Training, networking, and support infrastructure for ombudspersons for good research practice: A survey of the status quo in the Berlin research area

Simona Olivieri & Viktor Ullmann

Published online: 04 Aug 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

🔓 OPEN ACCESS 　 Check for updates

Training, networking, and support infrastructure for ombudspersons for good research practice: A survey of the status quo in the Berlin research area
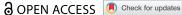
Simona Olivieri 🅭 and Viktor Ullmann 🅭

Seminar für Semitistik und Arabistik, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in the German academic landscape have seen a shifting approach to promoting research integrity. In 2019, the German Research Foundation (DFG) incentivized all research and higher education institutions to appoint ombudspersons who advise members of their institution in matters of good research practice or suspected research misconduct. These ombudspersons for good research practice, usually professors who act in this function on a voluntary basis, need institutional support to be prepared for and fulfill their diverse duties. The Ombuds-Modelle@BUA (2020) and OBUA – Ombudswesen@BUA (2021–2023) projects worked to advance the professionalization of ombudspersons in the Berlin research area by first investigating the current situation and then offering a meta-level of support in training, networking, and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, the OBUA project engaged in meta-research, investigating the status quo of local ombuds systems and demands for support. The project findings, discussed in this contribution, show that the professionalization of local ombuds systems has been evolving in past years, especially in the areas of training and networking. Infrastructural support measures, however, remain largely underdeveloped.

Introduction

Good research practice should not be understood as a strictly defined set of rules, but rather in terms of the adoption of a behavioral code.[1] This entails the enactment of a professional and ethical attitude based on the principles of integrity, responsibility, and transparency, and encompasses all levels and statuses of research and the research community.

CONTACT Simona Olivieri ✉ simona.olivieri@fu-berlin.de 🖃 Seminar für Semitistik und Arabistik, Freie Universität, Fabeckstraße 23/25, Berlin 14195, Germany

The authors wish it to be known that, in their opinion, both authors should be regarded as joint first authors.

In order to promote a culture of research integrity at all levels, higher education institutions and non-HE research institutions consequently should develop a "holistic institution-wide strategic approach" (Glendinning 2022, 199) to support the quality and value of research as well as fair conditions[2] in its production. There are different methods to achieve this, "including formal and informal processes" (Ferguson et al. 2007, 197), which range from designing institutional policies[3] to organizing teaching and training activities[4] for the research community. Studies on the international level highlight how diverse institutional approaches are.[5] In Germany, the handling of counseling and advising on good research practice is mostly referred to professors who serve as ombudspersons (Glendinning 2013), as well as, at some institutions, local ombuds offices.[6]

At German institutions, ombudspersons for good research practice are independent figures who can be contacted by members of their institution for confidential counseling on matters relating to good research practice and in cases of suspected misconduct (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019a, 12).

To fulfill their crucial functions, ombudspersons evidently need a broad range of knowledge and skills as well as institutional support. The professionalization of its central operators is thus at the core of an impactful ombuds system. Research findings at national and international level, as discussed in the next sections of this paper, underline that training and networking play a major role in this.

Between 2021 and 2023, the project OBUA – Ombudswesen@BUA followed up on these findings and experimented with a meta-level of support for ombudspersons for good research practice of the Berlin research area. With activities aimed at training and networking, the OBUA project investigated possible strategies for further advancement and professionalization of local ombuds systems. The framework of institutional support was also examined in order to explore the premises for possible transitions from an outsourcing approach to an institutionalized framework.

In this contribution, we present the findings of the meta-research conducted during the OBUA project along with our general considerations. The first part of the paper presents the German academic ombuds systems, the status of the support infrastructure, and the background and activities of the OBUA project. In the discussion, we present a survey administered in 2023; the discussion mainly focuses on the key aspects at the heart of professionalization measures, namely training, networking, and institutional infrastructure. In the concluding section, the findings are further contextualized within the framework of the general considerations, also drawing on the feedback received and the exchanges had with the participants in our project activities.

Background: Recent developments in German academic ombuds systems

The German higher education and research landscape witnessed a significant development of the ombuds system(s) following the foundation of a national committee in 1999,[7] that is appointed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and was recently renamed Ombudsgremium für wissenschaftliche Integrität in Deutschland.[8]

Since the publication of a new Code of Conduct by the DFG in 2019,[9] most German institutions have implemented local statutes to meet the requirements specified therein, including definitions of good research practice, procedures for handling suspected research misconduct, and the establishment of local ombuds systems with ombudspersons for good research practice. As defined in the Guideline no. 6 "Ombudspersons" of the Code of Conduct (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019a, 12–13), their responsibilities include providing confidential advice to the members of their institutions on topics related to good research practice, counseling in specific instances of conflict related to good research practice, and handling suspected cases of research misconduct.

