

ANNUAL REPORT 2015

Ombuds Officer for students

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1. Forward

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 2015.

In the reporting year 2015 there have been two ombuds officers. From January until April 2015 the position was held by Prof. dr. T. M. Willemsen. On 1 May 2015 Prof Willemsen was succeeded by E.A.J. van der Heijden LL.M.

A total of 114 complaints were submitted in 2015. This represents an increase of 21 percent compared to the number of complaints dealt with in 2014 (94). This increase will be examined in chapter 3.

Almost half of the complaints were submitted by Master's students (46%), a third by Bachelor's students (32%) and a fifth were spread over exceptional categories such as prospective students and medical interns.

Half of the complaints (50%) concerned procedural matters, however the category 'provision of information' represented more than a third of complaints (35%) in 2015. In half of cases the subject of the complaint was a university staff member (or sometimes two staff members). Many of these were lecturers in their role as providers of guidance, and study coordinators and advisors in their roles as providers of information and advice. The other half of complaints were divided between (entire) faculties and study programme, administrative departments (central and de-central), Boards of Examiners and other bodies within the university.

The issues of internationalisation and diversity will be evaluated this reporting year, given that almost two fifths of the complaints (38%) were made by international students and 17% (19) concerned matters of diversity to a greater or lesser extent. In these cases appeals were made based on the right to equal opportunities regardless of cultural background, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. In particular the degree to which study programmes take disability into consideration proved to be an issue.

Leiden, March 2016

Mr E.A.J. van der Heijden LL.M. , Ombuds Officer since 1 May 2015

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2. The ombuds officer¹

Since 2010 the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) has stipulated that all universities and institutes of professional higher education must have an accessible and visible facility to which students can turn if they do not agree with a decision or have a complaint. Leiden University has met this legal obligation through the creation of a webpage: the digital complaints box. By way of a series of questions concerning the nature of the complaint students are guided to the appropriate body.

Ombuds officer regulations at Leiden University²

Every student is entitled to submit a complaint to the ombuds officer about ‘the way in which an administrative body or staff member of the university has acted towards him or her in a specific situation’. This is a broad definition and consequently the ombuds officer deals with a broad range of complaints. The term ‘student’ is also interpreted in a broad sense: prospective students are entitled to submit a complaint, as are graduates as long as the complaint concerns the (period of the) study programme. Complaints about general university policy, decision-making (Executive Board and Boards of Examiners) or undesirable behaviour (for example discrimination) do not fall under the competences of the ombuds officer. There are separate procedures in place for such matters.

The methodology of the ombuds officer is stated in the Regulations. This entails, for example, investigating the complaint by listening to both sides of the argument and assessing whether an amicable agreement might be possible. All staff and administrative bodies of the university are obliged to cooperate in an investigation by the ombuds officer and provide any information requested.

The purpose of the ombuds officer’s yearly report is to give an overview of the cases dealt with, whilst maintaining the anonymity of the persons involved, and to make recommendations. The ombuds officer can also undertake investigations and issue recommendations to the Executive Board on his/her own initiative, without prior request.

Methodology of the ombuds officer

The most important characteristics of the ombuds officer’s methodology are: confidentiality, neutrality and independence. These are the specific characteristics of all ombuds officers.

Confidentiality

...means that all complaints are dealt with in strict confidence. A complaint will only be discussed with a third party if express permission is given by the person who lodged the complaint. Annual reporting is done in such a way that the persons who lodged complaints cannot be identified.

¹ The paragraph about the visible facility and ombuds officer regulations are indirect translations of excerpts from T.M.Willemsen (2014), Ombudsfunctionaris voor studenten, *Tijdschrift Conflictantering*, nr 6, 2014, 27-31.

² The ombuds officer regulations can be downloaded via: <http://regulations.leiden.edu/legal-protection/regulations-relating-to-the-ombudsperson.html>

Neutrality

...means that the ombuds officer tries to find a reasonable and fair solution to a problem without bias or prejudice. The methodology of the ombuds officer is based upon listening to both sides of an argument. Even though the nature of the ombuds officer's work results in a great deal of contact with students, he/she does not always take the side of the student. The ombuds officer acts for the general good of the university. 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. All Leiden University staff, from all levels of the organisation, are obliged to cooperate in investigations carried out by the ombuds officer and provide all information requested.

Information available about the ombuds officer

Online information about the ombuds officer can be found via the digital complaints box, which can be accessed by typing "klacht" or "complaint" into the search function on the university website. The majority of faculty websites also provide links to the digital complaints box or even a direct link to the web information about the ombuds officer (humanities). Only the LUMC website does not provide a direct link to the ombuds officer or the digital complaints box. In the Conclusion and recommendations section (chapter 5) the need for harmonisation of information about central complaints facilities and confidential advisors is discussed further.

