

## What to do when facing difficulties at work: Practical advice for UNIL researchers

Most PhDs and research projects take place under good conditions, whether at the University of Lausanne (UNIL) or elsewhere. This guide – proposed by ACIDUL and the Public Services Union (SSP) and available as a PDF – is intended for researchers who encounter difficulties at UNIL and/or experience inappropriate or even abusive behaviour.

As in other professional environments, working relationships at the university can lead to distress – one notable specific characteristic being that the highly hierarchical and vertical structures of universities grant considerable power to a small number of individuals, often accompanied by a sense of impunity in cases of inappropriate behaviour. During a PhD, the situation can be particularly critical due to a form of double dependency, as the thesis supervisor is often also the doctoral candidate’s manager (*supérieur hiérarchique*).

This guide provides practical advice on how to protect yourself and take action. It is based on our experience and may be adapted over time, for example in response to changes in available services. None of the services mentioned were consulted in the drafting or review of this document; it therefore reflects only the views of ACIDUL and the SSP.

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## Support from ACIDUL and/or the SSP

Whether you are an assistant, research collaborator, doctoral candidate (with or without a UNIL contract), graduate assistant, teaching assistant (*chargé de cours*), first assistant (PA), *maître assistant* (MA), SNSF researcher, or MER, you are automatically a member of the Association of Mid-Level Staff and PhD Candidates of the University of Lausanne (**ACIDUL**). The Association is available to answer your questions, provide support, offer advice, accompany you, and defend you in case of difficulties encountered on campus. You can write to us at [acidul@unil.ch](mailto:acidul@unil.ch).

It is advised to **join a trade union as soon as you start your work** at UNIL, even if you do not have a work contract. Too often, people join only when they are already in a difficult situation, but immediate support may not always be available. Completely independent of the University, a union can answer your questions, provide advice, defend you, and represent you. Membership also grants access to legal support and, if necessary, legal representation. The Public Services Union (**SSP**) is very present on campus and has in-depth knowledge of the functioning of UNIL and its internal procedures. You can join the SSP via [this link](#).

The SSP and ACIDUL guarantee **absolute confidentiality** with respect to the University, as the personnel working in both organisations are not employees of UNIL.

In general, participating in a trade union and/or the committee of a mid-level staff association helps to better **understand the University's structure**, services, regulations, and procedures, which also constitutes a form of protection: knowledge is power!

## Keeping a journal

If you have concerns about the quality of PhD supervision or the behaviour of your PI or colleague, begin by **keeping a journal**. Record all incidents that seem problematic to you (emails, messages, conversations in the corridors, classroom interventions, etc.), noting for each the day, location, and your immediate reactions or emotions. Save all written communications but never record oral conversations without explicit permission. Over time, this journal will help you evaluate the situation and will be valuable if you decide to take further action.

You can also seek an external opinion by contacting ACIDUL, a trade union, the trusted persons at UNIL, or the UNIL ombudsperson (more information below).

## Who to contact to take action

You may decide that you need to take action, for example to report misconduct or request protective measures. The SSP and ACIDUL can accompany you through these steps if you wish.

Before taking action, it is essential to **understand the different actors** at UNIL. Below, we list the most relevant, including their competencies and limits, based on our experience. Contact is generally made by email or phone.

Note: All UNIL staff are required to report serious incidents to their hierarchy or to the Human Resources Service (SRH), even if you do not wish to do so yourself.

A list of inappropriate or abusive behaviours can be found in [Directive 0.4 of the rectorate](#). For situations covered by the Penal Code (e.g., rape), contact the police or file a complaint with the public prosecutor (*Ministère public*), ideally after consulting a legal expert.

#### AIDE UNIL

This service allows [reporting of problematic situations](#), including via an anonymous form. However, do keep in mind that anonymous reports rarely lead to sanctions on their own; multiple reports over time regarding the same person and issues are usually required.

If you prefer oral communication, you can meet with the delegate for the protection of the work and study climate, who can listen and advise on available solutions. Depending on the severity of the information, the delegate may be legally required to report it to the rectorate, so confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed.

English-language support is generally available.

#### Trusted persons and the ombudsperson

The role of [trusted persons](#) – *personnes de confiance*, who are part of the HELP UNIL service – is to listen and provide advice. They are independent from the University and guarantee absolute confidentiality, but their role is not to defend you and they do not have the authority to engage UNIL services to implement solutions.

The [ombudsperson](#), who is also part of HELP UNIL, can assess the legal aspects of a situation and help you draft a report if necessary. This person can also guarantee absolute confidentiality.

