



ACTIVITY REPORT FOR 2023

22 January 2024 No. TS-4
Vilnius

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of my 5-years work at the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania (Office), I would like to give a snapshot on the changes that have been significant for the Office's performance and team, as well as for the academic community. First of all, the activities of the Office in the field of complaints handling have been improved in line with the development of case law, and amendments have been made to the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Research and Higher Education and the Regulations of the Office. Second, a more in-depth look at the status of academic ethics in Lithuania and international good practices was used to delve into the more complex areas of academic ethics in research, providing guidance on what standards of academic ethics each research and higher education institution should implement in building a culture of academic ethics. Third, looking at the most important work of the Office's team, the Guidelines for Ethical Review have been a milestone in the field of research ethics and research integrity.

The Office has remained open to the academic community through consultancy, newsletters, training and seminars and its annual conferences. The Office has joined international networks, one of which it founded with its European counterparts to share good practices and contribute to national legislation.

Like any organisation, the Office has faced many challenges. Some of these have been overcome through modernisation – through the implementation of various information systems, the use of electronic and other services, and the improvement of working conditions.

I express my gratitude to the academic community and all those who have supported the work of the Office and its team and contributed to the current Office's standing.

In 2024, a new Ombudsperson of the Office will take up his/her duties. I wish him/her patience and determination in pursuing his/her ideas.

Loreta Tauginienė
Ombudswoman for Academic Ethics and Procedures
2019-2024

ABBREVIATIONS

Complaint – complaints and investigations initiated by the Ombudsperson

ENRIO – European Network of Research Integrity Offices

ETINED – Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education

Government Programme – Eighteenth Government Programme of the Republic of Lithuania

LRHE – Law on Research and Higher Education of the Republic of Lithuania

Office – Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania

Office employees – civil servants, career civil servants and employment contract staff

Ombudsperson – Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures

Plan for the implementation of the provisions of the Government Programme – Plan for the implementation of the provisions of the 18th Government Programme of the Republic of Lithuania

RHEI – Research and higher education institution

RPE – Research and publication ethics

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Summary

2023 product indicators (achieved values)

	2021	2022	2023
<i>Education in academic ethics and procedures</i>			
Number of analytical studies by the Office	2	3	3
Number of thematic guidelines of the Office	1	1	n/a
Number of consultations (e.g. frequently asked questions, referrals)	58	54	59
Number of events on academic ethics for the academic community	19	20	28
Number of participants in academic ethics events	1135	1037	1135
Number of downloads of Office's documents (e.g. decisions, guidelines, analytical studies)	1325	823*	2902
Number of newsletter subscribers	224	611	708
<i>Involvement in legislation on academic ethics and procedures</i>			
Number of proposals for national documents related to research and higher education quality assurance in the field of academic ethics and procedures	6	6	3
<i>Office representation</i>			
Number of invited talks	8	4	7
<i>Creating the conditions for the competence development of the Office employees</i>			
Average number of hours of training and qualification improvement per employee (hours/employee)	42	32	37

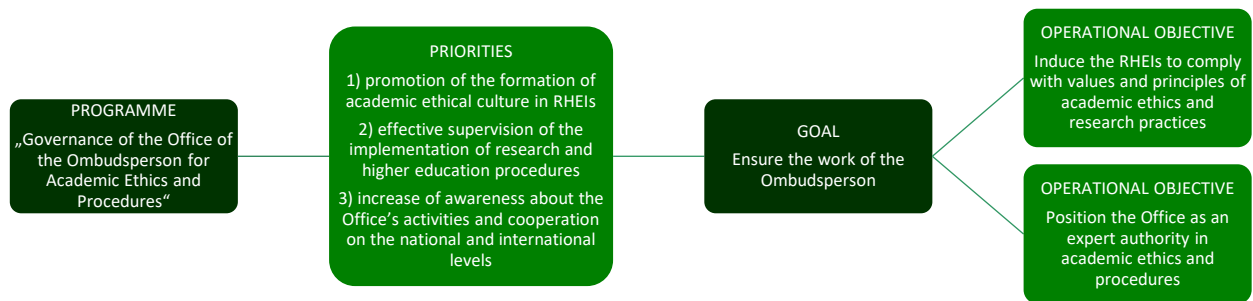
* Due to technical problems, this indicator is based on data of July–December 2022.

I. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LONG-TERM PROGRAMME OF THE OFFICE

The *mission* of the Office is to implement the research and higher education policy by safeguarding compliance with values and principles of academic ethics and research practices in the application of national and international practices.

The Office is implementing three priorities of activities: 1) promotion of the formation of academic ethical culture in RHEIs; 2) effective supervision of the implementation of research and higher education procedures; and 3) increase of awareness about the Office's activities and cooperation on the national and international levels. These three priorities of activities are implemented through the *Long-Term Programme of the Office "Governance of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania"* (Figure 1). This long-term programme aims to fulfil the *Office's strategic goal* of ensuring the work of the Ombudsperson in considering complaints, initiating investigations into a possible violation of academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics, supervising compliance with the provisions of academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics, investigating administrative transgressions, and preventing unethical behaviour. To achieve this goal, *two operational objectives are foreseen for the ongoing activities*: 1) to induce the RHEIs to comply with values and principles of academic ethics and research practices; and 2) to position the Office as an expert authority in academic ethics and procedures. The appropriateness of the first operational objective of the ongoing activity (to induce the RHEIs to comply with values and principles of academic ethics and research practices) is consistent with the implementation of the initiative "An environment conducive to excellence in higher education", which is part of the Government Programme's project "Modern, efficient and mission-oriented management of higher education" – to raise the requirements so that the need in academic ethics would be in line with international standards (sub-point 56.3). The relevance of the second operational objective of the ongoing activity (to position the Office as an expert authority in academic ethics and procedures) is in line with the public sector priority set out in the Government Programme – to increase the professionalism, flexibility, innovation, and technology implementation in the public sector, as well as to strengthen responsibility, decision-making and the ability to deal with complex challenges (point 200).

