

ANNUAL REPORT

Ombudsperson

University of Groningen

2025

Social safety as a three-pronged balance

Observations, analysis and recommendations for the 2025 reporting year

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Reporting year: 1 January – 31 December 2025

The English version of this document is a machine translation which has only been checked for common AI mistakes and consistent use of a few terms. It may still contain errors. Text in images has not been translated. The Dutch text is the official text.

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Foreword

An annual report is a look back, but writing it is also a way of understanding what a year has actually revealed. For me, 2025 was my first full year as Ombudsperson at the University of Groningen. I took up my post on 1 December 2024, during a transitional phase. The annual report for 2024 was still a transitional report, based on the records kept by my predecessor; 2025 is therefore the first year for which I am reporting on the basis of my own observations and my own understanding of the issues.

Above all, it was a year of getting to know the university – a large and multifaceted institution, with its own culture and way of working – and the many people who, each in their own role, are committed to ensuring a safe working and study environment. This process of getting to know the university is no mere formality: it is essential for being able to properly assess reports. You can only truly understand a report once you are familiar with the context surrounding it.

Behind each of the 82 reports received by the Ombudsperson's Office this year lies a human being. This calls for care and respect – not only in the handling of individual reports, but also in the way in which observations are recorded and interpreted. This report does so in an anonymised manner and in broad terms. It does not describe individual cases, but rather the patterns that emerge from the reports.

For the university, 2025 was marked by several, partly concurrent developments relating to social safety. Various external oversight and assessment processes converged in a single year, whilst at the same time the consequences of budget cuts and organisational changes were being felt within teams and degree programmes. For the Ombudsperson's office itself, it was a year of building foundations: from recording reports, to organising them into patterns, and to developing a working method that is replicable and not dependent on any one individual.

The common thread I observed throughout the year is summarised in the subtitle of this report: social safety as a three-pronged balance. Social safety can no longer be understood as an issue solely between the complainant and the accused. The position of the professionals who handle cases and prepare decisions also requires attention. Where one of these positions remains structurally neglected, the whole system becomes unbalanced. This report elaborates on that idea.

I would like to thank the staff, PhD candidates and students who sought out the Ombudsperson's Office in 2025, and the colleagues both within and outside the university with whom I have worked this year. Their trust and commitment form the foundation of this work.

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May 2026

1. Introduction and context

1.1 Accountability

In this annual report, the Ombudsperson accounts for her work during the reporting year from 1 January to 31 December 2025. The report has been drawn up in accordance with the Regulations for the Ombudsperson of the University of Groningen and contains an anonymised overview of the number of reports received, their nature and the resulting observations and recommendations. It contains no personal data and no situations that could be traced back to specific individuals. The report is addressed to the Board of the University and a copy is shared with the University Council, the Local Consultative Committee and the Supervisory Board.

The annual report serves three purposes. It provides an account of the performance of the role. It highlights trends and patterns in the reports received from staff, PhD candidates and students. And it offers observations and recommendations that can support the university as a learning organisation.

1.2 The Ombudsperson role in transition

The Ombudsperson role at the University of Groningen was established in September 2021 and shaped in the years that followed by the university's first Ombudsperson, Dr Carolijn Winnubst. She stepped down from the role on 1 June 2024. Following a period during which the post was vacant, the role was taken up by the current Ombudsperson on 1 December 2024. The annual report for 2024 – a transitional annual report – described this transition and, as the underlying issues were not known to the current Ombudsperson, was based on the recorded data covering the first few months of that year. 2025 is the first reporting year to fall entirely under the remit of the current Ombudsperson, for which she herself is accountable in terms of content.

Where relevant, this report refers to observations from previous annual reports of the Ombudsperson's Office. This highlights which themes recur over the years – and are therefore structural in nature – whilst at the same time maintaining a clear distinction between what was observed in which year.

1.3 The broader context of 2025

Attention to social safety within higher education has increased in recent years, driven by societal developments, national policy reports – such as the advice from Government Commissioner Mariëtte Hamer on tackling sexually transgressive behaviour in higher education and academia – and the experiences within the institutions themselves. At the University of Groningen, the Social Safety Programme 2024–2027 provides direction in this regard; the Ombudsperson's role is incorporated into this as part of the broader support structure for staff, PhD candidates and students.

At the same time, 2025 was characterised by financial constraints. Announced budget cuts and organisational changes had an impact on teams, degree programmes and services. This context is repeatedly evident in the reports received by the Ombudsperson's Office:

uncertainty about the future, the repositioning of roles and persistent work pressure form the backdrop against which questions about social safety arise.

1.4 A year of converging lines of oversight

What makes 2025 special is that various external oversight and assessment initiatives converged in a single year. These included an investigation by the Education Inspectorate, an ongoing project by the Dutch Labour Inspectorate concerning psychosocial workload, the national evaluation of the university Ombudsperson's Office, and the handling of complaints by the National Ombudsperson. These lines of inquiry were at different stages and were not all completed in 2025, but they all address the same core question from different perspectives: how carefully, predictably and fairly is the handling of reports of social insecurity organised? Chapter 6 examines these lines of inquiry in more detail.

2. The Ombudsperson's role: position and working methods

2.1 What the Ombudsperson role entails

The Ombudsperson is an independent, neutral and confidential point of contact for staff, PhD candidates and students at the University of Groningen. The role operates outside the hierarchical structures of the board, management and HR, and outside the formal complaints and appeals procedures. The Ombudsperson does not investigate the culpability of individuals and has no authority to impose sanctions. The value of the role lies elsewhere: in clarifying what is going on, highlighting patterns and mechanisms, and contributing to the organisation's capacity to learn.

The role was launched in 2025 as a two-day-a-week appointment. In practice, depending on the nature and complexity of the concerns raised, the time commitment regularly proved to be greater; consequently, during 2025, the appointment was extended to three days a week.

2.2 What the Ombudsperson role is there for

People turn to the Ombudsperson's Office when they are facing tensions, a breakdown in collaboration, a sense of insecurity or structural barriers in their work or study situation – and when the usual channels do not provide a satisfactory solution. This may be a request for advice, or the need for an independent sounding board. It may involve a situation that someone wishes to explore before taking any action. It may also involve identifying a pattern that extends beyond their own individual case.

