

Annual Report 2016

Ombudsfunctionaris voor studenten

*“Evenveel klachten,
more complaints!”*



142



17



125



9,6 %



71



54



Universiteit
Leiden

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1. Foreword

This report provides an overview of the nature of complaints submitted to Leiden University's ombuds officer and how they were dealt with in the year 2016. In contrast to the reporting year 2015, all complaints were submitted to one ombuds officer only, Mr. E.A.J. van der Heijden. This meant that a uniform processing of complaints was possible.

With a view to facilitating the comparison of the ombuds officer's annual reports, it has been decided not to make any major changes to the format of this annual report. However despite this consideration, the current ombuds officer saw reason to provide a more multi-annual perspective when drawing up the report, in order to give a better overview of trends and developments. The annual report has also been given a title for the first time, which draws attention to the most notable finding of 2016, namely that the number of complaints from national students has remained the same, whereas the number of complaints from international students has risen once again. In 2015, the percentage of the total number of complaints originating from international students was already remarkably high (38%). This year it has risen to 43%.

In 2016, 125 complaints were submitted to the ombuds officer. In addition, 17 questions requiring a certain amount of processing were posed to the ombuds officer, but were not recorded as complaints. In comparison with the figures for 2015 (114 complaints), the number of complaints submitted rose by 11. This represents an increase of almost 10%.

The majority of complaints were submitted by Master students (42%), followed closely by complaints from Bachelor students (40%). The other complaints originated from a number of exceptional categories, such as prospective students, students on teacher education programmes and clinical interns. It is remarkable that the roughly two thirds of students following Bachelor programmes submitted almost the same number of complaints as the roughly one third of students following Master programmes. Just as last year, many complaints concerned the provision of information, student (de)registration, procedures and (thesis) guidance.

Also of particular note in 2016 was a formal investigation, initiated in September at the Faculty of Social Science, as the result of four complaints submitted about the same lecturer in a short period of time.

Leiden, March 2017

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2. Ombuds officer – General outline

Legal foundation

Since April 1999, the University has had an ombuds officer for students, as well as regulations relating to the ombuds offer, which describe the methods of appointment, the target group that is granted the right to complaint, the procedures for submitting a complaint, the competences of the ombuds officer to conduct an investigation, and the annual reporting requirement to the Executive Board. The legal foundation for these regulations is article 7.59b of the Law on Higher Education and Scientific Research (Wet op het Hoger onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk onderzoek (WHW)). Although the position of the Leiden ombuds officer cannot strictly be classified as an ombudsman as in the sense of the General Administration Law Act (Algemene Wet Bestuursrecht), the complaints procedure follows closely the stipulations laid down in chapter 9, title 1, with regard to complaint handling by an administrative body.

Mission

The mission of the ombuds officer is to provide an accessible complaints facility for students, which in turn contributes to the sense of community amongst students and staff. This facility is intended to offer students the opportunity to approach an independent body, in the early stage of a disagreement, that can assess the reasonableness of a situation and offer opportunities for internal and confidential mediation.

Vision

The ombuds officer strives for a greater focus on student complaints within Leiden University and a safe and confidential environment, in which complaints can be discussed informally and with mutual respect. In the ombuds officer's opinion, student complaints should be seen as an important source of information in terms of how processes, interaction and behaviour can be improved.

Core values of the ombuds officer

The core values of the ombuds officer's methodology are: confidentiality, neutrality and independence. These are the core values of all ombuds officers.

Confidentiality

... means that all complaints are dealt with in strict confidence. Upon receipt of a complaint, contact will only be sought with other persons or bodies within the university with the express permission of the complainant. This guarantee of confidentiality also extends to the person or body that is the subject of the complaint. Annual reporting takes place in such a way that both the person who submits the complaint and the person who is the subject of the complaint cannot be identified.

Neutrality

...means that the ombuds officer strives to find a fair and reasonable solution to a complaint without prejudice. The methodology of the ombuds officer is based upon listening to both sides of an argument. Even though the ombuds officer deals primarily with students, he/she acts for the general good of the university, not solely for the benefit of students. A student may at any time discontinue the processing of his/her case, whereas the ombuds officer may only do so under clearly-defined circumstances.

Independence

... means that the ombuds officer works independently and does not have a manager or superior. If requested to do so, all university staff members are obliged to cooperate in a complaint investigation initiated by the ombuds officer and provide all information requested.

Embedding of the ombuds officer within organisation

Despite his/her independent and neutral role, it is important that the ombuds officer remains in touch with the latest developments within the university. In line with the structural embedding of the ombuds officer's position within the Student and Educational Affairs Expertise Centre (SEA), the ombuds officer has regular meetings with the director of SEA and also with the deputy director of Academic Affairs. In 2016, the ombuds officer's substantive cooperation with the university's confidential advisors (for undesirable behaviour, personnel and academic integrity) resulted in three confidential advisor meetings, a joint presentation and discussion of the annual report with the Executive Board, and several ad-hoc collegial consultations, primarily with the confidential advisor on undesirable behaviour in cases involving student complaints about issues that fell midway between undesirable and improper behaviour (for example discrimination and intimidation).

Also of note in 2016 is the intensification of contact between the ombuds officer and the Diversity Office. This resulted in a joint meeting between the confidential advisors, the Diversity Office and the ombuds officer, held on 12 January 2016. The ombuds officer also took part in a number of activities organised by the Diversity Office.

As a result of the ombuds officer's ongoing series of introductory meetings with faculty boards, the confidential infrastructure with education portfolio holders within faculty boards has become better defined. In exceptional cases, the ombuds officer has seen cause to 'escalate' issues, resulting in confidential discussions at board level. As a general rule, these discussions took place within the faculty board, with the education portfolio holder. In 2016, the ombuds officer met with the portfolio holder at the Faculty of Science as a result of three complaints, at the Faculty of Humanities as a result of one complaint, and at Archaeology as a result of seven complaints. However, in most cases, complaints were discussed confidentially at the level of coordinators and managers. The ombuds officer now has an effective network of contact persons within the various management boards, services, faculties and study programmes of Leiden University. Of particular note, in this respect, is the successful collaboration in the area of improving complaints coordination with SEA and Humanities, who were frontrunners in terms of

the number of complaints received in 2015. A very effective agreement has also been implemented with the management of the UFB, for cases of complaints.

Professional organisations

Leiden University's ombuds officer is affiliated with the (national) Association for the Right to Complain (Vereniging van Klachtrecht – VvK) and took part in two VvK seminars in 2016. The ombuds officer also attended two peer group meetings of the Dutch Mediation Federation (Mediationfederatie Nederland – MfN).



Chairperson VvK, national ombudsman Reinier van Zutphen, during seminar

The ombuds officer is also a member of ENOHE, the European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education, and makes regular use of the services of the International Ombudsman Association, based in the United States. On 8 December 2016 the ombuds officer followed a webinar entitled “*Leveraging Your Annual Report to Validate Your Office and Create Sustainability*” presented by Karey Barnes MSPA of South Texas College.



3. Complaints

This chapter contains an overview of the number and nature of complaints received in 2016, as well as information on how these were dealt with and the conclusions drawn.

Number of complaints

A total of 125 complaints were submitted to the ombuds officer for students in 2016. These complaints form the basis of the detailed explanations provided within this annual report. The 17 registered questions submitted to the ombuds officer will not be dealt with further in this report. It should however be noted that students are often reluctant to use the word “complaint” and often initially use the term “question” instead.

The total of 114 complaints dealt with in 2016, represents an increase of 9.6% in relation to the year 2015. This means that the trend of annual increases in the number of complaints received has continued, with the exception of slight decreases in the years 2014 and 2015. Remarkably, this trend is the direct result of the increasing number of complaints from international students. This will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.



The 4.6% increase in the number of Leiden University students from 2015 to 2016 can only partially explain the increase in the number of complaints. However, if we take into account the 18.2% increase in the number of international students in this period, i.e. from 2792 in 2015 to 3302 in 2016, the relatively large increase in complainants can be better understood, given that the percentage of complaints from international students was 38% in 2015, and 43% in 2016.