Figure 1. The Office's long-term programme



The tasks of the Office's activities are the following: 1) to promote compliance of research and higher education institutions with academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics; 2) to supervise compliance of research and higher education institutions with the standards of academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics; 3) to supervise the implementation of provisions of international treaties of the Republic of Lithuania, legal acts of the European Union, laws and other legal acts of the Republic of Lithuania regulating academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics; 4) to cooperate with research and higher education institutions in solving the issues related to violations of academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics; 5) to ensure effective and confidential investigation into possible violations of academic ethics and procedures related to the implementation of the provisions of academic ethics; 6) to contribute to the quality of higher education and research by nurturing the universally recognised values in this field, principles and research practices ensuring the dissemination of research and science (art), transparency of higher education and related activities, fairness, justice, responsibility, equality of persons being members of the academic community, their non-discrimination, academic freedom, trust and respect; 7) to supervise the implementation of recommendations given by the Ombudsperson; 8) to organise and/or to implement preventive measures against unethical behaviour of the academic community; 9) to fulfil other tasks provided by legal acts.

Part I of the Office's Activity Report 2023 presents the results of the Office's activities in accordance with its Strategic Action Plan for 2023–2025. Parts II and III of the Office's Activity Report 2023 present other performance results of the Office.

1.1. INDUCEMENT OF RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO COMPLY WITH VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF ACADEMIC ETHICS AND RESEARCH PRACTICES

Result indicator for 2023

Academic community competence in the field of research and publication ethics (RPE) (coefficient) – not applicable.

The value of the target indicator is based on the results of the biennial Responsible Research Barometer survey carried out by the Office. Given that the Responsible Research Barometer survey was first conducted in 2020 and 2022, the value of this indicator will be set in 2024.

Table 1. 2023 product indicators (achieved values)

	2021	2022	2023
<i>Education in academic ethics and procedures</i>			
Number of analytical studies by the Office	2	3	4
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Number of consultations (e.g. frequently asked questions, referrals)	58	54	59
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1.1.1. Education in academic ethics and procedures

Analytical studies

The Office has produced four analytical reviews¹ (Table 1). The *first research report 'Monitoring the Implementation of Academic Ethics Measures in Research and Higher Education Institutions'*² aimed at systematically assessing how in 2022 RHEIs complied with the provisions on academic ethics as well as implemented academic ethics measures (e.g. how RHEIs implemented the guidelines on academic ethics, how many and of what kind of complaints of alleged violations of academic ethics the RHEIs' ethics committees handled). It should be noted that, following the publication of the Research Data Management Plan template in 2022, as many as 50% of the RHEIs

¹ Analytical reviews are studies, research reports, etc.

² Liekė, B (2023), 'Akademinės etikos priemonių įgyvendinimo stebėsena mokslo ir studijų institucijose', Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 15 January 2024, <https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Akademines-etikos-stebesena_2023.pdf>.

surveyed have transposed it internally, which shows the relevance of this document. The number of complaints handled by RHEIs shows that it fell by 28% between 2021 and 2022. The highest number of complaints remains about student actions – 83% of the total number of RHEIs' complaints. The number of complaints declared unfounded by RHEIs has increased by 17 percentage points since 2017. The analysis of the violations of academic ethics by the RHEIs showed that plagiarism (61%) and use of scribing notes (22%) were the most frequent violations.

*The second research report 'Contract Cheating Services in Lithuania'*³ aimed to provide an overview of the nature of the contract cheating services for higher education and research offered on the country's main classified portals during the active study period, i.e. March and April. Various aspects of the offer of these services (e.g. visibility of the service provider, visualisation of the advertisement, quality and confidentiality assurance, communication methods of the service provider, timing of the service, research fields) are compared with the results of the August 2021 survey⁴. It is noticeable that the contract cheating services are advertised more intensively during the active study period compared to the summer holiday period. Both during the active study period and during the summer holidays, the most important features of such adverts are the associative visual material, the described quality of the service, the reference to at least a few research fields and the means of communication. Compared to the 2021 survey results, the 2023 adverts are more likely to refer to these services as consultancy or assistance and more likely to emphasise confidentiality. This may be linked to the Office's initiative in 2022 requesting 3 out of the 4 main classified portals to provide information about the administrative liability of such activities, which could be seen as reducing the illusion of contract cheating services.

*The third research report 'Ethical Aspects of Research-Business Cooperation'*⁵ aimed to identify the ethical challenges faced by Lithuanian RHEIs' researchers in science-business collaboration projects. The following ethical challenges were grasped using focus group discussions: in the area of publication ethics – allegations of authorship; in the area of research data management – inconsistent open data policies, insufficient data storage infrastructure, disagreements on data use (intellectual property rights); in the area of competing interests – problematic clarification of expectations, pressure from customers on research findings; in the

³ Umbrasaitė, J & Liekė, B (2023), '*Nesavarankiško mokslo ir studijų darbų rengimo paslaugų pasiūla Lietuvoje*', Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 20 December 2023, <<https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Nesavarankisko-mokslo-ir-studiju-darbu-rengimo-paslaugu-pasiula-Lietuvoje.pdf>>.

⁴ Vaškevičiūtė, S & Ozolinčiūtė, E (2021), '*Nesavarankiško mokslo ir studijų darbų rengimo paslaugų pasiūla Lietuvoje*', Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 20 December 2023, <<https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Nesavarankisko-mokslo-ir-studiju-darbu-rengimo-paslaugu-pasiula-Lietuvoje.pdf>>.