What you can expect from the Ombudsperson service is a careful and accessible approach. Reporting is voluntary. The Ombudsperson does not take sides, does not pass judgement on individuals and does not work towards a predetermined outcome. Instead, the situation is examined from various perspectives to identify what is at stake, which interests are involved and where there is scope for resolution, insight or improvement.

Anyone who comes forward retains control over their own account: no action is taken without first consulting the person who has raised the issue. At the same time, it is part of the role that, where reports indicate a wider pattern, the Ombudsperson highlights that pattern – in an anonymised and non-traceable manner – and identifies areas for improvement. The individual account remains that of the person making the report; the interpretation of what is happening structurally is the independent responsibility of the Ombudsperson's role.

What the Ombudsperson role is explicitly not is a substitute for other mechanisms. It does not take the place of the line manager, the confidential adviser, HR, the Contact Point Social Safety or the formal complaints procedure, but complements them: it provides an independent space for reflection and analysis, and a role capable of identifying issues across the organisation.

2.3 In what capacity the Ombudsperson role acts

The Ombudsperson role does not operate in a single, fixed form. Depending on what a situation requires, it fulfils three distinct functions in practice. These complement one another and are not all relevant in every case.

Firstly, the Ombudsperson role acts as a safety net: for situations in which the usual channels – the line manager, HR, existing procedures – do not offer a suitable outcome, or in which someone lacks sufficient confidence in them. Without such a safety net, an employee or student might sometimes have no choice but to raise a concern outside the university. The Ombudsperson role prevents this.

Secondly, it serves as an independent point of contact when a formal channel did exist, but there are concerns about the care with which a report or complaint was handled. Not to redo that handling, but to review the process and help clarify where it has stalled.

Thirdly, the Ombudsperson's role identifies trends and patterns, independently of individual cases. It is precisely here that its unique added value lies: by examining reports across a range of issues, it reveals what a single report cannot show. Much of what is contained in this report – and its central theme – stems from this third function.

Together, these three functions constitute the scope of the Ombudsperson's role. The working method described in the following section applies to each of the three.

2.4 Working method

Every report begins with an exploratory discussion. During this discussion, the Ombudsperson's position – independent, impartial, confidential – is explained, and expectations are discussed. Attention is paid to the context of the report, to the reporter's perspective and, where relevant, to the reporter's own role in the situation and the steps that have already been taken.

The Ombudsperson's role does not focus on the incident itself, but on the underlying dynamics. Each report is considered within its broader context, always bearing in mind whether it is an isolated incident or part of a recurring pattern. Where possible, informal, accessible solutions are sought, allowing for different perspectives and taking into account the position of all those involved. The primary responsibility for resolving work- and study-related issues lies with line management; the Ombudsperson's role is supplementary and preventative in nature: it provides clarification and helps prevent tensions from escalating unnecessarily.

Depending on the situation, the work may take various forms: an exploratory or reflective discussion, advice, mediation, referral, or – where multiple indications point to a structural pattern – an anonymised, aggregated assessment provided to the organisation or the board. A schematic overview of the Ombudsperson's working method is included in Appendix 1.

2.5 Establishing a transparent working method

A significant part of the work in 2025 involved establishing a systematic and traceable record-keeping system. An Ombudsperson role that may change hands carries the risk of knowledge and context being lost – a risk that became apparent during the transition in

2024. In 2025, investment was therefore made in a systematic, GDPR-compliant recording of reports, in a register of recurring themes, and in an overview of consultation and contact moments. The aim of this is twofold: it reveals patterns over time, and it ensures that the role remains traceable and is not tied to any individual, but is structurally embedded.

As has been customary in previous years, the Ombudsperson's office maintains regular peer review sessions and confidential contact with the confidential advisers. This involves coordination regarding reports that require mutual interpretation and in cases of referral, always whilst respecting the confidentiality and the independent status of both roles.

2.6 Position within the wider landscape

The Ombudsperson role is one of several mechanisms relating to social safety. Alongside it are the confidential advisers, the in-house social work service, HR, line managers, the Contact Point Social Safety and the formal complaints, objections and appeals procedures. Each of these mechanisms has its own legitimate role. For those seeking help, however, the distinction between these roles is not always obvious – the difference between a confidential adviser, who stands alongside the person making the report, and the Ombudsperson role, which moves impartially between different perspectives, is subtle but essential. A clear division of roles that is understandable to the user is therefore not merely an administrative matter, but a prerequisite for accessibility.

In carrying out her work, the Ombudsperson maintains contact with various parts of the university, including the Board of the University, faculty boards and services, HR, the Diversity Office, the Social Safety programme management, the staff representative bodies and the employee councils. Externally, she is a member of the National Association of Ombudsmen (LVOO) and takes part in peer review sessions with fellow ombudsmen, including within northern networks, and in the European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (ENOHE). This integration supports the further professionalisation of the role and the exchange of knowledge and experience – coordination with others does not limit independence, but rather fosters a well-informed, independent position.

2.7 The pilot Contact Point Social Safety

The establishment of a central Contact Point for Social Safety forms part of the four-year Social Safety Programme, which commenced in January 2024. It is in line with the national advice issued by Government Commissioner Mariëtte Hamer and with the collective labour agreement (CAO) provision of 1 July 2024, which stipulates that every university must have a single central reporting centre for reports relating to social safety. At the University of Groningen, the Contact Point was launched as a pilot scheme on 1 September 2025. The pilot has been extended until the end of 2026; an evaluation will take place in mid-August 2026, on the basis of which a decision will be made regarding its final structure. The Contact Point is intended to be an accessible and recognisable point of entry that helps those making reports to find their way through a landscape of multiple services – so that the sometimes subtle distinctions between functions do not act as a barrier, but instead people are guided to the service that best suits their needs.

The Contact Point is run by three coordinators, drawn from different parts of the care and support structure. The Ombudsperson's Office and the Confidential Advisor's Office are also

involved in its set-up and further development, providing input and advice. The Ombudsperson's Office also participates in the regular consultations with the coordinators. These consultations take the form of peer review sessions, in which case studies are discussed anonymously; the Ombudsperson's Office contributes reflections on proportionality and due care, whilst respecting everyone's confidentiality and individual position. It should be emphasised that the Ombudsperson is neither a coordinator nor a case handler within the Contact Point; their involvement does not affect the independent status of the role.

