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# THE ACADEMIC OMBUDSMAN: CHAMPIONING WELL-BEING

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**Purpose:** Highlighting the role and importance of the academic ombudsman in creating the well-being of the academic community at Polish public universities.
**Methodology**: Analysis of existing data – legal regulations concerning the positions established to support and protect academic values and principles. Analysis based on information available on websites and in the Public Information Bulletins (BIP) of 21 member universities of the Conference of Rectors of Polish Universities (KRUP).
**Findings:** The results of the research allows identifying the role of academic ombudsman in the context of building universities free from undesirable behaviour. They let to outline practical recommendations for shaping this role as support of well-being at Polish universities too.
**Research limitations**: The research allows for general recommendations for Polish universities. It does not take into account the specific characteristics of individual institutions resulting from their educational profiles.
**Practical implications:** An analysis of the existing roles of academic ombudsmen may assist in developing a concept for this role at universities that will be required to establish it.
**Social implications:** The opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the academic community in Polish higher education institutions.
**Originality:** This issue is rarely the subject of research in the Polish context.
**Keywords:** academic ombudsman, well-being, university, academic community.
**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

For years, the academic community has been experiencing an increasing workload and mounting pressure in the workplace (Du Plessis, Martin, 2019; McAlpine, Akerlind, 2010; Salimzadeh, Hall, Saroyan, 2021; Winefield, Jarrett, 2001). A heavy workload in research and teaching (Ross, Scanes, Locke, 2023), increasing bureaucracy, the weakening of social ties within the academic environment (Salimzadeh et al., 2021), and the emergence of undesirable behaviours (Täuber et al., 2022) are some of the factors contributing to the deterioration in the

well-being of university staff in recent years. Within universities there is observe a structural conflict between the two largest groups of staff: academic teachers and academic administration. It poses a significant challenge to day-to-day collaboration and affects the recipients of educational offer. The reduced level of well-being among university staff translates into a deterioration in staff–student relations, which significantly impacts students' well-being.

In light of the growing challenges facing public universities, the work of the academic ombudsman represents an important initiative in supporting the academic community. Hence, the aim of this article is to highlight the role and significance of the academic ombudsman in fostering the well-being of the academic community at Polish public universities. It is presented in the context of grassroots university initiatives and the systemic legislative changes planned by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW). Based on the research of the Academic Network for Safety and Equality (ASBiR) Research Section, a framework for defining the role of the academic ombudsman in public universities in Poland has been proposed. The research findings may serve as a guide and inspiration for university management in process of establishing and designing this role.

The research methodology determined the structure of the article. The first, theoretical section, is based on a critical review of the relevant literature. Identifies the challenges faced by the academic community, which result in a decline in the well-being of its members. The second, research-based part highlights the role of the academic ombudsman as one of the factors supporting the academic community in fostering its well-being.

## 2. Challenges Facing The Academic Community

Changes in the external environment of higher education institutions expose the academic community to constant pressure and an accumulation of stressors. They results, amongst other things, from frequent legislative changes, working with Generation Z, a teaching workload, reduced funding, remuneration policy, material condition of working environment, limited research opportunities, and the weakening of social bonds (Ross et al., 2023; Salimzadeh et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). The modern university is characterize by the dominance of corporate mechanisms, such as ubiquitous evaluations, competition driven by funding, and bureaucratization (Elznerowicz, Pajor, 2025). External pressure also manifests itself in the demand for high efficiency, the fulfilment of rigorous publication requirements, and the constant adaptation of programs to the needs of the labor market (Ross et al., 2023).

All above results in an overload of research, teaching, organizational and administrative work that far exceeds paid working hours (Winefield et al., 2008). A shift in the nature of this workload is also observe. Whereas in previous years increased workload occurred periodically

during the most demanding periods of the semester, now it is a permanent state (Morrish et al., 2019; Salimzadeh et al., 2021). This weakens social bonds and support (Marioni et al., 2020), and, combined with the low social status of the profession, exacerbates staff's negative feelings.

