



Office of the
Ombudsperson

Building a culture of fairness

TWELFTH ANNUAL REPORT

From June 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022

INDEPENDENCE • CONFIDENTIALITY • IMPARTIALITY



TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY



This annual report covers the period from June 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022. The Office of the Ombudsperson is a two-person team, and the year 2021–2022 saw the arrival of Rebecca Crabbe who became the new assistant ombudsperson at the end of August 2021. Rebecca was able to quickly take charge of our intake process and provide information to the people who contact our office. She also managed certain types of cases and was responsible for promoting the office. I am grateful for her many contributions to the work of the Office and the contents of this report.

As always, I also thank the many persons who reach out to our office for help, as well as staff, University administrators and student leaders who respond to our inquiries and assist in clarifying processes and resolving problems.

— Martine Conway

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I. 2021–2022: YEAR IN REVIEW

From June 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022, we responded to requests for services from 685 individuals (see **Table 1**), including 374 students (289 undergraduate, 72 graduate, and 13 other), 24 employees, 188 admission applicants, and 99 other persons. The main issues raised by **students and employees** are summarized on page 5 (see Table 2).

Among the **admission applicants** (188 in total), we received general inquiries (142) from English-speaking (67%) and French-speaking (33%) international students. They were mostly referred to undergraduate admissions services, academic units (for graduate programs) or financial aid services, as needed.

A smaller number of Canadian and international applicants (46) contacted us for assistance with an aspect of the process, or to lodge a complaint or contest a decision. Depending on the situation, we directed them towards an appeal process, or provided advice or an intervention to clarify information or resolve an issue.

The issues they raised related to technology (e.g. difficulties uploading documents or accessing a platform), to communication and the management of expectations (e.g. timeframes to review applications, unavailability of feedback about a rejected application given the high volume of applications), to errors (by the person or the administration), to disagreements over a decision, or to exceptional circumstances affecting their academic career or their application process.

The **“other”** category (99 in total) includes other members of the University community, as well as parents (about 30%), and members of the public (about 55%). In 2021–2022, parents raised concerns about the high number of online courses (as opposed to in person classes), about student mental health and about certain fees (e.g. ancillary, residence). Members of the public tended to express an opinion, particularly on the University’s vaccination requirements. A few complained about comments that members of the University community had made on social media (outside the University context).

Table 1: Service requests by type of person

| Year | Students | Employees | Admission applicants | Other | Total |
|------------------|------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| 2021–2022 | 374 | 24 | 188 | 99 | 685 |
| 2020–2021 | 389 | 21 | 171 | 115 | 696 |
| 2019–2020 | 389 | 24 | 185 | 56 | 654 |
| 2018–2019 | 335 | 36 | 241 | 38 | 650 |
| 2017–2018 | 318 | 20 | 146 | 91 | 575 |

Table 2 presents the issues raised by the persons who consulted us. See tables 3 and 4 for details of academic and human rights issues. (See also page 4 for a summary of issues raised by “other” persons.)

Students raised mainly academic and financial issues (tuition and other fees, loans, bursaries). There were also issues related to disability accommodation (human rights), residence agreements and, for graduate students, the supervisory relationship.

Student issues listed in the “Other” category (85 in total) represent 22% of the issues raised by students of all levels. They generally included

administrative, technological or communication problems such as difficulties in ordering official documents or accessing services, complaints about vaccination requirements and issues outside the University’s sphere (e.g. immigration or tenancy agreements).

Support and teaching staff (24 in total) consulted us primarily on issues related to the workplace. They generally sought information and advice on how to manage situations with co-workers or managers (communication, task organization, working conditions, feedback, etc.)

Table 2: Issues by type of person

| Type of problem* | Students | Employees | Other** | Total |
|---------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Academic issues | 161 | 2 | 13 | 176 |
| Admission | 5 | 0 | 185 | 190 |
| Student association | 7 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| Relational conflict | 10 | 1 | 1 | 12 |
| Human rights | 19 | 2 | 4 | 25 |
| Academic support | 11 | 1 | 1 | 13 |
| Financial (fees, funding) | 38 | 2 | 3 | 43 |
| Harassment | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Workplace | 4 | 10 | 3 | 17 |
| Residence | 15 | 0 | 10 | 25 |
| Security | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Graduate supervision | 14 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| Student’s conduct | 5 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Professor’s conduct | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Other | 85 | 5 | 70 | 160 |
| Total | 381 | 24 | 292 | 697 |

* A person can have more than one issue.

** Includes admission applicants.

Table 3 details the academic issues raised by students of all levels. These include problems related to registration, evaluation, allegations of academic fraud, graduation requirements (e.g. credits, equivalencies, or options), progress through a program (e.g. minimum average, probation) and withdrawal from a program.

In 2021–2022, we received fewer questions regarding evaluation and academic fraud than in 2020–2021 (a decrease of about 50%). Instead, we heard more particularly about

registration-related problems related to course selection and schedules, prerequisite exemptions, the range of course options available and waitlists.

The other main categories concerned the quality of the academic experience (e.g. the limited availability of in person courses, or the lack of interaction in some online courses), and the submission of concession requests (in particular, the processes and steps for requesting deadline extensions, deferred examinations, and course withdrawals).