Figure 2: Student numbers UL

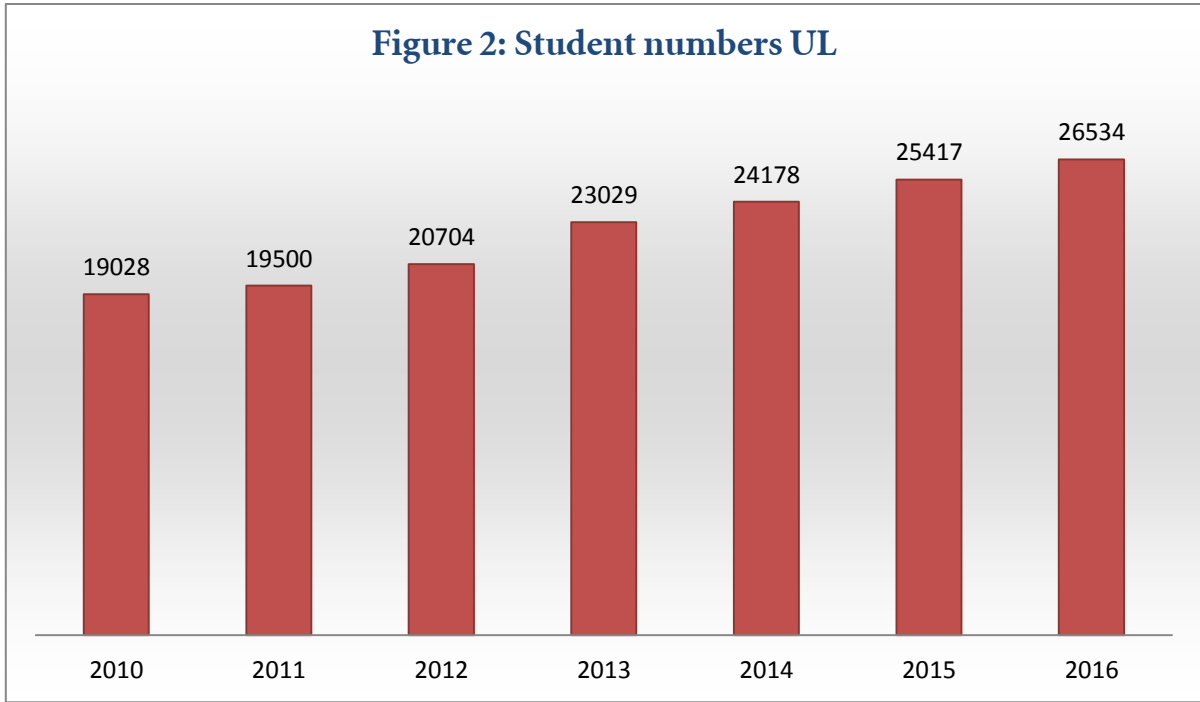
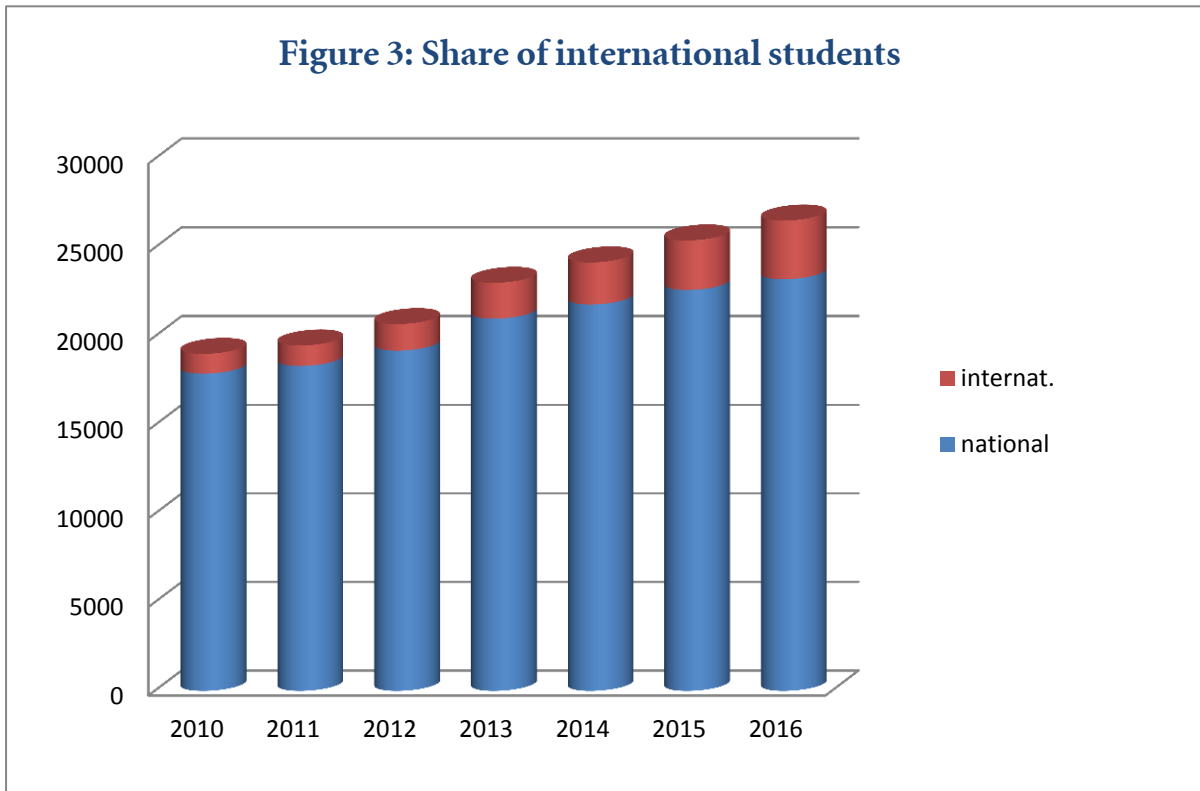
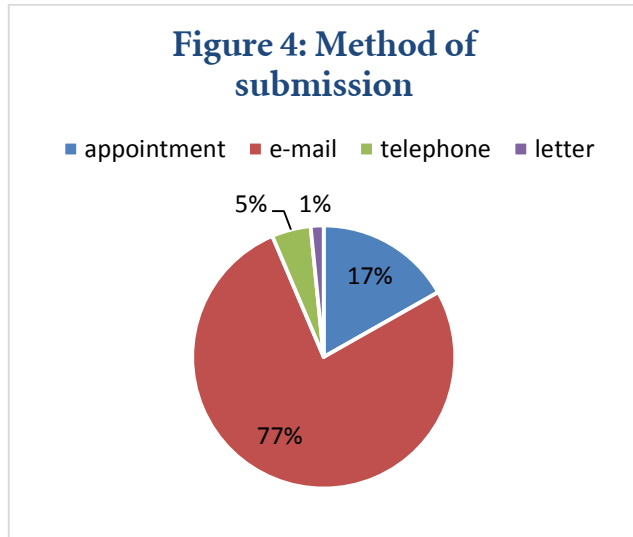


Figure 3: Share of international students



Method of submission

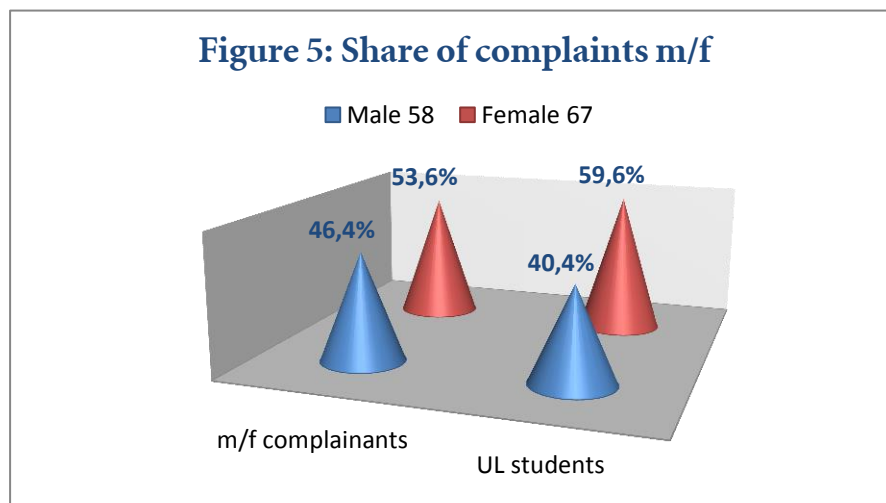
Just as in 2015, in 2016 the majority of complaints were submitted by email (85% in 2015 and 77% in 2016). These statistics can partially be explained by the fact that more students elected to initially contact the SEA secretariat in cases of complaints, particularly on the two days per week that the ombuds officer does not have office hours in Leiden (namely Tuesdays and Fridays).