A significant source of stress arising from within the organization is the difference in values and beliefs between staff and those in leadership roles within the university (Bone, Ross, 2021). These tensions relate to power and authority, and their roots are in the organizational culture and structure of the university (Bone, Ross, 2021). They may manifest as undesirable behaviours such as: bullying, discrimination or the devaluation of employees' achievements (Täuber et al., 2022). All of them have a devastating impact on employees' professional careers, mental health and general well-being (Faria, Mixon Jr, Salter, 2012). The Polish universities' environment is characterize by the presence of mechanisms that encourage abuse and normalize psychological violence as a management style (Safe University, 2025). Research confirms these phenomena, pointing to such forms of bullying, harassment and microaggression as: ridicule and humiliation within the academic community, being ignored during work meetings, intimidation and blackmail, unlawfully claiming authorship of publications, undermining trust in the person being bullied, making threats, refusing to provide support when formally required to do so, and creating a hostile atmosphere (UAM Report, 2022).

Although there is no shortage of research in the literature on unethical behaviour in the academic environment (Cornoiu, Gyorgy, 2013), solutions to effectively address it are rarely proposed (Flynn, 2025). A problem with reporting undesirable behaviours in Polish universities is the so-called burden of individual heroism. It means that the person experiencing harm must interpret the situation on their own to recognize the violations within it. This often requires rejecting common in the university environment explanations that normalize and trivialize violent and discriminatory behaviour as ordinary, necessary for professional training, or even pleasant and inclusive (Kubisa et al., 2022).

These problems result in reduced well-being among both staff and students. Problems – such as anxiety disorders, depression, chronic stress and burnout – are a common phenomenon in the academic community (SWPS Report, 2024). It is therefore essential to seek practical ways of promoting the well-being of the academic community.

Well-being at work encompasses various aspects of working life. 'From the quality and safety of the physical environment to employees' sense of well-being at work, their perception of the working environment, the atmosphere in the workplace and the way work is organised' (International Labour Organization, ILO, 2009, p. 1). Measures to promote well-being at work aim to ensure the safety and health of employees, as well as to foster a sense of well-being in the workplace, and to create engagement and job satisfaction (ILO, 2009, p. 1). Employee well-being is a key factor influencing the long-term effectiveness of an organisation (ILO, 2009). That is why it is so important. According to Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012), well-being is the result of a balance between an individual's psychological, physical and social resources and the challenges they face. Imbalances between excessive demands and insufficient

resources lead to stress or burnout (Puchalska-Kamińska, Lądka-Barańska, 2019). Increasing resources enables employees to cope more effectively with challenges, stimulating engagement and enhancing their well-being. In the case of universities, this applies to members of the entire academic community – staff, PhD students and students. All of them together form the university community. The individuals comprising this community are often interdependent and engage in diverse relationships. Their complexity stems from the fact that we are dealing not only with people who play different roles within the academic environment, but also with individuals characterised by a high degree of individualism, coming from various social backgrounds and inclined to experiment with established conventions and the boundaries of acceptable behaviours (Morek, 2024).

## 3. Empowering Voices: The Ombudsman as a Catalyst for Change

The younger generations of students and workers are bringing about inevitable social change and speaking out against instances of abuse. Those who have been working in higher education institutions for years are also becoming bolder in speaking out about undesirable behaviour. This translates into an increase in the number of reports of such incidents (Map of Bullying, 2022[1]). Universities are seeking to respond to the expectations of internal stakeholders regarding a safe learning and working environment by, among other things, appointing academic ombudsmen.

The history of academic ombudsmen (ombudspersons, ombuds) at Polish universities began with the appointment in October 2011 of the Academic Ombudsman at the University of Warsaw. The significant increase in the number of ombudsmen occurred in the 2020s. It stems, among others, from the fact that young people, when choosing a higher education institution, now pay attention to aspects that candidates previously overlooked, including a sense of safety (Gałkowski, Zatyka-Szlachcic, 2024). Given the lack of a Polish model for the role of the academic ombudsman, the following research questions arise:

RQ1: Who is the academic ombuds?