Table 3: Academic issues

| Type of issues | Under-graduate | Graduate | Level unknown or other | Total |
|------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------|------------|
| Registration | 29 | 2 | 2 | 33 |
| Evaluation | 26 | 0 | 1 | 27 |
| Academic fraud | 8 | 1 | 3 | 12 |
| Concession requests | 17 | 6 | 2 | 25 |
| Experiential learning | 10 | 1 | 0 | 11 |
| Performance and progress | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 |
| Requirements and options (program) | 12 | 4 | 1 | 17 |
| Course or program quality | 21 | 3 | 5 | 29 |
| Program withdrawal | 4 | 3 | 0 | 7 |
| Miscellaneous | 6 | 1 | 2 | 9 |
| Total | 136 | 23 | 17 | 176 |

Table 4 identifies the types of human rights complaints. For issues related to discrimination or harassment, we refer the person to the Human Rights Office and other relevant resources if internal recourses have not been exhausted. Our role is not to determine the merit of an allegation of discrimination or harassment per se, but if someone comes to our office as a last recourse, we can review the process that the University followed and make recommendations as needed.

As with other types of complaints, we can provide information on processes available or advice on how to address a situation. We can also intervene informally to help clarify information or resolve a problem.

We mainly dealt with issues relating to academic accommodations for students with a temporary or permanent disability (17). Specifically, this involved facilitating communication between students and support or academic staff, either through advice or intervention.

We intervened when delays or communication issues led to errors or problems in implementing an accommodation. We also assisted with the resolution of situations involving complex accommodation needs. (See the case examples presented on page 15.) People also sought advice when dealing with a transition (e.g. at the start of a university program, after a medical leave of absence, or after a program change resulting in different accommodation needs).

Table 4: Human rights issues

| Type of issues | Students | Employees | Other | Total |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Religious belief | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Disability | 16 | 1 | 0 | 17 |
| Sexual orientation | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sex | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Race | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 19 | 2 | 4 | 25 |

Table 5 summarizes the services we offered in 2021–2022:

- **Information and referral:** If the person has not yet used the available recourses, we inform them of the relevant regulations and the processes to be followed. If necessary, we explain the criteria that apply and the options that they may consider. We also refer them to support services.
- **Advice or coaching:** If the person needs help to take action on their own, we offer confidential advice and an independent perspective. We can help the individual better understand the steps to take, identify the issues or compare possible options. We can also help them develop effective communication tools. This may involve coaching or follow-up discussions depending on the situation the person is dealing with.
- **Various interventions:** If the person requires more direct assistance to navigate processes or to resolve the situation, we require their written consent to contact the relevant administrative or academic units. Depending on the situation, we use informal techniques to clarify the information the person needs or to help resolve a problem.
- **Final reviews:** If the individual has exhausted the recourses available at the University, we can also examine the situation and, where appropriate, make recommendations.

Table 5: Services offered by type of person

| Service | Under-graduate | Graduate | Other students* | Employees | Other** | Total |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Information and referral | 187 | 31 | 13 | 12 | 278 | 521 |
| Advice or coaching | 59 | 22 | 0 | 8 | 6 | 95 |
| Intervention | 42 | 18 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 65 |
| Final review | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 289 | 72 | 13 | 24 | 287 | 685 |

* Level unknown or unregistered, former, special.

** Includes admission applicants.

Table 6 presents the outcomes of our interventions. An intervention can occur at various stages of a university process and for a variety of reasons, such as to clarify information to move a case forward, discuss grounds or reasons for a decision, seek a solution, draw the attention of a service or faculty to an issue that was not communicated or understood, and facilitate communication to defuse a conflict.

It should also be noted that the solution sought by the person consulting our office is not necessarily the most appropriate. As a result, situations that are “partly resolved” may reflect several scenarios: clarification of the criteria or the steps to be followed, clarification of the reasons for a decision, a partial resolution to the situation, or a solution that differs from the one initially sought.

Table 7 shows the outcomes of the four final reviews. We received three complaints that we closed without making recommendations. Two of these complaints related to admissions issues from people who had failed to meet the posted application deadlines, without evidence of extenuating circumstances. The other situation was a withdrawal from a master’s program after academic failures.

When we close a file in final review without making recommendations, we inform the person concerned as to why there were not sufficient grounds to intervene. We also clarify the reasons for the University’s decision, as needed.

The fourth complaint resulted in recommendations to Housing and Admissions services. This situation dated back to the fall of 2017. The student, who was experiencing mental health issues at the time, had asked permission to defer (and eventually cancel) the offer of admission she had received. The student had previously accepted an offer for housing at one of the University’s residences. The University had accepted to receive an appeal but had authorized only a partial credit of housing fees.

Table 6: Outcomes of interventions

| | Outcomes |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Fully resolved | 23 |
| Partly resolved | 32 |
| Not resolved | 2 |
| No grounds | 3 |
| Discontinued by complainant | 5 |
| Total | 65 |

The situation was resolved in the fall of 2021, following a file review by the ombudsperson. We concluded that the student had received information in 2017 indicating that a request to defer an admission (which the student had submitted before the housing cancellation deadline) would trigger a deferral of the housing offer (which was not the case). The University agreed to completely waive the housing fees and coordinate communication processes between Admissions and Housing on this issue.

Table 7: Outcomes of final reviews

| | Outcomes |
|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Recommendations made and accepted | 1 |
| Complaints without grounds | 3 |
| Total | 4 |

II. OUR ROLE AND ACTIVITIES

Principles and structure

“The ombudsperson facilitates fair resolutions that build trust and fortify the relationship between individual and institution.” *Standards of Practice, Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO)*

The ombudsperson’s work is based on the principles of **independence, impartiality** and **confidentiality**, and on the concept of **fairness** in decision-making (i.e. relational, procedural and substantive fairness). In practice, this means that the ombudsperson’s goal is to promote fair solutions and improvements to an institution’s policies, procedures and practices, thereby helping to build a fairer, more respectful and inclusive environment.