Information about the ombuds officer is provided in both the Dutch and English version of the Student Charter. The ombuds officer regulations are available in both Dutch and English on the university website.

Consultation within the university

The ombuds officer consults regularly with other bodies within the university that are involved in the provision of services to students. Informal meetings take place on a regular basis between the ombuds officer and the confidential advisor for personnel, the confidential advisor on undesirable behaviour and the confidential advisor on academic integrity. These meetings are intended to improve the coherence of (central) complaints facilities within the university by, for example, making agreements on the referral of cases. This reporting year much attention has been given to the improvement of the provision of information about complaints. Contact has also been made with the diversity officer to draw up an inventory of overlapping activities and interests.

The ombuds officer has regular meetings with the director of the Student and Educational Affairs expertise centre (SEA) and the director of General Administrative Affairs to keep up to date with any developments within the university that may be relevant to complaints received by the ombuds officer.

In 2015 the (new) ombuds officer initiated a series of introductory meetings with faculty boards. These were aimed at raising awareness of the role of the ombuds officer, improving arrangements between central and faculty services and making agreements concerning the interim notification and reporting of complaints to faculty boards should this be required (for example in cases of problems concerning more than one study programme). The ombuds officer also met the faculty boards' (student) assessors during a LAssO meeting. Shortly after this appointment the (new) ombuds officer introduced himself at the Study Advisors Platform STAP.

The work of the ombuds officer is supported by the secretariat of the Student and Educational Affairs expertise centre (SEA). The secretariat provides assistance with agenda management, contact and administrative matters.

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 2015. The ombuds officer also attended three peer group meetings with the Dutch Mediation Federation (Mediationfederatie Nederland – MfN).

The ombuds officer is also a member of ENOHE, the European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education. This organisation holds yearly conferences. At the end of May 2015 Leiden University's ombuds officer participated in ENOHE's annual conference which this year took place in Innsbruck. The theme of the conference was *"30 Years of Solitude? European University Ombudsmen's Pioneering Past, Confident Present, Challenging Future"*.



3. Complaints

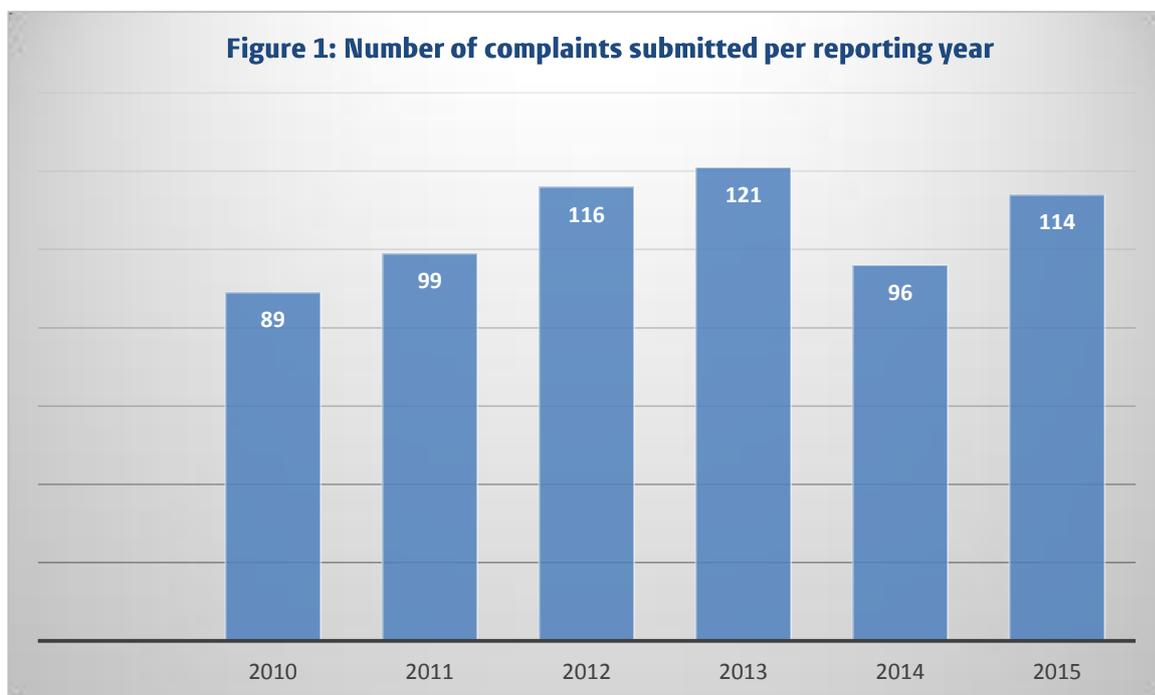
This chapter contains an overview of the number and nature of complaints received in 2015, as well as information on how these were dealt with.