RQ2: What role do academic ombuds play at universities and what defines it?

RQ3: What are the objectives of academic ombuds's activities?

## 4. Methods

To answer these questions, there was used data from a research project carried out in 2024 by the Research Section of the Academic Network for Safety and Equality (ASBiR), entitled 'Positions and roles related to safety, equality and diversity'[2]. They involved analysis of the information available on university websites or in their Public Information Bulletins (BIPs). The analysis covered regulations in force between January and June 2024. The research examined positions established to support and protect academic values and principles, including in particular equality and diversity, and to ensure safety in interpersonal relations. For the purposes of this article, the section of the ASBiR research concerning academic ombudsmen exclusively was utilized. The research indicated that of the 21 universities affiliated with KRUP, 10 of them have the role of academic ombudsman. They are: the University of Warsaw (UW), the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (UWM), the University of Wrocław (UWr), the University of Rzeszów (URz), Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (UAM), Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), University of Gdańsk (UG), University of Silesia (UŚ), Jagiellonian University (UJ) and Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (UMK).

A thematic analysis of the data was carried out in line with the research questions set out above. The data obtained were categorised thematically into three groups: the definition of the academic ombuds's role, the role they play within the academic community, and the purposes of the ombuds's activities.

## 5. Research Outcomes and Discussion

In seeking an answer to the RQ1: Who is an academic ombudsman? very important are the four principles. According to the data, they are the basis for academic ombuds currently working in Polish higher education. These principles[3], which are of key importance for fostering the safety and well-being of those studying and working at universities, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**
*Principles governing the work of academic ombudsmen and their significance*

| The principle | Ombuds practice |
|---|---|
| Independence | no direct reporting to the university authorities,<br>making autonomous decisions regarding, amongst other things, responses to reports,<br>operating independently of other university bodies. |
| Impartiality | protecting academic values,<br>staying impartial. |
| Informality | acting as a source of support, information and advice,<br>promoting ADR,<br>not accepting formal complaints,<br>not conducting formal proceedings,<br>not participating in decision-making,<br>not issuing binding decisions. |
| Confidentiality | not disclosing the identity of the person making the report or the information provided, without consent,<br>(exception: where required by law). |

Source: own work.

The academic ombuds's commitment to resolving disputes amicably and addressing difficult interpersonal situations before they escalate into conflict are directly link to a shift towards a more conciliatory organizational culture. The ombudspersons acts as a confidant for those with concerns and provides support for the individual courage of those reporting irregularities. This is closely align with the principles underpinning their role. On the other hand, they are a key element of the structure from the perspective of university management. They resolve difficult personnel matters and systemic issues identified during the course of their investigations.

Viewed through the lens of its operating principles, the role of the academic ombuds preserves, and may even strengthen, the university's fading social dimension (Report, 2025). This is crucial in the face of changes leading to the erosion of the academic community. The academic ombudsperson can help redefine the concept of this sense of community. By its very nature, the work of an ombuds influences the organisational culture of the university. The neutrality, impartiality and confidentiality inherent in this role have an impact on the university as an organisation, which is realised even if the academic ombuds 'simply sits in the office and waits for visitors' (Bloch, 2010).

Turning to the role played by academic ombuds at universities and by what it is define (RQ2), it is worth noting the four groups of roles identified in the ASBiR research: ombudspersons, representatives (plenipotentiaries), coordinators and specialists. The group of ombuds comprises 12 roles (listed in Table 2). One of these roles – the Academic Ombudsman acting as the Rector's Plenipotentiary – also falls within the category of representatives. The titles of ombuds roles most frequently refer to academic rights and values (8 positions); some of them include concepts related to equal treatment and anti-discrimination (3), whilst only one covers workplace bullying (Table 2).