English-language support is generally available.

#### Graduate Campus

The Graduate Campus supports doctoral and postdoctoral researchers by helping to identify solutions with relevant parties, such as deans' offices or HR.

It is not however a union or peer association: its role is not to take your side and to defend you. Moreover, the staff working within this service are legally required to report serious situations to the rectorate, so confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed.

English-language support is usually available.

#### Human Resources Service (SRH)

Distinguish the Human Resources Service (in French, SRH), which is attached to the rectorate, from the faculty HR offices. For contract matters (vacation, sick leave, maternity, leaving the country, etc.), contact your faculty's HR. To report inappropriate or abusive behaviour (e.g., harassment), contact the SRH, responsible for employee protection.

According to [Directive 0.4 of the rectorate](#), the SRH can:

- **Launch a preliminary procedure** (art. 24) conducted by them or by external lawyers, or an **investigation** (*enquête administrative*, art. 25) which will necessarily be entrusted to external lawyers;
- **Put in place measures**, for example protective measures, which can be immediate depending on the severity of the situation you report;
- **Ensure the implementation and follow-up of these measures**, notably in coordination with the Dean's Office of your faculty or other services, such as the Graduate Campus;
- **Pronounce sanctions** (e.g., warning, transfer, dismissal), with the approval of the rectorate.

Note: Confidentiality is not guaranteed. Depending on the severity of the situation, the SRH and HR are legally required to report it to the rectorate.

Keep in mind that **the role of the SRH and HR is not to take your side**, but to investigate the facts you have reported, implement protective measures if necessary, and take measures against the person you have accused if the facts are established. Be prepared for your statements to be confronted with those of the person you reported.

Finally, the SRH and HR generally only have the **competence to act if you are under contract** with the University. For doctoral candidates without a contract, reports will be handled by the *Conseil de discipline*, as is the case for students (cf. [Directive 0.4 of the rectorate](#)).

If you prefer to express yourself in English, you can generally contact HR in that language. At CHUV, unfortunately, HR rarely speak English.

### General advice

- Ensure that every meeting has an **agenda** (proposed by you or by the person who contacted you). This agenda must be determined before the meeting;
- **Request an interpreter** if needed (fees are covered by UNIL);
- **Prepare for each meeting**: clarify what you expect from it and what your needs are, for example in terms of protection;
- **Be accompanied** to meetings with the SRH or HR, the Dean's Office, etc., for example by the SSP or ACIDUL. Avoid calling upon a colleague for this role, as they may be subject to the same pressures as you;
- **Use written communication** as much as possible to keep proof of discussions and decisions that are made. If important conversations took place by phone or in the corridors, write an email afterwards to the people you were in contact with to briefly summarise your exchange (e.g., "Following our call on January 13, I noted that..."). Do not record exchanges without explicit authorisation. Unauthorised recordings are illegal and cannot be used;
- For each meeting, **ensure that meeting minutes are kept**. If there are none, follow the advice in the previous point;
- **Do not make important decisions on the spur of the moment**, for example if the SRH or your faculty's Dean's Office propose steps or solutions. Take note of the proposals, indicate that you will consider them carefully and respond in writing in the following days;

- Read all letters and emails carefully, and **strictly respect the deadlines** mentioned in them;
- Unless your situation involves legal deadlines, **a call or email can wait a day or two**, giving you time to reflect on the substance and form;
- Even if the situation seems unbearable, **avoid contacting UNIL services multiple times a day or week**;
- **Proceed step by step**. Trust yourself: you will react to the next step when it presents itself. Trying to anticipate everything quickly leads to exhaustion;
- As in any large institution, there may be a **significant time lag** between when you report a situation and when you see progress. Similarly, unanswered emails for weeks, having to retell your story from the beginning at each meeting, the transfer of your file to people who have not yet seen it, or the mobilisation of internal regulations that delay your requests can give the impression that your statements are ignored or that you are being discouraged. Contacting the SSP or ACIDUL, for example, allows you to **protect yourself by not acting alone**;
- You can share your emotions with the people you contact (HR, Graduate Campus, etc.) if you feel the need, but **ensure you remain factual and courteous at all times**;
- If your mental and/or physical health is affected by the situation, make an appointment with a doctor, who can either put you on [sick leave](#) if necessary or guide you toward **psychotherapeutic or psychiatric support**. In case of urgency, you can go to the Permanence du Flon, the psychiatric emergency services of CHUV, or the general A&E at CHUV. If you are a doctoral candidate, you can also contact the [Psychotherapeutic Consultation for UNIL Students](#), attached to the General Psychiatry Service of CHUV. Note that no UNIL member has the right to know your health status, whether or not you are on sick leave (see our [advice on sick leave](#));
- If you believe colleagues might be experiencing a similar situation to yours, it is always **preferable to act collectively**. However, avoid discussing your respective situations in public places (corridors, cafeteria, etc.) and in writing. The threat of defamation or slander complaints is regularly used by people accused of abusive behaviour;
- You can request a **work climate analysis** from the SRH before deciding to file a report. This procedure guarantees the anonymity of the people making the request, but it cannot target any specific person and can only lead to recommendations. Moreover, as the procedure is costly, the rectorate will only launch it if no other path seems feasible.