Number of complaints

In 2015 a total of 114 complaints were submitted to the ombuds officer for students. In addition a total of 20 questions were submitted by students that required a considerable amount of time, but could not be formally registered as complaints as they did not meet the definition of a complaint as specified in the Regulations for the Ombuds Officer (for example issues concerning PhD candidates and questions about standard regulations).

This total of 114 complaints submitted in 2015 represents an increase of 21 percent compared to the year 2014. This means the number of complaints has now returned to the levels recorded in 2012 and 2013. No clear explanation can be offered for the lower number of complaints received in the reporting year 2014. This could have been influenced by the fact that the acting-ombuds officer, Prof T. M. Willemsen, had to base her annual report for the year 2014 on the documentation of her predecessor Ms J. van Meerkerk. For a number of complaints it was discovered that too little relevant information was available for them to be included in the annual report for 2014.

In 2015 there were again a handful of students who submitted multiple complaints; two students submitted two complaints and one student submitted five.



Method of submission

The majority of complaints in 2015 (97 of the 114, i.e. 85%) were submitted by email. In at least one in every ten cases the SEA secretariat was the first point of contact for students wishing to make an appointment. It must be added that upon receipt of a complaint by email the ombuds officers generally asks the student to make an appointment with the secretariat. Figure 2 illustrates these figures.

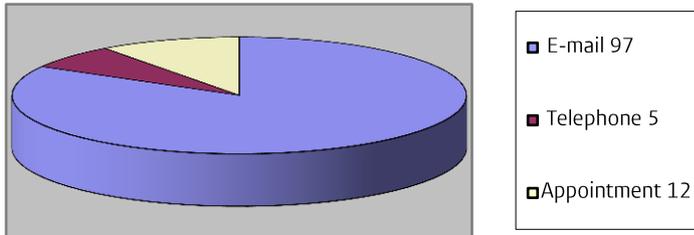


Figure 2: Method of submission

Who submitted a complaint?

In 2015 44% of complaints were submitted by male students and 56% by female students. Taking into consideration the gender of the students submitting multiple complaints the resulting ratio is 57% female and 43% men. This ratio is quite close to the female-male ratio of students at Leiden University in 2015 (60% female, 40% male).

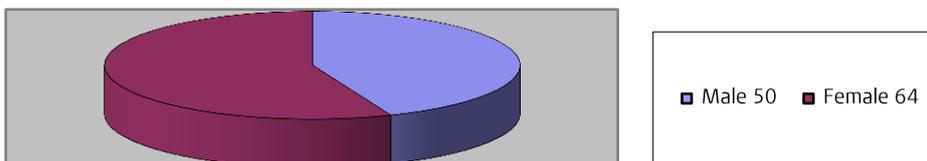


Figure 3: Number of complaints according to gender

Almost two fifths of complaints in 2015 (38%) were submitted by international students. This means that international students – particularly in the Master’s phase – were over-represented to an even greater extent than in 2014, this given the fact that the contingent of international students at Leiden University, whilst growing each year, amounted to only 12% in 2015³.

³ Students following non-government funded study programmes (for example LLM Advanced Studies programmes) do not feature in the statistics on student numbers at the university; whereas this group did have access to the facilities of the ombuds officer in 2015 and did submit complaints (4).

What was also striking was the relatively large number of Master's students submitting complaints compared to the number of Bachelor's students. Whilst the number of Bachelor's students (including first years/propedeuse) amounted to 64% in 2015, with Master's students making up 36%, almost half of all complaints submitted were from Master's students (37 complaints from Bachelor's student / 53 complaints from Master's students). Medical interns submitted a total of 5 complaints in 2015.

What and who were the complaints about?

Table 1. shows the affiliated faculty or division of the staff/department that was the subject of a complaint.