In this respect, the Office of the Ombudsperson occupies a unique position in relation to the University since it is both part of the University community—we work on campus and we develop communication and collaboration pathways with various bodies within the University and Student Associations—and yet the Office functions as an independent “external” agent to University and Student Association decision-making bodies.

These principles and concepts are reflected in the structure of the Office, which is funded jointly by the University and its students, and in the way the Office operates. The ombudsperson is appointed on the recommendation of the Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson (the Committee), which is composed, in equal measure, of representatives of the two Student Associations and representatives of support and teaching staff. The ombudsperson presents the annual report to the Committee, then to decision-making bodies of the University and Student Associations, and publishes it online for the University community.

The Committee met three times during 2021–2022. Their primary responsibilities are to ensure the independence and confidentiality of the Office, select the person who shall hold the title of Ombudsperson and evaluate his or her performance, recommend the ombudsperson’s budget, and ensure the wide distribution of the annual report. We wish to thank its members for the support and the broad range of perspectives they bring to the Office of the Ombudsperson.

Did you know?

Why we have an ombudsperson

- To help build a fair and equitable environment

Foundational principles

- Independence
- Impartiality
- Confidentiality

Accountability

- Submission of an annual report to the University community

Funding for the Office of the Ombudsperson

- Students: 50%
- University: 50%

Representation on the Advisory Committee

- Students: 50%
- Support and teaching staff: 50%

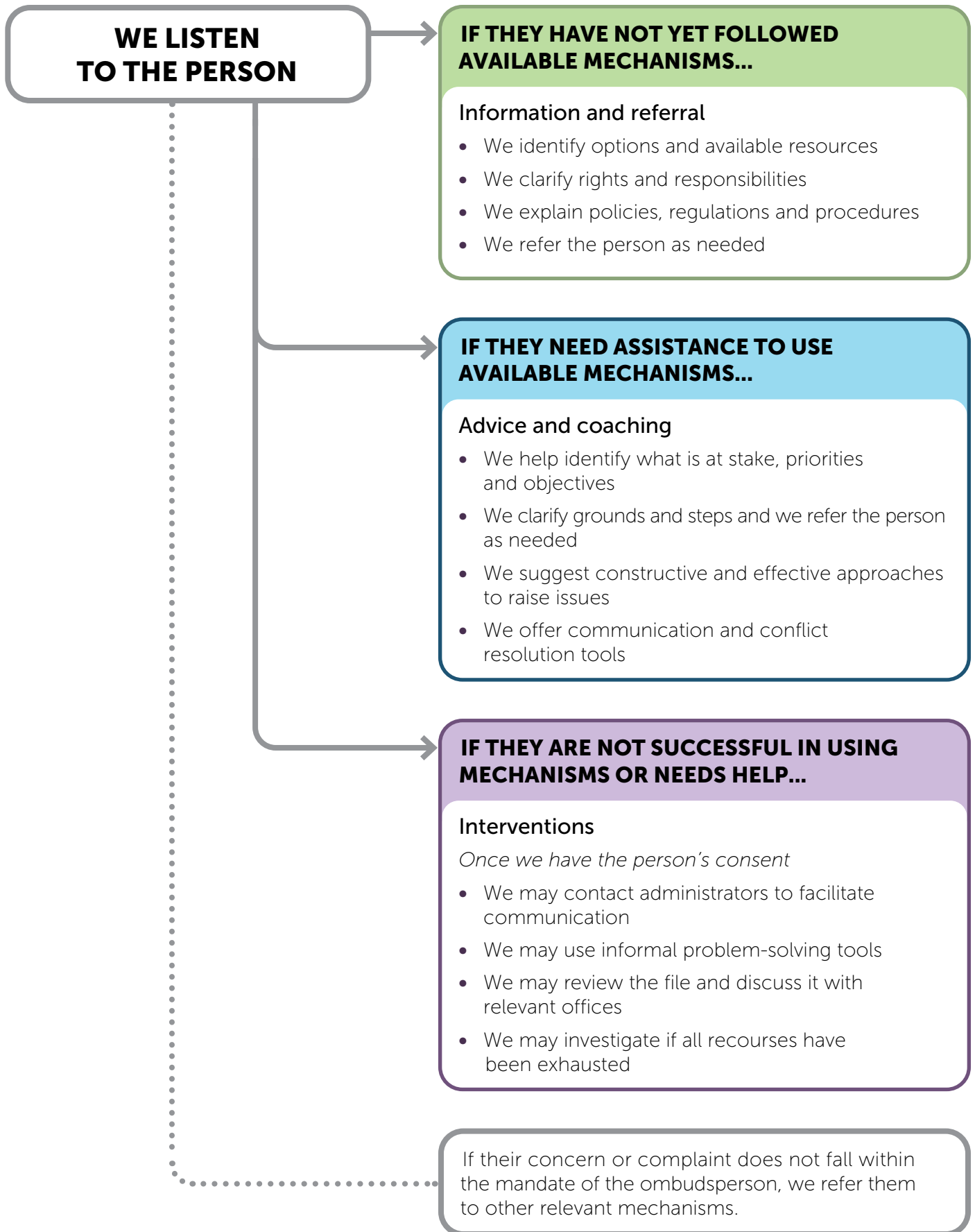
Roles and approach

The diagram on page 12 shows the services we provide to those who consult or bring their complaints to us, depending on their needs and the situation. The Office of the Ombudsperson does not replace University or Student Association decision-making bodies but can direct the person to the relevant processes or help them resolve a dispute.