### Advice in case of a report

- The procedure for filing a report (*signalement*, formerly "complaint") can be found [here](#);
- **Be accompanied** by ACIDUL or the SSP for any meeting, and seek help from the ombudsperson to draft your report;
- Do not have your report drafted by **artificial intelligence** (AI). AI errors, particularly in legal matters, are numerous (e.g., invented legal articles or rulings). The University does not expect you to be a lawyer to file a report. If you need to refer to legal articles and case law, get assistance from legal specialists, for example via the SSP or associations such as the [Ordre des avocats vaudois](#), the [CSP](#) or the [Maison de la Femme/Fondation Madeleine Moret](#). The University's ombudsperson is also available;

- **A report cannot be anonymous** and generally always involves its transmission (including all documents you have submitted, as well as your name) to the person you report;
- Do not hesitate to ask for clarifications on the **steps** for processing your report and the expected timeline for each step;
- If the rectorate decides to open a **preliminary procedure or an investigation** following your report, you will be invited by the SRH representatives or the lawyers mandated by UNIL to recount the situation as you experienced it. This individual interview – for which ACIDUL or the SSP can accompany you – generally lasts several hours, during which your statements will be recorded in written minutes. At the end of the interview, you will have to sign the minutes. We recommend **reading the document carefully before** leaving, so that you can correct any mistakes;
- Prepare yourself for a **slow, time-consuming, and complicated procedure** to understand, particularly if you are unfamiliar with it. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the processing of a report to take several months or even years. You may need to regularly follow up with HR to know the progress of the procedure. You have a right of access to the procedure files only if you have agreed to be a “party to the procedure”. In this case, request to consult the file regularly. However, know that this right can be temporarily limited, or restricted if predominant public or private interests oppose it – although this should not be the rule. Once the investigation is finished, you do not have a right to know the measures taken against the person you reported;
- **The University has a duty to protect its employees**, notably through measures such as distancing the person you reported, remote working, changing offices, or changing PIs. Despite this, academic authorities are sometimes reluctant to implement protection measures *before* the investigation concludes. Do not hesitate to request protection as soon as you file a report, and if no measure is put in place, contact ACIDUL, the SSP, or a legal expert/lawyer;
- Any report unfortunately exposes you to possible **retaliation** by the person you reported, which can take various forms. This risk is greater if the reported person holds power over your career (PhD, postdoc). If you feel your report leads to such actions, report them to HR to stop them;
- **Surround yourself with caring people**, take care of yourself, and try to engage in activities that help you take your mind off the situation.

### Courses of action and protection measures

- Since HR covers seven faculties and dozens of institutes, departments, etc., we advise you to **propose protective measures yourself** that would be useful in your specific work environment (e.g., remote work, change of office, co-supervision of your PhD, etc.);
- Do not accept **departure agreements** (*conventions de résiliation*) without full knowledge of the facts. Such an agreement can lead to significant sanctions from the Swiss unemployment system, as your departure from UNIL will be considered a resignation. We recommend seeking advice from the SSP, ACIDUL, or a legal expert/lawyer before accepting such an agreement;
- If you report the behaviour of a professor, we advise against accepting, as a protective measure, that another professor acts as a **guarantor or mediator**. Due to their

proximity and professional ties, the risk of bias is high. Moreover, professors are not trained to handle or manage inappropriate or abusive behaviour, and mediation is not part of their mandate. If such a measure is proposed, do not hesitate to discuss it with the SSP, ACIDUL, or a legal expert/lawyer;