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

	Number of complaints 2015	% complaints 2015 ⁴	% students 2015
Faculty			
Archaeology	1	1,4	1,9
Governance and Global Affairs	4	5,6	7,4
Humanities	25	35,2	25,6
Medicine/LUMC	12	16,9	10,2
Law	12	16,9	20,5
Social Sciences	10	14,1	20,5
Mathematics and Natural Sciences	7	9,9	13,9
<i>Total per faculty</i>	71	100,0	100,0
Other divisions			
Student and Educational Affairs (SEA)	34		
ICLON	2		
Other	7		
<i>Total non-faculty</i>	43		
Total	114		

When compared to the reporting year 2014, the percentage of complaints per faculty corresponds to a greater extent with the percentage of students per faculty. There were still a comparatively large number of complaints about Humanities in relation to its student numbers, but this is less pronounced than in 2014. The ombuds officer believes this can be partially explained by the large number of study programmes at the faculty, which makes the harmonisation of information and services problematic,

⁴ The basis for the calculation of this percentage is the total number of complaints concerning faculties, i.e. 71 (100%)

whilst smaller study programmes sometimes lack the critical mass to internally resolve problems of accessibility and guidance.

Whereas LUMC had a relatively small number of complaints in 2014 this increased to a relatively large number in 2015. This can be explained to a large extent by a combination of factors: i.e. a medicine student who submitted five complaints, and five complaints submitted in the summer 2015 period concerning a transitional ruling for Bachelor's students.

Also of note this reporting year are the 34 complaints about various staff and administrative departments within the Student and Educational Affairs department (SEA). These amount to almost one third of all complaints submitted, whereas in 2014 this was 'only' one fifth. This increase is linked to the rise in the number of complaints from international students about student registration and de-registration processes (including tuition fee payments) and housing. In the case of complaints about (de)registration the provision of information to this group of students by faculties and study programmes played an important role (for example "graduation procedures").

The ombuds officer regularly received complaints from international students stating that they were unaware of the need to terminate their student registration once they had met all their academic requirements. Frequent problems also occurred in the student registration process, these mostly resulting from tuition fee payment issues, which in turn were the result of problems with payment authorisations. Problems often had a combined cause, namely that students failed to read important emails sent by the student administration department and were then surprised to receive a formal notification of termination of registration by post. This came as a big shock to them.

In addition to the university divisions in question, we can also break down the data to determine the role of the person/department about which a complaint was made. This can be seen on page 9 in table 2. The table is arranged in order of the number of occurrences. It can be noted that most complaints, 43 out of the 114, concerned support staff. Students felt, for example, that they were not treated correctly by staff of the Student Administration Department – often the bringers of bad news about termination of student registration or payment arrears - or the Housing Department – not being allocated the room they wanted, or that they received incorrect information from the education information office at their faculty.

Thirteen complaints concerned the work of Boards of Examiners. Some concerned matters against which an appeal could be lodged with the Examinations Appeals Board. Students sometimes pursued these matters initially with the ombuds officer, but on discovering that the formal way is in fact the only way the ombuds officer was still able advise these students about the procedures for lodging appeals with the Examinations Appeals Board. Some complaints did not specifically concern a decision made by a Board of Examiners, but rather the treatment received, excessive response times, failure to adhere to regulations such as time-frames for the grading of exams and inconsistencies in the evaluation of courses (not in accordance with the course description).

Of the 29 complaints about lecturers, eight concerned thesis supervisors. This is not surprising given that thesis supervision represents the most intensive contact between students and lecturers. In addition, thesis grades often play an important role for students wishing to undertake a Research Master’s programme or register on time for a Master’s programme.

Table 2: *Role of staff members about whom a complaint was made in 2015.*

	Number of complaints
(Staff member) of education/information desk, administrative department, or facilities department	43
Lecturer(s)	29
Study coordinator, study advisor or programme director	21
Board of examiners	13
Faculty, study programme or university body in general	8
Total	114

Nature of the complaints

Table 3 on page 10 shows the nature of the complaints submitted along with a short description per category. For the recording and representation of complaints the current ombuds officer has used the same system that was used by his (acting) predecessor, in order to better facilitate the compilation of data. The most common category of complaint in 2015 was procedural issues⁵. This can be partially explained by the fact that this category has a rather broad definition, meaning that complaints overlap with other categories such as evaluation, financial issues, study planning and education.

Many complaints concerned inadequate provision of information or – following on from this– the provision of information that was inadequate for the intended target group. This could have resulted from the way in which individuals (staff, advisors, coordinators) communicated information to students, the channels used to disseminate information (e.g. website, blackboard, email, verbally), or the ways in which information was organised and distributed within a study programme (is the same information given by both the helpdesk and the study coordinator). Also of importance in this category is the need to refer

⁵ In the reporting year 2016 the category “procedural issues” will be replaced by the category “rules and regulations”, which has a more clearly defined character.

students to the departments/individuals who are best equipped to answer certain questions or resolve certain problem. The ombuds officer is aware of many cases in which students were sent back and forth from one department to another in search of information. Students also received conflicting information from different sections within the same university department. This lack of clarity caused students a great deal of uncertainty and resulted in complaints to the ombuds officer. A very large number of these complaints came from international students. These often concerned information about student (de)registration, which is clearly not adequate for international students. It must however be added that the responsibility for familiarising oneself with procedures at Leiden University does also lie with international students themselves.

