



Office of the  
**Ombudsperson**

Building a culture of fairness

# THIRTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT

From June 1, 2022 to May 31, 2023

INDEPENDENCE • CONFIDENTIALITY • IMPARTIALITY



# TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

This annual report covers the period from June 1, 2022 to May 31, 2023, the last year of my first 5-year term as ombudsperson at the University of Ottawa. I begin by thanking the members of the Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson who recommended the renewal of this mandate. I would also like to thank the University and the student associations for their interest in the work of the Office of the Ombudsperson and for the trust placed in us.

The report includes quantitative and qualitative data on our services, a description of the themes observed during the year and recommendations, and a follow-up on the recommendations made in the previous report. (Note: academic regulations were reorganized in spring 2023, and this report uses the new numbering.)

This year's themes section also includes reflections from experiences of the past five years. Over the last few months, three vice-provosts have started their mandates: for academic affairs, for graduate and postdoctoral studies, and for equity, diversity and excellence in inclusion. In this context, rather than immediate responses to the recommendations made in the report, I would like the opportunity to engage in exchanges during 2023–2024. I will also request responses or follow-ups for inclusion in next year's report.



The Office of the Ombudsperson consists of two persons. From summer 2021 to spring 2023, I had the pleasure of working with Rebecca Crabbe. As assistant ombudsperson, Rebecca demonstrated her tremendous capacity to listen with empathy, her ability to synthesize information and identify issues, her impartiality, and her collaborative approach when interacting with services and faculties in seeking solutions. I thank Rebecca for her excellent service and wish her every success in her future endeavours.

**I would also like to thank the many people who reach out to us, as well as the employees, administrators and student leaders who, through their answers to our questions, help clarify processes and resolve issues.**

**— Martine Conway**

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# I. 2022–2023: YEAR IN REVIEW

## 1. Facts and figures

From June 1, 2022 to May 31, 2023, we received a total of 804 service requests, representing an increase of 17.5% over the previous year (see **Table 1**). Requests came from 419 students (313 at the undergraduate level, 80 at graduate level, and 26 others), 38 employees, 218 admission applicants and 129 others. The main issues raised by **students and employees** are summarized on page 5 (see **Table 2**).

Among the **admission applicants** (218 in total), we received general inquiries (169) from English-speaking (75.7%) and French-speaking (24.3%) international students. We redirected them according to their needs. A smaller number of admission applicants (49) contacted us with requests for assistance, appeals or complaints. The questions raised were generally related to difficulties with technology, communication

or managing expectations. A few requests for clarification were related to the calculation of admission averages or courses counted as prerequisites.

The “**other**” category (129 in total) includes other members of the University community, as well as parents (about 28%), and members of the public (about 59%). In 2022–2023, parents informed us of their difficulties in contacting the University’s offices, mainly by telephone. Their concerns mainly included housing situations and financial and academic support issues. Members of the public often expressed opinions about a variety of topics (particularly freedom of expression issues) or about comments by members of the university community on social media (outside the context of the University).

**TABLE 1:** Service requests by type of person

Year	Students	Employees	Admission applicants	Other	Total
<b>2022–2023</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>804</b>
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

**Table 2** presents the issues raised by the persons who consulted us. See tables 3 and 4 on pages 6 and 7 for details of academic and human rights issues. (See also page 4 for a summary of issues raised by “other” persons.)

Compared to the previous year, **students** presented more academic issues and financial issues (tuition and other fees, loans, bursaries). There were also issues related to disability accommodations (human rights), residence agreements, academic support and, for graduate students, the supervisory relationship.

Student issues listed in the “Other” category (85 in total) represented approximately 20% of the issues raised by students of all levels.

They generally included administrative, technological or communication problems, as well as questions outside the University’s sphere (e.g. problems with visas). With students heading back to class, we also received more questions about the U-Pass exemption criteria.

**Employees** (support and teaching personnel, 38 in total) consulted us primarily on workplace issues. They generally sought information and advice on how to manage situations with co-workers or supervisors. See comments in this regard on page 22. Their “other” issues were generally technological or administrative.