**Table 2.**
*Role and title of the academic ombudspersons*

| | Academic value and rights | Equality and anti-discrimination | Workplace bullying |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Ombuds** | Ombudsman for Academic Rights and Freedoms (UAM).<br>Ombudsman for Academic Rights and Values (UJ, UŚ).<br>Ombudsman for Academic Rights (UMCS).<br>Rector's Representative – Academic Ombudsman (UMK).<br>Academic Ombudsman (UR, UW).<br>Ombudsman for Student and PhD Student Rights (UŚ). | Ombudsman responsible for conducting an investigation into a complaint regarding discrimination against a student or PhD student (UG).<br>Equal Opportunities Ombudsman (UWM).<br>Ombudsman for Equal Treatment and Anti-Discrimination (UWr). | |
| | | Ombudsman for Equal Treatment and Anti-Bullying (UG) | |

Source: compiled on the basis of ASBiR research, pp. 17-18.

The thematic areas indicated in the names do not always adequately reflect the full scope of duties inherent in the role of ombuds. The key role of the academic ombudsperson, as emerges from the above analysis, is protective in nature and closely linked to the well-being of members of the academic community. It is underpin by respect for rights and equal treatment.

When analysing the objectives of academic ombuds acting (RQ3), it should be note that, according to ASBiR research, these primarily involve upholding academic rights and values. They are sometimes described as ensuring compliance with academic or ethical standards, or safeguarding the rights and interests of community members (Table 3). Additionally, assisting in the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) was identify as a purpose of the ombuds's work (UW and UR). In Cybulko's view, this is an independent element of the academic ombudsperson's mission (ASBiR Research, p. 8). A unique feature is, among the objectives of the UW Ombudsman, improving the university by preparing proposals for the rector aimed at enhancing the university's operations (ASBiR Research, pp. 7-8). The objectives of the ombudsmen stem from diverse legal bases, as also illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3.**
*The objectives of academic ombudsmen and their legal basis*

| Legal basis | University, ombudsperson, goals |
|---|---|
| **Rector's decree** | Ombudsman UW:<br>• promoting academic rights and values,<br>• assisting in the amicable resolution of disputes,<br>• improving University, as pointed above. |
| | Equal Opportunities Ombudsman UWM:<br>• combating discrimination,<br>• implementing systemic changes based on accessibility policy. |
| | Ombudsman for Equal Treatment and Anti-Discrimination UWr:<br>• implementation of the principle of equal treatment and combating discrimination. |
| | • Academic Ombudsman UR:<br>• supporting the application of academic rights and values,<br>• promoting high ethical standards,<br>• assisting in the amicable resolution of disputes. |

Cont. table 3.

| | |
|---|---|
| **University statute** | Ombudsman for Academic Rights and Freedoms UAM:<br>• promoting among members of the academic community desirable attitudes and behaviours that are in line with the principles of social coexistence. |
| | Ombudsman for Academic Rights UMCS:<br>• protecting the interests of the University community and the rights and interests of its members, as well as ensuring compliance with academic standards. |
| | Ombudsman for Equal Treatment and Anti-Bullying UG:<br>• None. |
| | Ombudsman for Academic Rights and Values UŚ:<br>• safeguarding academic freedom and ethical standards in research and teaching. |
| | Ombudsman for Student and PhD Student Rights UŚ:<br>• protection of the rights of students, PhD students, postgraduate students and participants in other education forms. |
| **Senate resolution** | Ombudsman for Academic Rights and Values UJ:<br>• uphold the academic rights and values enshrined in Polish law and internal regulations, in particular the University's centuries-old traditions and customs, the Academic Code of Values and the Code of Good Practice in Higher Education. |
| **Policy on Combating Discrimination against Students and PhD Students** | Ombudsman responsible for conducting an investigation into a complaint regarding discrimination against a student or PhD student UG:<br>• conducting the investigation. |
| **None** | Rector's Representative – Academic Ombudsman UMK:<br>• None. |

Source: own analysis based on research.