Table 3: Nature of complaints received in 2015, ranked according to number of occurrences⁶.

Category	Nature of complaints in this category	Number of occurrences
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	57
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.	40
Education	Content of education received not of correct level, or different, or less choice than stated in the prospectus.	33
Financial issues	Additional costs incurred due to procedures over which the student had no control or which took an unreasonable amount of time; courses, study programmes or facilities that were found to be too expensive; excessive tuition fees debited.	30
Treatment	Improper treatment, offensive, intimidating or overly blunt behaviour on the part of UL staff (not involving discrimination, see 14)	29
Service	Too little, too slow, or unprofessional processing of requests and questions by UL staff.	23
Evaluation	Grading deadlines exceeded; evaluation was biased or not in accordance with the (appropriate) regulations in the OER or Board of Examiner's Rules and Regulations or prospectus.	20
Guidance	Too little, unclear or unconstructive feedback; insufficient time made available for guidance; absence of supervisor, tutor or mentor.	20
Diversity	Equal opportunities, irrespective of cultural background, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.	19
Accessibility	Inability to contact lecturer(s); e-mails or letters left unanswered; making appointments or communication with staff member not possible within reasonable timeframe.	17
Facilities	Facilities (e.g. ICT systems, study locations, sports facilities) not up to standard or	8

	(temporarily) unavailable.	
Planning and Schedule	Unfavourable schedule; courses or exams planned at same time; alignment of courses with compulsory overseas placement(s); allocation of places in study group or on clinical internship lead to delays; changes to schedule after commencement of academic year.	5
Breaches of privacy	Information about students unlawfully provided, or made available, to third parties.	4
Discrimination	Case appeared to concern issues of discrimination or exclusion of students on the basis of (personal) characteristics; the ombuds officer was obliged to refer these cases to the confidential advisor on undesirable behaviour on the basis of the applicable regulations.	3
Total		313

Table 4, below, demonstrates that each complaint generally concerned one main issue (principle cause). This table shows that that the registration and de-registration of international students and the (nine) complaints about international housing contributed to the relatively large share of complaints that originated from the international student population⁶.

Table 4: Principle causes of complaints received in 2015, ranked according to number of occurrences and further quantified in relation to international students.

Principle cause of complaint	# complaints	# international	% intern.
Student (de)registration	21	12	57%
Behaviour	17	1	6%
Rules and regulations	13	1	8%
Facilities (incl. Housing)	13	11	79%
Information	11	3	27%
Thesis supervision	10	2	20%
Evaluation	9	2	22%
Admission	7	3	43%
Study planning	4	1	25%
Accessibility	4	1	25%
Privacy	2	1	33%
Education in general	2	2	100%
	114	40	39%

⁶ A relevant factor in the large share of complaints originating from international students could be the range of services provided to international students – e.g. housing – which is broader than the range of services provided to Dutch students. Another factor could be that Dutch students are more likely to raise problems and complaints within their own study programme or faculty (e.g. with a study advisor or a study association).

How complaints were dealt with

In the reporting year 2015, 16 complaints were not processed. This was partially because some complaints (6) were only submitted at the end of the year, and partially because upon first review it was concluded that the complaint should be classified as inadmissible, that is to say not falling under the regulations for the ombuds officer (complainant not registered as a regular student at the time of the complaint), but falling instead under authority of another body (mostly Boards of Examiners or the Examinations Appeals Board). In these cases the ombuds officer often verified with the student by email whether the complaint was inadmissible or not.

Three of the four complaints submitted by PhD students in 2015 were also not processed. These three complaints are in fact not included in the total of 114 complaints recorded by the ombuds officer, but instead as 'questions' dealt with by the ombuds officer.