**TABLE 2: Issues by type of person**

Type of problem	Student	Employees	Other*	Total
Academic issues	180	1	10	<b>191</b>
Admission	4	0	214	<b>218</b>
Student association	6	0	2	<b>8</b>
Relational conflict	2	2	0	<b>4</b>
Human rights	26	1	4	<b>31</b>
Academic support	15	1	0	<b>16</b>
Financial (fees, funding)	49	0	7	<b>56</b>
Harassment	2	1	0	<b>3</b>
Workplace	2	15	2	<b>19</b>
Residence	25	1	10	<b>36</b>
Security	1	1	1	<b>3</b>
Graduate supervision	14	2	0	<b>16</b>
Student’s conduct	5	0	1	<b>6</b>
Professor’s conduct	3	0	1	<b>4</b>
Other	85	13	95	<b>193</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>804</b>

\* 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 misconduct (academic integrity), graduation requirements (e.g. credits, equivalencies, or options), progress through a program (e.g. minimum average, probation), and withdrawal from a program.

In 2022–2023, with the resumption of courses mainly in-person, we received far fewer questions about program or course quality. However, we saw a significant increase in issues related to concession requests (e.g. requests for deadline extensions, deferred examinations or retroactive course withdrawal), as well as program withdrawals due to poor performance. See comments on pages 11 to 13 regarding deferred evaluation issues.

**TABLE 3: Academic issues**

Type of issues	Under-graduate	Graduate	Level unknown or other*	Total
Registration	23	5	4	<b>32</b>
Evaluation	22	4	1	<b>27</b>
Academic integrity	11	2	2	<b>15</b>
Concession requests	36	4	3	<b>43</b>
Experiential learning	6	3	0	<b>9</b>
Performance and progress	3	1	1	<b>5</b>
Requirements and options (program)	17	1	1	<b>19</b>
Course or program quality	13	0	2	<b>15</b>
Program withdrawal	11	5	0	<b>16</b>
Miscellaneous	8	0	2	<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>191</b>

\* Unregistered, former and special students.

Note: Graduate supervision issues are not included in this table. See Table 2 on page 5 and comments on pages 20 to 21.

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

In 2022–2023, we met with students with disabilities who were seeking accommodations and who consulted us for information and advice. We intervened in several of these cases to clarify steps or facilitate communication with the Academic Accommodations Service or with the relevant program. See comments in this regard on pages 14 to 16.

We also received two communications from persons who had been misgendered, and requests for information about resources in place to prevent sexual violence, as well as available support and how complaint processes work.

In this regard, we intervened in one case, after the process by the HRO had been completed, to facilitate communication with the faculty to which the two students belonged. The purpose was to encourage feedback about the process followed and the actions taken to address the negative impacts of the incident. The central issues in that situation concerned taking responsibility for the person who was the subject of an allegation, and the merits of requiring an apology.

**TABLE 4: Human rights issues**

Type of issues	Students	Employees	Other	Total
Religious belief	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
Disability	20	0	2	<b>22</b>
Gender	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
Sex	3	0	1	<b>4</b>
Race	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
Other	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31</b>

**Table 5** summarizes the services we offered in 2022–2023:

- **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 the process followed, 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	172	37	22	19	328	578
Advice or coaching	93	33	1	15	16	158
Intervention	44	10	4	4	3	65
Final review	3	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>804</b>

\* 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 6: Outcomes of interventions**

	Outcomes
Fully resolved	28
Partly resolved	34
Not resolved	0
No grounds	2
Discontinued by complainant	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>

**Table 7** shows the outcomes of final reviews. We addressed three cases: one about a meal plan and two about the U-Pass program. We did not make any recommendations on the U-Pass program cases. In one case, we helped clarify the reasons for the decision made. In the other, we did not find reasons to request reconsideration of the decision.

We did a detailed follow-up on a case concerning the cost of a meal plan that had only been partially used during the academic year. The situation was complicated by communication issues and circumstances that were very specific to the person and the context. We made a recommendation that was accepted, which led to a discount for the student in this specific case.

**TABLE 7: Outcomes of final reviews**

	Outcomes
Recommendations made and accepted	1
Complaints without grounds	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>

## 2. Other activities

The Office of the Ombudsperson consists of two people: the ombudsperson, who is appointed for a five-year renewable term, and the assistant ombudsperson. During 2022–2023, we applied to regularize the assistant ombudsperson position, which was accepted. We have since staffed the position, which has become permanent. We thank the University and the student associations for their support in this regard.

The assistant ombudsperson supports the ombudsperson in all aspects of the work of the Office of the Ombudsperson. In particular, she handled the first contact with the persons who consulted us, provided them with information and advice, and managed some of the cases we followed up on.