Crucially, the document also states that "HEIs and non-HEI research institutions give ombudspersons the support and acceptance they need to carry out their duties" (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019a, 13). The framework of institutional support is a central aspect for the functioning and sustainability of ombuds systems. Due to the multifaceted nature of the tasks, they are confronted with, ombudspersons for research integrity are required to continuously "transform to meet changing needs" (Behrens 2017, 74); thus, they need a support infrastructure, of which training and networking are core measures (Beier and Nolte 2021; Olivieri 2021). An increasing professionalization of the systems is described by Czesnick (2022, 132),[10] who mentions that a valuable step in this direction is the establishment of local ombuds offices, which may handle initial contact with advice seekers and relieve ombudspersons from administrative and coordination tasks (2022, 125–126).

The tasks of ombudspersons fall into several different domains within and related to the area of good research practice. The level of professionalism that the handling of these tasks requires cannot draw on the academic background or professional experience of the ombudspersons alone but requires professional training, which should be provided by the institution (Beier and Nolte 2021, 2). Czesnick highlights similar challenges and identifies the need for networking, transfer of know-how, and training as major trends (2022, 126).

The OBUA project

The premises of the OBUA project draw on the investigation conducted in 2020 in the course of the Ombuds-Modelle@BUA project,[11] which investigated the ombuds systems of the four partner institutions of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA).[12]

The results of the activities conducted among a small pool of ombudspersons detected trends in line with those of the research conducted on the German landscape, e.g., by Beier and Nolte (2021), and Czesnick (2022), namely the perceived needs for (i) specific training (Olivieri 2021, 9); (ii) cooperation among ombudspersons (2021, 12); (iii) institutional support (2021, 39).

Hence, the idea was conceived to pilot a meta-level of support to ombudspersons as a measure to professionalize the local systems. The OBUA project (October 2021 – November 2023) was funded by the Berlin University Alliance and hosted at the Seminar für Semitistik und Arabistik of Freie Universität Berlin. It was led by Simona Olivieri, and featured Viktor Ullmann as a staff member and Ege Hazer as a student assistant. The project was conceptualized with the objectives to engage in meta-research on existing practices in the local ombuds system(s), and to develop new strategies for its advancement and professionalization in the Berlin research area. Accordingly, three basic activities were defined: conducting workshops (to counter the demand for more training activities), establishing a digital communication platform (to facilitate exchange and networking), and initializing institutional debates among the four BUA partners (to receive and integrate institutional requirements).

The workshops, organized as part of the OBUA project, envisaged training on those aspects of the ombuds work for which further expertise was perceived necessary. The general approach was to link training and networking activities to a continuous stream of feedback. The reason for this was twofold: on the one hand, we collected information about the ombudspersons' wishes and feedback on the events and selected the topics of the following activities accordingly; on the other hand, the feedback provided further information about current and new topics that emerged over time, as well as about the ombudspersons' self-assessment of their competences.

Seven training and networking activities were organized throughout the project, on topics such as data protection, roles and responsibilities of ombudspersons, and conflict-management in the ombuds work. The primary aims of these activities were to convey specialized knowledge on subjects that fall within the ombuds work, and to favor vertical as well as horizontal exchange.

The topics of the first activities were selected based on feedback collected prior to the start of the OBUA project; further feedback and inputs on the

topics for the next training events were collected with a short survey conducted between 8 December 2022, and 12 January 2023.[13] This was addressed to active ombudspersons as well as members of ombuds offices of the Berlin research area; 30 out of the 110 addressees took part and expressed their wishes regarding the topics,[14] format, and timing of upcoming activities.

The 2023 OBUA survey[15]

Design and methodology

In 2023, a more extensive survey was conducted to learn more about the current conditions of Berlin ombuds systems and ombudspersons' perceived level of professionalization and institutional support. The survey was estimated to be completed in 5–10 min; multiple choices were given for each of the 20 questions, with occasional optional open comment fields (e.g., open text fields to give answers not included in response options provided in multiple-choice answers) and built as a webform via Infopark CMS Fiona to be displayed and filled in both desktop and mobile browser applications without registration. The survey, as well as all related communications, was conducted in German.[16] It was online for 8 weeks after the link to the webform was sent via e-mail on June 27, with a reminder on August 10. Personalized invitation e-mails were sent to 127 addresses (ombudspersons, members of investigation commissions, and members of ombuds offices in the Berlin research area) that had been part of the project's mailing list, which was compiled and updated consistently during its runtime via research into ombudspersons, members of investigation commissions, and members of ombuds offices announced via websites of all publicly funded research institutions based in Berlin. Until the closing of the survey on 22 August 2023,[17] 59 complete answer sets were submitted, equaling a response rate of 46.5%.

Data processing

During the data processing, subgroups were created and compared according to four variables: function, time in office, amount of contacts, and number of ombudspersons at serving at the institution. These subgroups were then compared to both each other and the overall responses to investigate possible effects of these variables on respondents' experiences and needs as expressed in their answers.

