

Being an Ombud in European Higher Education - Gender, Governance, and Institutional Value - A Study Case in Portugal

Paula Rama-da-Silva

Senior Lecturer, English Language, Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies and Santarém School of Education, Portugal

Abstract

The role of the student ombudsman in European higher education has gained increasing prominence over recent decades, underlining values such as fairness, inclusion, and institutional accountability. This paper examines the student ombudsman's role in Europe, with special emphasis on Portuguese higher education, and analyses how gender shapes both the perception and impact of the office. Particular attention is given to the significant number of women holding these positions and the symbolic as well as practical implications of their presence.

ENOHE (the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education) provides a useful framework for understanding this role across borders. According to ENOHE, "The primary function for all of us is to resolve problems for students, staff, faculty and administrators, advocating for fairness and enabling good governance in institutions." The network emphasizes that the ombuds role is grounded in key principles: independence, impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

In Portugal, the Student Ombudsman is mandated by law (Law 62/2007) and implemented in many public universities and polytechnic institutes. The Portuguese Network of Student Ombudsmen (RPE) aligns with ENOHE in promoting both the legal and moral legitimacy of the role, particularly stressing its preventive functions—mediation, early intervention, and policy recommendation. The Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies (ESHTE) plays an active role in both networks and has developed meaningful initiatives with and for students over the past sixteen years.

From a gender perspective, preliminary empirical findings suggest that many student ombuds positions in Portuguese universities are held by women. This matters not only for representation but also for the subtle influence women exert in shaping institutional cultures that prioritize equality, responsiveness, and student welfare. For example, ENOHE conferences often highlight how ombuds offices can "balance power dynamics" and ensure responsiveness to issues such as gender discrimination, harassment, and inclusion. Moreover, academic literature on the competencies of ombuds in higher education underscores the importance of "behavioural competencies" (empathy, listening, fairness), knowledge of conflict resolution and ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution), and robust feedback mechanisms as central to effectiveness.

This paper reflects on this framework, drawing on new data (interviews and institutional documents) from Portuguese HEIs to map gender distribution, assess perceived value (by students, staff, and leadership), and discuss how involvement in ENOHE and RPE enhances effectiveness. It argues that women ombuds play a crucial role not only in resolving individual student grievances but also in reinforcing institutional values of equity, participation, and good governance.

Keywords

Education, Ombuds, Portugal, Gender role.