To this end, we provide information and advice to help members of the University community make effective use of the mechanisms at their disposal. We can also intervene informally to help with communication issues or problem solving. Finally, we can review the processes followed and, if necessary, make recommendations in individual cases or on systemic issues.

The ombudsperson’s role is often described as fostering the human qualities of an institution and its bureaucracy. We place a strong emphasis on listening. We aim to communicate respectfully, without bias and to provide clear and accurate information. When needed, we help the person analyze the issues and options, and look at ways to bring about an effective resolution to the problem or dispute.

When we intervene, we consider the perspective of all parties: the person making the complaint, those responsible for making a decision, and those who may be affected by a decision. We strive to understand the reasons behind a process or decision and to address issues of transparency, fairness or inclusion that arise. Beyond the principle of impartiality, we make an effort to apply the concept of multipartiality.



Outreach activities

We are available to give presentations on the Office of the Ombudsperson and on how to apply the concept of fairness in decision-making, which includes relational, procedural and substantive dimensions, to foster a just and equitable environment. We also provide feedback on regulations that are being developed or revised.

In 2021–2022, we provided feedback on three topics in particular:

- The drafting of Policy 130 – *Student Rights and Responsible Conduct*.

We provided comments to emphasize the document's constructive aspirations (protection of rights in an environment based on respect and fairness), to highlight more general aspects such as freedom of speech and assembly, and to help clarify the Policy's scope with respect to online conduct. We also touched on the importance of Section 4.1 of the Policy, which provides a comprehensive list of student rights, and Appendix 2, which summarizes the rights and recourses available for various academic and non-academic issues.

- Communication of the exemption process for the University Health Insurance Plan.

International students must be covered by the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP). During the pandemic, those who were not in Canada could be exempted. Ahead of the Fall 2021 deadlines, our Office and the Student Rights Centre provided feedback to the International Office to help ensure clear communication on the process and timelines.

- Revision of Policy 67b – *Prevention of Sexual Violence*.

In a previous report, we had provided comments to request clarification of confidentiality expectations. During the consultation in May 2022, we also called attention to Section 4.4 of the Policy, which describes the University's survivor-centred approach. We suggested specifying that this is a trauma-informed approach. The updated policy has since been adopted and published on the University's website.

We also participated in student orientation and promotional activities:

- During the summer of 2021, we contributed to the online orientation workshop on student rights in collaboration with the Student Rights Centre, the Human Rights Office and the Community Legal Clinic.
- During the school year, the assistant ombudsperson attended the Services Fair (101 Week) and Clubs and Services Day (Faculty of Law). She gave a presentation at the International Mentoring Centre on the ombudsperson's role. She also coordinated the advertising of the ombudsperson's services in the newsletters of both Student Associations and of the International Office for the fall and winter sessions.

Professional activities

We are members of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) and adhere to its standards of practice. The ombudsperson is also a member of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsmen, an association composed of Canadian ombudspersons from all sectors across Canada.

Since 2019, the present ombudsperson has also been on the Board of Directors of ENOHE (European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education), an association that organizes activities to promote best practices among ombudspersons within the higher education community.

In 2021, we took part in the joint ACCUO/ENOHE Virtual Conference held September 21 & 22, as well as an online discussion on October 14 to mark Ombuds Day. For these events, the ombudsperson participated in two panels, one on the impact of social media and the other on the ombudsperson's role in universities. In 2022, we also participated virtually in an ACCUO mini-conference on February 3, and in its Annual General Meeting on May 18.

In 2021–2022, the assistant ombudsperson took two training seminars: one on December 10, the *Fairness 101* workshop on applying the principles of administrative fairness, and another April 4, on administrative investigation techniques.

I appreciate the clear communication, attention to detail and respect that was given to our needs while using the ombudsperson services. They made a difficult situation easier and helped us get through the red tape to the right person at the university.

Thank you again for your help this past year. Your support and assistance made a huge difference for me and my family. I am not sure I would have been able to navigate that process on my own at this time.

My experience with the ombudsperson was excellent! We were given updates, everything from both sides was thoroughly explain, and we were treated very respectfully.

I'm really pleased with the outcome of this process. I'm thankful for your support and understanding as well as your dedication to digging into this issue.

III. EXAMPLES OF CASES

Not all the cases we handle require the ombudsperson to intervene or perform a detailed review of the situation. However, some situations are complex or involve administrative barriers or issues that make them difficult for the person to understand or to document without the help of the ombudsperson. To illustrate this type of situation, we have selected four examples of cases we handled during 2021–2022.

Academic accommodation application process

Early in the summer of 2021, a student consulted the ombudsperson about an exam for which she had not received any accommodation. Yet she had registered with the Academic Accommodations Service and information about her needs was available on the Ventus portal prior to this exam. Afterwards, she was assured that the information would be considered for future exams, but she did not understand why she was being told that she had not communicated her request for this first exam to the professor at the beginning of the session.

By following up, we learned that changes had been implemented within the Ventus system in May 2021 in response to requests from students for more control over communications with professors. These changes allowed students to choose, from among the accommodations to which they were entitled, which ones would apply to a particular course or exam.

Since the student in question was not aware of the change, she did not know that further action on her part was needed and, therefore, did not access the Ventus system prior to the exam to specify that her request for extra time should apply to exams in this course.

