

**2024 Annual Report
Confidential Counsellors' Network
for Staff and Students**



February 2025

**On behalf of the [confidential counsellors' network](#),
drs. Mariëlle van Leeuwen, coordinator**

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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 2024. We also outline trends and conclusions and make recommendations.

This annual report reflects the number of cases addressed to the confidential counsellors for students and staff. They do not provide any insight into the total number of cases of bullying, discrimination or harassment at the university. Cases could also be handled by HR staff, managers or Safe@EUR. Students can also approach Safe@EUR, student counsellors and psychologists.

For the 2024 year report 20 confidential counsellors handed in their data. In total 113 reports were filed with these confidential counsellors.

Numbers regarding solicited and unsolicited advice to management on policies and unsafe situations are not included in this annual report, nor the numbers of presentations and information sessions given by the confidential counsellors.

2. Confidential counsellors at 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 person reporting;
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 person reporting

The confidential counsellor listens to the person reporting 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 person reporting but does not take over. The confidential counsellor helps the person reporting make an appropriate choice and supports the person reporting 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 related 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. 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

In November 2023 Martin Blok retired as coordinator of the confidential counsellors' network.

Debra Young took on the position as temporary coordinator from January till July 2024 and from July 2024 till December 2024 the network was without a coordinator.

All 20-25 confidential counsellors perform their tasks alongside their formal position and have on average 2 hours a week available for their role as confidential counsellor. Due to the unpredictability of the work, the confidential counsellors sometimes experience high work pressure, especially when they are dealing with multiple cases simultaneously.

Confidential counsellors are not only available to students and staff within their own faculty or department. Any student or employee can approach one of EUR's confidential counsellors, regardless of where they study or work. This gives students and employees the freedom to choose whom they wish to contact and, for example, select someone who is either close to or at a distance from their own faculty or department.

In practice, people usually still choose the confidential counsellor from their own department or faculty.

All confidential counsellors have passed the basic training, most are also trained in integrity cases, and some are certified and registered in the official national registry of confidential counsellors.

The network meets 4 or 5 times a year. Apart from these meetings peer supervision meetings are also organised.

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.

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

The coordinator of the confidential counsellors' network has regular meetings with the ombuds officer, Safe@EUR, and other actors within the care structure of the university. The coordinator of the network confidential counsellors is a member of the Expert Team on worrying Behaviour and participates in the National Consultation Confidential Counsellors of Dutch Universities.

The confidential counsellors at Erasmus University report directly to the Executive Board.

3. Legal provisions

To assess whether undesirable behaviour takes place, the Dutch Occupational Health and Safety Act (Arbowet) and the the Code of Integrity of Erasmus University Rotterdam are leading.

Undesirable behaviour is considered to have occurred when any of the parties involved could reasonably perceive it as such. The Dutch Occupational Health and Safety Act requires every employer to implement policies aimed at minimizing the psychosocial workload (PSA) of employees as much as possible. The following categories are included:

- **Physical or verbal aggression:** psychological or physical harassment, threats, or attacks, often involving psychological pressure, sometimes combined with abuse of a formal or informal position (both verbal and non-verbal aggression/intimidation).
- **Sexual harassment:** sexual misconduct occurs when someone crosses another person's boundaries, such as unwanted touching, online sexual messages, sexual harassment, or sexual abuse. This can cause significant physical, mental, and emotional harm to the individual, the environment, or even the person engaging in such behaviour. It is often linked to abuse of power.
- **Discrimination:** making distinctions between individuals based on religion, beliefs, political affiliation, race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, or other characteristics, without an objective justification.
- **Bullying:** bullying is a form of systematic psychological, verbal, or physical aggression where there is an ongoing attempt to harm someone. Examples include making jokes at someone's expense, exclusion, insulting, or damaging property. Bullying can occur both offline and online.

Although most EUR confidential counsellors are also trained to handle reports of integrity violations, these are not within their mandate.

4. Reports

4.1. Reports by students

The number of reports of unwanted behaviour by students is significantly lower in 2024 than in previous years. 23 Students filed a report with the confidential counsellors in 2024.

Most persons reporting continue to be female and most accused continue to be male or faculty/staff. In 2024, most reports by students concern negative treatment/harassment, discrimination and other forms of unwanted behaviour (such as abuse of authority).

Reports of sexual harassment have substantially decreased compared to previous year.

STUDENTS

Table 1 Overview background person reporting

Reported by	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	9	11	23	7	8	6
Female	14	28	70	33	40	36
Total	23	39	93	40	48	42

Table 2 Overview background accused offender

Accused offender	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male (students)	5	14	44	21	20	21
Female (students)	3	5	10	6	9	6
Faculty/Staff	14	19	28	9	10	10
Other	1	3	3	4	5	5
Total	23	41	85	40	48	42

Table 3 Overview type of reports and complaints

Type of report	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Negative treatment/harassment	11	15	34	17	20	12
Bullying	3	8	8	9	9	2
Sexual harassment	3	12	48	23	20	20
Aggression	2	3	10	3	3	5
Discrimination	5	10	7	6	9	5
Well-being	0	0	3	1	2	1
Stalking (physical/online)	1	4	6	5	7	3
Other	6					

Please note that a case may have multiple dimensions and contain more than one type of report.