From 1 September to 31 December 2025, the Contact Point received a total of 17 reports: 12 from staff and 5 from students. These reports are separate from the 82 alerts received by the Ombudsperson's role; they constitute the Contact Point's own records.¹

Meanwhile, the Ombudsperson's Office is following the pilot with interest: a well-positioned Contact Point can be a valuable tool for preventing the fragmentation of reports and guiding people to the appropriate desk.

¹As the pilot is still ongoing and the Ombudsperson's Office bears no responsibility for the operation or reporting of the Contact Point, this annual report will limit itself to this brief mention. From the next reporting year onwards, the Contact Point is expected to report on its activities and figures itself.

3. Figures and trends

This chapter outlines the key statistical picture for 2025. The full figures – including tables and graphs, as well as comparisons with previous years – are set out in Appendix 2. The focus here is primarily on what the figures reveal.

3.1 Number of complaints and comparison with previous years

In the reporting year 2025, the Ombudsperson's Office received and recorded 82 reports.

Any comparison with previous years requires some caution, as the reporting years are not all of equal length. The Ombudsperson's first annual report covered sixteen months – from its launch in September 2021 up to and including December 2022 – and recorded 130 reports. 2023 was a full calendar year with 91 reports. The transitional year 2024 covered a recorded period of five months with 44 reports. A true one-to-one comparison is therefore primarily possible between 2023 and 2025: two full calendar years, with 91 and 82 reports respectively. These figures are taken from the Ombudsperson's annual reports for the years in question.

If one converts the figures to a monthly average, it becomes clear that the years are very similar – ranging from around seven to nine reports per month. The picture is therefore not one of a sharp decline, but of a relatively stable inflow. And, as previous annual reports have also noted: for a university with over 37,000 students and around 6,000 staff members, this is a modest number. It says little about the severity of the issues at hand. The significance of a report does not lie in the number; each report may represent an undercurrent that is much broader than it appears at first glance.

3.2 Who reported incidents in 2025

The vast majority of reports came from staff. Of the 82 reports, 55 concerned staff and 20 concerned students; 7 came from external parties or could not be clearly attributed. This continues a pattern that has recurred in all previous annual reports: students are significantly less likely to seek out the Ombudsperson's service than staff. Set against the size of the student population, their proportion is small, and this is a structural issue.

The fact that students find it less easy to access the Ombudsperson's office is likely linked to two factors: the findability and recognisability of the role, and the fact that students often turn first to services closer to them with their queries – the study adviser, the student counsellor, or the confidential adviser. Moreover, the fact that the threshold for approaching an Ombudsperson's office can be high is not a situation unique to the UG; it is a widely recognised phenomenon within the sector. The position and visibility of the role were also the subject of the national evaluation of the university Ombudsperson's office in 2025, in which the UG participated.

Within the staff context, reports came from a variety of groups. Support and administrative staff formed the largest group, with 28 reports. Academic staff and PhD candidates each contributed 13 reports; in addition, there were reports from external parties and, in a few cases, from or about professors. The fact that PhD candidates are so prominent in relative

terms is a recurring pattern and no coincidence: their position involves a high degree of dependence on their supervisor, and that dependence makes them vulnerable.

One clarification is required regarding these figures. Not every report can be traced back to a single individual reporter. Some reporters come to the Ombudsperson's office after being made aware of its existence by someone else – a confidential adviser, the company social work service, a colleague or the Contact Point Social Safety. They always take the step of contacting the Ombudsperson's office themselves; there is no question of the report being referred to them. In addition, two of the 82 reports are of a collective nature: they did not come from a single individual whistleblower, but from a group of staff members and an employee council raising a concern that enjoys broader support. As no personal details are associated with such a collective report, it has been categorised under the 'staff' category in the register. A more nuanced distinction in this regard is a point for consideration in the further development of the register.

Just over a third of the reporters in 2025 had an international background: 46 reporters were of Dutch origin, 22 were from within the European Union and 14 from outside it. This is a significant proportion, and it is reflected in the content of the reports.

Of the reports submitted by individual reporters – 80 out of 82 – 43 came from men and 37 from women. The remaining two reports came from a collective and therefore do not specify gender. Whereas in previous years the majority of reporters were women, the distribution in 2025 was almost equal, with a slight predominance of men. No great significance need be attached to this shift – the numbers are small and annual fluctuations are to be expected – but it does fit with the picture of a role that is being taken up by a broader group of people.

3.3 The nature of the reports

The reports can rarely be pigeonholed; virtually every report touches on several themes at once. Social safety and conduct are by far the most common common denominator, almost always intertwined with issues of leadership, governance, procedural due care, workload and relationships of dependency. The following chapter describes these thematic strands.

4. Themes and patterns for 2025

Based on the clustering of the signals, a number of interrelated thematic strands are emerging for 2025. These are described below at a pattern level, without reference to individual situations. The themes are not isolated from one another: social safety often forms the axis around which the others develop.

4.1 Social safety in a system under pressure

Social safety and social norms remained the most prevalent theme in 2025. The signals related, amongst other things, to perceived exclusion, power imbalances, reluctance to voice concerns or criticism for fear of the consequences, and team dynamics in which a sense of insecurity is gradually becoming the norm.

What was particularly striking in 2025 was the link to the broader context of budget cuts and organisational changes. Uncertainty about the future, the repositioning of roles and persistent work pressure formed the backdrop against which tensions arose. It is precisely during such periods that it becomes clear how closely the perceived safety climate is linked to the way in which change is managed: to the extent to which decision-making is explained, agreements are made visible and applied consistently, and there is scope for input. Where such explanation is lacking, room for interpretation arises, and a decision may be perceived as targeting an individual – even when that is not the intention.

The fact that workload is rarely explicitly cited as the reason for a report, but is almost always an underlying factor, is an observation that has also been made in previous years' annual reports. High workload seems to be regarded more as a given than as a signal that warrants attention.

4.2 Governance and procedural rigour

A second pattern concerns the rigour of procedures and decision-making. This involved questions about the explainability and transparency of decisions, the application of rules and procedures, and the governance of bodies that take far-reaching decisions affecting staff and students. In several reports, the feeling of not being heard played a central role – both in the context of staff and in the relationship between students and the organisation.