In addition, the assistant ombudsperson coordinated the publication of announcements about the services of the ombudsperson in the newsletters of student associations and the International Office, organized the production and distribution of promotional materials and made presentations when requested to explain our role.

We also participate in professional activities. We attended the joint conference of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO) and the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) held on October 18 and 19, 2022 in Ottawa.

We also participated in ACCUO’s Equity, Diversity and Inclusion webinar on February 21, 2023 and its Annual Meeting on May 24, 2023. On April 4, the assistant ombudsperson participated in ACCUO’s online discussion on procedural fairness in universities. On April 12, the ombudsperson contributed to a webinar by the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) on approaches to addressing sexual violence issues in universities.

The Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson met three times in 2022–2023. The committee, composed of undergraduate and graduate

students, professors and employees of the University, recommends the budget of the Office of the Ombudsperson and ensures the independence and confidential nature of the ombudsperson function.

**“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)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your recent invaluable assistance. You have enabled us to better navigate the maze faced by a neophyte. You have been very supportive, and we are very grateful for your kindness and sensitivity. (parent)

Thank you for your help during this process and for explaining my options as a student in a difficult situation. I really appreciated the information and advice you provided me. (student)

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me yesterday. I appreciated your listening and thinking about possible options for the benefit of employees as well as students. It made me feel good to finally feel heard. (employee)

## II. ISSUES OBSERVED IN 2022–2023

### 1. Increase in service requests

In the fall of 2022, after two years spent primarily online, the University welcomed three cohorts of students in person. The University’s administrative and academic services had anticipated an increase in demand for services and had developed approaches that combined online appointment scheduling and access to online, telephone or in-person services. Despite this, some services struggled to cope with the volume of requests.

For our part, this resulted in an approximately 30% increase in service requests to our office during late summer and fall 2022. (This upward trend then decreased and the total increase over all of 2022–2023 was 17.5%.)

For our two-person office, this resulted in a slowdown in our ability to respond to non-urgent questions or to follow up on some general issues (e.g. preventing the recurrence of a problem by providing feedback to an administrative or academic unit). This was also reflected in the feedback we received on our services because some people indicated that they waited to receive a response or did not receive all the time needed to feel properly understood by the ombudsperson.

Regarding their dealings with the University, students who contacted us during the fall of 2022 mostly complained about not receiving timely responses to emails sent to their faculty or not having access to in-person appointments. We often advised them on how to use Q-Less to make it easier to get an appointment (including in person), and how to ask and direct their questions to the appropriate services. It seems to us that the university community has since become better accustomed to an approach that combines online and in-person services.

Parents who contacted us often sought to reach the University’s administrative services directly over the phone and sometimes met with full voice mail boxes. They had difficulty understanding to which department they should direct the questions that concerned them. This often involved financial or housing issues, particularly for students starting or wishing to leave the University. In this regard, improved communication about withdrawal and refund processes could reduce telephone or email exchanges. See Section 4 pages 16 to 19.

### 2. Challenges in the process for justified absences from an evaluation (tests, exams, etc.)

Regulation A-8 on the evaluation of student learning has been amended. As of September 2022, section A-8.6 on justified absences specifies that students may only request one “deferred evaluation” per course.

There are various reasons for such a change. There may be a need to make deferred examination requests more manageable for teaching and

administrative staff. It may also be necessary to avoid situations that could be unmanageable for students (e.g. accumulation of deferred evaluations, impact on workload in the next semester, possible triggering of a situation that could be repeated from session to session).

However, at the University of Ottawa, the various faculties have not adopted a common approach on how to respond to justified absences:

- In some programs or faculties, a justified absence from a test or exam during the session results in a redistribution of its weight to other graded components. In this context, only the final exam can be deferred. A person who has had a justified absence from a test or exam during the session may obtain a redistribution of the value of that component and may, if necessary (for another justified absence), receive a deferred final exam to complete the course.
- In other programs or faculties, a justified absence from a midterm exam leads to a deferred evaluation for that exam. Under the amended regulation, a person who has another justified absence from the final exam cannot complete the course and receives an EIN letter grade (Failure-Incomplete).

These differences in practice have led to several problems:

First, the regulation was not always well understood, and the notion of justified absence was sometimes confused with the notion of deferred evaluation. (i.e., an individual would only be entitled to one *justified absence for an evaluation* rather than one *deferred evaluation*.)