The ombuds infrastructure, deducted from the number of ombudspersons working at respondents' institutions, deserves some reflection since it implicates different factors that need to be considered carefully. The first of these factors is the size of the institution in terms of members, for which the number of ombudspersons is not an indicator since there is no correlation between the two. At German institutions, in fact, the number of

ombudspersons is not determined in proportion to the number of members. The two largest research institutions in Berlin (with nearly 40,000 members each) have very different ombuds infrastructures established: Freie Universität has a total of 24 active ombudspersons, while Humboldt-Universität has only two, which also goes for most of the smallest institutions with less than 500 members.

The second factor is the possibility of respondents to receive advice from ombuds colleagues, which would not be available to ombudspersons who are the only one in this function at their institution. Here, too, however, information on the local statute and the level of collegial advice it actually allows is missing.[18] Consequently, the number of ombudspersons will be handled carefully in the following analysis.

In the following, the findings of the survey will be presented with special attention to the key aspects we have focused on throughout the OBUA project, namely training, networking, and institutional infrastructure.

Respondents' profiles

No personal data were collected in the survey. Questions relating to the respondents' profile opened the survey; these concerned the function, their time serving in the given function, and the total number of ombudspersons working at their institution. The information collected with these three questions did not allow for identification of respondents, but the processing of these data gave insights into the possible effect of experience, activity, and ombuds infrastructure on

Q1: How many ombudspersons are currently working at your institution?	
1	20.3%
2	50.8%
>2	28.8%

Q3: How long have you been working in this function?	
<6 months	3.4%
6 months–2 years	33.9%
>2 years	62.7%

working conditions and needs. While we cannot report results on participants' function (Q2, e.g., active/former ombudsperson, member of an ombuds office/investigation commission) for reasons of confidentiality, the following tables show the results on their institutional ombuds infrastructure and experience (reported here are only the results of active ombudspersons):

Q4: Generally speaking: How often are you contacted in your capacity as an ombudsperson per year on average?

0–2 times	42.6%
3–5 times	27.7%
6–10 times	14.9%
10–20 times	10.6%
>20 times	4.3%

Q5–6: How many of these contacts are open inquiries (e.g., request for advice or general questions in the area of good research practice)/cases (e.g., cases of suspected misconduct or conflicts)?

Frequency	Inquiries	Cases
0–2	57.6%	59.3%
3–5	22%	20.3%
6–10	11.9%	13.6%
10–20	3.4%	3.4%
>20	3.4%	1.7%

Q9: How much time does your work as ombudsperson, commission member, or similar take?

barely noticeable (1)	18.6%
multiple hours in irregular, rare intervals (2)	44.1%
multiple hours per month (3)	22%
multiple hours per week (4)	5.1%
almost daily (5)	5.1%
not applicable	5.1%
overall average (translated into a number on a scale from one to five)	2.30
	(SD: 0.99)

Q10: How often do you feel like your ombuds work collides in terms of timing with your other responsibilities in teaching, research, and administration?

never (1)	30.5%
rarely (2)	45.8%
sometimes (3)	0%
regularly (4)	11.9%
often (5)	3.4%
always (6)	0%
not applicable	8.47%
overall average (translated into a number on a scale from one to six)	2.04
	(SD: 1.13)

Amount and type of ombuds work

The next set of questions was designed to get insights into the amount and type of ombuds work and the overall workload of participants, showing that the majority of ombudspersons is contacted less than six times per year and their work consists almost equally of advising on general inquiries and of handling cases.

Regarding the first aspect, responses show that the workload is perceived on average between *multiple hours in irregular, rare intervals;* and *multiple hours per month.* Regarding the second, respondents on average felt that their ombuds work *rarely* collided with their other academic responsibilities.

Q7: In your work, how often do you deal with the following topics?

Topic	Average[19]	SD
Authorship conflicts	2.75	1.25
General inquiries on issues of good research practice	2.68	1.18
Power abuse	2.51	1.24
Plagiarism	1.97	1.08
So-called "questionable research practices" (QRPs)[20]	1.75	0.88
Falsification and manipulation of research data	1.53	0.80
Fabrication of research findings	1.31	0.56

Q8: On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely), how competent do you feel in dealing with these topics?

Topic	Average	SD
General inquiries on issues of good research practice	4.10	0.74
Authorship conflicts	3.85	0.78
Fabrication of research findings	3.64	1.01
Plagiarism	3.54	0.97
Power abuse	3.37	1.03
Falsification and manipulation of research data	3.36	1.03
So-called "questionable research practices"	3.14	1.04

Recurring topics and topical competence

A third set of questions dealt with recurring topics of ombuds work as well as the confidence of respondents in dealing with these topics.

Both advising on general inquiries and handling cases requires knowledge of standards of good research practice. Consequently, the participants' perceived competence on selected topics (Q8) was surveyed before inquiring about training and other support measures. The responses indicate an average high level of confidence in all specified subject areas. Notably, there is

a low difference between the suggested topics; the aggregated average confidence stands at 3.57, from which the strongest derivation is only around 0.5 positively (general inquiries) and negatively (QRPs).

