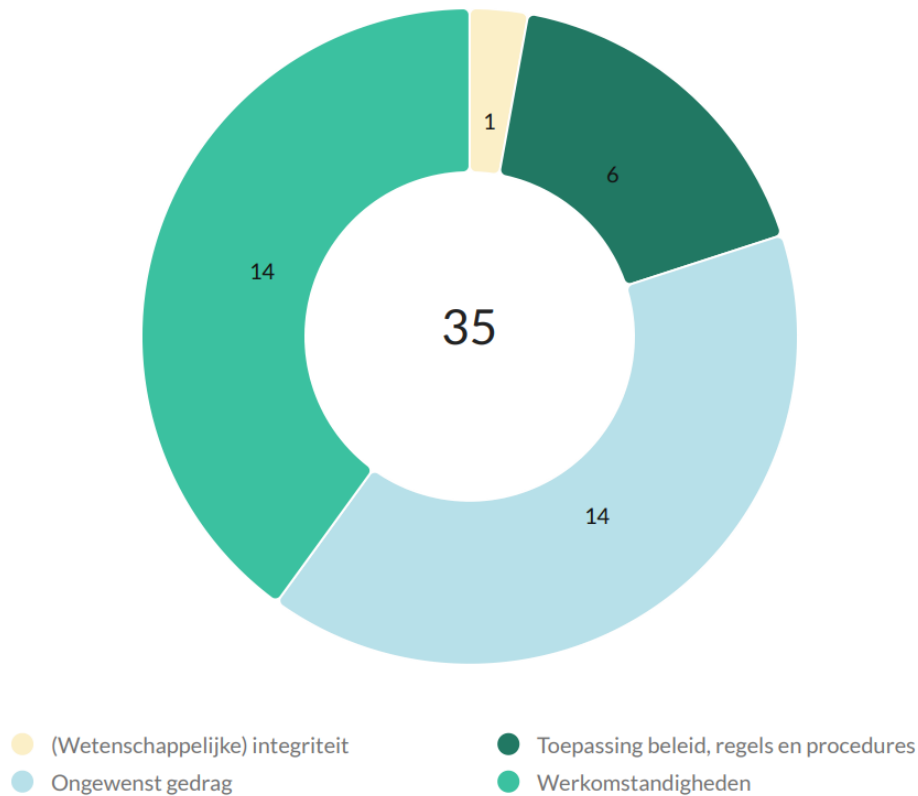
Projection formula: $Number\ to\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11$

Most reports in 2024 came from employees, with 19 reports from academic staff (WP) and 16 from support and management staff (OBP). In addition, 6 reports were registered from students, 2 from PhD candidates (PhDs) and 1 from a former student. This distribution is consistent with previous years, in which the willingness to report among staff was structurally higher than among students or PhD candidates.

For PhDs, the number of reports remains low, consistent with previous observations about their vulnerable position and reluctance to seek formal support. At the same time, the Confidential Advisors Office points out that the decrease in reports may be related to the PhD Support Programme implemented by the Graduate Schools. Whether this indicates an actual decrease in problems or rather better internal guidance requires further monitoring. Limited student reports also remain a recurring concern that asks for targeted communication, better referrals and closer alignment with the student-centered job structure.

Although the percentage of reports by OBP employees has risen slightly, this represents a minimal shift in absolute numbers. This fluctuating ratio does not currently warrant further investigation, but will be included in the monitoring of reporting dynamics within staff groups.

Employee reports



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 77\ notifications\ 2024$

Of the 35 reports from employees received through May 2024, 14 concerned **undesirable behaviour** and likewise 14 concerned **working conditions**. In addition, there were 6 reports about the **application of policies and procedures**, and 1 report about **(scientific) integrity**.