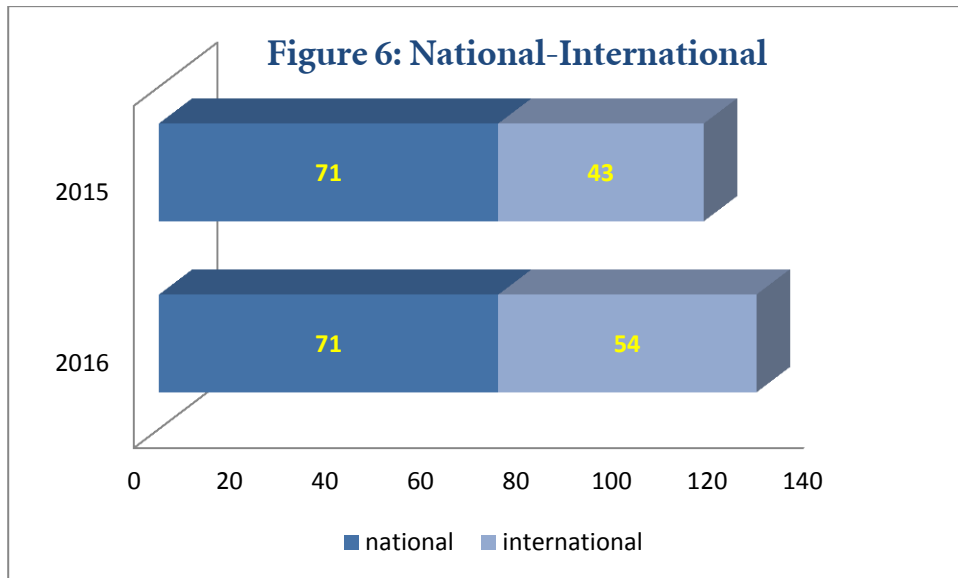
In autumn 2016, the ombuds officer launched a pilot scheme enabling individuals to contact him via WhatsApp. In 2016 no complaints were submitted via this medium.

Who submitted a complaint?

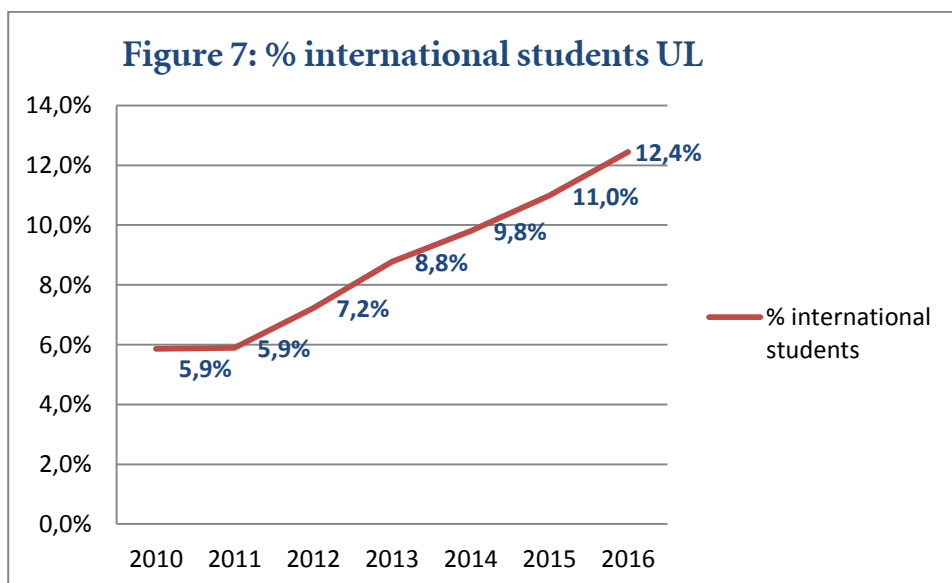
In 2016, 46.4% of complaints were submitted by male students, as opposed to 44% in 2015. Viewed in the context of the male/female student ratio, the share of male students who submitted a complaint in 2016 was relatively high, but not exceptionally so.



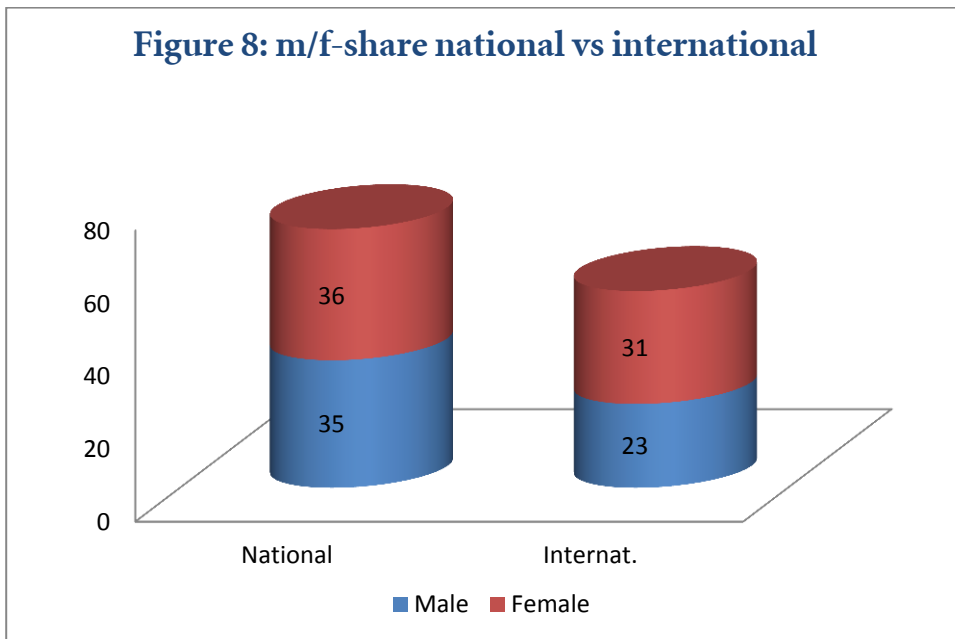
What is exceptional, as has been previously mentioned, is the share of complaints from international students, which has increased from 38% in 2015 to 43% in 2016. When looking at the overall number of complaints received in 2015 and 2016, it can clearly be seen that the number of complaints from national students has remained exactly the same, whereas the increased number of complaints from international students is entirely responsible for the growth in complaints in 2016 (figure 6). In terms of percentages, the total number of complaints from international students has increased by 25% from the year 2015 to the year 2016, from 43 complaints to 54 complaints.



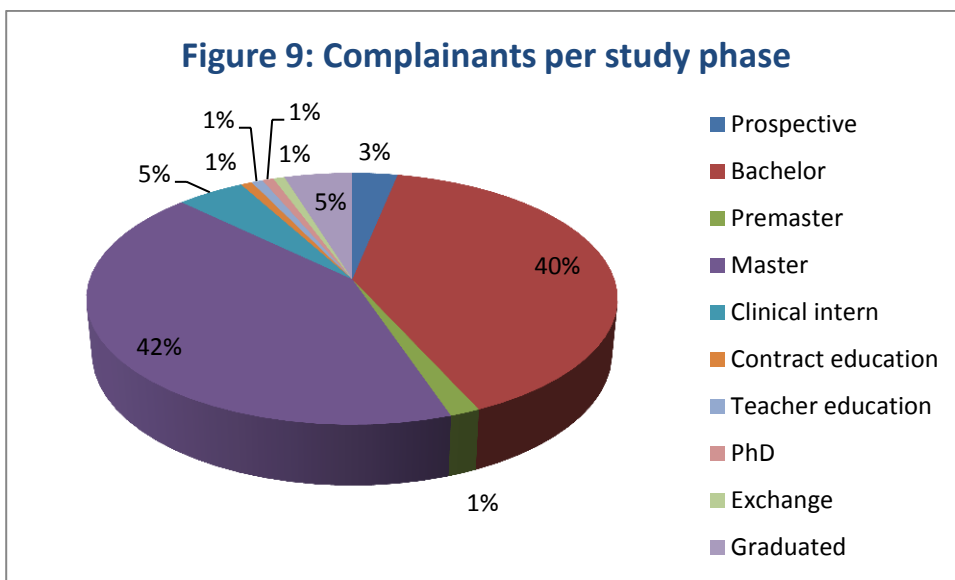
To gain a clearer picture of the share of complaints from international students that would ‘normally’ be expected see figure 7.