Furthermore, comparisons of respondents with different times in office[21] and workload[22] did not show an impact on aggregated average confidence, implying that the relatively high confidence of respondents in dealing with issues related to good research practice and research misconduct stands regardless of their experience and activity.

Institutional support: Training, infrastructural support, and networking

Questions 11-14 inquired into institutional support that participants received and desired in terms of training and infrastructure (Q11–13) as well as their experiences in networking (Q14).

Training

Q11: Generally speaking: Are you interested in receiving more training?	
yes	37.3%
yes, but I do not have the time	28.8%
no	33.9%

When asked about support received (Q12), *training* and *active referral to useful networks and materials* were the two most frequent responses (each indicated by 42.4% of respondents). The two most frequent support mechanisms are thus based mostly on knowledge transfer, either through workshops and courses or referral to useful resources and networks, which are made available to a large pool of ombudspersons.

Q12–13: Which offers of support do you/would you wish to receive from your institution?

Support offer	Received	Wished
Further training in the form of workshops or training courses	42.4%	23.7%
Active referral to useful networks, materials or other supportive offers on the topic of good research practice	42.4%	13.6%
Advice or support from other offices within own institution	35.6%	1.7%
Support from a local ombuds office	27.1%	8.5%
Relief from other responsibilities (e.g., through a reduction of the teaching load)	6.8%	13.6%
Support from a secretary or student assistants	3.4%	8.5%
none of the above	22.0%	50.8%
not applicable	6.8%	8.5%

In terms of respondents' interest in receiving more training for their ombuds or commission work from their institution, responses to Q11 showed that roughly one in three is generally not interested. A comparison of respondents according to their workload, however, suggests that the more often they are contacted, the more likely they are to be interested in more training.[23] The same observation can be made in Q13, which surveyed the support wished for.[24] Such an influence cannot be observed in the *yes, but I don't have the time* responses,[25] suggesting that too much workload is no explanation for this. Experience itself also does not appear to be an explanation, since a comparison according to the variable of served time points into the opposite direction (i.e., the longer they work, the less likely they are to be interested in more training).[26] It can thus be assumed that practice may be a deciding factor: the more respondents have to deal with inquiries and cases, the higher their need for training.

Further comparisons of the answer sets suggest that the ombuds infrastructure may be a factor impacting the tendency not to be interested in additional training. At institutions with more than two ombudspersons, an above-average number of respondents (52.9%) replied that they were not interested, significantly more than among respondents from institutions with one (33.3%) or two ombudspersons (23.3%). This observation, too, is confirmed in Q13.[27] The availability of training, which is lowest at institutions with one ombudsperson,[28] might thus also feature into interest.

Infrastructural support

The survey did not explicitly inquire into the infrastructure established at the respondents' institutions, at least not independently of other support factors related to training and networking as discussed above. However, there were questions addressing infrastructural support, namely the number of

ombudspersons (Q1), workload (Q9, Q10), and support structures received and desired (Q12, Q13).

Unsurprisingly, responses vary when observing perceived workload (Q9) and collision with other tasks (Q10) according to respondents' number of annual contacts, suggesting that the more contacts they have, the higher their workload[29] and collision[30] with other responsibilities is.

While the reported increase in perceived workload with increase in cases and inquiries was certainly expected, the possible impact of ombuds infrastructure(s) deserves some attention. Perceived workload,[31] as well as perceived collision,[32] rises with the number of ombudspersons working at an institution. For reasons discussed above, this variable needs to be handled with care, since it can have the size of the institution as a hidden factor, which surely would impact the actual amount of ombuds work. The observation, however, suggests that more ombudspersons per institution do not equal an easement in their working conditions. To the contrary, it apparently brings a perception of more work and less reconcilability with other duties.

In terms of institutional support that respondents already receive (Q12), infrastructural measures ranked much lower than those on knowledge transfer or networking. While ombuds offices were indicated by 27.1%, relief from other responsibilities and support from a secretary or student assistants were indicated by only 6.8% and 3.4%, respectively. Infrastructural measures thus result as the least common support mechanisms established at respondents' institutions.

At the same time, infrastructural measures are apparently not wished for by most respondents. To Q13, asking for additional support they would like to receive from their institution, relief from other responsibilities was indicated by 13.6%, and ombuds offices and secretaries or student assistants by 8.5% each. Here, again, support through knowledge transfer was indicated far more frequently, as discussed above.

The findings in the area of desired support show that, in terms of structural working conditions, participating ombudspersons apparently are relatively satisfied with the infrastructure they are currently being offered.

Networking

The behavior of Berlin ombudspersons in terms of networking was surveyed concerning both internal (i.e., within their own institution) and external networking. Among the optional responses to Q12 and Q13 was *advice or assistance from other offices within my institution*, which gives insights into the dimension of internal cooperation respondents engage in and wish for. Overall, 35.6% indicated that they received such advice or assistance, which made it the third most frequently given response to Q12, following *active referral to useful resources and networks* (42.4%), which can also be understood as a means of internal cooperation.