This misinterpretation led to failure grades and avoidable appeals, and, in one case, excessive requests for detailed confidential medical documentation (fortunately corrected in time after intervention with the department).

In addition, students taking courses in different faculties or departments faced different rules, which caused them some confusion and to make certain decisions without proper knowledge of the consequences, including the risk of course failure.

It is important to note that a justified absence or a justified delay in submitting work should not result in failure for the course. There are other possible

inclusive and proactive solutions for completing a course (see comments on *best practices* below and *essential requirements* pages 14 to 16).

It should be noted that retroactive withdrawal from a course may also be a solution if the justified absences were such that the student was unable to participate sufficiently in the essential requirements of the course to be able to complete it. However, this option may impact the student's status (full-time or part-time) and access to financial supports.

Finally, it is important to remember that this type of rule can create barriers, especially for students with certain disabilities. A person who suffers from a fluctuating physical or mental condition cannot progress through their program if the only response to sporadic absences is limited to a choice between a single deferred evaluation or withdrawal from the course. Those individuals are entitled to accommodations, but the process of requesting and obtaining them can add avoidable barriers.

#### **We noted the following best practices:**

- In this context, where the regulation allows only one deferred evaluation per course, it is important not to limit the possible scenarios to a deferral or a failure. Integrating solutions into the syllabus enables professors and their students to quickly resolve ad hoc situations that do not require a more specific accommodation.

Many courses provide for inclusive proactive measures, such as redistributing the percentage of an element over other elements, processes for extending deadlines, counting most but not necessarily all tests or quizzes, etc.

- Starting in fall 2023, the introduction of the online form "Declaration of Absence from an Evaluation" will ease the administrative process for students, professors, administrators, and health services providers. Regulation A-8.6 specifies that no justification will be requested for a first declaration of absence from a course evaluation. Justification will only be required starting with a second declaration in the course.

- Finally, in some faculties, we were also told that requests for deferred evaluations (after the first) would be managed by the faculty rather than by professors or departments. This type of approach should lead to greater consistency in the interpretation and application of the regulations within a faculty. It could also help to better identify situations that give rise to an exception or accommodation related to a disability.

**Note:** In the context of the amendments to Regulation A-8.6 and to reduce avoidable barriers and the resulting requests for individualized accommodations, it is essential that professors, academic units and faculties design course evaluations, including options for responding to justified absences, with an inclusive and universal approach<sup>1</sup>.

The amendment that limits deferred evaluations to one per course may result in more accommodation requests or more complex requests in the short- and medium-term because some students, for instance with a fluctuating health condition or with young dependents, will encounter more barriers if a course is not designed from the outset with an inclusive and universal approach.

Academic units and faculties have an important role to play in guiding professors, advising students, and helping them reduce the avoidable risks of program failures and withdrawals. They also have a responsibility to implement reasonable academic accommodations<sup>1</sup>.

## Recommendations

- a) Consider the merits of maintaining divergent processes among faculties regarding how to respond to justified absences.

Whether or not the processes remain divergent among faculties:

- b) Establish good practices aimed at removing barriers unrelated to *essential requirements*<sup>1</sup> in courses and adopt an inclusive and proactive approach to identify viable academic solutions to justified absences; incorporate good practices into syllabus templates.
- c) Clearly communicate to students and to professors the processes regarding justified absences and requests for deferred evaluations (particularly in the faculty-level or program-level syllabus templates) to ensure consistent, fair and non-discriminatory application of these processes.
- d) In specific cases where there would be no viable academic solution to a second justified absence from a course evaluation, ensure that students are clearly informed that a retroactive withdrawal from the course may be possible, and that they receive follow-up from academic specialists in their home faculty and the financial aid department to consider their options.

<sup>1</sup> See Section 3, Accessibility and academic accommodations.

### 3. Accessibility and academic accommodations

In fall 2022, the Academic Accommodations Service saw a significant increase in the number of accommodation requests. In addition, the 2022–2023 report from the Human Rights Office (HRO) indicates that the HRO received a significant increase in disability-related requests over the past five years. (The report notes that similar trends have been observed at other universities.)

In particular, the HRO report notes that one third of requests in 2022–2023 from students or employees were outside the mandate of the HRO because they were seeking intervention to help them with ongoing accommodation processes. It also noted that nearly one third of the “requests involved individuals not understanding their duty to accommodate, despite the requirement for all University employees, including academic staff, to complete mandatory online training related to the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*.”