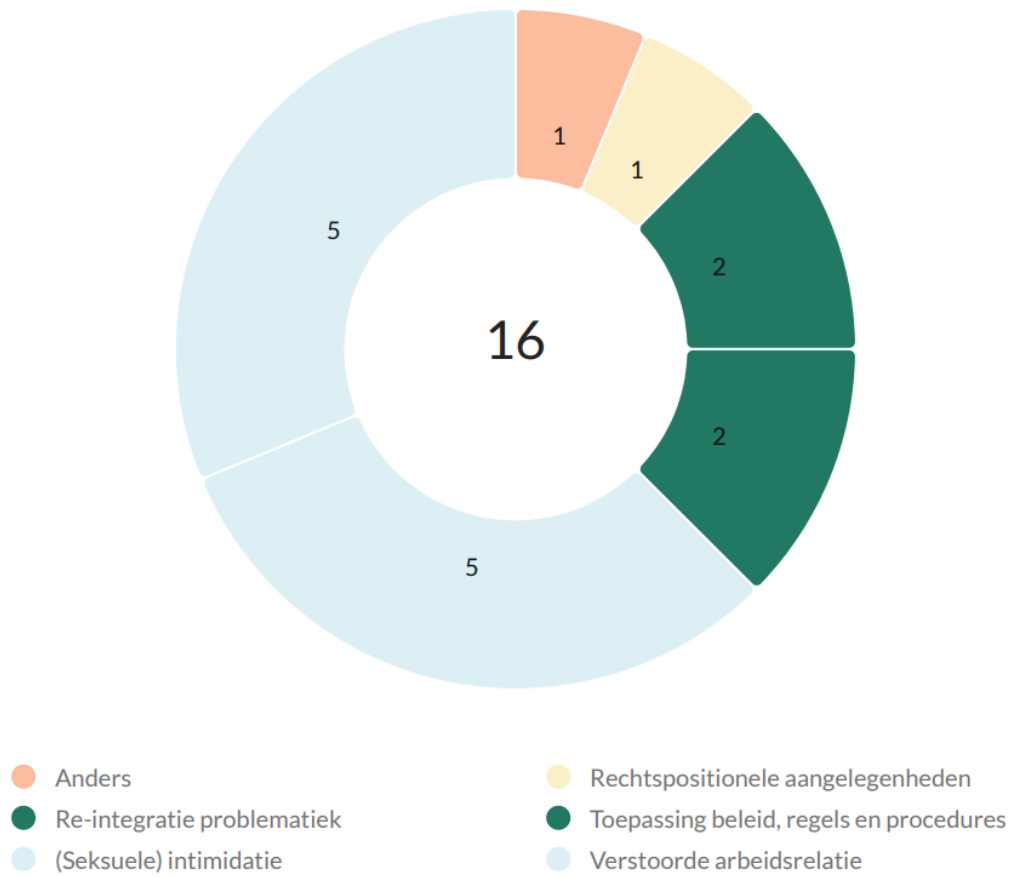
When projected over 11 active months, this amounts to:

- Undesirable behaviour: $14 \div 5 \times 11 = 31$
- Working conditions: $14 \div 5 \times 11 = 31$
- Policies/Procedures: $6 \div 5 \times 11 = 13$
- Integrity: $1 \div 5 \times 11 = 2$

This distribution is similar to previous years, in which undesirable behaviour and working conditions structurally formed the largest share within employee reports. It underlines the need for constant attention to social dynamics, psychological safety and clear communication in teams and leadership.

The structural nature of these themes asks for an integrated approach, looking at behaviour, structure and culture in conjunction. As in 2022 and 2023, it appears that reporters often raise the alarm late, when previous internal routes are perceived as unsafe or ineffective.

Reports OBP



Projection formula: $\text{Number through May} = (\text{Number}) \div 5 \times 11 = \text{Projection total 35 notifications 2024}$

In the first five months of 2024, 16 reports were received from employees within the OBP. The largest categories are (sexual) harassment (5 reports) and disrupted labour relations (5 reports). In addition, reports were registered about the application of policies and procedures (2), reintegration issues (2), and one report each about legal status matters and other issues.