4.2. Reports by staff

The increase in reports since 2022 continues. In total, 90 members of staff filed a report in 2024. Almost 25% of all reports are made by PhD candidates. Most persons reporting are female and most accused are male. The reports accusing the organisation have grown compared to previous years. Most reports filed by staff concern negative treatment/harassment, abuse of authority and labour conflict. The number of reports concerning abuse of authority has increased significantly in 2024.

STAFF

Table 1 Overview background person reporting

Reported by	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	33	20	29	13	19	15
Female	57	58	68	25	27	30
Total	90	78	97	38	46	45

Table 2 Overview background accused offender

Accused/alleged offender	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Male	52	37	58	20	29	26
Female	25	33	36	12	16	15
Organisation	12	4	3	3	1	4
Other	1	4	0	3	1	0
Total	90	78	97	38	47	45

Table 3 Overview type of reports and complaints.

Type of report	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Negative treatment/harassment	50	36	58	15	22	34
Bullying	15	7	15	8	5	8
Sexual harassment	8	15	13	7	6	6
Aggression	7	4	10	3	3	4
Discrimination	8	2	10	5	4	3
Labour conflict	22	10	18	6	8	16
Integrity	11	3	5	4	1	0
Stalking	1	1	5	2	4	2
Abuse of authority	46	5	15	2	4	4
Other	1					

Please note that a case may have multiple dimensions and contain more than one type of report.

4.3. Trends and conclusions

Students

The total number of reports filed by students at EUR is significantly lower in 2024 than in previous years. 23 Students filed a report with the confidential counsellors in 2024.

Students, more than staff, also reach out to Safe@EUR to discuss unwanted behaviour. Sometimes, it concerns a case that's more suited to be addressed with Safe@EUR and, naturally, these are not referred to the confidential counsellors. Prior, these cases were mostly handled by confidential counsellors. In addition, more support has been developed for students in recent years. There are more resources students can turn to, such as OpenUP, ROOM, the Personal Support Hub, and the student experience officers at the faculties. This could be a reason why the number of reports by students is lower.

Reports of sexual harassment have substantially decreased compared to previous year. This trend can also be seen at other universities.

This is noteworthy, as sexual misconduct and sexual violence are most prevalent in the student age group. Approximately half of women aged 18 to 24 have experienced some form of sexual misconduct in the past year. The number of victims who do not report or speak out within higher education institutions is, according to national and international estimates, substantial.

Most reports from students concerned negative treatment/general harassment. This report category also scored high in 2023 and 2022.

Although the university places great attention to unwanted behaviour in their information provision, fear, shame, feelings of guilt, insufficient awareness of the report 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 report.

Staff

In total, 90 members of staff filed a report in 2024.

The number of reports accusing the organisation has grown compared to previous years. Most reports filed by staff concern negative treatment/harassment, abuse of authority and labour conflict.

The number of reports concerning abuse of authority has increased significantly in 2024.

Abuse of authority was mentioned 46 times by staff members, often in relation to negative treatment/harassment (this category includes the use of threatening or intimidating language) and sometimes in relation with labour conflicts.

Compared to the previous year also discrimination, integrity, aggression and bullying were mentioned more often in reports.

Labour conflicts seem to be more common in some departments or faculties than others. Labour conflicts are not the domain of confidential counsellors. The confidential counsellors can support a colleague emotionally, but cannot provide guidance on HR matters. The HR officers and occupational physician ('ARBO arts') should not refer colleagues to a confidential counsellor when they seek legal advice in cases of employment conflict or redundancy. The confidential counsellors sometimes hear that colleagues are reluctant to involve HR, but we cannot step into that role.

In some cases, a confidential counsellor joined as an observer during an interview about a labour conflict. While this is not one of the confidential counsellor's explicit roles, these interviews were often conducted in the presence of an HR person, which led staff members to feel outnumbered and wish for a neutral person to attend as an observer. The prevailing view among employees involved in a labour conflict is that HR typically aligns with the employer.

PhD candidates are a special group. Three confidential counsellors within the network focus only on this group. Confidential counsellors regularly receive reports of strained relationships between supervisors and PhD students, sometimes accompanied by various forms of undesired behaviour, with the relationship of dependence playing a major role.

Confidential counsellors also often see situations that have escalated, Whereas if action had been taken at an earlier stage, for example by confronting 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 occasionally appears that managers fail to recognize certain problematic situations or exhibit reluctance in taking action due to uncertainty regarding the appropriate course of action. In some cases however, managers have asked the confidential counsellors for advice on potential steps to take.

In general, staff members appear to find it progressively easier to contact the confidential counsellors. However, there is also a significant level of distrust towards the organization.