After comparing the date that the change was implemented to the date when students were informed of the change, we discovered that, although it was communicated towards the beginning of the session, it was shortly after this student's first exam. Once the ombudsperson informed the academic unit of the situation, program management authorized the student to retake the exam. The Academic Accommodations Service in parallel also took action to resolve other similar situations.

A return to studies (accommodations and confidentiality)

After a program interruption due to health reasons, a student with a disability experienced a complicated return to her studies in the summer of 2021. She had difficulty navigating the online systems, which caused delays in registering for support services. In addition, she needed several accommodations that were not easy to implement in one of her courses.

In a required course that was given outside her faculty, she felt singled out among her peers during an online test as a person entitled to an accommodation. The student then decided to withdraw from courses and start her program again in the fall. She called on the ombudsperson to help her resolve the issue.

Since it was too late for the student to withdraw without having to pay the tuition fees and given the complexity of the situation, the ombudsperson gathered all the information from the various academic and administrative units, made a recommendation to the unit offering the course to improve the confidentiality of its approach, and then informed the vice-dean of the student's

faculty of all the barriers that the student had encountered. The faculty granted the withdrawal with full refund. The ombudsperson also put the student in contact with the case management service to help coordinate her return in September.

Tuition appeal process

A student with mental health issues had withdrawn from her courses during a previous winter session. She thought that she had submitted an appeal to her faculty for a retroactive withdrawal with a tuition fee refund. She explained to us that the appeal had initially gone unanswered and that it was only after following up with her faculty during the summer that she learned that it had been denied. However, given her medical situation, she believed that she was eligible to receive a refund for the fees she had paid.

The student came to us when the University initiated the collection processes. We then realized that this student's appeal had not been submitted through the right channel and had therefore not been considered. The student should have submitted her appeal through InfoService because she had been withdrawn from the program and had special student status.

This information had been communicated to her by email during the winter in response to her appeal request. The student had not understood it and did not resubmit her appeal. The following summer, in response to a request for clarification from the student, the faculty communicated (by mistake) a decision regarding a previous term.

Once the situation and confusion had been cleared up following the ombudsperson's intervention, the appeal was considered and granted retroactively.

Internship and vaccination policy

A student who was scheduled to do a practicum tied to his program complained that the faculty had cancelled his registration. As practicum placements are generally conducted in person, and there were few opportunities for online placements, the faculty had adopted a system to prioritize those who were vaccinated against COVID-19 (since vaccination had become a requirement for in person placements) as well as those who had obtained an exemption, as defined in Policy 129 on COVID-19 vaccination (for example, for medical or religious reasons).

The faculty had sent out reminders regarding these expectations and clearly communicated the deadlines with respect to placements. The Office of the Ombudsperson did not find any grounds for complaint regarding the adoption of this prioritization system per se. However, we checked the messages sent to this student during the placement process (between September and January) and after the decision to terminate the placement (in February-March).

This was a special case as the student had found an online placement by himself, which had been approved in principle by the faculty in the fall. The faculty then terminated the student's placement before it started and told him that, to access this online activity, he had to meet the Policy 129 requirements (either through vaccination or a permitted exemption).

As Policy 129 did not apply to online activities, and since communications to this student involved other sources of confusion unique to this file, we recommended that he be re-registered for the online placement. The faculty authorized the student to do so in April, which allowed him to complete his internship before the end of the academic year.

IV. ISSUES OBSERVED IN 2021–2022

1. Overview

In 2021–2022, the University and members of the University community continued to adapt to changes caused by the pandemic. Consequently, we received comments or complaints about new or temporary requirements or processes, such as vaccination mandates or the transition to online activities.

The issues brought to our attention also suggested an increased need for assistance in the form of mediation, coaching or other types of conflict resolution, particularly in situations between members of the student body (or within a student entity), or in some workplace situations.

In some instances, a lack of tools to de-escalate a situation had impacted relationships and led to a polarization of positions among members of a group. In other cases, the need was more

for assistance after a formal complaint, to help normalize relationships between parties or between members of a team or unit. I therefore want to encourage members of teams or units and their managers or leaders to proactively seek information about conflict management and prevention strategies and resources.

We also received a variety of concerns related to financial matters during the year. We dealt more often with questions from students withdrawing from courses or from the University residence, for example, and we received more complaints about certain ancillary fees. Finally, as explained in section IV.2, we followed up with the administration about concerns with the communication of tuition fees to international students.

2. Communication of tuition fees to international students

Context

In Fall 2021, we received three complaints from international undergraduate and graduate students who thought that their 2021–2022 tuition fees were higher than had been announced in Spring 2021. They were in the third and fourth years of their respective programs.

In reality, the fees they had been charged were consistent with decisions the University had made, but the issues raised by these students (and, according to them, by others in their programs) prompted us to take a closer look at how the structure governing tuition fees for international students was communicated.

Generally, tuition fees are charged according to the registration “level” reached by the student. For undergraduates, one “level” corresponds approximately to one year of study, depending on the number of units earned (e.g. 33 credits or less; 33.01 credits to 66 credits; etc.). For graduate students, the levels are based on the number of terms completed (e.g. 2 terms or less; 3–5 terms; etc.).

In some programs, tuition fees are the same for all levels, but in programs where tuition fees differ by level, the rate of the Level 1 (or “first year”) is generally higher than that of the second level, and so on.