⁵ Umbrasaitė, J & Liekė, B (2023), '*Mokslo ir verslo bendradarbiavimo etiniai aspektai*', Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 20 December 2023, <<https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Mokslo-ir-verslo-bendradarbiavimo-etiniai-aspektai.pdf>>.

area of conflict of interest – enabling conditions for the conflict of interest to emerge, probability of conflict of interest.

The fourth research report ‘Study on the Application Templates to Institutional Review Boards’⁶ was delivered for the first time. It aimed to assess the clarity of the criteria for submitting an application for an ethical review, the potential risks to researchers, and the research waste as some of the aspects of ethical review. The results show that almost a quarter of RHEIs use self-assessment questionnaires, which are based on a checklist approach that allows researchers to self-assess the appropriateness of an ethical review. Two RHEIs define in advance when it is mandatory to apply for ethical review, while the other two RHEIs inform researchers after submission and evaluation. Two RHEIs also request researchers to provide information on potential risks for researchers, while almost a quarter (22%) of RHEIs consider the research waste.

The aim was to produce three analytical studies during the reporting year. The information provided shows that the product indicator has been achieved above the target value by 33 percentage points.

Thematic guidelines

In 2023, the Ombudsperson set up a working group to develop guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence in research and higher education. These guidelines will aim to provide guidance to RHEIs and the academic community on how to ensure the ethical use of artificial intelligence technologies in research and higher education. The working group composed of representatives of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Lithuanian University Rectors’ Conference, Rectors’ Conference of Lithuanian University Colleges, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, and the Office. Representatives from the Lithuanian Students’ Union and the Lithuanian Scientific Society participate as observers in the working group.

In December 2023 – January 2024, the Office carried out a survey on the implementation of academic ethics measures in the RHEIs⁷, in which 44 out of 52 (88%) institutions participated. The results of this survey show that on average 90% of the RHEIs surveyed have introduced in 2023 or plan to introduce to the academic community in 2024 the guidance documents (e.g. guidelines, recommendations, other written communications) produced by the Office, and on average 81% of the RHEIs have transferred during the reporting period or plan to transfer them to their internal documents in 2024 (Table 2).

⁶ Liekė, B (2023), *‘Paraiškų atitikties mokslinių tyrimų etikai komitetui formų apžvalga’*, Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 28 December 2023, <<https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Paraisku-Atitikties-moksliniu-tyrimu-etikai-komitetui-formu-apzvalga.pdf>>.

⁷ Liekė, B (2024), *‘Akademinės etikos priemonių įgyvendinimo stebėsena mokslo ir studijų institucijose’*, Akademinės etikos ir procedūrų kontrolieriaus tarnyba, Vilnius, viewed 18 January 2024, <https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/MSI-apzvalga_2024.pdf>.

Table 2. Monitoring the implementation of prevention measures in RHEIs

Title of the prevention measure	Community awareness (e.g. planned or publicly available on the institution's website or through internal communication)*			Transposition into the institution's internal documents (e.g. guidelines are planned to be transposed or integrated into codes of academic ethics, etc.)*		
	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023
Guidelines for Publication Ethics (2019)	34 (77%)	40 (80%)	42 (95%)	17 (39%)	18 (36%)	42 (89%)
Guidelines for Recognition of Fictitious Scientific Events (2019)	33 (75%)	42 (84%)	40 (91%)	14 (32%)	11 (22%)	40 (75%)
Recommendations on the Preparation, Adoption and Implementation of Academic Ethics Codes by Lithuanian research and higher education institutions (2020)	24 (55%)	30 (60%)	43 (98%)	32 (73%)	26 (52%)	43 (91%)
Guidelines for Objective and Fair Evaluation of Group Works (2020)	31 (70%)	37 (74%)	37 (84%)	15 (34%)	14 (28%)	37 (73%)
Guidelines for Ensuring Academic Ethics by Remote Means (2020)	30 (68%)	32 (64%)	35 (80%)	17 (39%)	15 (30%)	35 (75%)
Guidelines for Ethical Review (2020)	30 (68%)	37 (74%)	41 (93%)	24 (55%)	20 (40%)	37 (84%)
Guidelines related to Ensuring Academic Ethics and Equal Opportunities in the Scientific Events (2021)	34 (77%)	40 (80%)	40 (91%)	16 (36%)	14 (28%)	35 (80%)
Template form for a research data management plan (2022)	not applicable	37 (74%)	39 (89%)	not applicable	21 (42%)	36 (82%)

* The table shows the number of RHEIs that filled in the Office's survey: N=44 (2021), N=50 (2022) and N=44 (2023).

It is notable that a significant part of the RHEIs (91%) have adopted the *Recommendations on the Preparation, Adaptation and Implementation of Academic Ethics Codes by RHEIs* in their internal documents or are planning to do so in 2024 (Table 2). It should be noted that one RHEI has consulted the Office on the adoption of these Recommendations in its internal documents. The smallest proportion of RHEIs have adopted or plan to adopt the *Guidelines for Objective and Fair Evaluation of Group Works* in their internal documents – 73%. The percentage of RHEIs planning to adopt the Office's guidance documents into internal documents has increased in recent years. According to the 2021–2023 data, the RHEIs have been the fastest in transposing the *Recommendations on the Preparation, Adaptation and Implementation of Academic Ethics Codes by RHEIs*, the *Guidelines on Publication Ethics*, and the *Guidelines for Ethical Review*.

During the reporting year, no value was foreseen for this product indicator.

