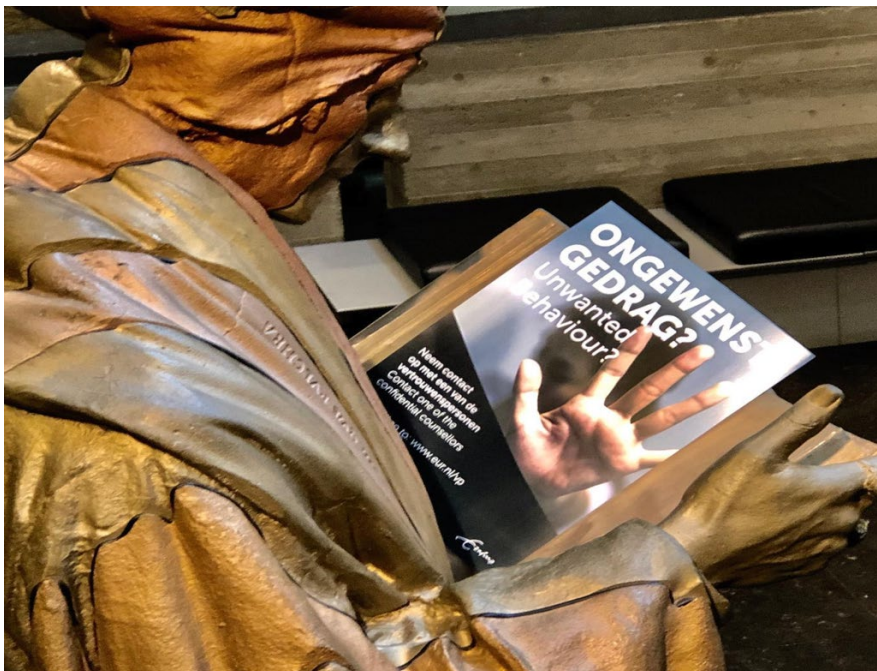


2022 Annual Report



Confidential counsellor network for staff and students

Martin Blok

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1. Introduction

In this report, we take a brief look at the tasks, working method and activities of the confidential counsellors and present the reporting statistics for 2022. Next, we outline trends and conclusions and make various recommendations.

In the reporting by the confidential counsellors, only the number of cases reported to the confidential counsellors is expressed. They do not provide any insight into the total number of cases of bullying, discrimination or harassment. In the faculties, notifications are sometimes handled internally, often by HR staff or managers. Students can also approach study advisors, student counsellors, and psychologists. As there is no central reporting on this, the extent of the problem is not clear.

In 2022, there were 190 (in 2021: 78) calls on the confidential counsellors. In total, 352 interviews took place (2021: 136).

In most cases, one meeting sufficed. People often want to report a case, but they do not want a follow-up. These are consultation or information interviews, or the notifier wants the confidential counsellor to be aware of a particular situation so that, for example, he or she has a point of reference in the event of any subsequent reports. Depending on the nature of the notification, the number of interviews per case can increase.

The confidential counsellors perform these tasks alongside their own work. The network is coordinated by Martin Blok, who also works as a student counsellor at the Institute of Social Studies.

The confidential counsellors report directly to the Executive Board.

2. Vision of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

2.1. Task and working method of the confidential counsellors

The three main tasks of a confidential counsellor are as follows:

1. Offering support and guidance to the notifier;
2. Identifying inappropriate behaviour and providing managers with solicited and unsolicited advice;
3. Informing and coaching staff and managers.

Offering support and guidance to the notifier

The confidential counsellor listens to the notifiers and gives them the opportunity to tell their story and express their emotions. Everything remains confidential, unless a serious criminal offence is involved that places the confidential counsellor in a moral dilemma.

The confidential counsellor stands by the notifier but does not take over. The confidential counsellor helps the notifier make an appropriate choice.

The confidential counsellor supports the notifier throughout the process.

Identifying inappropriate behaviour and providing managers with solicited and unsolicited advice

The confidential counsellor can advise managers about updating, refining and implementing the policy relating to inappropriate behaviour. The confidential counsellor's role also includes raising alerts with managers.