It is crucial that international students understand tuition fees and how they increase from year to year so that they can plan for a realistic budget before they accept an offer of admission and make their way to Canada. This information is also necessary to understand the University's tuition fee predictability commitment:

"Because we're committed to ensuring that newly-admitted international students are able to predict their tuition fees beyond first year, we've put in place the following:

Limiting tuition fee increases to 5.5% for international students admitted for the Spring-Summer 2022 term or earlier who remain enrolled full time and progress normally from one tuition fee level to the next.

This applies until you reach the final tuition fee level indicated for your program, after which you pay final-level tuition fees in subsequent years.(...)"

Issue

To be able to predict tuition fees from year to year, it is necessary to understand how the maximum increase of 5.5% is calculated. However, we realized that the information on tuition fees available to students needed to be more explicit to ensure a complete understanding of the process.

The system as a whole is complex because different premises and increase rates will apply, depending on whether a person is a Canadian from Ontario, a Canadian from outside Ontario, or whether they are an international student¹.

The rates charged for one term in a given year are presented in a table online, according to the "levels" students have reached. The annual table provides the figures for a single term in the current year and is not intended to explain the basis on which increases are calculated from year to year.

However, if, for example, you are in your first year, i.e. at Level 1, and you refer to this table, it might seem logical to predict the maximum increase for the following year (when you would be at Level 2) by adding 5.5% to the current year's Level 2 rate.

This is what the international students who came to see us had understood, and this is indeed how increases were calculated in September 2022 for Canadian students from outside Ontario. But that was not the premise applied to international students in September 2021 or September 2022.

The premise that applies to international students is not in itself complicated: in September 2022, a full-time student who "progressed normally from one tuition level to another" paid a 5.5% increase *based on the rate they had paid the previous year*. This is also called an increase "by cohort." But this means that if you are at Level 1, you have to predict the maximum increase for the following year by adding 5.5% to the current year's Level 1 rate (and not that of Level 2).

¹ Differences exist in part because domestic tuition fees are subject to government decisions.

Given that in programs with different rates per level, the rate for Level 1 is generally higher than for Level 2, and that of Level 2 higher than for Level 3, etc., and that the difference between levels can be significant in some cases, a maximum increase prediction error at the beginning can lead to financial problems that could have repercussions throughout the course of the program².

Follow-up with the university

We raised this issue with the administration and learned that the University was working on redesigning their online information regarding tuition fees, and updating student communications and staff training concerning this issue.

In light of this, at the end of January 2022, we specifically requested:

- clear communication to international students so that they can make informed decisions when budgeting for their studies
- that consideration be given to the needs of international students who may be experiencing financial hardship as a result of this situation

Since then, the University worked extensively to improve the information available online, to deliver staff training, and to update the tools that generate

the annual rate tables. As of May 31, the website includes separate sections to explain, for example, university fee changes at the beginning of the current year, factors affecting tuition fees, and annual university fee increases.

Our Office followed up with the University in June and July but, unfortunately, the issue has not been fully resolved. At the end of May, the tool used for communicating tuition fees to international students contained an error. Tables with the corrected rates for 2022–2023 were updated in early July. That was when it was first clarified that: *“International students returning to the University will pay tuition fees about 5.5% higher **than what they had paid in 2021–2022.**”* [emphasis added]

It should also be noted that the information regarding the University’s predictability commitment is presented on a different page and does not include the above clarification. The sections explaining the factors affecting tuition fees and tuition increases are geared to all students and include tables with hypothetical increases of 2% for returning students. These tables show two possible types of tuition increases, but without making it clear to international students which of these two systems has generally applied to them in recent years³.

² It is difficult to generalize because in some programs rates are the same across all levels, and in others, differences may be small or nonexistent between some levels. However, given the system’s recursive nature, the ombudsperson calculated that a maximum-prediction error at the beginning of the program, for example by a student who began their first year in September 2021, could result in a difference of \$8,000 to \$15,000 over the course of the program, in many undergraduate programs across several faculties.

³ The University’s online archives date back to 2015–2016 and show that annual increases for international students, including the 2021–2022 freeze (0% increase), were based on what students had paid the previous year (the so-called increase “by cohort”) and not on the lesser amount of what a student would have paid at the next level the previous year (also called an increase “by level”). The only exception was the year the pandemic started, in 2020–2021.

At the time of writing this report, we still have two concerns:

- First, information remains fragmented and is presented generically, which fails to make it clear and transparent.
- Furthermore, financial aid systems, particularly for continuing students at the undergraduate level, are not designed to help international students cover their tuition fees. However, international students may face financial problems related to a misunderstanding of the system, at least until recently. Problems may surface when it is time for the student to pay their tuition fees or may impact their budget for rent, food, etc.

Recommendations

- a) Given that it is essential to understand the basis on which the *maximum* increases are calculated to understand the predictability commitment, I recommend communicating clearly and transparently, as soon as possible, in a section of the website dedicated to international students, how to understand the predictability commitment and how to calculate the *maximum annual fee increases*, for example, with a table showing the actual 5.5% increase established in 2022–2023 for a given program, compared to what the students were paying in 2021–2022.

- b) I also recommend that the University pay particular attention to applications for financial aid from international students returning this year and in the coming years, and that it establish a reliable process to take this issue into account when identifying their needs and support options.