Consultations

During the reporting year, the Office provided 59 consultations (Table 1), of which 80% to Lithuanian RHEIs and 20% to other stakeholders. Compared to the proportion of the Office's consultancy provided to Lithuanian RHEIs in 2022, the proportion of such consultancy increased by 13 percentage points. As every year, the Office has also been approached by representatives of foreign institutions (e.g. from Austria, Portugal, the Philippines) to conduct research in Lithuania and to provide information for research purposes and about research integrity training.

RHEIs addressed the Office on the handling of violations of academic ethics, incentives related to academic ethics, the improvement of the draft code of academic ethics, the actions of the supervisor, the publication of a monograph on the basis of a doctoral thesis, the use of artificial intelligence technologies for research purposes, the criteria for detecting a text produced by means of artificial intelligence and the recognition of such a text as a violation of academic ethics, the transparency of the student assessment and the provision of equal opportunities in the oral examination, and others. Other stakeholders have contacted the Office regarding the conduct of research with parents and blind or partially sighted people, unethical behaviour by members of a doctoral thesis defence board, as well as regarding other questions about academic ethics and the Office's activities. *12% of the consultations provided to RHEIs were related to the implementation of the Guidelines for Ethical Review.* One official assistance was also provided within the Ombudsperson's remit.

Compared to the number of consultations provided by the Office in 2022, their number in 2023 remained stable.

The aim was to provide 55 consultations during the reporting year. The information provided shows that the product indicator has been achieved above the target value by 7 percentage points.

Events in the field of academic ethics

The Office organised seven events of various types (e.g. conference, training, seminar) for the academic community. The Office also participated in 21 events initiated by RHEIs. Some RHEIs have taken a more active interest in various academic ethics issues and have initiated more than one event for their academic community.

As in 2022, during the reporting year, more than 1,000 members of the academic community took part in events organised by the Office and initiated by the RHEIs (Table 1). A total of 50 presentations were given by the Office to the academic community at the 28 events.

The Office's annual conference *Ethics in an Academic Environment*, commemorating Global Ethics Day, focused particularly on academic ethics in higher education (studies). This conference particularly focused *on the ethical use of artificial intelligence in higher education*; representatives from Kaunas University of Technology, Vytautas Magnus University, Vilnius University of Applied

Sciences and Vilnius University Students' Union shared their insights. The participants of the conference also had the opportunity to get acquainted with the results of the survey "Academic Integrity Index" carried out by the Lithuanian Students' Union and the research report "Contract Cheating Services in Lithuania" delivered by the Office.

During the reporting year the Office's event on ethical review, which attracted a great deal of interest, served as training for RHEIs' ethics committees and institutional review boards, the Research Performance Ethics Committee of the Research Council of Lithuania, and the Lithuanian Bioethics Committee. Prof. Tina Skinner from the University of Bath (UK) gave a presentation on the importance of secondary trauma, its consequences for researchers' mental health and possible remedies of RHEIs as employers of researchers.

As in previous years, the Office continued its close cooperation with the RHEIs' academic ethics committees, organising two meetings with them. The meetings provided representatives of academic ethics committees with an overview of violations of academic ethics related to research data, measures to identify and manage them, international trends in the ethical use of artificial intelligence technologies, and the protection of whistleblowers in research. Representatives of the academic ethics committees shared their experiences and discussed topical issues.

The Office was also invited by Vilnius Žirmūnai Gymnasium to share what every school student should know about academic ethics. Around 50 school students from Vilnius Žirmūnai Gymnasium participated in this training.

During the reporting year two product indicators were sought to achieve: 15 events on academic ethics for the academic community and 800 participants in academic ethics events. The information provided shows that the product indicator "Number of events on academic ethics for the academic community" has been achieved above the target value by 87 percentage points and the product indicator "Number of participants in academic ethics events" has been achieved above the target value by 42 percentage points.

Dissemination

During the reporting year, the Office's website received around 230,000 visits. The most visited sections of the Office's website in Lithuanian were 'Contacts', 'Decisions' and 'Analytical Studies'.

Looking at the number of downloads of the Office's documents by visitors to the Office's website from the 'Decisions', 'Recommendations' and 'Analytical Studies' sections and compared to the 2022 data, the number of downloaded Office's documents has increased by 3.5 times from the above-mentioned sections of the Office's website during the reporting year (Table 1).

As in 2022, during the reporting year the Office made it possible for visitors to its website to subscribe to information on academic ethics and the activities of the Office in two ways: by subscribing to the website news, and by subscribing to the e-newsletters, issued since 2021. A total

of four newsletters were published during the reporting year (one per each quarter). The e-newsletters are increasingly attracting the academic community and other stakeholders, i.e. with a 16 percentage point increase in the number of subscribers is observed compared to the 2022 data (Table 1).

During the reporting year two product indicators were sought to achieve: 800 downloads of the Office's documents (e.g. decisions, guidelines, analytical studies) and 700 subscribers to the Office's newsletter. The information provided shows that the product indicator "Number of downloads of Office documents (e.g. decisions, guidelines, analytical studies)" has exceeded the target value by 3.6 times and the product indicator "Number of subscribers to the newsletter" has been achieved above the target value by 1 percentage point.

1.2. THE OFFICE AS AN EXPERT BODY IN ACADEMIC ETHICS AND PROCEDURES

Result indicators for 2023

Proportion of initiatives (e.g. proposals) on national documents related to quality assurance in research and higher education submitted and adopted – 50%.