Also of note is the fact that amongst national students, the male/female share of complaints is more or less equal, whereas amongst international students, a relatively large share of complaints come from female students.



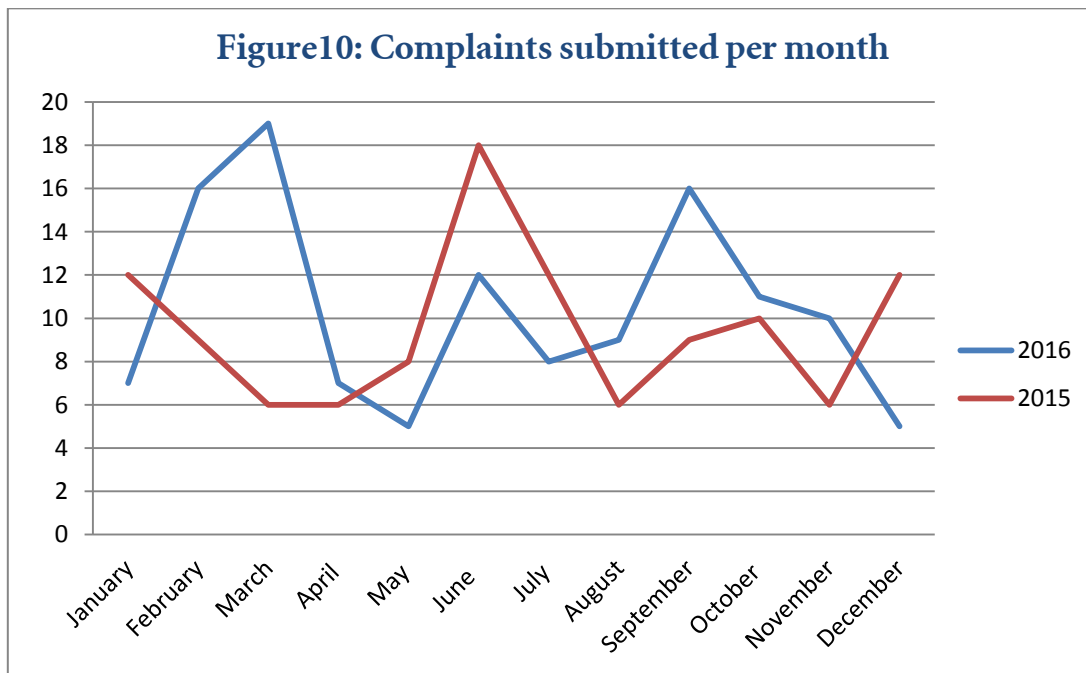
The breakdown of complaints submitted per study phase can be seen in figure 9.



As was noted in the introduction, the share of complaints from Master students is relatively high in relation to the ratio of Bachelor/Master students.

When were complaints submitted?

Due to the lack of multiannual data on this question, the reporting year 2016 represented the first opportunity to compare data on the months in which complaints were submitted. Would it be possible to identify a pattern that would enable the ombuds officer to adapt his/her capacity planning to better accommodate the peaks and troughs in workload? The answer so far is “no”.



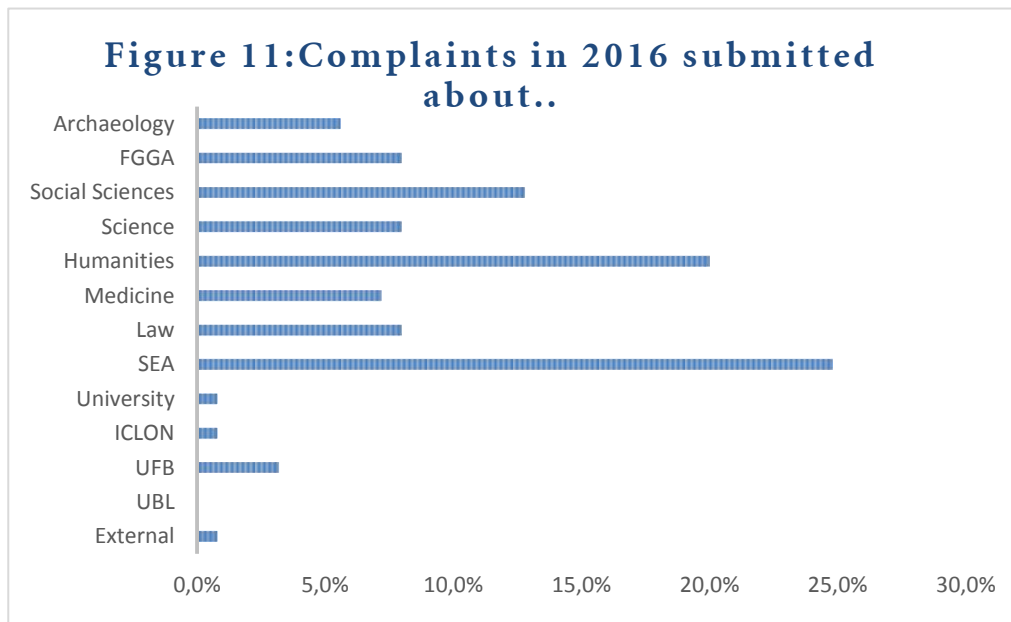
A clear pattern cannot be discerned from this limited multiannual perspective. It should also be added that the ombuds officer’s peak workload is not only determined by the number of complaints submitted in any specific month. In more complex cases, the complaints procedure can take much longer than one month. Added to this are the ombuds officer’s other duties, namely providing advice upon request and upon own initiative, reporting (including this annual report), representation and networking, which also take up a substantial amount of time, although priority is always given to the timely and effective processing of complaints.

What and who were the complaints about?

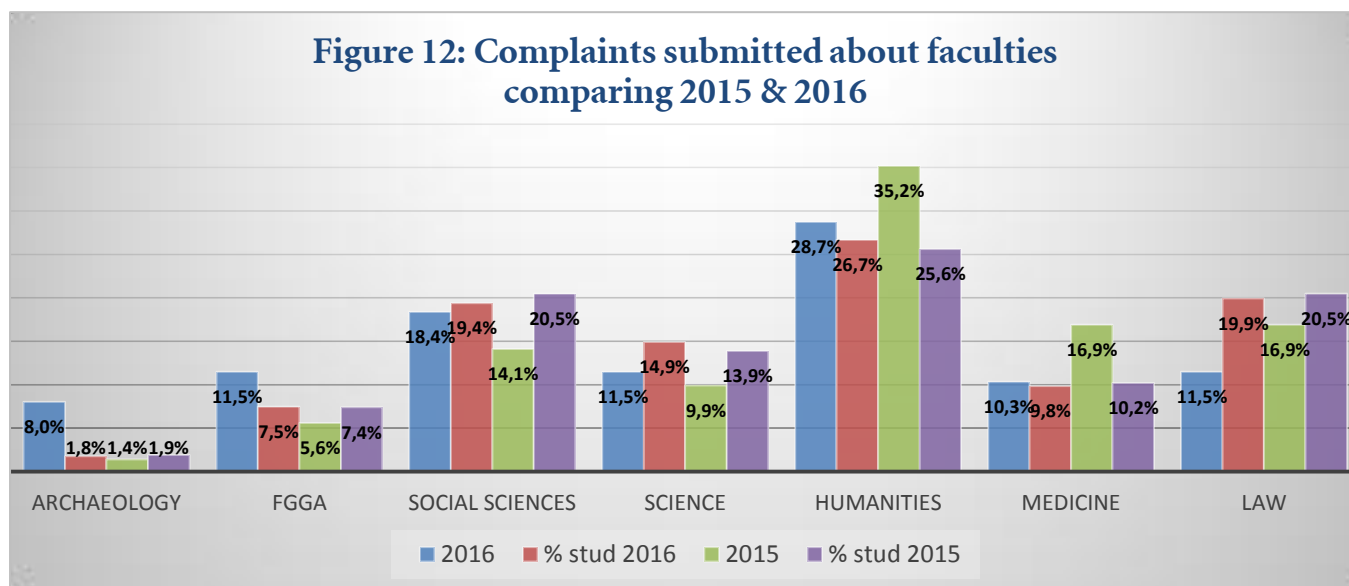
Table 1, on page 12, shows the affiliated faculty or division of the staff/department that was the subject of a complaint. It is interesting to note the distribution of complaints from faculty to faculty.