Behind this procedural issue lies a human one. Anyone who approaches a helpdesk, a scheme or a procedure with a question or a problem and is told that it is not possible – simply because the system adheres strictly to the rules – often gives up. Often not because the rule itself is unreasonable, but because the scope for flexibility around it is hard to find. That scope requires someone who is willing and able to seek it out, and not everyone involved finds this equally easy. The difference between considering what someone needs and sticking rigidly to the rules largely determines how fair a process is perceived to be. This is an observation that has also been highlighted in previous annual reports by the Ombudsperson's Office, and it remains as relevant as ever.

Procedural due care is not a mere formality. It forms the foundation of social safety: a process in which those involved are informed in good time and given the opportunity to share their perspective contributes to trust, to careful decision-making and to preventing

unintended perceptions. Where the Ombudsperson's Office received reports in 2025 concerning the working methods of bodies, the approach taken was one of aggregation: multiple reports were brought together to form a description of a pattern, discussed without focusing on the question of blame, and with respect for the independence of the body itself. In doing so, the Ombudsperson's Office examines the way in which a process unfolds – not the correctness of an individual decision; the substantive assessment of an individual case remains with the competent body.

Finally, this theme touches on external scrutiny. Oversight – such as the investigation by the National Ombudsperson – focuses strongly on the traceability of procedures, which underlines just how important procedural rigour is. At the same time, it is important that the emphasis on accountability does not crowd out the scope for a tailored approach: rigour and a human touch are not opposites, but go hand in hand.

4.3 Power and dependency relationships

A third, closely related theme concerns relationships characterised by a high degree of dependency: between a PhD candidate and their supervisor, between an employee and their manager, and in other hierarchical relationships. In these relationships, behaviour that might not in itself be described as inappropriate carries greater weight – precisely because the dependent party feels they have little scope to speak out against it. A comment, a tone of voice, a casual decision: these take on a different significance when the other person is responsible for your assessment, your contract or your progress. This makes such behaviour difficult to discuss and hard to bring to light, and it explains why people often wait until it is too late to speak out. By then, a great deal has usually already happened.

The position of PhD candidates deserves special attention here. They are highly dependent on their supervisor, and that dependence extends over a long period and covers virtually everything that determines their career. Where the supportive role of a supervising figure acting as a confidant or counsellor is not clearly defined, or where that role overlaps with a substantive supervisory role, there is scope for a blurring of roles. Previous annual reports have also highlighted this; it remains an area for attention.

4.4 International staff, students and inclusion

A fourth area concerns the international community within the university. In 2025, over a third of those who reported issues had an international background. Themes relating to inclusion recur in their reports: language and communication, the quality of onboarding, a perceived distance from informal networks and decision-making, and vulnerability at times of contract renewal or staff turnover. This vulnerability also has a financial dimension: international staff sometimes have a different type of contract, meaning that the loss of work has considerably more severe financial consequences in a number of cases.

The handling of these concerns in 2025 highlighted just how much figures and perceptions can diverge: a statistical analysis of the distribution of work within a faculty yielded a different outcome to what the staff members concerned actually experienced. The fact that figures do not demonstrate specific inequality does not make a perceived inequality any less real: the feeling of not quite belonging, or of having to do more on a structural basis, is in itself a signal that deserves attention. Figures and perceptions both deserve serious

consideration, without using one to dismiss the other. It is precisely the awareness of that distinction that is part of a careful interpretation.

4.5 Clarity of roles and coherence within the support structure

A final point concerns the support structure itself. With the Ombudsperson's office, the confidential advisers, the university social work service, the Contact Point Social Safety, HR and the formal procedures, the university has multiple mechanisms in place to address social safety. This is a strength, but it also carries a risk: reports may be received in a fragmented manner, follow multiple channels simultaneously or fall between the cracks. Clear delineation of roles and mutual coordination are therefore not merely an administrative matter, but a prerequisite for due diligence.

5. Social safety as a three-pronged balance

The themes from the previous chapter will converge in 2025 into a single overarching perspective. This perspective forms the central theme of this report. It is also the core of the end-of-year memorandum that the Ombudsperson's Office submitted to the Board of the University in December 2025.

5.1 The social- safety paradox

Social safety within the university is currently in a transitional phase. There is – quite rightly and necessarily – a great deal of focus on the protection of those who report incidents: on accessible reporting channels, on confidentiality, and on the recognition of perceived boundary violations. At the same time, it is becoming apparent in practice that this focus, on its own, is insufficient to guarantee social safety in a sustainable and equitable manner.

This gives rise to a structural tension, referred to in this report as the social safety paradox. Social safety requires that perceived breaches of boundaries be taken seriously. Yet it is simultaneously linked to a fundamental principle of due process: that a person is not guilty in advance unless this has been established. Tension arises when an as yet unproven – alleged – report is already taken as fact before there has been an opportunity for both sides to be heard, and when this leads at an early stage to actual consequences – for example, a remedial programme being initiated, a formal warning, or damage to reputation – for the person to whom the report relates, whilst a thorough investigation has yet to begin or is still ongoing.

Thus, a measure intended to enhance social safety – when procedural safeguards are lacking – may actually lead to feelings of insecurity among other parties involved. Furthermore, insufficient opportunity for both sides to be heard increases the risk of premature judgements being formed. This is not a new insight: the importance of hearing both sides, particularly in situations where people are being held to account for their behaviour, has also been addressed in previous annual reports by the Ombudsperson's Office. The reports from 2025 show that this remains as relevant as ever.

5.2 A third role: the frontline professional

Alongside the complainant and the accused, a third role became particularly prominent in 2025: that of the operational professionals. These are the people who handle cases, monitor procedures and prepare or implement decisions – managers, HR advisers, lawyers, committee members – and, by extension, the directors and senior managers who ultimately take the decisions.

In complex and long-running processes, these professionals face intense pressure, sometimes involving threatening or intimidating communication, and public or semi-public escalation. This demonstrably affects their performance, whilst their role in policy and reflection often remains implicit. This, too, relates to social safety. Those who drive processes must themselves be able to rely on a safe working environment and on administrative support.

5.3 The three-way balance

The experiences of 2025 show that social safety can no longer be understood as a bipolar model of the complainant versus the accused, but as a balance between three positions:

- **the protection and recognition of complainants** – taking perceived breaches of boundaries seriously and providing safe, accessible channels;
- **the careful and balanced protection of those accused** – allowing for both sides of the story to be heard and providing protection against premature judgement;
- **the protection and administrative support of frontline professionals and decision-makers** – taking into account both the pressure and the fragmentation they face in complex cases.