The Office has made nine proposals (six in 2022 and three in 2023) for national documents on quality assurance in higher education and research. During the reporting year, the Office made three proposals for a draft Descriptor of the Formal Framework for the Evaluation of Research and Development and Artistic Activities of Universities and Research Institutes. In order to promote the obligation of the RHEIs' staff to comply with the code of academic ethics, as laid down in Article 71(4)(1) of the LRHE, and to contribute to the quality of research and higher education by upholding the universally accepted values, principles and research practice in this field, the Office has proposed that scientists and other researchers in universities and research institutes shall be required to continuously improve their scientific qualifications and to strive for compliance with, *inter alia*, the values of academic ethics in the conduct of research and development. The Office has also made two proposals for Chapter II of the draft Descriptor: to include provisions on the non-evaluation of scientific works published in co-authorship with artificial intelligence, and to improve the formula in the first section, taking into consideration that only ethical research should be considered (and therefore promoted) as research quality. These proposals were not discussed during the reporting year.

In 2022, the Office made six proposals for the improvement of the provisions on the Doctoral Regulations. To promote social changes in research conduct and dissemination in terms of academic ethics, the Office proposed introducing a requirement for RHEIs to establish a procedure for the revocation of the doctoral degree and to allow for the revision of the doctoral thesis prior to the defence. These proposals of the Office were not addressed. Other proposals made by the

Office were accepted in full or in part, such as: requiring the RHEI to establish requirements for the doctoral thesis; requiring doctoral supervisors to comply with academic ethics (to be free from violations of academic ethics and related procedures); providing compulsory education of doctoral students on the RPE and removing the provision concerning the handling of a complaint against a failure to confer a doctoral degree by the Office. These suggestions entered into force on 1 February 2023.

It should be noted that in 2020, the Office, together with the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, has submitted two proposals regarding the improvement of the Description of General Requirements for the Studies Organising: 1) to add the provision to the section “Higher education management” that the higher education institution must apply measures for students and teaching staff to understand, implement and improve the *“compatibility of study results with the provisions and practices of academic integrity and social responsibility”*; 2) to change the sub-point of the section “Teaching staff and material resources”, which requires *the higher education institution to ensure the development of teaching staff’s digital and ethical competences* as well as the development of other general competences. The proposals were not taken into consideration when the Description was amended in 2021 but were in principle fully taken into consideration during the reporting year. The first proposal has been fully approved (point 32.3 of the Description of General Requirements for the Studies Organising). The second proposal has been formulated more broadly, i.e. ethical competences as part of other general competences (point 33.6 of the Description of General Requirements for the Studies Organising). The new wording of the Description of General Requirements for the Studies Organising entered into force on 1 September 2023.

During the reported year it was sought that the proportion of initiatives (e.g. proposals) on national documents related to research and higher education quality assurance submitted and adopted would reach 50%. The information provided shows that this result indicator is fully achieved.

The part of invited talks in international events – 50%.

During the reporting year, the Office gave seven invited talks/presentations, three of which were given at international events organised by the Uppsala University (Sweden) together with Kherson National Technical University (Ukraine), Max van der Stoep Institute of South East European University (North Macedonia) and the Research Council of Lithuania, which is implementing the international project “GENDERACTIONplus” in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania and the Lithuanian Women’s Lobby Organisation. At the international events, the Office presented challenges of ethical fading in citizen science, questioned whether the integrity principle is sectoral or, nonetheless, overarching

as well as raised questions about how ensuring equal opportunities might affect the evaluation of research performance.

During the reporting year, the target for the proportion of invited talks at international events was 50%. The information provided shows that this result indicator has been partially achieved at 43%.

The average length to handle complaints and investigations is 270 calendar days.

Article 17(10) of the LRHE provides that ‘The Ombudsperson shall examine the complaint or conduct an investigation, take a decision and inform the applicant in writing not later than 30 days from the date of receipt of the complaint or the date of the initiation of the investigation. The time limit for the examination of the complaint or investigation and the adoption of the decision may be extended twice by four months each, due to the complexity of the circumstances of the complaint or investigation or due to the need to obtain additional information while examining or investigating the complaint.’ This provision provides for a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 270 calendar days for the decision of the Ombudsperson.

During the reporting year, the Office dealt with 19 complaints (in 2022, one complaint was suspended due to ongoing legal proceedings; therefore, it has not been lodged) and one decision of the Ombudsperson was adopted within the time limit laid down in Article 17(10) of the LRHE (Table 3). A total of 17 out of 18 (94%) complaints received during the reporting year were rejected for the following reasons: The complaint could not be dealt with within the purview of Ombudsperson as laid down in the LRHE (N=14); The complaint has been forwarded to another public administration body (N=1); No grounds for an investigation have been established (N=2). These complaints took on average six calendar days to process. Compared to the 2022 data, the proportion of rejected complaints increased by 25 percentage points. It should be noted that one complaint was returned to the complainant for rectification in accordance with the statutory procedure and, following receipt of the rectified complaint at the Office, the investigation of the complaint began.

Table 3. Complaints handling in 2023

Year of receipt of complaints	Complaints received			Complaints handling		
	Total	Number of handling complaints	Number of complaints suspended*	Number of complaints handled**	Number of complaints rejected	Number of complaints under handling in 2024***
2019	1	1	0	0	1	0
2021	1	0	1	0	0	1
2023	18	18	0	1	17	0
Total:	20	19	1	1	18	1

* The complaint is suspended due to ongoing legal proceedings.

** The Ombudsperson's decisions are taken regarding these complaints.

*** Data of 1 January 2024.

During the reporting year the target was to investigate complaints and carry out investigations at the initiative of the Ombudsperson within an average of 270 calendar days. The information provided shows that this result indicator has been achieved above the target value, with an average length of 65 calendar days for complaints and investigations.