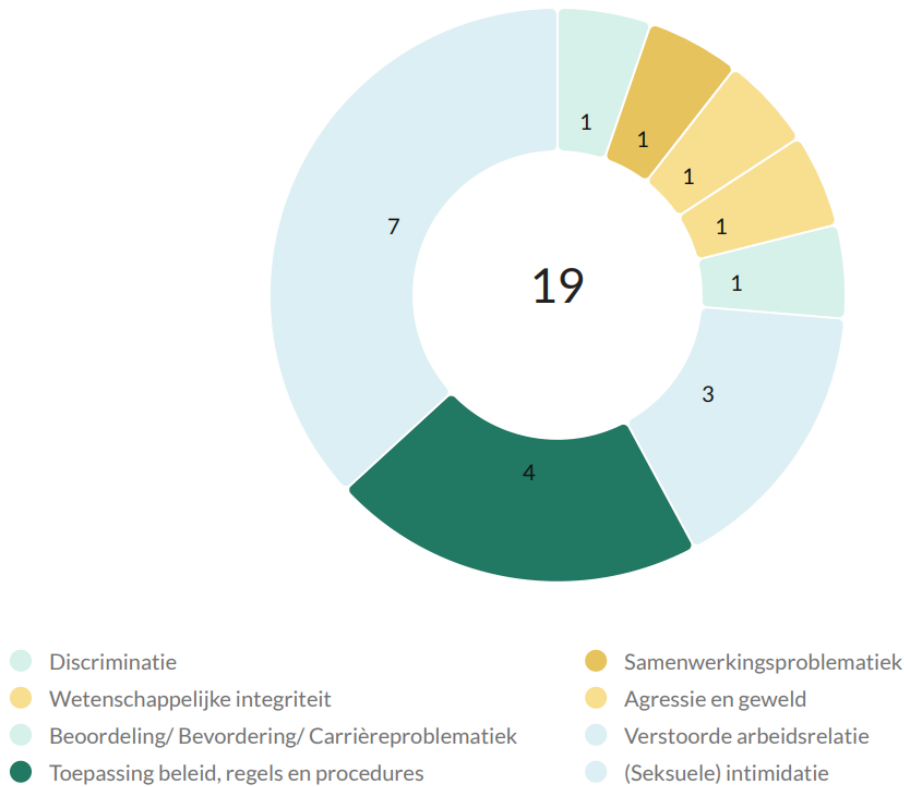
When calculated through, this amounts to the following projection:

- Intimidation: about 11 reports
- Disrupted working relationship: about 11 reports
- Policies/Procedures: about 4 reports
- Reintegration: about 4 reports
- Legal position: about 2 reports
- Other: about 2 reports

This distribution shows that tensions in the working relationship in OBP are often accompanied by perceived insecurity or lack of clarity about structure, guidance or recovery. As in previous years, the combination of behavioural dynamics and systemic questions is a recurring pattern in this reporting category.

The relatively high reporting frequency from the OBP is slightly higher than in previous years. This may indicate improved findability and awareness of the Ombuds function within this target group. Given the limited numbers, caution is warranted in interpreting these findings, but the pattern deserves attention in the broader monitoring of social safety.

Reports WP



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 42\ 2024$

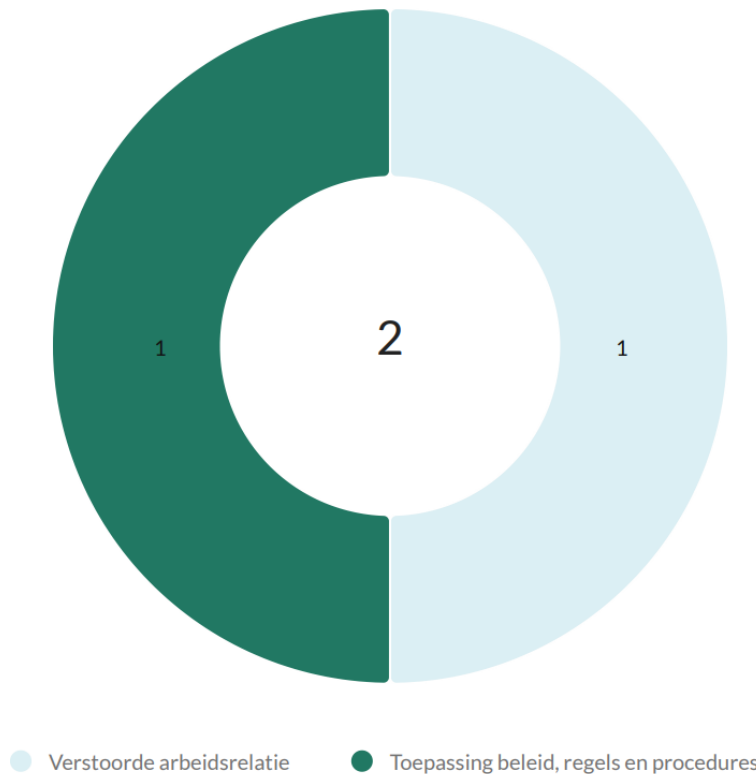
The projected 42 academic staff (WP) reports in 2024 show an increase from 2023, in which about 31 WP reports were recorded. The number was presumably higher in 2022, although no exact WP category was distinguished then; however, the thematic analysis showed that WP in particular made reports about work culture, hierarchy and insecurity in supervisory relationships.¹