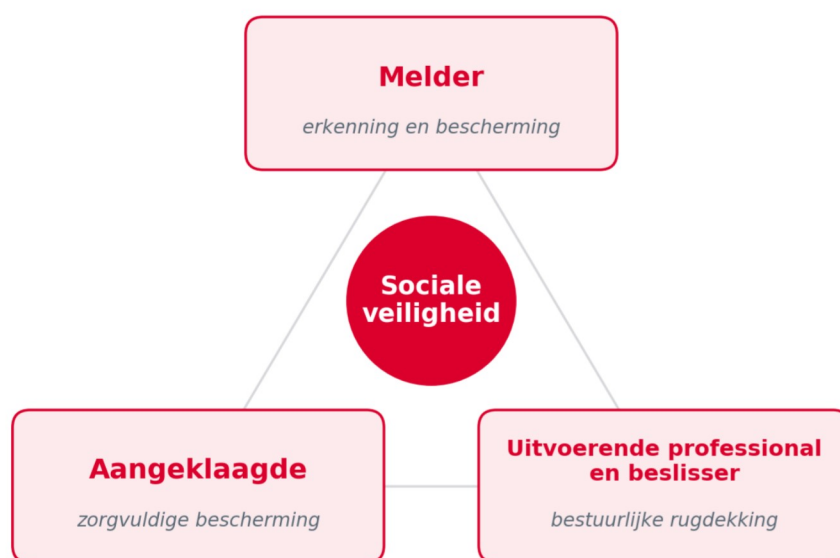


Figure 1. Social safety as a three-pronged balance: three positions that all deserve protection simultaneously.

If one of these three positions is structurally neglected, the whole system becomes unbalanced. That is the essence of the three-pronged approach: not a choice between these positions, but keeping all three in view simultaneously.

5.4 Professional coordination in complex cases

The national advisory report by Government Commissioner Mariëtte Hamer (2024) advocates close cooperation between the officials involved – such as ombudsmen and confidential advisers – to support whistleblowers, those accused and managers alike. This same idea is reflected in the experience of 2025: complex social safety issues require joint professional interpretation.

This does not involve an additional layer of management, but rather a working method: bringing together the relevant professionals in a timely manner – in the form of an expert team – to ensure that procedures, responsibilities and due diligence are properly safeguarded. Within the university, it is evident that cases where multiple pathways converge are vulnerable to fragmentation when such coordination is lacking. It is precisely this joint interpretation that enhances the predictability and quality of decision-making. It is a form of

collaboration that does not undermine, but rather strengthens, the independence of the individual roles.

6. Administrative interpretation

This chapter places the observations from 2025 within a broader, institutional perspective.

6.1 A year of external scrutiny

As mentioned earlier, various external oversight and assessment processes converged in 2025. They all relate to the quality and diligence with which social safety is addressed.

In 2025, the Education Inspectorate conducted an investigation into the university. As part of this, the Inspectorate visited the University of Groningen and interviewed the Ombudsperson. Upon request, the Ombudsperson provided an overview of her own reports. The Inspectorate's final report was not yet available at the time of drafting this annual report.

In addition, a process led by the Dutch Labour Inspectorate concerning psychosocial workload was underway in 2025. This process forms part of a sector-wide focus on workload and social safety at Dutch universities.

In 2025, a national evaluation of the university Ombudsperson role also took place, as part of the assignment given to the collective labour agreement negotiating body for Dutch universities. Four years after the introduction of the role, a sector-wide review was conducted to examine how the Ombudsperson role is organised and safeguarded. The Ombudsperson role at the University of Groningen took part in this evaluation. The evaluation was completed in the spring of 2026, prior to the publication of this annual report.

6.2 The report by the National Ombudsperson

During the reporting year, on 17 December 2025, the Ombudsperson received the report from the National Ombudsperson concerning Mr Landman's complaint. The National Ombudsperson concluded that the university's handling of the complaint had, in some respects, lacked transparency and had not followed clear procedures, particularly with regard to the explicit conclusion of the procedure.

At the same time, the report notes that the university demonstrably made efforts on several occasions to reach a resolution and make progress – including through discussions, tailored solutions and independent investigations. The complexity of the case and the overlap of various processes played a role in this.

The report confirms, through an external assessment, what also emerges from the university's own 2025 findings: the importance of clearly concluding procedures, of reaching a joint professional interpretation, and of taking into account the positions of all those involved in complex cases.

6.3 Coherence in a landscape with multiple points of contact

A recurring institutional concern relates to coherence within the support structure. The university has multiple services dealing with social safety, each with its own legitimate role. The downside is that reports may be received in a fragmented manner. When the same

situation is handled by several points of contact simultaneously, or when a report falls between the cracks, the overall picture is lost – and with it the ability to identify patterns in good time. The National Ombudsperson’s report also touches on this point.

This does not argue for fewer services, but for better coordination: for bringing together insights where cases are complex, and for a clear division of roles that is also understandable to the person reporting the issue. In this light, the pilot of the central Contact Point Social Safety is an important development: if well positioned, the Centre can guide people to the appropriate point of contact and thus counteract fragmentation. The evaluation of that pilot in 2026 will be a natural opportunity to clarify the division of roles within the support structure as a whole.

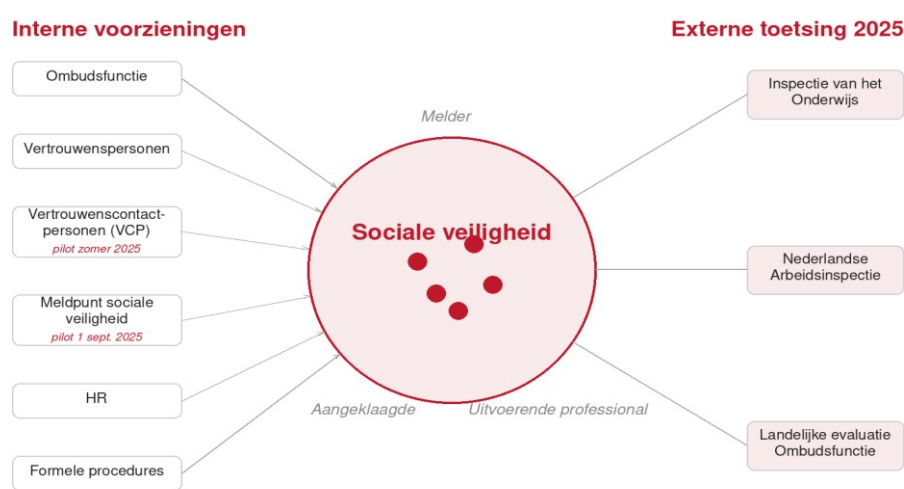


Figure 2. The social safety landscape in 2025: various internal services and external assessment criteria each focus on their own specific area of the field.