1.2.1. Involvement in legislation on academic ethics and procedures

Table 4. 2023 product indicators (achieved indicators)

	2021	2022	2023
<i>Involvement in legislation on academic ethics and procedures</i>			
Number of proposals for national documents related to research and higher education quality assurance in the field of academic ethics and procedures	6	6	3
<i>Office representation</i>			
Number of invited talks held at events	8	4	7
<i>Creating the conditions for the competence development of the Office employees</i>			
Average number of hours of training and qualification improvement per employee (hours/employee)	41.6	32	37

Proposals for quality assurance in the field of academic ethics and procedures

During the reporting year, the Office was involved in legislation in the field of academic ethics and procedures, submitting three proposals within the purview of the Ombudsperson, as laid down in the LRHE, on national documents related to the quality assurance of research and higher education (Table 4). All proposals were submitted to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania. Details of the proposals are given in Section 1.2 of this report.

During the reporting year, the aim was to make nine proposals for national documents related to research and higher education quality assurance in the field of academic ethics and procedures. The information provided shows that this product indicator has been partially achieved at 33%.

1.2.2. Office representation

Invited talks

During the reporting year, the Office delivered seven invited talks (Table 4), four of which were given at national events organised by Mykolas Romeris University, Vytautas Magnus

University and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania. Information about invited talks at international events is provided in section 1.2 of this report.

During the reporting year, the aim was to perform four invited talks. The information provided shows that this product indicator has been achieved above the target value by 75 percentage points.

1.2.3. Conditions for the development of competences of the Office employees

Office employees' qualification improvement

All the Office employees were given the opportunity to improve their skills through self-learning, learning while doing, learning from others and/or non-formal education (Table 4). Office's employees received training in both general and specific competences: 44% of the training was dedicated to improving their specific competences and 56% to improving their general competences. 19% of trainings were conducted in English.

Office's employees have been learning how to ensure and improve the quality of the Office's internal administration, e.g. in the areas of fire safety, occupational health and safety, document management, personnel administration, corruption prevention, protection of personal data and other areas. Office's employees have received training in specific areas, such as responsible research, ethics of artificial intelligence, genomic science-based nursing, ethical challenges of research-business collaboration and other relevant areas to academic ethics.

During the reporting year the target was an average of 20 hours of training and qualification improvement per the Office's employee. The information provided shows that this product indicator has been above the target value by 85 percentage points.

II. HANDLING OF COMPLAINTS

2.1. COMPLAINTS ABOUT ALLEGED ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSGRESSIONS

The Office is authorised to investigate administrative transgressions under Article 123 of the Code of Administrative Transgressions of the Republic of Lithuania. One administrative transgression was opened in 2022; however, it was not closed during the reporting year due to the temporal sick leave of the Office's employee from June 2022 to May 2023 and subsequent request for dismissal.

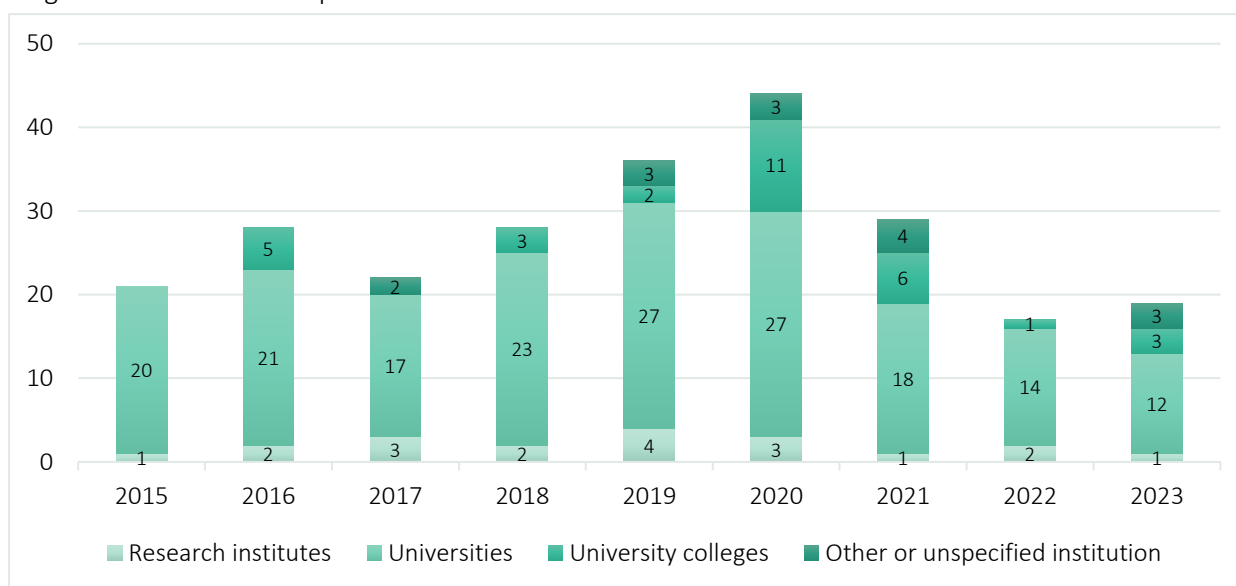
2.2. COMPLAINTS ABOUT ALLEGATIONS OF ACADEMIC ETHICS AND PROCEDURES

During the reporting year, the Office dealt with 18 complaints (one complaint was suspended due to ongoing legal proceedings; therefore, it has not been lodged) and one decision of the Ombudsperson was adopted (Table 3).

As mentioned above, 17 out of 18 (94%) complaints received during the reporting year were rejected for the following reasons: The complaint could not be dealt with within the purview of Ombudsperson as laid down in the LRHE (N=14); The complaint has been forwarded to another public administration body (N=1); No grounds for an investigation have been established (N=2). These complaints took on average six calendar days to process.