The upward trend in 2024 confirms this pattern: the largest proportion of reports involve (sexual) harassment, followed by disrupted working relationships and frustration with policies or career paths. These recurring themes ask for continued attention to social safety and accountability in academic structures.

The increase may be partly explained by increased visibility of the position and improved referral from the network, but may also reflect continued bottlenecks within WP's work environment.

¹ Note: comparison with 2023 is indicative because WP/OBP were not recorded separately then.

Reports PhDs



Projection formula: *Number through May = (Number) ÷ 5 × 11 = Projection total 4 notifications 2024*

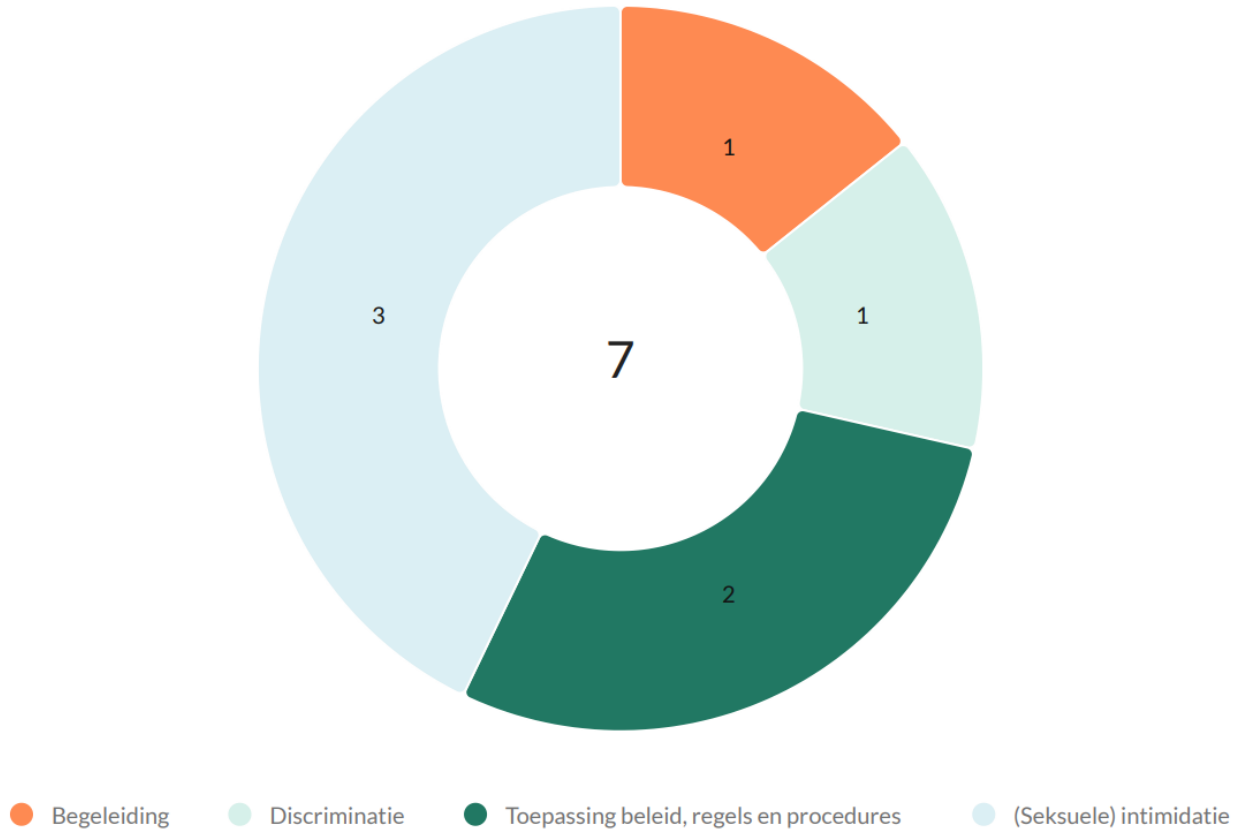
In the first five months of 2024, 2 reports were registered from doctoral students (PhDs): one involved a disrupted working relationship, and one related to the application of policies, rules and procedures. When projected over the calendar year (excluding July), this amounts to an expected 4-5 reports in 2024 - a decrease from 2023 (9 reports) and 2022 (8 reports).