This shows that internal cooperation is one of the more widely used measures of institutional support. Given that the frequency of seeking advice or assistance rises significantly with the number of annual contacts,[33] it can be assumed that internal cooperation is strongly used in the context of particular cases and inquiries that respondents handle.

In terms of desired support, the situation is notably different. To Q13, only one of the 59 respondents indicated *advice or assistance from other positions within my institution*, making it by far the least demanded support measure.

Q14: To which degree did you cooperate with members of other institutions in the context of your work?	
I was in general exchange with other institutions on questions of good research practice	50.8%
I have cooperated with other institutions in the context of particular inquiries or cases	30.9%
I have participated in external workshops or trainings on good research practice	30.9%
I also work in other functions on the issue of good research practice (e.g., as editor for a journal, as reviewer for the DFG, etc.)	37.3%
None of the above	18.6%

Q14 inquired explicitly about the level of external cooperation. Generally speaking, these responses indicate a high level of exchange with institutions other than one's own, with more than 80% of responses indicating at least one experience in that area. Comparing the likeliness to participate in external networking in dependence of the time that respondents have worked in their function, it results that all ombudspersons working for less than 2 years indicated that they had engaged in some form of cooperation, while 31% of those who have been in office for more than 2 years had fewer experiences or none at all. Also, in terms of exchange on general matters related to good research practice,[34] cooperation on inquires and cases,[35] participation in external workshops,[36] and working on good research practice in further functions,[37] newer ombudspersons seem to be significantly more likely to have cooperated

with members of an institution rather than their own, compared to ombudspersons that had been in office for longer. Considering that a longer term as an ombudsperson may mean more opportunities to participate in these activities, this observation is particularly interesting and may indicate a new generation of ombudspersons for whom external networking is becoming more important.

Another variable that may impact external networking is the ombuds infrastructure at their institution. The more ombudspersons serve in an institution, the more likely respondents seem to have been in exchange with other institutions on matters of good research practice.[38] While, for reasons discussed above, the variable of ombuds infrastructure should be regarded with caution, this indicates that an existing internal network of ombuds colleagues does not mean that respondents would seek less external exchange. On the contrary, it suggests heightening their likeliness to do so.

The final block of the survey contained six questions on participants' experiences with the OBUA project itself. Since these questions were added for the purpose of internal monitoring and evaluation, they will not be discussed in this contribution.

Concluding remarks

Between 2021 and 2023, the OBUA project experimented with a meta-level of support for ombudspersons for good research practice of the Berlin research area. The premises were that support, training, and networking appeared to be common needs to be addressed to foster the professionalization of ombuds systems, due to a perceived lack of institutional support indicated by our preliminary investigations. The results of the 2023 survey and the findings of the research conducted throughout the project contrast this initial assumption, suggesting that there has been an evolution in the Berlin ombuds systems during the last 2 years. In particular, ombudspersons perceive that institutional support is growing; also, the self-assessed level of competence they indicate is fairly high; finally, networking activities beyond the ombudspersons' own institution are currently more common, especially among new ombudspersons.

Throughout our research, we observed that ombudspersons seem to receive more support compared to the situation prior to the start of the project; as indicated by almost half of the respondents in the 2023 survey, ombudspersons report having more access to support mechanisms based on knowledge transfer (e.g., workshops, courses, useful resources).

At the same time, the feedback to our activities shows that interest in professional development remains a perceived need, especially with respect to the acquisition of topic- and area-specific knowledge related to the ombuds work. Examples are mediation and conflict-management techniques, which ombudspersons need to acquire to handle conflicts.

Although the data we gathered from the survey do not provide a detailed overview of how the institutions deliver support to their ombudspersons (i.e., number and type of events, institutional measures, their effectiveness, etc.), we can deduce that the support institutions offer is perceived stronger than 2 years prior. This applies in particular to training and active referral to useful networks and materials; on the other hand, support from a secretary or student assistants, or relief from other responsibilities (e.g., teaching load) were much less frequently indicated in the responses, indicating that compensation and administrative support are not yet (fully) institutionalized.

Due to data anonymization, we cannot compare whether there are differences in the level of support provided at institutions with recently established ombuds systems with that of institutions with a longer history in this regard. Therefore, the only trend that we can fairly conclude is the general perception that institutional support is growing.

Another interesting trend resulting from our survey is a fairly high level of self-assessed competence. In general, the confidence-level for the topics presented in Q8 (e.g., general inquiries, authorship issues, QRPs, etc.) was nearly equal. At the same time, the level of confidence may be problematic to assess, as some survey participants made us notice via the open comments. Although an ombudsperson may feel competent with the theory on the subject (knowing the principles, the current debates, etc.), it could be harder in a "real case," especially with topics that rarely occur. Similarly, a person may feel confident in dealing with a topic because of their training or the research they have carried out but may not be able to translate the knowledge into a practical application.