Compared to the previous year, the Office of the Ombudsperson has more often intervened with faculties or the Academic Accommodations Service to help resolve issues of delay in the implementation of academic accommodations.

These delays were sometimes due to a lack of knowledge of the process and its deadlines on the part of new students. But they were also the result of a lack of staff in the Academic Accommodations Service during the year.

This service is essential to meeting the University’s obligations, and I want to stress the need to ensure that it is well resourced. The management of this service has informed us of positive changes underway, including the staffing of vacant positions and some improvements to current processes. They have also launched an optimization project,

which is expected to lead to recommendations by late fall 2023, to implement more permanent improvements by the fall of 2024.

Other interventions by the ombudsperson have also led us to reflect on the role of professors, academic units and faculties in proactively implementing academic accessibility and accommodations.

The responsibility for making programs and services accessible and for providing accommodations does not belong to a specialized service. It is a shared responsibility among all members of the University community. We noted two issues about the role of faculties, academic units and professors.

#### Formulation and application of essential course requirements

The first issue concerns course design and the formulation of the essential course requirements. According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission:

*A requirement should not lightly be considered to be essential, but should be carefully scrutinized. This includes course requirements and standards. For example, at the post-secondary level, it may likely be an essential requirement that a student master core aspects of a course curriculum. It is much less likely that it will be an essential requirement to demonstrate that mastery in a particular format, unless mastery of that format (e.g. oral communication) is also a vital requirement of the program.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/guidelines-accessible-education/appropriate-accommodation>

In this regard, regulation A-6 on academic accommodations states that the University will make efforts to inform students of the “essential academic requirements and skills related to courses [and] programs”, and to “incorporate principles of universal design into its teaching, evaluation methodologies, academic activities and course curricula”. As indicated in the regulation, this helps reduce the need for academic accommodations.

Regulation A-6 defines essential academic requirements and skills as “**indispensable, vital and very important** knowledge or skills, which must be acquired or demonstrated in order for a student to successfully meet academic standards and the learning outcomes of the course/program, or milestone requirements such as comprehensives and thesis requirements” (emphasis added).

The Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS) site, under the “Inclusive pedagogies” tab<sup>3</sup>, lists numerous resources for universal course design. For example, the document titled *Introduction to Inclusive Teaching Practices* notes that “determining essential course components is key to an optimal course design” and *Accessibility in Five Steps* recommends that “essential academic requirements and skills” be included in the course syllabus.

Professors may be supported by the TLSS and their academic unit or faculty in determining essential course requirements. However, we observed students with disabilities who continued to encounter barriers related to requirements (practices or rules established in the course syllabus) that did not appear to be based on essential course requirements.

To be effective, the process of identifying essential course requirements and adopting a universal design of teaching and evaluation must be overseen by faculties and academic units. For example, if the essential requirements of a program or course have not been defined, it is important to establish the resources, steps and timelines for doing so.

At the same time — and in particular to avoid an increase in requests for exceptions or accommodations in the context of changes to regulation A-8 — it is important to identify best practices related to justified absences and incorporate them into course syllabus templates to proactively reduce barriers unrelated to essential requirements in courses and programs.

## Requests for temporary or retroactive academic accommodations

The other issue we identified is requests for temporary or retroactive accommodation, such as in response to an accident or a new diagnosis. Of course, the student must be referred to the Academic Accommodations Service to identify permanent needs and, if necessary, to assess the documentation on temporary or retroactive needs. But it is not enough to direct these students to that service.

These are emerging needs that may arise late in the term. In that case, the professor, the academic unit or the faculty are the ones that can implement the temporary accommodation, for example by supervising an exam with specific equipment or additional time, or by granting a deferred exam. It is also up to the faculty to process requests for retroactive accommodations.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://saea-tlss.uottawa.ca/en/course-design/inclusive-pedagogies> in particular the documents *Accessibility in Five Steps* <https://saea-tlss.uottawa.ca/en/teaching-technologies/documentation-en/51-accessibility-five-steps-towards-accessibility/viewdocument/51> and *Introduction to Inclusive Teaching Practices* <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/sites/g/files/bhrsksd336/files/2022-08/accessibilite-guide-inclusion-fr-2013-10-30.pdf>

## Recommendations to faculties and academic units

- a) Ensure that there is a systematic framework in place to review and identify essential requirements as they apply in each course and to reduce barriers unrelated to essential requirements in the design of the evaluation and in options for justified absences (or justified late submission of assignments)
- b) While referring the student to the Academic Accommodations Service, ensure that requests for retroactive and temporary accommodations are handled directly (at the level of the professor, the academic unit or the faculty), such as those that occur after the usual term deadlines set by the Academic Accommodations Service due to an accident or a new diagnosis

## Reminder to the University

In the previous report, the University agreed to adopt a statement on accommodations to propose an amendment to Regulation A-2.4 on course syllabi. The goal was to make this statement mandatory in all syllabi.