University's response

- a) *"As noted in this report, over the last year the University has made important efforts to provide international students with more information to help them understand tuition fees. In light of this report, we now understand that other clarifications could be made. With a view to ongoing improvement, we will continue our efforts to introduce other clarifications related to this recommendation."*
- a) *"The University already offers international students one of the most generous financial aid and scholarship programs in Canada. From the total budget of \$122,009,695 in scholarships and financial aid in 2021–2022, approximately \$55,535,065 were granted to international students. The University commits to continue taking into account various factors, including the tuition fees to be paid, in granting financial aid."*

V. FOLLOW-UP ON ISSUES RAISED IN PREVIOUS REPORTS

1. Challenges to inclusion: practices in some courses

In the previous report, the ombudsperson had identified some inclusion-related challenges pertaining to courses or wording in course syllabi. In this regard, the recommendations of the ombudsperson and the responses received from the University can be summarized as follows:

Recommendation (a)

Add to Regulation I.8.5, *Course syllabus for undergraduate and graduate studies*, a requirement to include a statement on academic accommodation in the syllabus. (Also develop a recommended statement.)

University's response (a)

"The Director of the Academic Accommodations Service will propose a statement on academic accommodations to the undergraduate and graduate vice-deans. Once approved at this stage, it will be sent to the APUO for consultation. According to the Academic Regulation I.8.5 amendment procedure, the APUO has eight weeks to make recommendations to the Senate committees. Once consultation with the APUO is complete, the statement can be presented to the Council on Undergraduate Studies, the Council on Graduate Studies, the Executive Committee of the Senate, and the Senate."

Recommendation (b)

In Academic Regulation II.5.3 *Deferred evaluation* (which applies to graduate studies), include the concept of "exceptional personal circumstances".

University's response (b)

"The regulation on the evaluation of student learning (I.9.5), which refers to deferred evaluation on the grounds of exceptional personal circumstances, will henceforth apply to undergraduate and graduate studies."

Note: as part of the revision of the regulations and in response to a previous recommendation from the ombudsperson, the University will amend Regulation II.3 on graduate enrolment and leaves of absence. The purpose of this change is to distinguish between a "deferred time limit", for example due to illness, and an "extension" for other reasons once the time limit has been reached.

Recommendation (c)

Issue reminders to faculty members about the following points related to course syllabi:

- include a statement on academic accommodations
- refer to regulations I.9 (on the evaluation of student learning) and I.16 (on academic accommodations) rather than rely on paraphrasing, which may narrow their scope
- consider a course's essential requirements before adopting systems in which absences or a missed assignment or test automatically result in an EIN letter grade (Failure-Incomplete).

University's response (c)

"In Simple Syllabus, a software for faculty, there is a statement on accommodation and references to regulations I.9 and I.16. We feel that this conveys the information and that there is no need to send out a reminder on these issues.

With respect to essential course requirements, we feel that non-compulsory attendance would be difficult to apply to all courses and the University has no automatic process by which

to identify courses in which attendance is compulsory or not. This recommendation cannot be implemented at this time."

Ombudsperson's comments

I would like to thank the University for addressing the recommendations on regulations I.8.5, II.3 and II.5.3, and for adopting the systematic use of an accommodation statement to reduce challenges to inclusion.

2. Student roadmap and the communication of information about the process for requesting academic concessions

In previous reports, the ombudsperson recommended the creation of:

"... a generic and succinct roadmap for all students (...) which would identify the main offices for administrative and academic matters affecting [them], as well as academic support services, and the offices to contact within and outside their faculty to resolve conflicts and address complaints."

and

"... a document such as a roadmap or frequently asked questions that would bring together and summarize information on the options (...), processes to follow and resources available when a student experiences a medical issue or exceptional personal circumstances. The intent would be to present the information in an

abbreviated, student-centred manner while including links to existing regulations or information pages:

- requests for deferred examination or the late submission of assignments,*
- requests for withdrawal after deadlines,*
- requests for tuition fee refunds (...)"*

University's responses

In the summer of 2021, the University stated that it was working to standardize academic support information on faculty websites and to create a web page to identify the different entities to contact in the event of an academic problem. With respect to the issue of exceptional personal circumstances or illness, the University had responded that, once it created the Academic support page, it would add the link on the Academic regulations explained page.

Since then, the University has provided us with the following clarifications:

“The main Student Affairs page serves as a roadmap for all students: [Academic Support | Study \(uottawa.ca\)](https://www2.uottawa.ca/study/academic-support)⁴. It provides a means for disseminating academic support information, including referring students to their faculty’s Office of Undergraduate Studies where they can find information about academic support specific to their faculty. The website also includes resources to direct faculty and students to technical support they may need.

In addition, two academic support initiatives were launched in the past year. The Spotlight Initiative makes a concrete connection between faculty and student support to strengthen the teaching and learning experience. It allows faculty to gain a better understanding of student services through an information session. It should also be noted that a virtual guide on this subject is being developed and will be geared to new teaching staff.

In addition, the vice-deans of all three study levels approved a self-declaration form that students will be able to fill out if they are unable to submit an assignment or attend an exam. This form was also developed in collaboration with the new medical clinic for students, and in particular with its director, Dr. Patrick Leclair. The Information Technology team is currently working on automating the form. This new self-declaration form will eliminate the need for the medical certificate. Technologically speaking, the file will continue to advance in 2022–2023. Academic Regulation I-9.5 will also be amended.”

Ombudsperson’s comments

I thank the teams who were involved in developing these tools and resources. Academic support webpages include a lot of information about services and resources to help students navigate program requirements, to establish accommodations for disabilities, and to provide academic support as such. The self-declaration form will also be very useful once it is adopted.

I note that the central academic support pages do not include a specific section about what to do in case of illness or exceptional personal circumstances. To document an absence, students can usually find a form on their faculty’s website. The faculty websites mention, but not always consistently, processes for deferrals or for withdrawals. The information about the late submission of work is often found in the section about exams. Students must consult several pages before understanding their options.

