



Implementing Ombuds Services in Higher Education: The Next Step

Ever since 1965, first in Canada, ombuds services for students and/or staff have been available at higher education institutions throughout both Americas, in Europe and in Australasia. Set up in different organizational environments and due to different societal developments today ombuds offices are an essential element in the governance of higher education institutions. They serve as independent and neutral players vis-à-vis “the powers that are”, i.e. rectorates, senates, deans, professors. They are acting together with student representatives and their organizations to counterbalance hierarchical structures and asymmetrical relationships between the different organizational levels. They help individuals with their issues and raise organizational topics if needed.

As far as Europe is concerned, under respective higher education legislation in 30 Northern, Western, Southern and Central European countries or by autonomous decisions, of the respective authorities ombuds offices have been set up and are operational. Recently, within a multilateral Erasmus+ project, the idea and the concept of ombuds offices in higher education is being extended to some of the Newly Independent States.

A European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (ENOHE), which endorses the further extension of the institution of higher education ombudsmen, was established in 2003. Its main aims are sharing approaches to common issues, comparing working methods and developing competences.

Already during the preparation of the Yerevan (2015) and Paris (2018) EHEA ministerial conferences ENOHE had come up with documents proposing a recommendation on the installation, by law or respective national regulations, of ombudsmen in higher education throughout the “Bologna states”.

The intention for the forthcoming ministerial conference in 2020 in Italy remains the same: the recommendation on a regulatory framework for ombuds offices in higher education, as a resource for the independent adjudication or mediation of disputes, to provide self-empowerment for students and staff for resolving upcoming issues in daily life at higher education institutions.

Dr. Josef Leidenfrost, MA (Mediation)

Austrian Student Ombudsman at the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, President of the European Network of Ombudsmen