Table 1: *Affiliation of staff or departments that were the subject of a complaint.*

	Number of complaints 2016	% of complaints 2016	% of students 2016
Faculty			
Archaeology	7 (2015: 1)	8,0	1,8
Governance and Global Affairs	10 (2015: 4)	5,6	7,5
Humanities	25 (2015: 25)	28,7	26,7
Medicine/LUMC	9 (2015: 12)	10,3	9,8
Law	10 (2015: 12)	11,5	19,9
Social Sciences	16 (2015: 10)	18,4	19,4
Science	10 (2015: 7)	11,5	14,9
<i>Total per faculty</i>	87 (2015: 71)	100,0	100,0
Other divisions			
Student and Educational Affairs (SEA)	31 (2015: 35)		
University Services Department (UFB)	4 (2015: 2)		
University - General	1 (2015: 0)		
ICLON	1 (2015: 2)		
Other	1 (2015: 4)		
<i>Total non-faculty</i>	38 (2015: 43)		
Total	125 (2015: 114)		



When compared with the statistics from 2015, several interesting shifts in the complaints distribution per faculty can be noted. Figure 12 illustrates the share of complaints received in 2015 and 2016, in relation to student numbers at each faculty.



Notable decreases can be observed for Medicine, Humanities and Law. At Medicine, this coincides with the absence in 2016 of a cause that led to several (almost) identical complaints. In 2015 there were issues concerning the compulsory transfer of a group of Medicine Bachelor students to a new curriculum.

At Humanities, the decrease can be partially explained by an improved complaints infrastructure that was developed in collaboration with the faculty management. The resulting shorter lines of communication mean that action can be taken more swiftly in situations causing student complaints. Whereas in 2015 several complaints were received about the same organisational shortcoming at Humanities, this number was substantially reduced in 2016; in many cases one sign from a student was sufficient to prevent further complaints. The relative decrease at Humanities is remarkable, however, given the sharp rise in the number of complaints about the International Studies programme (3 complaints in 2015, rising to 10 complaints in 2016). This increase prompted the ombuds officer to seek contact with this study programme's Board of Examiners on diverse occasions, to find out whether a further increase could be averted. Many complaints made about International Studies in 2016 concerned information and communication on the issue of binding study advice.

The most notable increase in 2016 was for Archaeology, from 1 complaint in 2015, to 7 complaints in 2016. Due to the relatively low numbers involved the increase seems more dramatic than it actually is. However it still gave cause for the ombuds officer to (confidentially) contact the portfolio holder within the faculty board. There seems to be no apparent reasons for the almost doubling in complaints for Governance and Global Affairs. Many complaints about FGGA concerned the provision of information, which complainants found to be very late or inadequate.

In addition to the university divisions in question, we can also break down the data to look at the role of the person/department about which a complaint was made. This can be seen in table 2.

Table 2: *role of the person/department about which a complaint was made in 2016.*

	Number of complaints
- (Staff member of) education/information desk, administrative department, or services department	38
- Lecturer(s)	27
- Study, internship or thesis coordinator; study advisor; programme director or manager	10
- Board of examiners/admission board	24
- Faculty, programme, institute or body (e.g. CvB) in general	21
- Other (e.g. student counsellor)	5
Total	125

Compared to 2015, the number of complaints about a university body, as opposed to a specific staff member, rose markedly. This is in line with the ombuds officer’s observation that, whilst it may be possible to identify a situation that gives cause for complaint, it is often difficult to identify the exact cause of this situation. The ombuds officer also makes efforts to ensure that the “bringer of bad news” is not always identified as the subject of a complaint, when the responsibility for a decision or opinion may lie elsewhere.

In 2016, the distribution of complaints about other categories of staff members or bodies was very similar to that in 2015. In terms of complaints about boards of examiners/admission boards, many of these lead to the conclusion “inadmissible”, given that the issues raised proved to be fully the responsibility of the board in question, in some cases with the option for a formal appeal. However the ombuds officer did, in some cases, contact the boards in question to discuss improvements in procedural, informative or communication issues.

Nature of the complaints

Table 3 shows the nature of the complaints received, with a short description of the content per category.

Table 3: *Nature of complaints received in 2016, ranked according to number of occurrences¹.*

Category	Nature of complaints in this category	Amount
1. Procedural issues	Staff or boards of examiners failed to act according to regulations and agreements, or acted too late, or showed extreme lack of leniency.	70
2.Provision of information	Information was incorrect, too little, too late, or difficult to find; not in accordance with regulations stated in OER or prospectus; student did not receive clear information or was too frequently referred elsewhere.	64
3.Guidance	Too little, unclear or unconstructive feedback; insufficient time made available for guidance; absence of supervisor, tutor or mentor.	38
4. Evaluation	Grading deadlines exceeded; evaluation was biased or not in accordance with the rules and regulations laid down by the study programme.	33
5. Financial issues	Student believes excessive amounts were charged for services, including student registration; or that unnecessary costs were incurred due to procedures over which the student had no control.	30
6. Improper treatment	Improper treatment towards a student, that is experienced as offensive or insulting.	27
7. Unequal treatment	Student perceives that comparable situations were not dealt with equally; or, for example, that a disability was insufficiently taken into account, thus leading to inequality.	24
8. Accessibility	Inability to contact lecturer(s); e-mails or letters left unanswered; making appointment or communication with UL staff member not possible within reasonable timeframe.	23
8. Service	Too little, too slow, or unprofessional response to requests and questions by UL staff members	23
10. Facilities	Facilities (e.g. IT systems, study locations, accommodation) not up to standard or (temporarily) unavailable.	18
11. Diversity	Equal opportunities, irrespective of cultural background, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.	16
12. Education	Content of education not of expected level, or different, or less choice	9

¹ Note: this table states the nature of the complaint as was initially described by the complainant. It therefore represents the complainant's perception, which may or may not reflect the perception of other persons involved in the complaint (for example the subject of the complaint or the ombuds officer).

	than stated in the prospectus.	
12. Planning & schedules	Unfavourable schedule; courses or exams planned to coincide; alignment of courses with compulsory overseas placement(s); allocation of study group or clinical internship places lead to delays; changes to schedule after commencement of academic year.	9
14. Breaches of privacy	Information about students unlawfully provided, or made available, to third parties.	3
14. Other	Student complained about aspects other than those mentioned above	3
Total		390

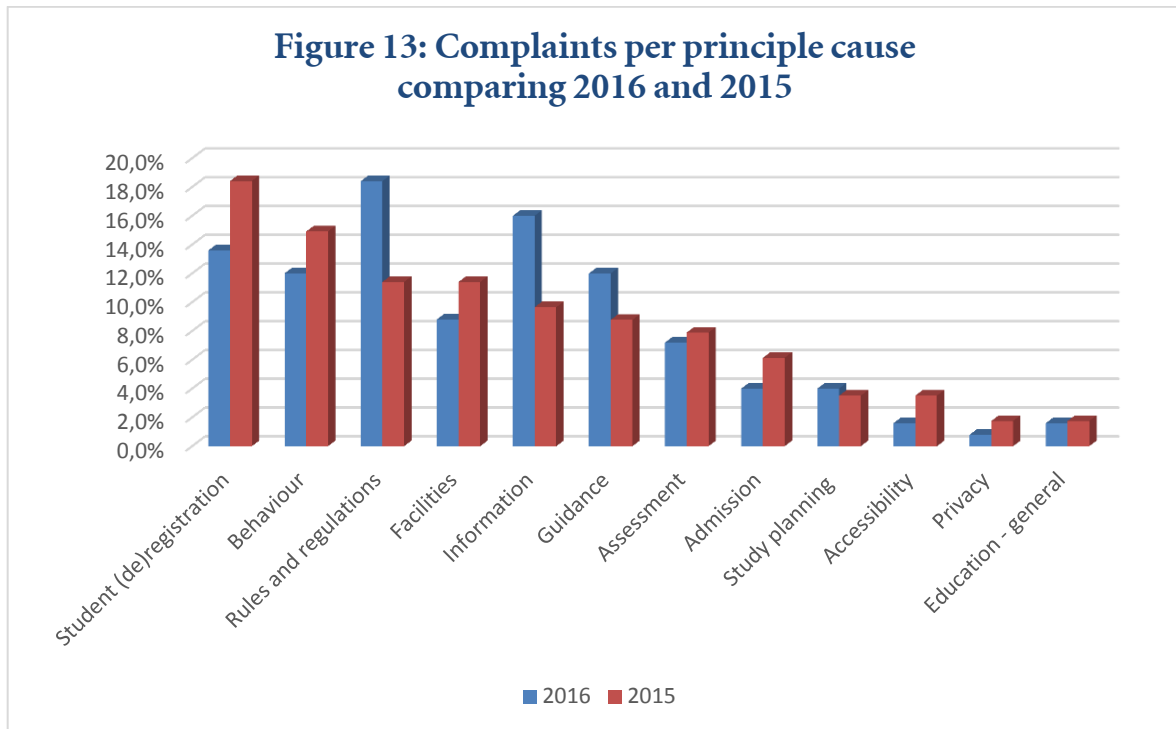
Compared with 2015, the two top-ranking categories remain unchanged, namely ‘procedural issues’ and ‘provision of information’. In 2015 the third ranking category was ‘education’, whereas in 2016 this was replaced by ‘guidance’. I will discuss this aspect further in my conclusion and recommendations, given that many questions in this category involve rather worrying situations, with a lengthy complaint processing time and, often, an even lengthier lead time until a complaint is submitted.