Informing and coaching staff and managers

Managers may also call on the expertise of the confidential counsellor to discuss policies or a case of inappropriate behaviour they are dealing with or a trend observed by a manager. This involves sharing ideas about the planned policy or listing the advantages and disadvantages of possible 'solutions' for a case. In this way, unnecessary escalation can often be prevented, and value is added for all concerned. The confidential counsellors can only do this if they are not yet involved in the case based on their support role. If the confidential counsellor is involved, the manager may be referred to a fellow confidential counsellor or an external confidential counsellor.

2.2 The confidential counsellor network

Until early 2022, the confidential counsellor network was a pilot project. In addition to two central confidential counsellors for both students and staff, there are currently seven confidential counsellors for students and 23 for staff.

The pilot was evaluated in January 2022. On the basis of the recommendations and advice from the evaluation report, the network will be structurally embedded in the organisation in the coming year.

Students can choose which confidential counsellor they want to speak with. This does not need to be the confidential counsellor of the student's own faculty. The same principle applies to staff, who can choose which of the available confidential counsellors for staff they want to speak with. This counsellor does not need to be from the notifier's faculty or department. In practice, people usually still choose the confidential counsellor from their own department or faculty.

The network meets four times a year. Besides the network meetings, there are peer supervision meetings at which cases are discussed in smaller groups.

Also in 2022, the network and peer supervision meetings were held both in person and online.

The confidential counsellors in the network ensure that they are known in their faculty or department. They can provide solicited and unsolicited advice on policies and unsafe situations.

There is also a small sounding board group, which is tasked with preparing the network meetings, for example.

If this is desired, confidential counsellors can consult each other about cases if they have consent from the notifier. All confidential counsellors in the network have taken a training course in order to be able to play this role effectively.

The project leader/coordinator of the confidential counsellor network has very regular meetings with the ombudsperson.

In 2022, however, there was a vacancy for the post of ombudsperson and the two central confidential counsellors also functioned temporarily as the first point of contact for notifications for the ombudsperson.

In some cases, notifications are also passed on to the Erasmus MC (EMC) ombudsperson.

The two central confidential counsellors are also members of the Worrying Behaviour Team, and they took part in the wider actor meetings on social safety within EUR. In addition, they function as designated officers for cases of domestic violence.

They also participate in the National Consultation Confidential Counsellors of Dutch Universities.

3. Notifications

3.1. Notifications from students

The number of students reporting inappropriate and transgressive behaviour rose sharply in 2022, from 40 in 2021 to 93 in 2022. In 2022, too, most notifications from students concerned negative treatment, harassment and sexual harassment. Some notifications related to multiple problem areas.

STUDENTS

Notifiers (students):	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	23	7	8	6
Female	70	33	40	36
Total	93	40	48	42

Accused	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male (students)	44	21	20	21
Female (students)	10	6	9	6
Faculty/Staff	28	9	10	10
Other (well-being/perpetrator/unknown)	3	4	5	5
Total	85	40	48	42

Nature of the notification:	2022	2021	2020	2019
Negative treatment/harassment	34	17	20	12
Bullying	8	9	9	2
Sexual harassment (including online)	48	23	20	20
Aggression	10	3	3	5
Discrimination	7	6	9	5

Well-being	3	1	2	1
Stalking (physical/online)	6	5	7	3

3.2. Notifications from staff

In total, 97 members of staff filed a notification in 2022, compared with 38 in 2021. Like in 2022, the accused were generally men, often in managerial positions. The number of notifications about both men and women has more than doubled. The number of notifications about negative treatment and harassment greatly increased, while the trend in recent years was downward. The number of notifications about labour conflicts also increased significantly.