The relatively low frequency of reporting contrasts with previous years in which PhD candidates more frequently reported unsafe supervision, dependence on supervisors, or ambiguity in the doctoral programme. Therefore, previous reports highlighted the structural vulnerability of this group, in part because of long-term dependence and limited access to informal routes of assistance.

Although the low figure in 2024 should be interpreted with caution (given the small number), it is important to remain alert to this group. The nature of the reports confirms the need for clear positioning, accountability and guidance for PhD candidates in graduate schools. Targeted communication and low-threshold access to the Ombuds function remain essential in this regard.

At the same time, the annual report of the Confidential Advisors suggests that the decrease in reports may be related to the PhD Support Programme implemented by the Graduate Schools. This raises the question whether the lower number of reports indicates an improvement in the supervision structure or reduced visibility of the Ombuds function in this target group. In either case, vigilance is required. The nature of the reports confirms the need for clear positioning, accountability and guidance for PhD candidates within graduate schools. Targeted communication and easy access to the Ombuds function remain essential in this regard.

Student reports



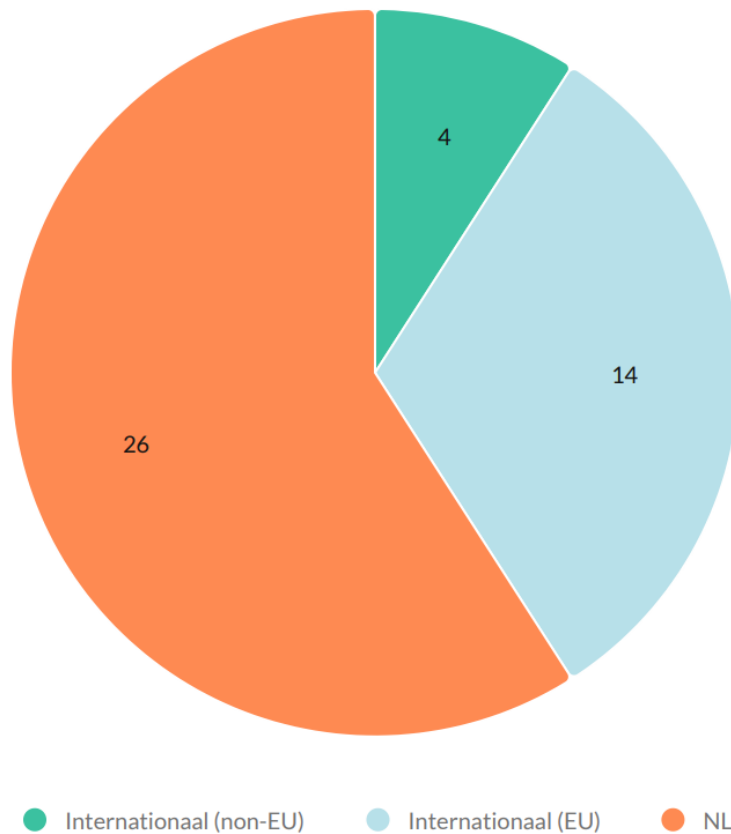
Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 15\ notifications\ 2024$

In the first five months of 2024, 7 reports were received from students. The topics mainly concerned (sexual) harassment (3 reports) and the application of policies and procedures (2 reports), supplemented by reports on discrimination (1) and counseling (1).

The projected 16 reports in 2024 represents a slight decrease from 2023, which recorded 21 student reports. In 2022, there were still 31 student reports. This downward trend is consistent with national signals: students appear less likely to find the Ombuds function than employees.