- **Mediation** applies only to certain types of workplace conflicts. It should not be used in cases of abusive behaviour (discrimination, harassment, physical aggression, etc.) and can only take place with the consent and active engagement of all parties involved;
- Proposals for intervention by external **coaches** should be approached with caution, as coaches do not necessarily understand the academic environment or the power dynamics inherent to it;
- Only the SRH has the authority to **terminate a work contract** and formally communicate this decision to you. Any decision from a Dean's Office or a professor, for example, is invalid, meaning that your contract remains in force until HR officially notifies you;
- If your work capacity has been affected, you can request an **extension of your work contract** at UNIL, no later than five months before the planned end of your contract:
  - If your funds come from UNIL: you must submit a request to your PI specifying the time you estimate you have lost, the reasons for your request, and the number of months of extension needed (step 1). If your request is approved (step 2), your PI will forward it to the head of your institute, section, lab, etc., which, if it approves it (step 3), will forward it to the Dean's Office which, if it approves it (step 4), will forward it to the SRH, which will make the final decision (step 5);
  - If your funding comes from an external source (e.g., SNSF): you must submit a request to your PI specifying the time you estimate you have lost, the reasons for your request, as well as the number of months of extension needed (step 1). If your request is approved, your PI will contact the funding body (e.g., SNSF) to request an extension of the project and funding (step 2). If the funding body accepts, your PI will forward your file, along with the decision, to the Dean's Office, which will forward it to HR (step 3). If your request is refused, your section, institute, lab, etc., may finance the extension. In this case, they will forward your file, along with the funding body's decision, to the Dean's Office. In certain situations, the rectorate may also finance a contract extension;
  - In all cases, **a contract extension is never automatic**. The decision will be communicated several weeks or months after the request is submitted, depending on the situation.

For doctoral candidates experiencing difficulties with their thesis supervisor: you may request the introduction of a **co-supervisor** if you find it useful, or a **change of supervision**. If your funding comes from UNIL ("*fonds Etat*"), this type of request is generally easier to implement than with external funding, such as SNSF funding. The request can be made to the Graduate Campus or HR, who will initiate the necessary procedures with your faculty, department, institute, etc.

For doctoral candidates who have filed an appeal after failing an evaluation carried out within the framework of their PhD, please note that your **exmatriculation is suspended** during the processing of your appeal.

## Other services

### The Dean's Office of your faculty

The Dean's Office may be informed of your actions by the services you contact, and it is often important to include them in identifying and implementing concrete solutions. However, we advise you **not to file a report solely with the Dean's Office** or only with the head of your institute, section, lab, etc. Dean's Offices may have biases, as their members are usually not trained to handle situations involving harassment, for example, and they often maintain close professional ties with the reported person(s).

The secretariat of your section, institute, or faculty is also not an appropriate place to report abusive behaviour.

### Funding bodies (e.g., SNSF)

If you are funded by an external source, you may report your difficulties to the funding body (e.g., SNSF). However, they are not your employer and you will most likely be referred back to UNIL to find solutions. In case of serious issues, we recommend preparing your report with the support of a trade union, ACIDUL, or a legal expert/lawyer.

### Lawyers

You may consult a lawyer at any time, **at your own expense**. However, while lawyers are legal experts, they may not be familiar with UNIL's many internal regulations or the specific dynamics of the academic environment. If you choose to consult a lawyer, we recommend contacting people specialised in **labour law** (*droit du travail*), particularly within the Vaud public sector (*fonction publique vaudoise*). Note that unless you have legal insurance or are a member of a trade union, legal consultation can be **very expensive**. Check in advance whether financial support is available.

### Labour Courts (Prud'hommes)

We recommend first using UNIL's internal resources to seek solutions. If you consider that the University's response to your situation is insufficient, you may turn to the Administrative Labour Court of the cantonal administration ([TRIPAC](#)), which handles employment-related disputes. The **procedure** can be found [here](#). ACIDUL does not have the capacity to accompany you in this procedure, unlike the SSP. In any case, we strongly advise against undertaking this process alone.

## Knowing your rights

- Faculty directives (PhD regulations, etc.), available on the respective faculty websites
- [Internal directives of UNIL](#), in particular [Directive 0.4](#) on the protection of personal integrity within the university community, which provides information on sanctions in cases of violations of personal integrity;
- [Regulations on assistants at the University of Lausanne](#) (applies to graduate assistants, first assistants, student assistants, and non-medical assistants)
- [Law on the University of Lausanne](#) (LUL)
- [Implementation regulations of the Law on the University of Lausanne](#) (RA-LUL)

- [Law on the Civil Servants of the Canton of Vaud \(LPers\)](#)
- [Implementation regulations of the Law on the Civil Servants of the Canton of Vaud \(RLPers\)](#)
- [Swiss Code of Obligations](#)
- [Labour Law and ordinances relating to the Labour Law](#)

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