For these reasons, I still think it would be useful to add, either on the Academic regulations explained webpage or on the central academic support webpage, a summary of options and processes to follow in case of illness or exceptional personal circumstances, including links to faculty processes, regulation I.9 and the webpage on course withdrawals.

⁴ <https://www2.uottawa.ca/study/academic-support>

3. Graduate studies supervisory relationship

In previous reports, the ombudsperson had highlighted the need to clarify two aspects of the graduate supervision relationship:

- firstly, the responsibilities of the parties in this relationship (student, thesis supervisor, other parties on the supervisory or evaluation committee, etc.)
- and secondly, the tools and options available to assist in resolving disputes between the parties in this relationship

In the last report, the ombudsperson specifically noted the need to provide online information to students, faculty members and program heads to:

- normalize the fact that difficulties or conflict situations may arise
- refer them to resource persons within their program and Faculty, and clarify the confidentiality of these interactions
- clarify the roles and responsibilities of other parties (within the program or faculty) in helping to seek fair solutions (including other committee members, program leadership, the faculty graduate studies office, etc.)

- refer them to other confidential resources as needed
- provide them with tools to address conflict situations constructively (e.g. a tips and hints page, workshops, etc.)
- ensure that program heads and Faculty administrators have practical tools to guide students and faculty members towards fair solutions in situations of conflict or in the event a supervisory relationship ends.

University's responses

In previous responses, the University stated that it was undertaking to identify tools and best practices with faculties to develop a supervisory guide. In the summer of 2021, it stated that it wanted to create a new workshop to support faculty in their supervisory role and that the thesis regulations, which must be updated as part of the review of all academic regulations, would include essential requirements to support faculty and students in managing expectations and responsibilities.

Since then, the University has provided us with the following updates:

“Almost all of this information exists on our website at a general level. Several programs already have their own guide, which meets the specificities of their structure and disciplinary standard. Although a supervisory guide continues to be a key objective for the Office of the Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, we are unable to provide a delivery date for this project due to the lack of staff to carry out the task.”

Ombudsperson’s comments

The central Graduate Studies webpages include very useful and clearly organized information to help guide students through the general stages of a graduate program and the development of a thesis. They also provide tools to initiate a supervisory relationship, questions to ask in a meeting with the thesis supervisor, information on academic support and on services and resources for help with a variety of questions.

I note that the information on those pages do not specify the responsibilities of faculty members in the supervisory relationship. The University may intend to clarify those responsibilities in the regulation on thesis or the one on supervision (which are being revised), or in existing departmental guides.

- a) It remains important to develop a supervision guide that includes tools and resources to prevent and resolve problems and disputes that may arise.
- b) In the meantime, it is important to communicate best practices that have emerged from discussions among the faculties, from the creation of the workshop, and during the work to review regulations, in particular to clarify responsibilities in the supervisory relationship. I look forward to continued discussion of these matters.

APPENDIX A: OTHER STATISTICS

Table 8: Official language used

| Official language used | French | English |
|--|--------|---------|
| All persons who consulted us | 24.3% | 75.7% |
| Students who consulted us | 20.5% | 79.5% |
| Students enrolled at the University (Fall 2021)* | 31.0% | 69.0% |

* <https://www.uottawa.ca/institutional-research-planning/resources/facts-figures/fact-book/enrolment>

Table 9: Students — faculty distribution

| Faculty | Students who consulted us | Students registered at the University (Fall 2021)* |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Arts | 7.8% | 11.0% |
| Law | 4.0% | 4.4% |
| Education | 5.4% | 6.0% |
| Engineering | 9.7% | 14.4% |
| Management (Telfer) | 5.9% | 11.0% |
| Medicine | 1.9% | 5.4% |
| Sciences | 5.9% | 12.5% |
| Health Sciences | 7.5% | 11.1% |
| Social Sciences | 16.7% | 23.9% |
| Unknown | 35.2% | 0.3% |

* <https://www.uottawa.ca/institutional-research-planning/resources/facts-figures/quick-facts>

Table 10: Students – Level of study

| Level of study | Students who consulted us | Students registered at the University (Fall 2021)* |
|------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Undergraduate | 76.9% | 83.6% |
| Graduate | 19.3% | 16.4% |
| Unknown or other | 3.8% | N/A |

* <https://www.uottawa.ca/institutional-research-planning/resources/facts-figures/quick-facts>

Table 11: Feedback on our services

| Question | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| Was it easy to find the Office of the Ombudsperson? | 22 | 3 |
| Did you receive a quick reply to your email, telephone message or letter? | 25 | - |
| Was the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson explained to you clearly? | 24 | 1 |
| If you asked that your name not be released, was your concern handled in a confidential manner by the Office of the Ombudsperson? | 22 | - |
| Did the ombudsperson demonstrate impartiality (objectivity) in reviewing your concerns? | 25 | - |
| Did the ombudsperson handle your concern fairly? | 25 | - |
| Were you treated with respect? | 25 | - |
| Would you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson again? | 24 | - |

Table 12: Feedback on our services (continued)

| Why did you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson? | Total |
|--|-------|
| To acquire information | 7 |
| To get advice | 14 |
| To facilitate communication with others | 12 |
| To determine if I had been treated fairly | 13 |
| To discuss options or alternatives so that I could handle the problem myself | 10 |
| For the ombudsperson to intervene and to assist with the resolution of the problem | 18 |



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