As in previous years, student reports are often made only after other routes have been tried or have not helped sufficiently. This underlines the importance of targeted communication, good findability of the Ombuds function and cooperation with student-oriented facilities such as student advisors, deans and confidants.

Reports by Nationality



Projection formula: $\text{Number through May} = (\text{Number}) \div 5 \times 11 = \text{Projection total 97 notifications 2024}$

The projected distribution for 2024 shows that approximately 59% of reports are expected to come from Dutch reporters, followed by EU internationals (approx. 32%) and non-EU internationals (approx. 9%).

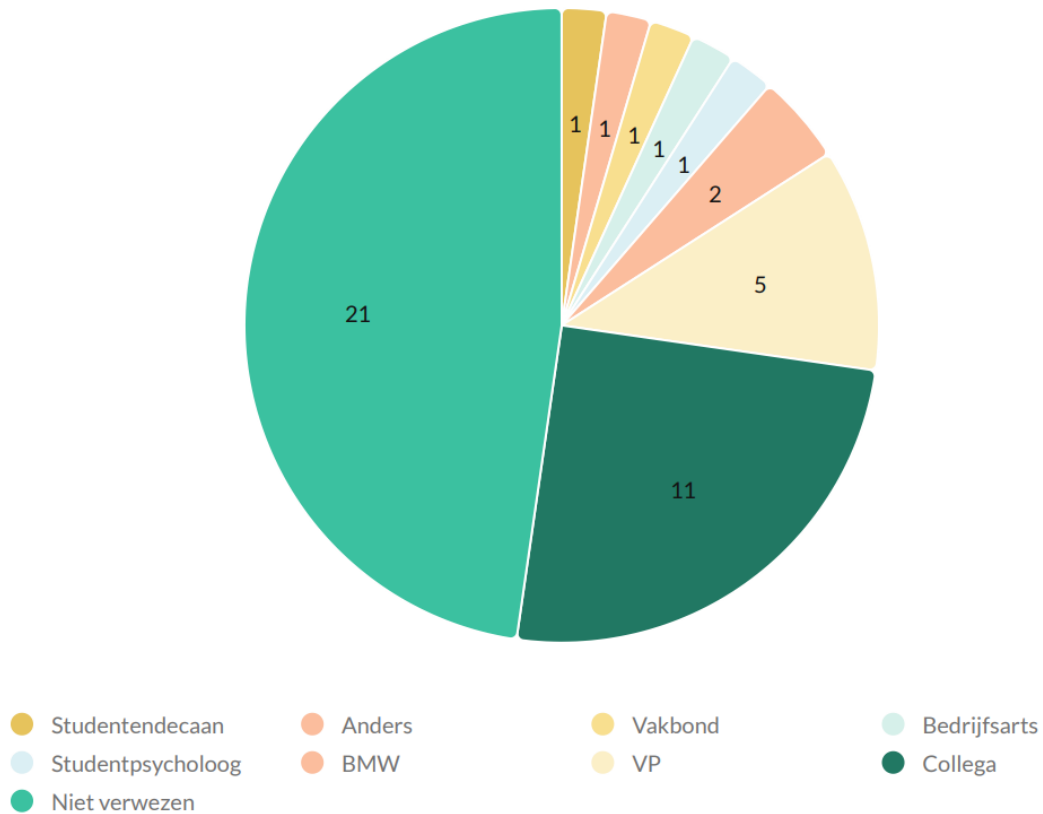
Compared to previous years, the proportion of Dutch reporters has increased:

- In 2022: NL 63, EU 13, non-EU 27
- In 2023: NL 45, EU 16, non-EU 9
- In 2024 (projection): NL 57, EU 31, non-EU 9

This means that the proportion of reports from international students and staff remains stable, although it is striking that the number of reports from non-EU internationals has fallen compared to the peak year of 2022. This development may be related to factors such as language barriers, cultural barriers, limited awareness of the function or uncertainty about position and residence.

Given the international composition of the university community, it remains important to take this diversity into account in communication and reporting structures.

Origin of reports: how did reporters end up with the Ombudsperson?