I hope that the current project to optimize academic accommodations processes will be an opportunity for productive discussions on the points raised in this report, and to consider the adoption of a mandatory statement on accommodations in all course syllabi for the 2024–2025 academic year.

## 4. Requests to terminate residence agreements when withdrawing from the University due to illness

In 2022–2023, we received 36 requests for services from students and parents related to University residences. These included requests for contact information of relevant services to resolve administrative issues (process for booking a room, cancellation and refund processes, protocols for health issues), and requests for assistance to resolve problems related to quality of experience, costs related to services, or problems with roommates.

About one quarter of the requests for assistance concerned requests to terminate the residence agreement due to health issues, generally mental health issues. These were situations in which a health condition arose or worsened after the start of the fall session, resulting in the student withdrawing from the University.

A withdrawal from the University does not automatically lead to the termination of the residence agreement. Moreover, after August 15, a residence agreement starting in September for 8 or 12 months can only be cancelled if the student finds another student with a similar profile to take over the agreement. There is a process for requesting a medical cancellation, but that process itself presented many obstacles in 2022–2023.

A withdrawal from the University during a student's first session results in a cancelled admission. This led to the closure of student files and loss of access to uoZone and the @uOttawa email. Students could no longer receive or follow certain instructions regarding requests to cancel their residence agreement or meal plan, or the process of finding someone to take over their agreement.



At the same time, in the case of a request for medical reasons, the agreement stipulates a possible termination at the end of the month after giving at least 30 days' notice. A difference of a few days, for example between the end of September and the beginning of October, can result in a bill for an additional month (until the end of November). It is therefore important to immediately obtain clear information about criteria, processes and timelines. Unfortunately, technical barriers and the complexity of processes resulted in delays in communication or in processing of certain cases.

We helped families submit their application and a medical note by the end of September, after they lost access to uoZone and had difficulties navigating separate processes and different deadlines for cancelling the residence agreement, the meal plan and the U-Pass. Others asked us for help later in the session, particularly regarding medical notes that were considered insufficient or when they faced problems in the process of finding someone to take over the agreement.

In 2022–2023, we discussed several points with Housing Services:

- A lack of integration between the withdrawal processes managed by admissions or faculties (in particular, requests to cancel or postpone admission) and the processes for terminating a residence agreement, a meal plan, if applicable, and the U-pass (depending on the circumstances). It should be noted that cancellation or postponement of admission does not result in cancellation or postponement of the residence agreement.
- At a minimum, the need for consistency between these processes. At the University level (and not just within each service separately), the need for more complete, effective and proactive communication of all the processes to be followed, the deadlines and the offices with which to communicate when a student expresses

an intention to withdraw from the University or residence. Note that the student's starting point may be to notify the faculty, Admissions, Housing, or a support service such as Counselling or the Academic Accommodations Service.

- Given that the loss of access to uoZone and/or the @uOttawa.ca email has created barriers and delays for certain urgent actions, the need either to maintain access to these platforms for students who request cancellation or postponement of their admission, or to ensure complete, effective and proactive communication outside of these platforms.
- In terms of Housing and Card services: some difficulties in integrating cancellation or termination processes managed by the teams handling residence agreements, meal plans and the U-pass.
- The need to revise the content of the communications (email templates) used by Housing to communicate its own processes, criteria and timelines.

#### **Since then, Housing has communicated the following improvements:**

With the amalgamation under the same management of the teams dealing with the residence agreement, the meal plan and the U-pass, there is greater consistency, better integration and more effective communication among these processes.

Housing has clarified the agreement cancellation clause and revised its communication templates to better communicate the processes to be followed, criteria and timelines for applications to terminate residence agreements. They now communicate using the student's personal and @uOttawa email addresses. In 2022–2023, they began working more closely with the Case Management team (student support) to ensure quicker follow-up

on cases and help with supporting documentation when a student in residence needs to leave the University for medical reasons.