An analysis of the objectives of academic ombuds clearly shows that academic rights and values require support to ensure they are upheld in the day-to-day running of universities. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW) also recognised this need. In 2025 this ministry took steps to analyse the scale of the problem of undesirable behaviour in higher education[4] and to prepare law changes preventing and eliminating such behaviour. On 23 January 2026 the MNiSW presented the first part of the 'anti-discrimination package for universities and institutes', as a result of the work of two advisory bodies. This legislative proposal promotes equality and combating workplace bullying. One of the ten amendments (and the first on the list) to the Higher Education Act is an obligation to ensure access to an academic ombudsperson for the community of every higher education institution. Such an obligation will be a landmark step in the development of the ombudsman's role in Polish higher education. This will be the first proposal to establish under Polish law an academic ombuds. The academic community is awaiting the final form of it. Especially since in other European countries, the role of the ombudsperson in higher education has been well establish for years[5].

Research indicates that, regardless of the terminology used, the rationale behind the objectives of academic ombudsmen is consistent, namely to promote respect for academic rights and values (ASBiR Research, p. 8). There is a lack of a Polish model for the ombuds's role. Despite that, universities are establishing such functions or positions, recognising the need to support members of their community and promote their well-being. The new law regarding

the academic ombuds will certainly be a step towards harmonising and standardising activities in this area.

## 6. Summary

The academic community face today many challenges and difficulties. It seems essential to provide support in the form of a specific role: the academic ombudsperson. The research findings provided answers to the research questions posed in the article, indicating that the role of the ombuds is crucial. It helps resolving many difficulties related, among other things, to unethical behaviour in higher education institutions (RQ1). The activities of academic ombud, conducted in an impartial, informal and confidential manner, have a tangible impact on changing the organisational culture of higher education institutions and fostering the well-being of the academic community (RQ2 and RQ3). It appears that Polish higher education is ready for this change, i.e. ensuring access to an academic ombudsperson for every member of the community. The MNiSW's announced work on introducing a legal obligation for such access offers hope for accelerating progress in this area. Among the forms of operation of this role or position existing in practice, three variants have been identified: 1. a term-based statutory body; 2. a person employed to the position (optionally: for a term, with the consent of the senate); 3. a person appointed to the role for a term, with the consent of the senate. The optimal solution appears to be for the legislator to leave the choice in this regard to the university authorities and to allow for the individual regulation of specific issues, including the definition of the ombuds's objectives and requirements.

This article is one of the first publications to raise awareness of the role played by academic ombudsperson in promoting the well-being of members of the academic community. The topic of the academic ombudsman's role in fostering the well-being of the academic community is a broad field. It is worth continuing in-depth research into the possibilities for systemic interventions, not only at ministerial level but also at individual universities, including educational profile (e.g. technical, arts and medical universities), taking into account their specifics. An important direction for future research will be the possibility of increasing tangible organisational support for the academic community not only through the role of the ombuds. Additionally, it would be useful to analyse models of the academic ombudsperson's relationship with university authorities in the context of the effectiveness of changes in organisational culture. Promoting those changes is essential for ombuds work.

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## Footnotes

[1] A survey of the academic community conducted by the Science Watch Polska Foundation indicates that 63.5% of respondents have encountered workplace bullying. More than half of the respondents reported incidents of bullying – often to no avail.

[2] We use only a part of these research - a legal analysis of existing data carried out by PhD Anna Cybulko.

[3] As set out in the documents of the International Ombuds Association (IOA), the largest international organisation of ombudsmen: the 'Code of Ethics' and the 'Standards of Practice'.

[4] In this context, the term 'unacceptable behavior' refers to violence of any kind, bullying, discrimination (both direct and indirect), harassment and sexual harassment.

[5] The European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) has been bringing together academic ombudsmen for over twenty years.