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 97\ notifications\ 2024$

For the 44 reports registered in 2024, we mapped out how people found their way to the Ombudsperson. Just like in previous years, we checked if people were referred by others or if they reached out on their own.

The breakdown is as follows:

- Not referred/unknown/contacted independently: 21 reporters
- Via colleague or manager: 11 reporters
- Via confidential advisor (VP): 5 reporters
- Via company social worker (BMW): 2 reporters
- Via student counselor: 1 reporter
- Via student psychologist: 1 reporter
- Via trade union: 1 reporter
- Via company doctor: 1 reporter
- Other referrers (including external coach, legal advisor): 1 reporter

Compared to 2023, the proportion of reporters who contacted the Ombudsperson on their own initiative remained virtually unchanged. The most common referral source remains the immediate work environment (colleague or manager), followed by the confidential advisor. Referrals from student support structures remain limited in absolute numbers, which is in line with the broader trend of low reporting frequency among students.

This distribution underscores the importance of the Ombuds function being easily accessible and visible in the broader university infrastructure, as well as the importance of a well-informed network of colleagues, confidential advisors, and supervisors.

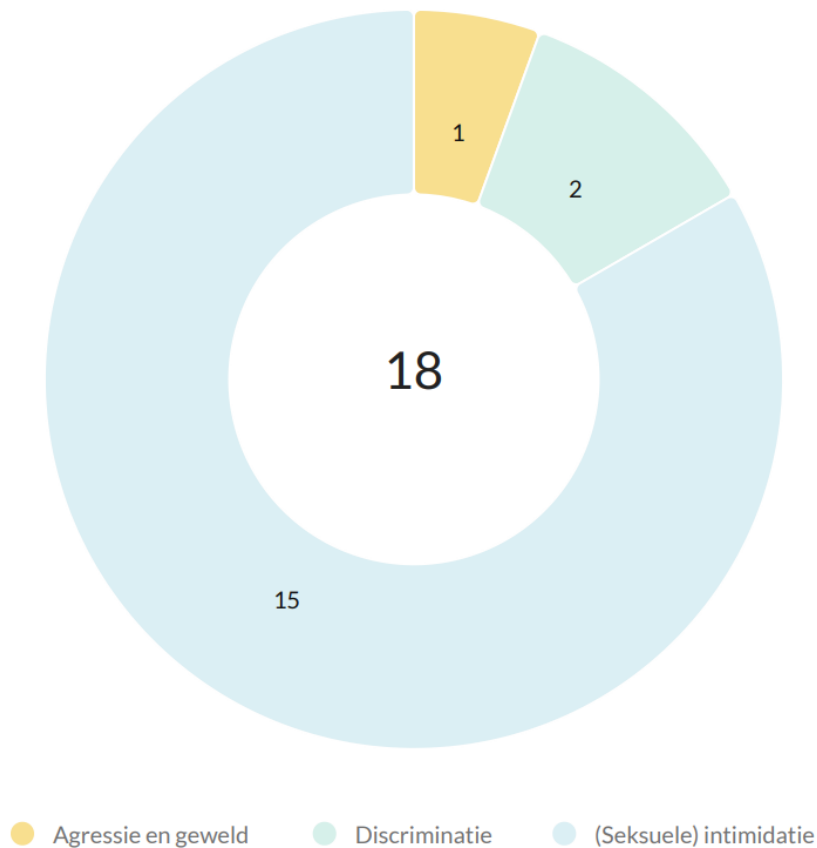
Appendix 4: Reports by category

The tables in this appendix provide a brief overview of reports in 2024, divided into categories such as *undesirable behaviour* and *other reports*. This classification is intended to provide an outline of the types of signals received by the Ombudsperson.

It is important to interpret these figures with caution. Reports can vary greatly in nature and seriousness, and cannot always be placed unambiguously under a single category. In practice, many signals touch on several themes at once, such as behaviour, communication, position, leadership or procedural justice. The classification chosen is therefore indicative, not explanatory.

A thorough thematic analysis asks for knowledge of the content, context and dynamics of the case itself. No conclusions about trends or causes can be drawn on the basis of figures alone. Therefore, these tables offer a general overview and do not provide a basis for policy interpretation without additional qualitative analysis.