6.4 The Ombudsperson function and the formal channels

The Ombudsperson’s role exists alongside the formal complaint, objection and appeal procedures; it does not replace them. Much of what the Ombudsperson’s role achieves concerns situations that do not (yet) lend themselves to a formal procedure, or in which a formal procedure is not the most appropriate route. The Ombudsperson’s informal approach, focused on restoration and interpretation, and the formal channels complement one another.

The Ombudsperson’s insight into patterns – across faculties and services, and independent of questions of blame – is of a different nature to the insight gained through a formal procedure into an individual case. Both are necessary. It is precisely this combination that makes it possible both to do justice to the individual case and to learn at the systemic level.

7. Recommendations

The recommendations set out below are based on the findings and observations from 2025. They are intended as a contribution to the university as a learning organisation, and not as a judgement. Several of them build on the end-of-year memorandum of December 2025 and on recommendations from previous annual reports by the Ombudsperson's Office; this underlines that these are structural issues requiring attention. For the sake of practicality, a conscious decision has been made to limit the number of recommendations to a few, interrelated ones.

- 1. When implementing organisational change, pay particular attention to openness and careful communication.** The feedback from 2025 showed that budget cuts and reorganisation are not separate from the perceived sense of security: it is precisely during periods of change that the way in which decisions are explained and managed determines how safe people feel. This requires openness, clear guidelines and an awareness of the link with the pressure on staff – within management and leadership, and in the implementation of HR-related processes, where that pressure is felt most acutely.
- 2. Treat social safety as a three-part system.** In policy, communication and the handling of cases, keep all three perspectives in mind simultaneously: the person making the report, the person accused, and the professionals and decision-makers carrying out the process. Pay particular attention to the two perspectives that have received less attention to date.
- 3. Ensure careful, transparent processes – and organise professional coordination for complex cases.** Make the steps involved in a procedure clear in advance and explicitly indicate when it has been completed. Where multiple pathways converge in a complex case, bring the professionals involved together in good time for joint interpretation, in the spirit of the social safety team advocated by Government Commissioner Hamer.
- 4. Strengthen the coherence of the support structure.** Use the evaluation and further development of the Social Safety Hotline to make the roles of the various services clear and comprehensible to the person making the report, and to prevent the fragmentation of reports.
- 5. Continue to invest in the visibility of the Ombudsperson's role and in the clarity of its approach and remit.** A role that is easily found and well understood requires ongoing attention to visibility, communication and a clear roadmap, as well as a clear description of the Ombudsperson's approach and remit. The national evaluation of the Ombudsperson's role provides starting points for this. In this regard, the role's visibility amongst students deserves particular attention: their share of reports is consistently low, a pattern that is also recognised at national level. A concrete step would be to make this annual report available within the university, as is done with the annual report of the confidential advisers: this increases the visibility of the role and demonstrates that reports are taken seriously and lead to insights.

8. Structural areas for attention

Not everything highlighted in this report is new. A number of areas for attention recur in year-on-year reports from the Ombudsperson's Office – including those of my predecessor. The fact that they keep recurring does not make them any less important, but rather more so: these are not isolated incidents, but structural patterns. I shall briefly outline three of them here.

The vulnerable position of PhD candidates. The long-term dependence of PhD candidates on their supervisors, within highly hierarchical relationships, makes this group particularly vulnerable. This was repeatedly highlighted in the annual reports for 2022 and 2023, and the findings from 2025 confirm this picture. It calls for continued attention to clear supervision and the availability of support within the graduate schools.

Workload and working conditions. High workloads, the distribution of work and the hierarchical relationships within which this takes place have been one of the largest categories of concerns in all previous reporting years. This remains a recurring theme in 2025 – and this year's financial constraints have made the issue more acute rather than less so.

Procedural rigour and the follow-up to concerns. Uncertainty and a perceived lack of consistency in the application of rules and in decision-making, as well as the absence of visible follow-up to previous concerns, recur time and again in the annual reports. When people are unable to track how a decision is reached or what happens to their concern, this undermines trust in the organisation – regardless of the substantive outcome.

The characteristic of structural areas for attention is that they rarely feel urgent. There is no incident that demands immediate action, and it is precisely for this reason that they easily slip from view – until they resurface in a specific situation. The Ombudsperson's advice is therefore not so much to resolve these issues all at once, but rather to keep them constantly in focus. The Ombudsperson's successive annual reports serve as a natural tool for this purpose: by comparing observations from one year to the next, issues that would otherwise go unnoticed remain visible.

9. Reflection and outlook

For the Ombudsperson's Office, 2025 was a year of both development and consolidation. Development, because in addition to handling complaints, further work was carried out on establishing a systematic record-keeping system and a standardised working method – so that the role is not dependent on a single person and complaints are not largely lost during staff changes. Consolidation, because the complaints became more complex and could increasingly be viewed in context.

Looking back, I see a learning process – not just for myself in this role, but for the organisation as a whole. Social safety has proved not to be a static policy area, but a dynamic field of tension in which interests, vulnerabilities and responsibilities constantly intersect. It is within this field of tension that the Ombudsperson's role demonstrates its value: not by passing judgement, but by bringing to light what is going on beneath the surface, and by creating space for reflection rather than knee-jerk reactions.

This role also requires a certain degree of restraint. Not every issue can be resolved through intervention. In an organisation as large and multi-layered as a university, multiple realities coexist, and sometimes a situation calls precisely for patience, for tolerating differences of opinion, and for enduring uncertainty whilst a careful process runs its course. That is not passivity, but a form of due care – and more often than one might think, it is precisely what makes a situation safer.