STAFF

Notifiers (staff)	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	29	13	19	15
Female	68	25	27	30
Total	97	38	46	45

Accused	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	58	20	29	26
Female	36	12	16	15
Organisation	3	3	1	4
Unknown	0	3	1	0
Total	97	38	47	45

Nature of the notification	2022	2021	2020	2019
Negative treatment/harassment	58	15	22	34
Bullying	15	8	5	8
Sexual harassment	13	7	6	6
Aggression	10	3	3	4
Discrimination	10	5	4	3
Labour conflict	18	6	8	16
Integrity	5	4	1	0
Stalking (online/physical)	5	2	4	2

Abuse of authority	15	2	4	4
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3.3. Trends and conclusions

Students

The total number of notifications filed by students at EUR increased to 93 in 2022 (up from 40 in 2021). This trend can also be seen at other universities. The figures are comparable. Among those 93 notifications was a group notification filed by 10 students about transgressive behaviour on the part of a lecturer. They were recorded as separate notifications. The number of international students who filed a notification is relatively high (approximately half).

This substantial increase has to do with the increased focus on transgressive behaviour in the media, but also the greater attention it receives at the university itself. For instance, in the past academic year, all Eureka week participants were given information about the confidential counsellor network and the guides completed a fast-track bystander training programme.

Ultimately, more students seem prepared to file notifications.

Most notifications from students concerned negative treatment/general harassment. Although the number of notifications concerning sexual harassment has increased, it still seems under-reported if you consider the results of various surveys. The number of incidents would appear to be much higher.

Fear, shame, feelings of guilt, insufficient awareness of the notification procedures, complaints procedures and the expectation that there is little the university can do may still be causing students to decide not to file a notification.

Only one faculty addresses the subject during the introduction week for new students. Peer advisers, who act as the initial point of contact for fellow students, receive training at two faculties. During the past academic year, the Institute of Social Studies launched a series of workshops and training programmes which students were required to attend. A number of those workshops and training programmes had already been part of the orientation period for students for some years. They have now been extended and made compulsory. Students have been involved in putting together the content of the programme, the name of which is: 'Collectively preventing and addressing situations of harassment, violence, and discrimination'. One of the results of the programme is a jointly drawn-up list of rules of conduct concerning transgressive behaviour, which everyone signs.

Staff

The number of notifications filed by staff concerning negative treatment and harassment has more than tripled, even though the trend in recent years was downward. This category includes, for example, the use of threatening or harassing language.

Here, too, there is an increased readiness to file a notification. The number of notifications in other categories has also risen. Notifications of harassment are often coupled with labour conflict notifications. Three times the number of notifications as compared with last year were filed for this category as well. Notifiers also frequently experienced abuse of authority.

Labour conflicts seem to be more common in some departments or faculties than others.

We have not mentioned them in this annual report to avoid possible traceability to individuals. The same applies to the other categories. The staff satisfaction survey does, however, give an indication of where most situations occur.

In a few cases, a confidential counsellor joined in as an observer during an interview about a labour conflict. This is not one of a confidential counsellor's explicit roles, but those interviews were often held in the presence of an HR adviser, causing staff members to feel outnumbered and wish that a neutral person could attend as an observer. The most common view among employees involved in a labour conflict is that HR is usually on the side of the employer.

PhD researchers are a special group; confidential counsellors regularly receive notifications of strained relationships between supervisors and PhD students, sometimes accompanied by various forms of transgressive behaviour, with the relationship of dependence playing a major role.

We hear the same from other universities too. Notifications concerning aggression have more than tripled. Most cases involved verbally aggressive behaviour. The number of notifications concerning discrimination has doubled. They involved various forms of discrimination: based on origin, sex, religion or disability.

We also often see situations that have escalated, whereas if action had been taken at an earlier stage, for example by tackling someone about his or her behaviour or taking a different approach to solving the problem, the events leading to escalation could have been prevented. It sometimes seems as though managers fail to recognise certain problem situations or are hesitant about taking action or fail to act because they are not really sure what to do. In some cases, a manager asked a confidential counsellor for advice on what action to take.

In the past year, the Institute of Social Studies provided academic staff and managers with a compulsory, short 'active bystander' training programme where participants learned how to react or act in specific situations.

In general, staff members seem to find it increasingly easy to find confidential counsellors, but there is also considerable distrust of the organisation.