More intense cooperation and access to broader offers for professionalization, which are both indicated by our survey findings and feedback received, could be possible explanations of the high level of competence indicated by our respondents. Other factors such as public discourse, higher levels of awareness, as well as wider circulation of research on subjects related to ombuds work could be further and equally plausible readings.

Related to this are the findings on ombudspersons' experiences with networking beyond their own institution. In 2021, prior to the start of the project, the data collected among a smaller pool of ombudspersons from the BUA institutions indicated that they engaged in networking and exchange with other institutions to an extremely limited extent, and most frequently related to the handling of specific cases (Olivieri 2021, 8–9). Our 2023 survey, conducted on the larger level of the ombuds infrastructures in the Berlin research area, suggests a different trend, indicating that more than 80% of respondents had at least one experience in cooperating with members of other institutions in the context of their ombuds work. Even higher rates of positive responses are detectable in the pool of ombudspersons appointed in the last 2 years, suggesting a positive trend.

The topic of exchanging knowledge and practices was often discussed in the framework of the OBUA activities. A recurring theme was that of mutual mentorship. Positive feedback to our activities related to how the training events did not only convey specialized knowledge but also favored peer-to-peer exchange. On the top down-level, expertise was transmitted from the trainers to the participants; at the same time, the participants counseled each other on the horizontal level by sharing experiences, engaging in mutual-mentorship, and establishing contacts for future collaboration.

Based on the feedback received during our OBUA activities, however, the engagement in networking is usually not framed as an institutional activity. There is no institutionalized framework for promoting networking and exchange among ombudspersons of the area; similarly, onboarding activities on the local level are reported to be scarce if non-existent at all. Ultimately, systematic exchange seems to be rather a matter of private initiative of individuals who may refer to colleagues or experts for advice. This issue becomes particularly significant, especially during transition periods when, at the start of their term in office, new ombudspersons must familiarize themselves with the wide range of tasks and responsibilities they will have to attend to. One of the results of the OBUA activities was hence the publication of a Toolbox to be of support to both new and experienced ombudspersons, and especially during transitional phases (Olivieri, Ullmann, and Hazer 2023a, 2023b).[39]

It is evident from the results of our 2023 survey and from the feedback received throughout the project that our earlier assumptions of the need for professionalization measures such as training and networking must be adjusted to the dynamic situation of the Berlin research area, and that the support systems, or ombudspersons' perceptions of it, have evolved. However, to secure the sustainability of the professionalization measures, these systems will have to be further integrated into the institutional infrastructure(s), since the responsibility of supporting ombudspersons is, as stated by the DFG Code of Conduct (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019a, 13), on the institutions, and not on the ombudspersons themselves.

Notes

1. See ALLEA - All European Academies (2023); see also Lerouge and Hol (2020); Roje et al. (2022).
2. On "fairness in research," see Frisch, Hagenström, and Reeg (2022).
3. See Löfström et al. (2015); Martin and van Haeringen (2011). See also Morris (2016), and Morris and Carroll (2016).
4. Teaching, training, and knowledge transfer are highlighted in the scholarship as relevant aspects of the process, e.g., with regard to teaching research integrity from a very early stage (see e.g., Young, Miller, and Barnhardt 2018).

5. See e.g., Glendinning (2016); Lancaster et al. (2017); Glendinning and Stella-Maris (2022).
6. In Berlin, institutions such as Freie Universität Berlin and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin have established institutional ombuds offices. In addition, German unions and associations of research institutes, such as the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft and the Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, have central ombuds offices in addition to the local ombudspersons at the single institutes.
7. https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/ombudsman/index.html.
8. "German Research Foundation"
9. This was published in 2019 in German and English under the titles "Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis. Kodex" (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019b) and "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code of Conduct" (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2019a). It followed a series of documents on this topic which the DFG had previously published, starting with the first recommendations of 1998 (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 1998).
10. In this contribution, all translations of texts originally in German and for which no English version of the excerpt is available or included in the source are provided by the authors.
11. Led by Simona Olivieri and funded by the Berlin University Alliance (BUA). Part of the activities conducted were held in cooperation with the project Automatisierte Fehlverhaltensprüfung: Einsatz und Effekte digitaler Tools zur Untersuchung von wissenschaftlichem Fehlverhalten, funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung and led by Felicitas Heßelmann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin).
12. The Berlin University Alliance (BUA) was established in 2018 as a collaboration platform of Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Technische Universität Berlin. One of its objectives is "Advancing Research Quality and Value," which includes developing strategies to promote good research practice in the Berlin research area. In this context, the BUA funded both the Ombuds-Modelle@BUA (2020) and the OBUA – Ombudswesen@BUA (2021–23) projects. https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/research-quality/index.html..
13. The survey was built as an online form created via the content management system for the website of Freie Universität Berlin (Infopark CMS Fiona). No personal or sensitive information was requested or collected in the questionnaire; therefore, no formal approval was solicited from the ethics committee of the institution hosting the project.
14. In addition to the multiple-choice answers for the "desired topics" (such as *ombuds procedures*; *plagiarism*; *conflict management*; *data protection*; *networking*), respondents could include further requests, which included: *legal issues in the ombuds work (including confidentiality, record keeping)*; *whistleblower protection*; *overview of topics/conflicts that belong to the ombuds work and which do not*; *authorship*; *data handling.*
15. Upon consultation with the responsible persons at the institution hosting the project, the requirement for formal approval by the ethics committee was waived since the survey did not collect any personal data nor sensitive information.
16. In this paper, all questions and responses were translated into English by the authors.
17. The original closing date communicated to the addressees was August 18, 2023.
18. On confidentiality and collegial advice in ombuds work, see Olivieri, Ullmann, and Hazer (2023a, 13–14).
19. Response options were: *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *regularly*, *almost always*. To calculate the average, response options were numbered on a scale from 1 to 5.