The majority of complaints investigated during the reporting year (63%) related to alleged violations of academic ethics and/or related procedures in universities (Figure 3). Compared to the 2022 data, the proportion of complaints concerning alleged unethical practices in universities decreased by 19 percentage points. Slightly more than a tenth of the complaints (16%) related to allegations of academic ethics and/or procedures related to the implementation of academic ethics in university colleges (Figure 3). Compared to the 2022 data, the proportion of complaints of allegedly unethical behaviour in university colleges has increased by a factor of 2.7, but the proportion of complaints of allegedly unethical behaviour in research institutes has decreased by a factor of 2.2.

Figure 3. Number of complaints 2015–2023



In 2023, the Office participated in 24 legal proceedings, of which 16 were concluded during the reporting year (5 before the Vilnius Regional Administrative Court and 11 before the Supreme

Administrative Court of Lithuania). Recent court decisions annulled in whole one decision of the Ombudsperson taken in 2021.

During the reporting year, one fifth of the completed legal proceedings (21%) related to the Office were initiated by the same natural person. Compared to the 2022 data, the proportion of legal proceedings initiated by the same person against the Office halved; however, in the last four years, the proportion of legal proceedings initiated by this natural person accounted for as much as 35% of the Office's total legal proceedings.

III. COOPERATION

3.1. NATIONAL COOPERATION

The Office concluded an agreement with the State Patent Bureau of the Republic of Lithuania on cooperation in intellectual property matters. The information provided by the Office on intellectual property in terms of academic ethics will be uploaded on the website *intelektine.lt*. The Office, together with Andrius Bambalas, attorney-at-law of the law firm LITIGO, has also submitted an article on intellectual property in the context of law and academic ethics to the journal “TEISMAI.LT”, which will be published in 2024 by the National Courts Administration.

The Office used various means of cooperation at national level, e.g. by taking part in discussions organised by other institutions, making suggestions, providing information. The Office contributed its expertise to the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO by providing proposals regarding the draft document from the Kingdom of the Netherlands entitled “Strengthening the implementation of the Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers”. The Office also collaborated with the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences on the translation into Lithuanian of the updated *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity*.

It should be noted that the Office continued to participate in the informal working group on behavioural changes in education and content consumption initiated by the Ministry of Culture and the Alliance “Baltas”.

3.2. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The Office participated in the event “Policy Dialogue on the Safety of Scientists” organised by UNESCO, where it shared insights on the potential impact of research integrity and research ethics on the safety of scientists. This event is part of UNESCO’s programme on the freedom and security of researchers.

The Office continued its participation in international networks. As part of ENRIO’s activities (Figures 4 and 5), the Office together with the members of this network published a Handbook on

Whistleblower Protection in Research⁸. A book chapter on ENRIO’s evolution, transformation and the added value of membership was also published together with ENRIO members⁹. The results of the Barometer of Responsible Research by the Office were published in ENRIO’s bulletin “Research Integrity Practice in Europe (RIPE)”¹⁰.

At the ENRIO meeting in spring 2023, representatives of Norway and the Office launched a Working Group to help harmonise concepts related to research integrity and research ethics. The core working group consists of representatives from Ireland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Croatia, France, Finland, and Germany. Representatives from Belgium, Estonia, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Sweden have also joined the scoping group.

Figure 4. Participation in the ENRIO General Assembly meeting in Brussels



Photo: Maura Hiney

⁸ ENRIO (2023) *ENRIO Handbook on Whistleblower Protection in Research*, <https://zenodo.org/record/8192478>

⁹ Nolte, H, Videnoja, K, Tauginienė, L, Czesnick, H & Rutiku, S (2023), ‘ENRIO’s Leading Pathway to Research Integrity Promotion’, in Eaton SE (ed) *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, Springer, Cham, pp. 1789–1806, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39989-3_168

¹⁰ Umbrasaitė, J & Ozolinčiūtė, E (2023), ‘Responsible Research Barometer 2022 signals the need for systemic changes’, *RIPE*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.enrio-ripe.eu/2023/09/04/lithuanian-rr-barometer/>

The ENRIO Working Group on Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities was reactivated in autumn 2023. This working group is chaired by representatives from Finland.

Figure 5. Participation in the ENRIO General Assembly meeting in Paris



Photo: Dora Chertier

Figure 6. Participation in the 7th plenary session of ETINED in Paris



ETINED Bureau members (from left to right): Henry Alexander Henrysson (Iceland), Luca Lantero (Italy), Tomáš Foltýnek (Czech Republic), Loreta Tauginienė (Lithuania) ir Adam Liwak (Malta).

Photo: Ursula Sticker

During the reporting year, the Office continued its active involvement into the ETINED Bureau. In January 2024, the participation of the Office as the second Lithuanian representative in ETINED was terminated on the initiative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania (the Council of Europe was informed about the end of the Ombudsperson's term of office).

The ETINED 7th Plenary Session in November 2023 discussed the creation of an Observatory on Educational Fraud as a monitoring tool, the conduct of a student survey, open data for schools, ethical artificial intelligence, and other academic ethics issues (Figure 6).

The Office participated in online meetings of the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN) to learn about other countries' experiences, e.g. on the regulation of ethics of artificial intelligence. During the reporting year, the Office joined one international project proposal's partnership under the European Cooperation in Science and Technology programme. This project proposal aims to develop international networking to develop and strengthen competences in genomic science-based nursing, including an in-depth study at the relevant ethical challenges and responsibilities. The results of the evaluation of this project proposal will be published in 2024.