Reports of undesirable behaviour



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 40\ notifications\ 2024$

Undesirable behaviour is defined as behaviour that is perceived by an employee or student as transgressive, intimidating, hurtful, exclusive or harmful, and that puts pressure on the work or learning environment. This may be verbal, nonverbal or digital and manifest itself in direct confrontations or subtle, prolonged patterns of interaction. Intention is not determinative: unintended behaviour can also be perceived as undesirable.

The Ombudsperson always assesses these reports in the broader context of power relations, cultural characteristics and system dynamics that may contribute to social insecurity or exclusion.

Most reports in this category in 2024 involved (sexual) harassment (15 reports), followed by discrimination (2 reports) and aggression or violence (1 report).

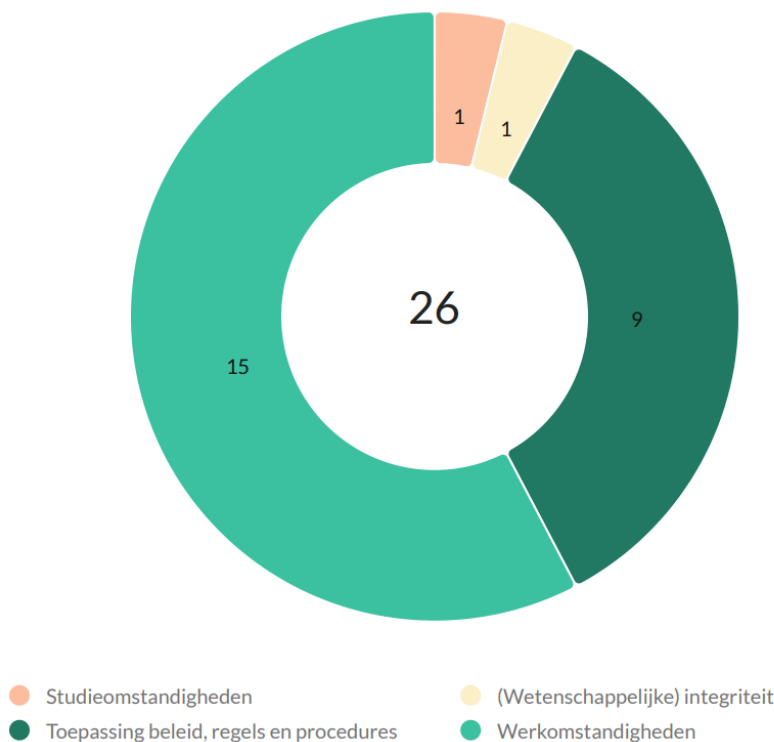
When projected to the annual result, this means:

- (Sexual) harassment → $15 \div 5 \times 11 = 33$ reports
- Discrimination → $2 \div 5 \times 11 = 4$ notifications
- Aggression/violence → $1 \div 5 \times 11 = 2$ reports

In both 2022 and 2023, reports of harassment constituted the largest share of the undesirable behaviour category (31 and 36 reports, respectively). This recurring magnitude makes it clear that the issue has a structural character in the work and study environment. In the 2023 annual report, this was therefore named as a worrisome and ongoing development.

As in previous years, reports are rarely unambiguous; they often touch on multiple themes such as power relations, procedural ambiguity or lack of accountability. The graph is therefore intended as an indicative overview; substantive interpretation always requires contextual analysis.

Other reports



Projection formula: $Number\ through\ May = (Number) \div 5 \times 11 = Projection\ total\ 57\ notifications\ 2024$

The largest subcategory in the other reports concerns working conditions (15 reports), under which reporters named, for example, task load, social tension, role ambiguity or lack of supervision.

In addition, there are 9 reports about the application of policies, rules and procedures, including situations of lack of clarity or perceived arbitrariness in selection, appointment or decision-making. The remaining reports concern study conditions (1) and (scientific) integrity (1).

Although the chart provides direction on the type of bottlenecks experienced, it is true that these reports often touch on multiple themes simultaneously. Therefore, the Ombudsperson always assesses these signals in their broader social, organizational and human context.

A similar spread was observed in previous years, with workload, organizational ambiguity and policy inconsistency remaining structural areas of concern. These reports deserve follow-up, as they often signal an inability to recover in the line or missed coordination at the system level.