20. This was the only response where the English term was given, followed by an explanation: *i.e., for example careless methodology (e.g., P-hacking, HARKing), systematic citation of own work, or frequently citing unread texts.*

21. The aggregated average of participants working for less than two years in their function was 3.58; and for those working for more than two years 3.51.

22. The aggregated average was 3.43 among participants with 0–2 annual contacts; 3.68 with 3–5 contacts; 3.53 with 6–10 contacts; and 3.57 with more than 10 contacts.

23. 50% of respondents with 0–2 contacts per year replied with *no*; 38.5% of those with 3–5 contacts;14.3% of those with 6–10 contacts; and 28.6% of those with more than 10 contacts.

24. 20.2% of respondents with 0–2 contacts per year indicated *training* as a desired support measure; 30.8% of those with 3–5 contacts; 42.9% of those with 6–10 contacts; and 14.3% of those with more than 10 contacts.

25. 35% of respondents with 0–2 annual contacts replied with *yes, but I don't have the time*; 15.4% of those with 3–5 contacts; 14.3% of those with 6–10 contacts; and 28.6% of those with more than 10 contacts.

26. 33.3% of respondents working in their function for less than two years replied *no* and 41.4% of those working for more than two years.

27. 25% of respondents from institutions with one ombudsperson indicated *training* as a desired support measure; compared to 30% of those from institutions with two, and 11.8% of those from institutions with two or more.

28. In Q12, among respondents from institutions with one ombudsperson, 25% indicated *training*; compared to 46.7% among those from institutions with two ombudspersons; and 47,1% among those from institutions with more than two ombudspersons.

29 The average of ombudspersons with 0–2 annual contacts was 1.70; with 3–5 contacts 2.08; with 6–10 contacts 3.00; and with more than 10 contacts 3.71.

30. The average of ombudspersons with 0–2 annual contacts was 1.70; with 3–5 contacts 1.54; with 6–10 contacts 2.50; and with more than 10 contacts 3.43.

31. At institutions with one ombudsperson, the average in responses was 1.58; at those with two ombudspersons 2.33; and at those with more than two ombudspersons 2.86.

32. At institutions with one ombudsperson, the average in responses was 1.67; at those with two ombudspersons 1.93; and at those with more than two ombudspersons 2.62.

33. To Q12, asking for *offers of support that you receive from your institution*, 30% of the respondents with 0–2 contacts per year indicated *advice or assistance from other positions within my institution*; 30.8% of those with 3–5 contacts; and 57.1% of those with 6–10 or more than 10 contacts.

34. Indicated by 61.1% of the ombudspersons working for less than two years and by 41.4% of those working for more than two years.

35. Indicated by 44.4% of the ombudspersons working for less than two years and by 31% of those working for more than two years.

36. Indicated by 44.4% of the ombudspersons working for less than two years and by 37.9% of those working for more than two years.

37. Indicated by 50% of the ombudspersons working for less than two years and by 27.6% of those working for more than two years.

38. Indicated by 41.7% of the respondents from institutions with one ombudsperson; by 50% of the respondents from institutions with two ombudspersons; and by 58.8% of the respondents from institutions with more than two ombudspersons.

39. The Toolbox is available in open access in German and English. See Olivieri, Ullmann, and Hazer (2023b, 2023a).

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Simona Olivieri http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0154-9156
Viktor Ullmann http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6827-1814

References

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. 1998. *Vorschläge zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis: Empfehlungen der Kommission "Selbstkontrolle in der Wissenschaft"*. Weinheim: Wiley-VCH.

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. 2019a. "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice." *Code of Conduct*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3923602 .

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. 2019b. "Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis." *Kodex*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3923602 .

ALLEA - All European Academies. 2023. *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity - Revised Edition 2023*. Berlin: ALLEA - All European Academies. https://doi.org/10.26356/ECoC .