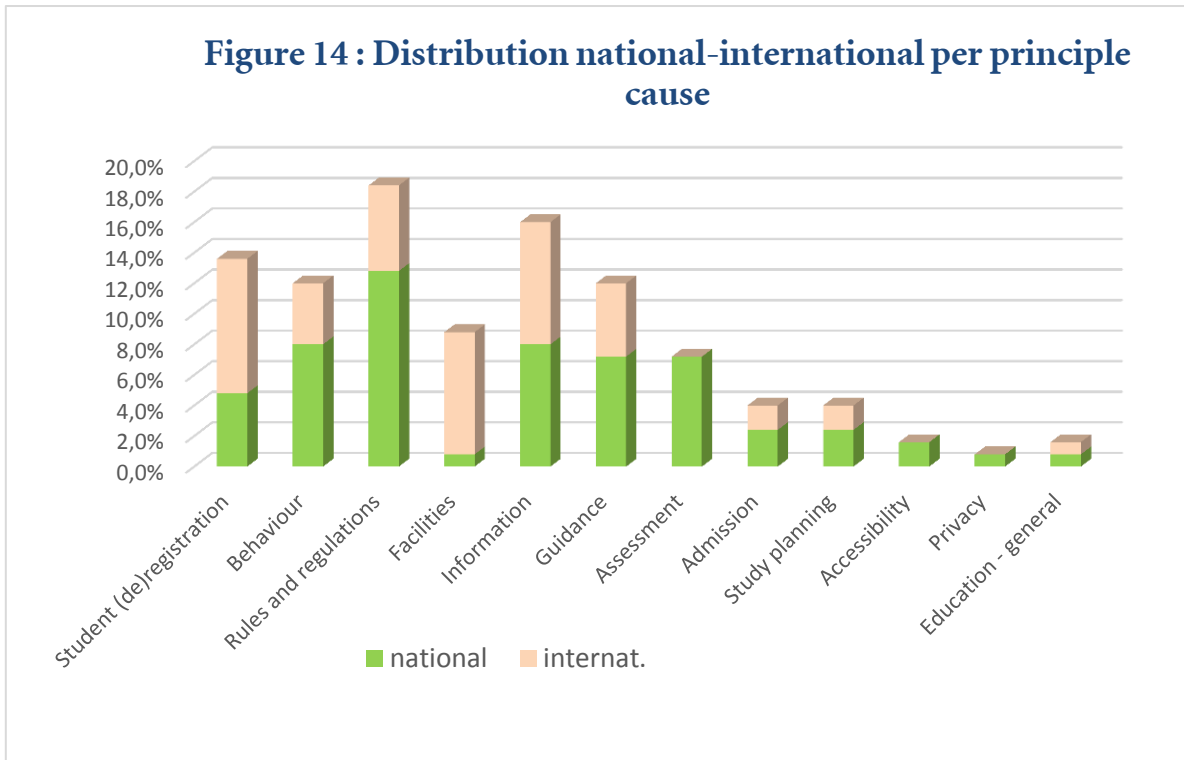
The basis of table 4, below, is that each complaint generally concerns one main issue (principle cause). This table also states the number of international students per principle cause, thus allowing greater insight into the areas in which international students feel they are being let down.

Table 4: Principle causes of complaints received in 2016, ranked according to number of occurrences and further quantified in relation to international students.

Principle cause of complaint	# complaints	# international	% intern.
1. Rules and regulations	23 (2015: 13)	7	30%
2. Information	20 (2015: 11)	10	50%
3. Student (de)registration	17 (2015: 21)	11	65%
4. (Thesis)supervision	15 (2015: 10)	6	40%
5. Behaviour	15 (2015: 17)	5	33%
6. Facilities	11 (2015: 13)	10	91%
7. Assessment	9 (2015: 9)	0	0%
8. Study planning	5 (2015: 4)	2	40%
8. Admission	5 (2015: 7)	2	40%
10. Accessibility	2 (2015: 4)	0	0%
10. Education general	2 (2015: 2)	1	50%
12. Privacy	1 (2015: 2)	0	0%
	125 (2015: 114)	54	43%

In 2016, most complaints fell into the category ‘rules and regulations’. In 2015 the top category was ‘student (de)registration’. Another recurring cause of complaint was ‘information’. The share of complaints from international students remains high for the categories ‘student (de)registration’ and ‘facilities’, although in terms of overall statistics there were fewer complaints about these issues. The following two figures further illustrate these statistics.





Furthermore, with respect to complaints about facilities, it should be noted that the number of complaints about international housing, which falls into this category, has fallen slightly. In the ombuds officer’s opinion, this is down to the improved provision of information by the Housing Office and more attention for complaint prevention. This has, in turn, partly come about as the result of the ombuds officer’s regular contact with the international housing team leader since the last reporting year.

How were complaints dealt with?

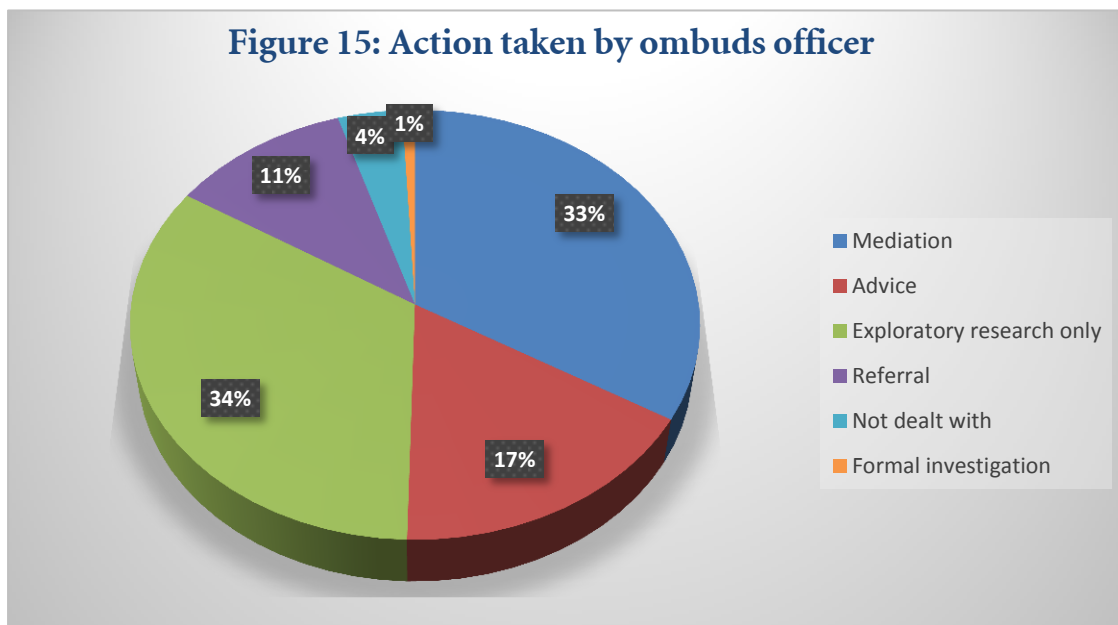
As in previous years, the ombuds officer has kept a record of the ways in which complaints were dealt with. Table 5 illustrates these various methods and here also, principle categories can be discerned. Most categories go hand in hand with advice. In general, complaints that were not processed concerned situations in which students submitted (overly) general complaints, resulting in the ombuds officer being unable to deal with the complaint. The number of un-processed complaints in 2016 was 5, which is significantly lower than the 16 unprocessed complaints in 2015. This can partially be explained by the difference in the number of complaints submitted at the end of the year and not yet processed (6 in 2015, as opposed to 1 in 2016). It also seems that fewer complaints were submitted that fell into the category ‘inadmissible’ according to the ombuds officer’s regulations (5 complaints from PhD candidates in 2015, as opposed to 1 only in 2016).