3.4 Recommendations

There remains much work to be done in the area of awareness, prevention and ability to act as far as transgressive behaviour is concerned. Examples include training programmes for managers and other staff members. Such training programmes, including, for example, an active bystander training programme, should routinely be included in EUR's range of Training and Development Platform (TOP) training programmes. They should be made compulsory for all staff members, not just for managers. These training programmes should be offered to new staff members shortly after they take up employment.

Compulsory training courses should also be offered for students, for instance in the area of inter-cultural sensitivity, consent and bystander perspective.

Study and student associations are also working hard on this issue. Many associations are keen to appoint a confidential counsellor, adopt a policy and draw up their own complaints procedure. There are fast-track courses aimed at training confidential counsellors for associations. We propose that the university should facilitate this annually.

It is important to keep the conversation about transgressive behaviour going at the university. A special day with workshops, a conference, theatre, etc., could be a driving force for that conversation.

The complaints procedures also need to be addressed. EUR has a formal complaints procedure, but at faculty level, another procedure can be used to deal with notifications. Too often, referrals are made to the Undesirable Behaviour Committee, when something could perhaps be done at an earlier stage to deal with milder forms of transgressive behaviour.

The confidential counsellor network pilot was evaluated and it was concluded that the network certainly helps to create a socially safe work and study environment at the university. We now need to further embed the network within the organisation. The current coordinator, who has overseen the project temporarily and on a part-time basis, will retire in November. We need a permanent coordinator, preferably full-time, like in Amsterdam (UvA), for example. This coordinator could then be a fully-fledged sparring partner for the ombudsperson and for Safe@EUR and, even more than is the case now, help to create a socially safe climate by making recommendations, policy suggestions and creating or contributing ideas for a training course and other activities in the area of prevention and awareness.

It is also important to investigate incidents involving transgressive behaviour. We are in favour of the wide-ranging inclusion of the issue of transgressive behaviour in staff surveys. Students' experiences in this area should also be investigated further. This will give a better indication of the nature and extent of the problem than the number of notifications to confidential counsellors.

In his letter to the Dutch House of Representatives of 8 June concerning the integrated approach to social safety in education and science, Minister Dijkgraaf writes:

“Several reports published in recent years make it clear that we still need to work hard to improve social safety in higher education and science. They show the prevalence of, among other things, power inequality, competition, untouchability of lecturers and researchers and gender stereotyping. This forms a breeding ground for the creation and maintenance of an unsafe social environment. A researcher who leaves science with a heavy heart because he does not feel safe. A student who dares not ask questions during lectures because of the lecturer's behaviour. These are examples that are very close to my heart, particularly because a place of education should be a safe and respectful environment. Students and staff should feel safe always and everywhere and be able to develop optimally. That's why I intend to work with universities and universities of applied sciences on the changes needed to create a sustainably safe learning and working environment.”

You will find the letter here:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2023/06/08/integrale-aanpak-sociale-veiligheid-in-hoger-onderwijs-en-wetenschap>.

4 Other activities and developments

Members of the confidential counsellor network met regularly during the past year. Various peer supervision meetings were also held. Needless to say, we will continue this in the coming year. It is good to see that most of the confidential counsellors who started in 2019 are still part of the network.

Some of the confidential counsellors attended training on Integrity Matters last year; almost all of them can now deal with integrity cases.

Various activities will also be undertaken in the coming year to further professionalise the network. Activities will also be undertaken to further increase the network's visibility among both staff and students.

We look forward to effective cooperation between the ombudsperson, Safe@EUR and the confidential counsellor network.

It is important to have a uniform appointment procedure for confidential counsellors. We will discuss this with HR.

The way notifications are registered should be evaluated. For instance, it would be useful to know from staff members whether they are support staff or academic staff.

The two central confidential counsellors conduct annual interviews with staff and also students from all parts of the university. The aim of these interviews is to introduce and draw attention to the work of the confidential counsellors and give them the opportunity to share ideas and make suggestions. The interviews are conducted at the mutual initiative of the parties concerned. Here, too, the confidential counsellors are easy to find.

During the next Eureka week, several activities will again be undertaken in the coming academic year to further increase awareness of the confidential counsellor network among students.