The political view of academia changed drastically after the elections of 2023. As the legislative proposals on internationalization became clearer and the budget cuts on higher education were announced, the confidential counsellors also saw a growing number of colleagues who experienced stress due to these changes and ensuing uncertainty.

The reorganization announced by one school in December 2023, along with its still-unknown consequences, has already reverberated in a number of conversations. It is expected that when the consequences of this reorganization are finally revealed in mid-2025, we will see another increase in workload.

4.4 Recommendations

Significant efforts remain to be made in the areas of awareness, prevention, and the ability to respond to unwanted behaviour.

- The confidential counsellors should be involved in the onboarding program for new employees and new managers. The latter group is not always fully aware of the option to consult confidential counsellors. By addressing a case in a timely manner with a confidential counsellor, a manager can receive support in taking de-escalating actions. Furthermore, a confidential counsellor can assist the manager in providing guidance on desired behaviour for the team and supporting the resolution of a developing conflict.
Additionally, there should be a bigger focus on enhancing knowledge and skills related to social safety and integrity during the onboarding of new employees. Offering standard mandatory training sessions and ensuring these topics are addressed in reviews and team meetings will help.
Compulsory training courses should also be available to students, particularly in areas such as intercultural sensitivity, consent, and bystander awareness.
- Study and student associations are also working hard on this issue. Many associations have already appointed a confidential contact person, adopted a policy, and drew up their own complaints procedure. Fast-track courses aimed at training confidential contact persons for associations are facilitated.
These trainings and maintaining support for the associations in their activities aimed at creating a safe environment should be continued.
- There is a growing demand for mediators for students. At present, students who report inappropriate behaviour and wish to discuss the matter with the accused have no access to a mediator, which is a missed opportunity in the de-escalation process. The confidential counsellors cannot take on this role, as they are already involved in supporting either the reporter or the accused.
- With the departure of Debra Young Erasmus University Rotterdam no longer has an external confidential counsellor. At least one external confidential counsellor should be available and therefore hired. The current coordinator will integrate this advice in her action plan.
- Invest extra attention and resources in individuals who are consistently in vulnerable positions, especially PhD candidates.
- There have been instances in which managers have requested confidential counsellors to disclose identities. Such requests are unequivocally unacceptable, and it is essential that confidential counsellors receive full support from the organization when they refuse to comply with such demands.
- The tasks, working methods, rights, duties, workload, and scope of EUR confidential counsellors should be outlined in a Regulation for Confidential Counsellors on Undesirable Behaviour. Each faculty and department has established its own appointment procedure for confidential counsellors, with varying provisions and timelines. Implementing a standardized appointment procedure for all confidential counsellors is necessary.
- Provide communication resources to confidential counsellors to produce videos and content to keep the topic alive, increase our visibility, and lower the reporting barrier.

5. Other activities and developments

During the period without a coordinator for the network, several experienced confidential counsellors were designated as advisors for managing challenging cases and contact persons for HR and the Health, Safety & Wellbeing colleagues.

Members of the confidential counsellors' network met regularly during the past year. Various peer supervision meetings were also held. At the request of many confidential counsellors, and because of welcoming a considerable group of new colleagues, the peer supervision meetings intensified to five times a year.

Although most EUR confidential counsellors are now trained to handle reports of integrity violations, these are not yet within their mandate. We hope to also change this from 2026 onwards and communicate which confidential counsellors are specialized in integrity issues.

From January 2025 Marielle van Leeuwen has been appointed as project manager and coordinator for the confidential counsellors' network at Erasmus University Rotterdam. As a project manager, she will be drawing up a plan for the further development of the current confidential counsellors' network. We hope that this plan will be presented to all stakeholders by summer 2025.

We look forward to enhancing the collaboration between the ombuds officer, Safe@EUR, and the network of confidential counsellors. As an initial step, in 2025, the aim is to standardize the reporting categories across the confidential counsellors, Safe@EUR, and the Ombuds officer, enabling more effective use of data from the various annual reports.

Additionally, for the 2025 confidential counsellors' annual report, we will introduce several new categories (e.g., national/international, support/academic staff, referrals, number of formal complaints, etc.) to provide a more comprehensive data set. Furthermore, starting from 2026, the confidential counsellors will send evaluation forms to the reporters they have spoken to, to receive feedback on their work.

During the next Eureka week, several activities will again be undertaken in the coming academic year to further increase awareness of the confidential counsellors' network among students. The confidential counsellors' network will again staff a booth, in collaboration with Safe@EUR. And throughout the entire Eureka week, two or three confidential counsellors will be available by telephone for Eureka week staff and participants.

The coordinator of the network has agreed to meet several times a year with the student association Erasmus Pride to address signals in a timely manner and collaborate on creating a safe environment for the LGBTQI+ student community.

For visibility purposes, the coordinator confidential counsellors' network considers offering a weekly consulting hour at the student personal support hub as from January 2026.