As of this reporting year, the ombuds officer has decided to no longer differentiate between the following two methods: mediation and shuttle mediation, as these two methods tend to overlap. In shuttle mediation the ombuds officer makes use of mediation skills, and in regular mediation the ombuds officer often has to shuttle from one party to the other.

Table 5: *Method of dealing with complaints received in 2016*

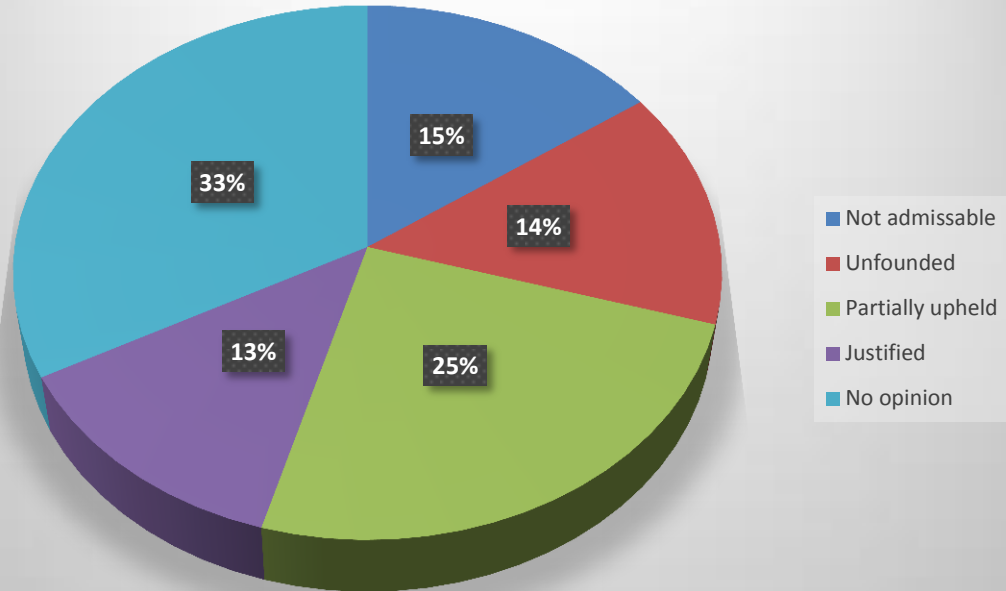
Method of dealing with complaint	Number of occurrences
Not dealt with	5
Exploratory research only	42
Referral	14
Advice	21
Mediation	42
Formal investigation pursuant to art. 6	1
Total	125

Figure 15 illustrates the methods used to deal with complaints. As can be seen, there is roughly a three-way split between ‘exploratory research only’, ‘mediation’ and all other categories combined. In 2016, the ombuds officer also initiated a formal investigation into a complaint, which was not the case in 2015.

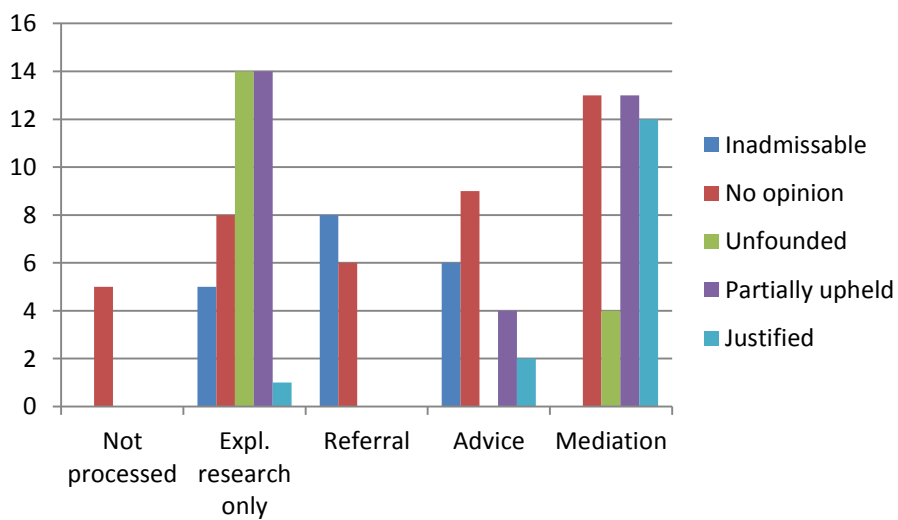


What conclusions did the ombuds officer reach as a result of the processing of each complaint – insofar as a conclusion could be reached – and which conclusions resulted from which actions on the part of the ombuds officer?

Figur 16: Conclusion of complaint procedures

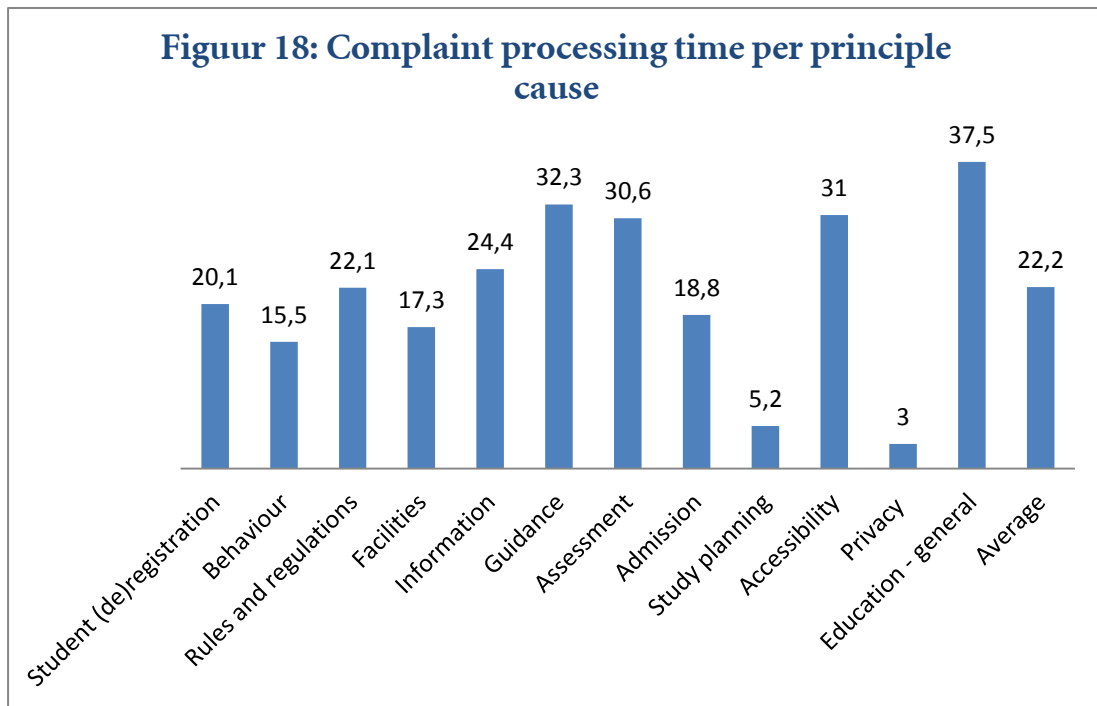


Figur 17: Action versus conclusion



Duration of complaints procedure

The duration of the complaints procedure is shown in figure 16. In 2016, the average processing time for a complaint was roughly 22 days, as opposed to 23 days in 2015. The processing time varies according to the principle cause of the complaint (figure 16).