Table 5: Methods of dealing with complaints received in 2015

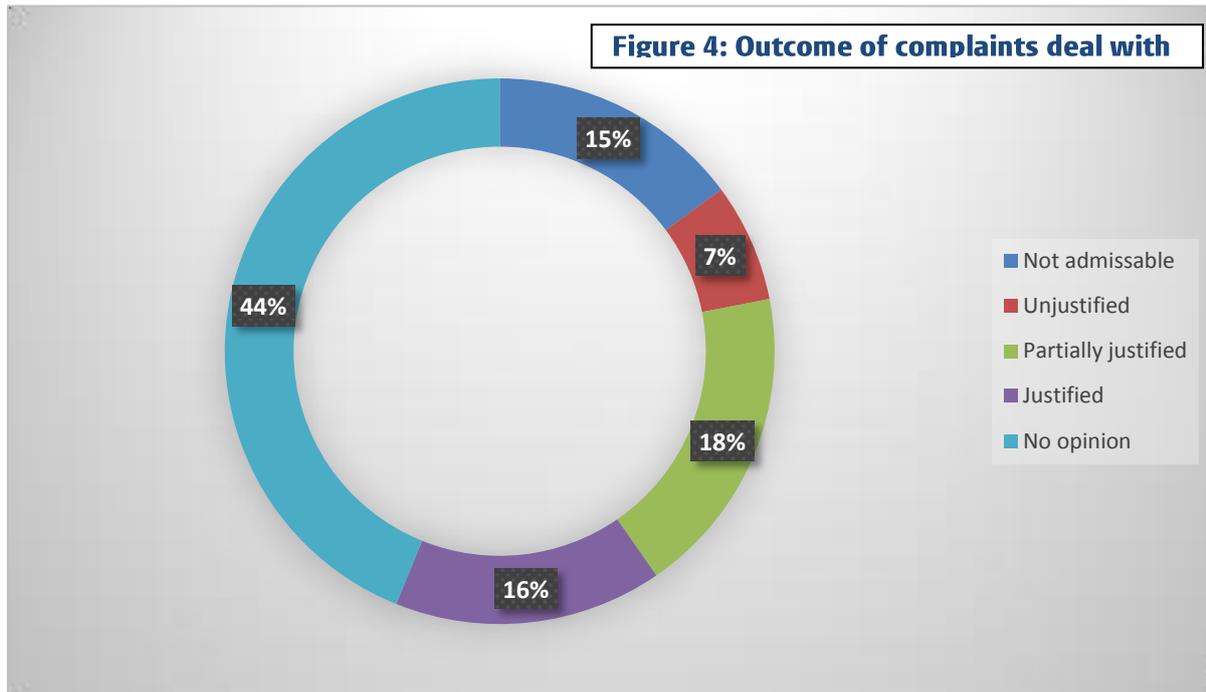
Method of dealing with complaint	Number of occurrences
Not dealt with	16
Exploratory research only	28
Referral	16
Advice	17
Shuttle mediation	34
Mediation	3
Total	114

In 28 cases exploratory research only was carried out. This consisted of, for example, looking up relevant regulations such as the OER (Education and Examination Regulations) of the study programme in question; checking the course description as stated in the prospectus; or contacting the study advisor or coordinator, with the permission of the student, to request further information about a specific study programme or ruling. During exploratory research it was frequently discovered that the study programme, staff member, or body that was the subject of the complaint was already aware of the complaint and was looking into ways of resolving the matter. In these cases the ombuds officer often looked into ways in which similar complaints could be reduced or avoided in the future, and advised the study programmes accordingly.

Table 5 clearly shows that the ombuds officer's preferred method of dealing with complaints is shuttle mediation. In this method of mediation the emphasis is on the ombuds officer acting as a critical process manager; the complainant and respondent ultimately resolve the problem themselves, with the

ombuds officer offering guidance as to ways in which a reasonable solution could be found and the framework and guidelines within which the solution could be found.

Figure 4 shows the outcome of the 114 complaints submitted in 2015.



The largest category, namely “no opinion”, merits further explanation. This could be the outcome of (only) “exploratory research” (14), “shuttle mediation” (12), “not dealt with” (11), as well as the outcome of other methods of (not) processing complaints. Frequently “no opinion” appears when the ombuds officer’s role in dealing with a complaint was primarily process-orientated and he was not required to form an opinion. The large number of inadmissible complaints will be further discussed in Conclusions and recommendations (chapter 5).