In August 2023, the project *Bridging Integrity in Higher Education, Business and Society* (project No 2020-1-SE01-KA203-077973, BRIDGE), funded by the Erasmus+ programme under the action 'Cooperation for innovation and sharing of best practices', has been completed in the Office. During this project the Office took leadership over the development of two guidelines (Guidelines for Research Ethics and Research Integrity in Citizen Science; Guidelines for Integrity in Research and Business Collaboration), contributed to their gamification, also developed the module on citizen science ethics. In addition, the Office together with the project partners co-organised training in Vilnius and online webinars as well as contributed to other project outputs. The project results were used for training purposes both in Lithuania and abroad¹¹ (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Participation in the 9th European Conference "Ethics and Integrity in Academia" in the United Kingdom.



From left to right: The Office's senior analysts Dr Julija Umbrasaitė and Dr Birutė Liekė.

Photo: Archives of the Office

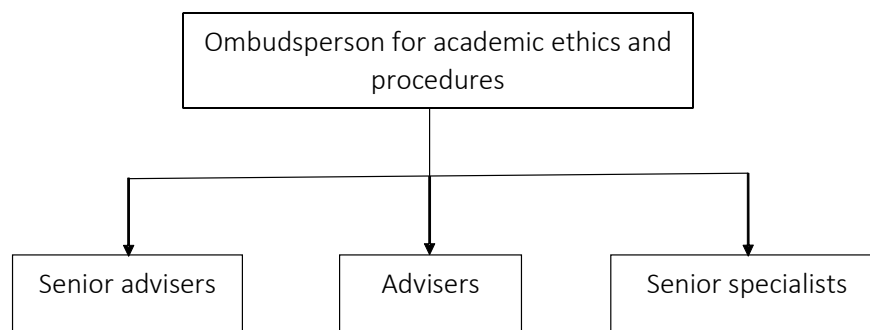
¹¹ For example, Umbrasaitė, J & Liekė, B (2023), 'Addressing Conflict of Interest in Research, Business, and Society Collaboration', in Glendinning, I, Sivasubramaniam, S, Parthasarathy, V & Illingworth, T (eds.), *Book of Abstracts*,

IV. OFFICE GOVERNANCE

4.1. HUMAN RESOURCES

The Office does not have any units, so all employees are directly accountable to the Ombudsperson (Figure 8). The Office's employees are the following: civil servants, career civil servants and employment contract staff. The Office's staff consists of senior advisers, advisers, and senior specialists.

Figure 8. The Office's governance chart



The allowed number of positions of career civil servants and employment contract staff and receiving remuneration from the State budget and State cash funds in the Office is 10. According to 31 December of the reporting year there were 7 women and 2 men working for the Office. The average age of the Office's employees is 46 years.

All the Office employees have a university degree: 4 out of 9 staff members have a doctor degree, 5 out of 9 staff members have a master's degree or equivalent. The most recent university degree obtained by the Office's employees, based on the year in which it was awarded, shows that the Office employs staff with university degrees in social sciences (e.g. law, educational sciences, (business) management), biomedical sciences (e.g. biology) or physical sciences (e.g. mathematics). The most recent graduates are alumni of Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuanian Sports University and Mykolas Romeris University.

During the reporting year, 5 out of 8 staff members were given the opportunity to work remotely. Six Office's staff members were incentivised by means of an increase in the coefficient of the fixed part of the salary, in addition to the award of a bonus. One member of staff was

awarded a bonus of 30% of the fixed part of his salary for the performance of additional functions and tasks not set out in the job description and formulated in writing. The average of the coefficients of the fixed part of the salary of the Office employees was 10.5 for 2023, i.e. compared to the 2022 data, it increased by 1.5 points (EUR 279).

4.2. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

State budget funds. In 2023, the State budget allocated EUR 266,000 for the programme “Governance of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania”, of which EUR 202,000 were for salaries. The Office spent 82% of the State budget under this programme. Unspent appropriations for salaries amount to 18%. The latter was not used due to several failed calls for the same position (e.g. no applicants) as well as due to sick leave of one member of the Office’s staff for a period of 4.5 months.

Foreign funds. The Erasmus+ funds allocated to the Office in the international project *Bridging Integrity in Higher Education, Business and Society* amounted to more than EUR 40,000 or 12.4% of the budget of this international project. This project was implemented at the Office within the period of 2020–2023.

4.3. INFORMATION RESOURCES

During the reporting year, the virtual servers of the Office (2 units) were transferred to the consolidated infrastructure of the State information resources (State Data Centre, supplier: the Information Society Development Committee). The transfer of information resources was carried out at the initiative of the Office to save budgets.

The efficiency of the Office’s operations was ensured by maintaining the existing information systems. In accordance with the provisions of Article 4 of the Law on Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Lithuania (wording as of 1 January 2024), the Office carried out preparatory work related to the provision of information in sign language and in an easily comprehensible language on the Office’s website.

According to the 2023 Report of the Information Society Development Committee on the Compliance of Websites of State and Municipal Institutions and Agencies with the general requirements, the website of the Office *etikostarnyba.lt* complies with 99% of the requirements of the Description of General Requirements for the Websites and Mobile Applications of State and Municipal Institutions and Agencies, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No 480 of 18 April 2003 (general provisions – 100%, structural requirements – 96%, and information requirements – 100%).

In 2023, the Office joined centrally provided Documents Management Information System. The Office also participated in the national cyber security exercise “Cyber Shield PhishEx 2023”.

V. THE OFFICE’S PRIORITIES FOR 2024 ACTIVITIES

Based on the Office’s performance in 2020–2023, it is foreseen to continue the implementation of the Office’s 2023 priorities:

- 1) Implementation of measures to prevent unethical behaviour of academic community (Q1–Q4)
- 2) Improving the efficiency of the handling of cases of alleged administrative transgressions (Q1–Q4)

<https://etikostarnyba.lt/en>