It is noteworthy that in 2016, the duration of complaints procedures concerning questions of behaviour, study planning and privacy was relatively short. In cases involving behaviour it is important, as an ombuds officer, to act both decisively and in strict confidence to avoid further escalation. Often a conflict concerning behaviour on the part of a staff member or lecturer is a cause of considerable stress for students, which in turn can have a negative effect on academic performance. It is therefore important to ensure that the matter or conflict is quickly discussed, with or without the involvement of the ombuds officer.

With reference to the relatively short processing time for issues involving study planning, it could be suggested that the responsibility for resolving the majority of such complaints does not lie with the ombuds officer, but instead with a study advisor or coordinator. These issues often quickly bring the ombuds officer back to the place where the problem can be dealt with best. With regard to the processing time for the single complaint about privacy, no further conclusions can be drawn.

LEIDS UNIVERSITAIR WEEKBLAD

Mare



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Studenten klagen vaker

3 november 2016

Studenten dienen steeds vaker een klacht in tegen een besluit van hun universiteit. Leiden voert de klachtenranglijst aan.

Het Hoger Onderwijs Bureau (HOP) ging turven en kwam uit op een totaal van 2032 klachten in 2015. Een recordaantal. Een jaar eerder stopte de teller bij 1937 klachten. In 2013 werden er 1696 klachten genoteerd. Het HOP heeft de cijfers ook per universiteit uitgesplitst. Leiden scoort het hoogst van alle universiteiten met 303 klachten in 2015. In 2014 was dat getal 304, maar in 2013 waren er een stuk minder klachten: 253. Dat Leiden op nummer een staat is niet verbazingwekkend. Het invoeren van het bindend studieadvies in het tweede jaar, dat inmiddels alweer geschrapt is, zorgde voor een flink aantal beroepschriften tegen besluiten van examencommissies. Maar ook in de jaren voor het advies in het tweede jaar was er al een flinke stijging in het aantal klachten in Leiden. **VB**

Deel dit bericht:

      0

4. Noteworthy cases

In the reporting year 2016, diverse complaints were submitted that lead to intervention on a broader scale by the ombuds officer. These cases emphasise the importance of united action, when it comes to acting on points for improvement that have arisen from student complaints.

Complaints about BSA at International Studies:

In the reporting year 2016, the ombuds officer received diverse complaints about the way in which the International Studies programme implemented binding study advice (BSA). At the start of the reporting year this concerned both the ‘experimental’ second year BSA, as well as the first year BSA. Although the ombuds officer is obliged to respect the authority of the board of examiners in this matter, there was still sufficient reason to contact both the programme’s study coordinator and the board of examiners (directly). Ultimately, only one of the six complaints received by the ombuds officer was found to be justified, given that the (international) student in question was informed too late (only after making enquiries on 9 September 2016) that her definitive binding study advise was negative.

Complaints about behaviour of a University Services Department (UFB) staff member:

In 2016, three complaints were received by the ombuds officer about a UFB staff member. In all three cases, permission was sought from the students in question to make use of the confidential coordination arrangement with a member of the UFB management team, which was set up in 2015. In all three cases, the staff member against whom the complaints were made was informed about the complaints in a confidential setting. Unfortunately, only one of the complainants was prepared to have a discussion with the staff member in question. In the other two cases, the complainants wished to remain anonymous.

As a result of the complaints mentioned above, the UFB decided to seek information from the Personnel department about possible courses for its staff members on the subject of dealing with cultural differences.

Complaints from student mothers-to-be:

In the second half of October, the ombuds officer received two complaints in short succession from students who were expecting their first child. In both cases this, in itself happy, situation was causing considerable concern and difficulties. It seems that Leiden University, in contrast to many Dutch universities of applied sciences, is not optimally equipped to provide adapted education and services to this particular group of students. In the ombuds officer’s opinion, this is most certainly a situation that requires attention, particularly given Leiden University’s desire for diversity.

Complaints about international housing:

In 2016, the number of complaints received about international housing (the Housing Office) fell. Nine complaints were received in 2015, as opposed to six in 2016. In the case of a seventh complaint, the

ombuds officer decided that it did not concern a complaint about the Housing Office itself, but rather about the (external) housing provider DUWO. Until the ombuds officer received this complaint, the Housing Office had no knowledge of the situation that had given rise to the complaint, nor had the student sought contact with the Housing Office. In only one case did the ombuds officer reach the conclusion “partially upheld”. This case (May 2016) involved a student from India who, for various reasons, was not satisfied with the accommodation she was offered by the Housing Office. Unfounded, but still significant, was the element of her complaint concerning the large numbers of bicycles stolen in Leiden and at the student complexes. In terms of the aspects of her complaint that did require further attention, the ombuds officer made the following recommendation: involve the student from India in a student panel looking into facilities for international students. This recommendation was acted upon and the student appears to have played a very constructive and active role on the student panel.

In 2016, the ombuds officer also undertook several other roles and activities in matters concerning complaints about housing. In one case, the ombuds officer acted as mediator during a meeting between a student and the team leader of the Housing Office. In another case, he addressed a Greek student about his behaviour towards the Housing Office and appropriate manners at Leiden University.

Complaint about compulsory study trip:

A second-year Korean studies student was obliged to deal with serious family circumstances. However, she managed to catch up with her studies in order to join a study trip to Korea in the second semester. One week before her planned trip she failed her last required course by 0.1 points during an oral examination, whilst at the same time all arrangements for her trip and stay abroad had already been made. On 29 February the student spoke to the ombuds officer and less than one day later she was on the plane to Korea.

Four complaints about one lecturer:

In September 2016, the ombuds officer initiated an investigation after four complaints were received about the same lecturer in a period of less than one year. The first two complaints (submitted at the end of 2015) were discussed in confidence with the lecturer in April 2016. Despite this, the lecturer’s behaviour led to a further two complaints shortly after. As a result, the ombuds officer decided – despite the fact that the lecturer was about to leave his/her post – to inform the faculty in question that he wished to initiate a formal investigation on the grounds of article 6 of his own regulations. The conclusion and recommendations arising from this report will be addressed in the 2017 ombuds officer’s annual report, given that the investigation was only concluded at the beginning of 2017.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion 1: The share of international students submitting complaints has further increased.

Recommendation: The ombuds officer regards the fact that he receives so many complaints from international students (43% of complaints received from 12.4% of the student population) as a clear sign that international students do not feel there are sufficient points of contact for their complaints within their own study programmes or faculties. The international student should, for example, be able to turn to the study coordinator of the programme in question. The ombuds officer recommends that it should be ascertained to what degree international students are aware of these facilities and whether the information provided about such facilities is adequate.

Conclusion 2: A focused approach to complaints at unit level is effective.

Recommendation: In the reporting year 2016, in contrast to 2015, the ombuds officer worked with dedicated contact persons within a number of university units that required additional attention (including Student Administration, UFB, the Housing Office and the Faculty of Humanities). This led to a marked improvement in the efficiency and efficacy of the complaint handling procedure; fewer complaints were received about these units and shared lessons were learned about the processing of complaints. The ombuds officer recommends that this approach be implemented more broadly.

Conclusion 3: Direct contact between the ombuds office and boards of examiners works.

Recommendation: In 2015, the ombuds officer was cautious about making direct contact with boards of examiners in cases of frequently occurring complaints. This was motivated above all by the desired division of competences (broadly speaking, education versus behaviour) and procedures (broadly speaking, formal versus informal). In 2016, it became clear that abandoning this cautious approach from time to time can contribute to the quality of processes and procedures. The ombuds officer recommends that the relationship between boards of examiners and the ombuds officer be better defined.

Conclusion 4: Escalating complaints to faculty board level can increase the level of urgency.

Recommendation: In 2015, the ombuds officer made agreements with faculty boards concerning the interim reporting of complaints. On only a small number of occasions, when a specific question was directly linked to a decision by the faculty board, or when the complaint was considered important enough to merit attention at this level, did this take place. The ombuds officer's standpoint remains that complaints should be dealt with as close as possible to the education floor. However, when a complaint touches on the quality of the faculty as a whole, the mere possibility of escalating it to faculty board level can help to ensure that greater urgency is given to the search for a solution. The ombuds officer recommends that guidelines be drawn up concerning the escalation of complaints to faculty board level.



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