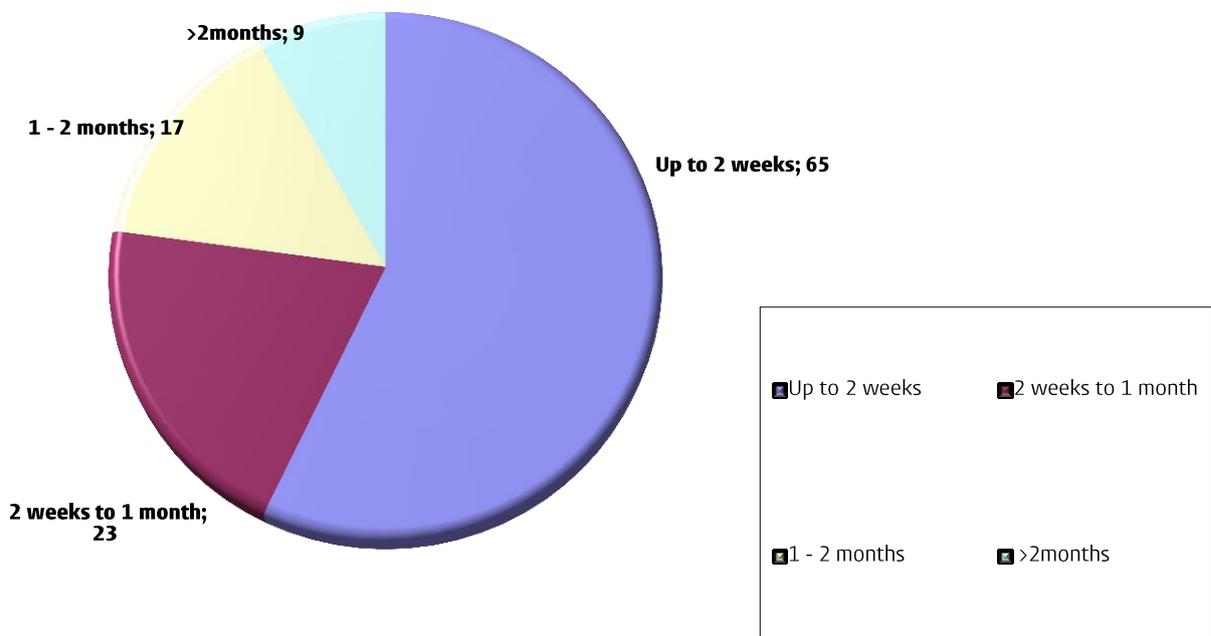
It is also interesting to evaluate which complaints were ultimately deemed to be justified or partially justified. A quarter of these (10) concerned student (de)registration for both the academic year and for courses. Seven complaints about facilities were also found to be justified or partially justified. These were mostly complaints about housing (6) that were deemed to be (partially) justified in certain aspects by the ombuds officer. These aspects were included in the advice on international housing that was issued in July 2015. There were four justified complaints about lack of information and four (partially) justified complaints about thesis supervision. In almost all complaints that were found to be justified the study programme, management or service in question reached a settlement with the student(s), either in

the form of financial compensation or ‘individual arrangements’ as to how a specific ruling could be applied (for example an exception to admission regulations).

Duration of the complaints procedure

The duration of the complaints procedure is shown in figure 5. In approximately 60% of the cases, 65 of the 114, the duration of the procedure was not longer than two weeks. Around three quarters of complaints (88 of the 114) were dealt within one month. 17 complaints were dealt with within two months. The average processing time for complaints in 2015 was 23 days.

Figure 5 Duration of the complaints procedure



One of the reasons for the increase in the average duration of the complaints procedure is the fact that the ombuds officer sometimes put the procedure temporarily on hold, for the benefit of the student. This occurred, for example, in the case of a non-urgent complaint about the treatment of a student during thesis procedures. Enquiries were only made with the supervisor once the thesis or study programme had been successfully completed.

4. Lessons learned

Lessons can be learned during the processing of complaints by the ombuds officer, in terms of improving both the handling of complaints and the quality of university processes. Here below is a selection of complaints that illustrate this point.

A phone call can work wonders: A student complained that she had not received replies to emails sent to her thesis supervisor and study coordinator. A day after the ombuds officer contacted the study coordinator in question the student suddenly received a reply from both parties answering all her questions, this to amazement of the student who remarked to the ombuds officer "...that phone call worked wonders".

Time (and financial) pressure is an additional cause of concern for international Master's students: In early July two Chinese students visited the ombuds officer in short succession. Both had purchased tickets to go home to China in August but had not yet officially completed their studies. This was a great cause of concern for them; should they re-register for the next academic year or not? Further enquiries revealed that there were ways in which they could complete their studies within the current academic year, but these solutions had not been discussed with the students. Ultimately both students were able to leave for China on the planned date.

A cup of coffee instead of a judicial procedure: One Monday the father of a student contacted the ombuds officer to complain that his daughter had been unfairly treated by the receptionist of a UL building. Given the nature of the complaint, which initially appeared to fall into the category of undesirable behaviour (insult, intimidation and discrimination), I spoke to the father, despite the fact that the ombuds officer generally only talks to students themselves. I did however request that the student, his daughter, submit the complaint to me by email. On the basis of my initial evaluation the complaint was referred to the confidential advisor on undesirable behaviour.