What has stayed with me most this year is the trust that complainants have shown by coming forward. That trust cannot be taken for granted; every complaint takes courage. The fact that people take that step confirms that the Ombudsperson's role is seen as an independent and safe space for reflection, advice and clarification. I equally appreciate the scope afforded within the university to the independent nature of the role.

The observations from 2025 point to the future. The financial constraints and organisational changes that became apparent this year will continue to have an impact in 2026; their influence on the perceived climate of safety is expected to be a key issue. How change is managed – with a focus on transparency, consistency and scope for input – will largely determine how safe people feel.

Various external developments that converged in 2025 will be followed up in 2026. The final report from the Education Inspectorate, the process led by the Dutch Labour Inspectorate and the findings of the national evaluation of the Ombudsperson's role will guide the further development of policy on social safety. The Ombudsperson's role will interpret these findings in their overall context.

Closer to home, too, there remain areas requiring attention: the evaluation and further development of the Social Safety Helpline and the coherence within the support structure as a whole will continue to require attention in 2026.

The central theme of this report is the three-pronged approach to social safety: the conviction that a safe working and study environment requires simultaneous attention to the person making the report, the person against whom the allegation is made, and the professionals handling the case. That balance is not a state that is achieved once and for all,

but a consideration that arises time and again – with every report, in every case file and in every decision. A university that continues to view these three positions in their inter , keeps in mind everyone involved in a matter. Maintaining that balance is the contribution that the Ombudsperson's Office aims to make in 2026 as well.

Appendix 1. Working methods of the Ombudsperson's Office

The Ombudsperson's Office operates according to a fixed, transparent procedure. The phased approach outlined below describes the broad outlines of this procedure; the precise details will always depend on the situation.

Stages

- **Report or enquiry.** A member of staff, PhD candidate or student contacts the Ombudsperson directly. Reporting is voluntary.
- **Exploratory discussion.** Explanation of the independent and impartial position, discussion of expectations, and exploration of the context, the reporter's perspective and the steps already taken.
- **Assessment of jurisdiction and suitability.** An assessment of whether the Ombudsperson's role is the appropriate course of action, or whether referral – with an explanation – is more appropriate.
- **Intervention appropriate to the situation.** Advice, a reflective discussion, mediation or referral, aimed at restoring communication and preventing unnecessary escalation.
- **Interpretation of structural indicators.** Where multiple indicators point to a pattern, provide an anonymised, aggregated interpretation to the organisation or the board.
- **Reporting.** Annual, anonymised reports on trends, observations and recommendations.

Principles

The Ombudsperson is independent, impartial and confidential. She does not take sides and does not pass judgement on the culpability of individuals. She has no authority to impose sanctions; the influence of the role rests on diligence, persuasiveness and integrity. Information is shared only with the consent of the person making the report, subject to statutory exceptions. The person making the report retains control over their own account.

Appendix 2. Statistical overview 2025

This appendix provides a comprehensive statistical overview of the 2025 reporting year, including tables and graphs. Source: the Ombudsperson's register of reports, 82 registered reports. As the reporting years are not all of equal length, the most accurate comparison is between 2023 and 2025 – two full calendar years. The figures for previous years are taken from the Ombudsperson's annual reports for those years.

1. Number of complaints per reporting year

Reporting year	Number of complaints
2022 (± 16 months)	130
2023 (12 months)	91
2024 (5 months, transition year)	44
2025 (12 months)	82

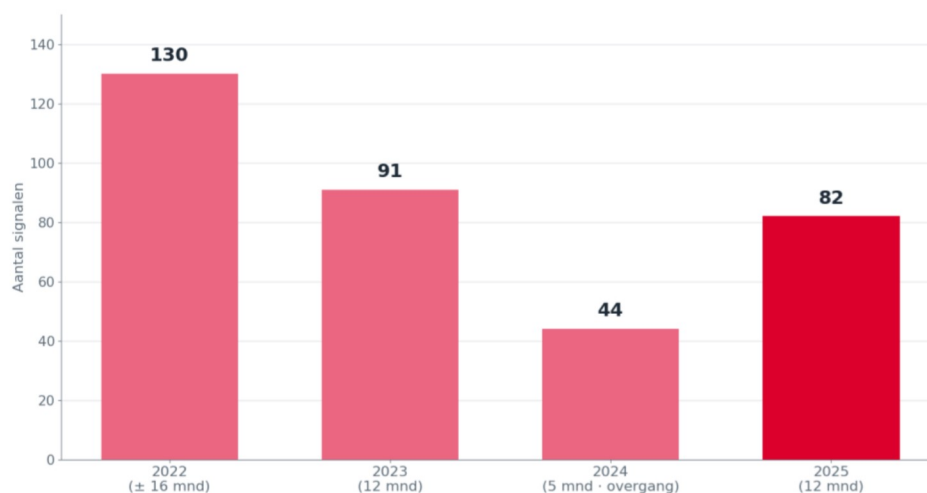


Chart 1. Number of reports per reporting year. The period is stated per year; the reporting years are not all of equal length.

2. Staff and students

Category (2025)	Number
Staff	55
Students	20
External / other	7
Total	82

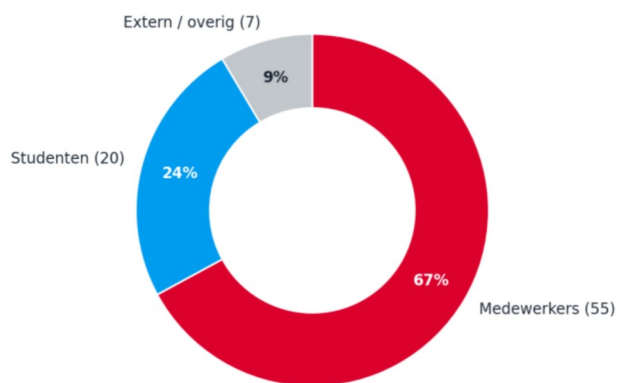


Chart 2. Breakdown of the 82 reports in 2025 by staff, students and external/other.