Behrens, R. 2017. *Being an Ombudsman in Higher Education. A Comparative Study*. Vienna: ENOHE European network of Ombudsmen in higher education.

Beier, K., and H. Nolte. 2021. "Rahmenbedingungen und Herausforderungen für die Arbeit von Ombudspersonen an Hochschulen und außerhochschulischen Forschungseinrichtungen in Deutschland. Ergebnisse einer explorativen Umfrage." *Zenodo*. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.5764560 .

Czesnick, H. 2022. "Die Professionalisierung des Ombudswesens zur Stärkung einer Kultur wissenschaftlicher Integrität." In *Verlässliche Wissenschaft: Bedingungen, Analysen, Reflexionen*, edited by K. Miller, M. Valeva, and J. Prieß-Buchheit, 119–134. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Ferguson, K., S. Masur, L. Olson, J. Ramirez, E. Robyn, and K. Schmaling. 2007. "Enhancing the Culture of Research Ethics on University Campuses." *Journal of Academic Ethics* 5 (2–4): 189–198. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-007-9033-9 .

Frisch, K., F. Hagenström, and N. Reeg. 2022. *Wissenschaftliche Fairness: Wissenschaft zwischen Integrität und Fehlverhalten. Science Studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Glendinning, I. 2013. *Plagiarism Policies in Germany*. IPPHEAE. http://plagiarism.cz/ippheae/files/D2-3-06%20DE%20RT%20IPPHEAE%20CU%20Survey%20GermanyNarrative.pdf .

Glendinning, I. 2016. "European Perspectives of Academic Integrity." In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, edited by T. Bretag, 55–74. Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-079-7_3-2 .

Glendinning, I. 2022. "Aligning Academic Quality and Standards with Academic Integrity." In *Contract Cheating in Higher Education: Global Perspectives on Theory, Practice, and Policy*, edited by S. E. Eaton, G. J. Curtis, B. M. Stoesz, J. Clare, K. Rundle, and J. Seeland, 199–218. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2 .

Glendinning, I., and O. Stella-Maris. 2022. "Comparison of Institutional Strategies for Academic Integrity in Europe and Eurasia." In *Academic Integrity: Broadening Practices, Technologies, and the Role of Students*, edited by S. Bjelobaba, T. Foltýnek, I. Glendinning, V. Krásničan, and D. H. Dlabolová, 29–46. Vol. 4. Ethics and Integrity in Educational Contexts. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16976-2_3 .

Lancaster, T., T. Foltýnek, I. Glendinning, D. Dlabolová, and D. Linkeschová. 2017. *South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity Final Report*. Council of Europe. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10754.17605 .

Lerouge, I., and A. Hol. 2020. "Towards a Research Integrity Culture at Universities: From Recommendations to Implementation." *League of European Research Universities*. https://www.leru.org/publications/towards-a-research-integrity-culture-at-universities-from-recommendations-to-implementation .

Löfström, E., T. Trotman, M. Furnari, and K. Shephard. 2015. "Who Teaches Academic Integrity to Our Students and How Do They Do it." *Higher Education* 69 (3): 435–448. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9784-3 .

Martin, J., and K. van Haeringen. 2011. "Can a Policy Change Practice? An Evidence-Based Approach to Developing Policy." *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 7 (2). https://doi.org/10.21913/IJEI.v7i2.760 .

Morris, E. J. 2016. "Academic Integrity Policy and Practice: Introduction." In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, edited by T. Bretag, 409–411. Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-079-7_3-2 .

Morris, E. J., and J. Carroll. 2016. "Developing a Sustainable Holistic Institutional Approach: Dealing with Realities 'On the Ground' When Implementing an Academic Integrity Policy." In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, edited by T. Bretag, 1055–1073. Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-079-7_3-2 .

Olivieri, S. 2021. Ombuds-Modelle@bua: Internal Final Report. Grey Literature. Berlin: Berlin University Alliance.

Olivieri, S., V. Ullmann, and E. Hazer. 2023a. *OBUA-Toolbox for Ombudspersons at Berlin Research Institutions*. Freie Universität Berlin. https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-40721 .

Olivieri, S., V. Ullmann, and E. Hazer. 2023b. *OBUA-Toolbox für Ombudspersonen an Berliner Forschungseinrichtungen*. Freie Universität Berlin. https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-40722 .

Roje, R., A. Reyes Elizondo, W. Kaltenbrunner, I. Buljan, and A. Marušić. 2022. "Factors Influencing the Promotion and Implementation of Research Integrity in Research Performing and Research Funding Organizations: A Scoping Review." *Accountability in Research* 30 (8): 633–671. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2022.2073819 .

Young, R. L., G. N. S. Miller, and C. L. Barnhardt. 2018. "From Policies to Principles: The Effects of Campus Climate on Academic Integrity, a Mixed Methods Study." *Journal of Academic Ethics* 16 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-017-9297-7.