It was then discovered that the complaint had also been submitted via a different channel, not by the student, and uncertainty had arisen as to who should handle the complaint, i.e. the faculty at which the student was registered, or the university service for which the receptionist worked? Finally, sometime later, the complaint reached the manager of the university service in question, who contacted me for advice. The ombuds officer advised the manager to hold a meeting with both the complainant and respondent. This meeting went well for all concerned and the student and receptionist agreed to 'have a cup of coffee together' to bring the matter to a close.

The ombuds officer also heard that, as the result of the complaint, the manager established a complaints procedure within the university service in question.

Prevention is better than cure...: Many complaints – particularly from international students – arise through a lack of awareness of procedures at Leiden University. Although the 'graduation

procedures' for study programmes state the importance of (timely) termination of student registration, this frequently goes wrong due to insufficient emphasis placed on this information and a lack of clear communication to students. In 2015 several almost identical complaints were submitted to me about this issue. Clearly (even) more attention needs to be given to this matter, especially for international students.

Upon admission enter “additional courses” into uSis: A Master's student, admitted on the basis of a Bachelor's diploma from the UvA, was convinced that she had completed her Leiden Master's degree. In fact she was about to start a new job abroad. However upon requesting her diploma she was unexpectedly told that she still had three courses to complete (of maximum 15 ECTS). These courses were “added” when she was admitted, but not entered into uSis and therefore the student and her study advisor had not taken them into account when planning her studies. Urgent advice – to all study programmes – enter any “additional courses” into uSis directly upon admission.

The medium is the message... though not a hard and fast rule, in conflict situations emails generally tend to escalate situations, whereas verbal discussions (phone calls or face to face) tend to de-escalate. Of course this is not the case if a verbal discussion was the initial cause of the complaint. When sending emails a quick reaction is often expected. When this fails to materialise the complainant can become (even more) angry. In some cases the ombuds office needed only to advise a student to seek personal contact with the person with whom differences had arisen through emails.

Not authorised but “notification” still important: At the beginning of July 2015 the ombuds officer received five complaints about a compulsory transitional ruling at the faculty of medicine. After checking the relevant regulations and provisions he concluded that the responsibility for these complaints lay with the Board of Examiners for the medicine programme. Despite this conclusion the ombuds officer still made “notification” of the complaints received. This resulted in meetings with the Chairperson of the Board of Examiners, in which the better streamlining and communication of the complaint procedure for the transitional ruling was discussed.

Contract is contract: International students who choose to make use of international housing facilities (or are obliged to do so due to visa requirements) are sometimes not fully aware of the conditions for which they are signing. This results in frequent complaints. Of course the stand point must always be ‘contract is contract’. However these complaints highlight the need to properly inform students about the conditions that apply to international housing contracts, both before and after arrival. The ombuds officer understands that steps are already being taken in this respect.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion 1: In 2015 a relatively large number of complaints were submitted by international Master's students.

Recommendation: As well as ensuring that information is available about current regulations, it is important to make sure that this information is also included in the cycle of information provided to students. Staff members who are in frequent contact with students, both at a central and decentral level, play an important role in this task.

Conclusion 2: In 2015 the ombuds officer received more complaints about student registration and de-registration than in previous years.

Recommendation: This increase is closely related to conclusion 1 (57% of complaints about (de)registration were submitted by international students). However when communicating with students it is still highly advisable to keep in mind that emails sent by the university are not always treated with the importance or urgency they merit by students. A student may undeniably have received several emails about problems with his/her registration or tuition fee payments, however in this case "prevention is better than cure".

Conclusion 3: In 2015 the ombuds officer frequently (17 times) concluded, after initial evaluation of a complaint, that it was inadmissible.

Recommendation: University complaints, objections and appeals procedures should be more clearly defined. The various facilities available (both centrally and at faculty level) should be better synchronised and harmonised, not only in terms of the provision of information, but also in terms of mutual awareness and referral procedures. Particular attention should be given to the complaints procedure for PhD candidates (especially contract and external candidates) who in cases of uncertainty sometimes contact the ombuds officer, who is not authorised to deal with such complaints.

Conclusion 4: In 2015 problems concerning thesis procedures lead to complex and lengthy complaints procedures.

Recommendation: It is essential that study programmes determine thesis procedures well in advance (i.e. timeframes, forms of guidance, feedback moments). These procedures should be monitored periodically during the thesis writing period and 'checks and balances' should be incorporated, when desired or required, to ensure balanced and fair evaluations. At present it seems that students struggle along with a supervisor for a period of a year or more, only complaining to an external party, namely the ombuds officer, once thesis procedures have been concluded and the end result proves to be disappointing.