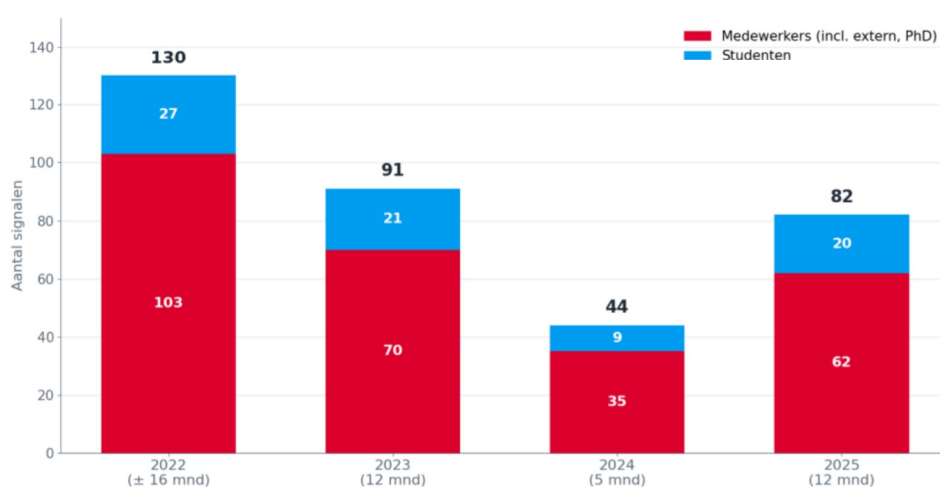


Chart 3. Breakdown of staff and students by financial year. For the sake of comparability, external staff and PhD candidates have been included in the staff figures; the differences in the time periods also apply here.

3. Type of reporter 2025

Type of reporter	Number
Support and administrative staff (OBP)	28
Student	20
Academic staff (WP)	13
PhD candidate	13
External	5
Unknown	2
Professor	1
Total	82

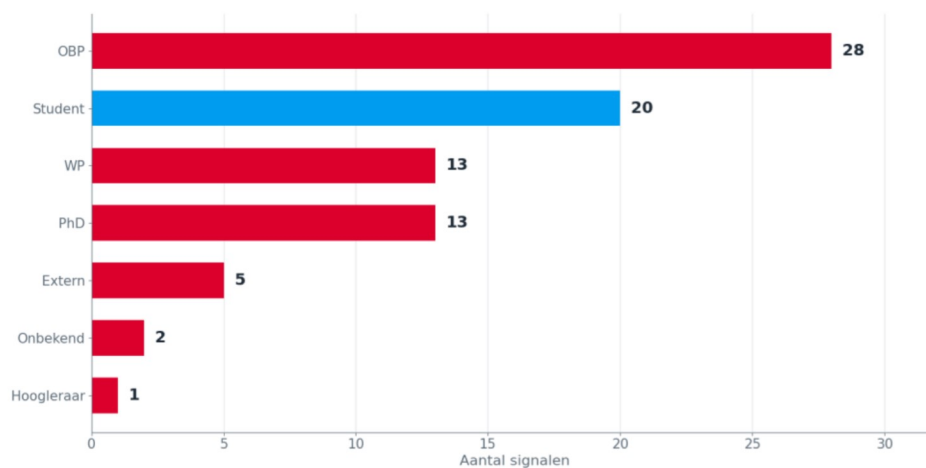


Chart 4. The 82 reports from 2025 by type of reporter.

4. Background to the 2025 reporter

Background	Number
Dutch	46
International (EU)	22
International (non-EU)	14
Total	82

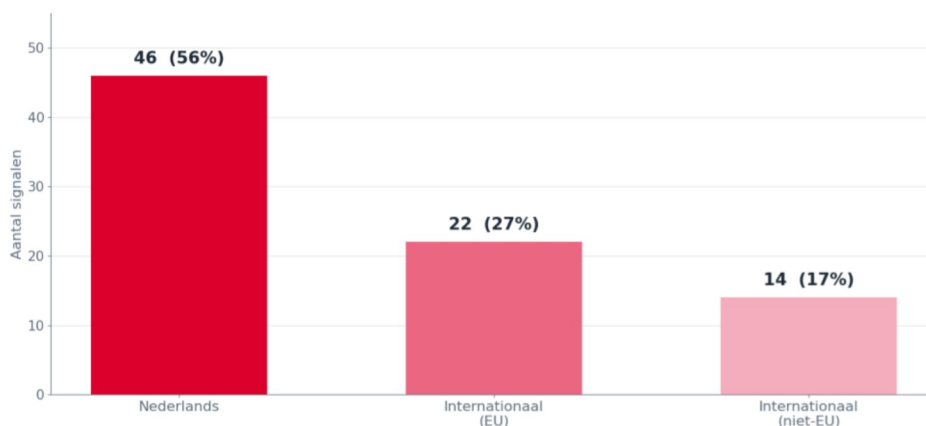


Chart 5. The 82 reports from 2025 by reporter's background.

5. Gender of the reporter in 2025

Gender	Number
Male	43
Female	37
Collective report (no individual reporter)	2
Total	82

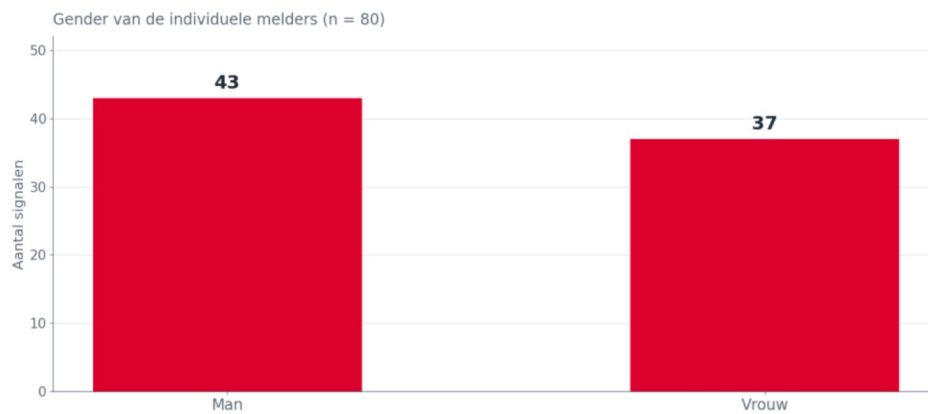


Chart 6. Gender of individual reporters in 2025 – 80 of the 82 reports; two reports came from a collective and do not specify gender.

Most reports touch on several themes at once; a thematic description at pattern level is included in Chapter 4. A numerical breakdown by individual faculties or services has been omitted for reasons of traceability.