Housing is also working on developing new online features for fall 2024, which will enable its partners (admissions services, faculties, other services) to better direct students (and their families) to residence processes, particularly when applying to withdraw from the University or for a deferral of admission.

We thank the managers and directors in Housing for the constructive exchanges that we had in 2022 and 2023, as well as for the progress made on these issues.

## Ombudsperson's comments

The year 2022–2023 was unusual given the large number of students who had completed their secondary education online. The transition towards a more independent university life has been more difficult for these persons. This likely contributed to the higher number of residence termination requests. This does not appear to be the case in the fall of 2023, at the time of writing this report.

That said, I want to emphasize that these were requests to terminate residence agreements from students experiencing mental health challenges. When withdrawing from the University, these people face financial repercussions (e.g., student loan repayment) and complex and multifaceted administrative processes. Such steps can be difficult for those already going through personal health challenges.

It is also important to highlight that these people are not necessarily already under the care of health care providers, and they may not have timely access to care, diagnosis, or documentation to apply for termination of the residence agreement.

Wait times to see specialists can be long. (For example, the website of the University's Student Health and Wellness Centre states that appointments with psychiatrists or psychologists are subject to eight-month wait times.) People who do not (or do not yet) have access to regular medical follow-up often move from emergency departments to community services, making it difficult to obtain supporting documentation or a consistent assessment of their functional limitations.

### The new residence agreement (for 2023–2024) stipulates:

*"For terminations due to medical reasons, the 30-day notice will begin on the date the supporting documentation is deemed acceptable by Housing Services.*

*(...)*

*A resident who wishes to terminate their Residence Agreement for withdrawal due to medical reasons must also provide a medical certificate and supporting documentation from the health care provider (who has treated the resident for the purpose of assessing need and adaptive measures required to live in residence) that outlines the accommodation needs for support and adaptive measures that cannot be met by living in residence (...)"<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.uottawa.ca/campus-life/sites/g/files/bhrskd281/files/2023-03/Residence%20Agreement%202023%20-%202024%20.pdf>, Clause 1.7

This text represents a significant difference from the previous agreement, which provided for a compassionate process to consider exceptions in the case of requests to terminate a residence agreement for medical reasons.

First, the text implies that the date of notification or departure by the student for medical reasons will not be used to determine the notice period, but rather the date on which the medical documentation will be deemed sufficient.

Second, the text appears to limit the exceptions to situations in which the student has access to a specialized assessment of functional limitations, to the point of being able to demonstrate that the University could not put in place sufficient supports or accommodations to allow the individual to live in residence.

I note that this type of documentation (indicating functional limitations and needs for supports and accommodations) is normally used as part of a request for accommodation of a service. For example, a person with a physical or mental disability can make a documented request to Housing to reasonably adapt their environment accordingly. If the needs cannot reasonably be met, it is up to the University to do the analysis to demonstrate this.

Clause 1.7 appears to reverse this process (since individuals who leave the University do not request service accommodations). This clause also represents a more stringent test than those normally applied in a compassionate process to consider exceptions.

In addition, it is not clear that students who have left the University for medical reasons or those who treat them are aware of what supports and accommodations are available from the University and how to assess support or accommodation needs “that cannot be met in residence.”

Given the above remarks about the difficulties and delays in accessing specialists and medical documentation, it is important to consider

whether these requirements are reasonable. Finally, it is also not clear that a family with no previous experience with a disability or mental health situation understands the implications of clause 1.7 of the agreement when accepting their offer of residence.

## Recommendations

- a) Ensure that students who cancel or postpone their admission are provided with timely, clear and complete communication of the processes, criteria and deadlines to be followed to complete the residence agreement, meal plan and U-Pass cancellation procedures (note that communication will often begin with Admissions, the faculty or other support services)
- b) Maintain their access to uoZone and to the @uOttawa email, or, if this is not possible, ensure that information related to recommendation (a) is shared with them proactively and by taking into consideration their lack of access to these tools
- c) Continue to consider requests for termination of the residence agreement due to medical reasons through a compassionate lens, using criteria that are not limited to narrow documentation requirements
- d) Continue to calculate the notice period for a student who has left the University for medical reasons from the date of the first submission in the case of documentation initially deemed insufficient
- e) Continue to improve the accessibility and integration of the various processes related to housing, meal plans and the U-Pass for students leaving the University

## 5. Graduate studies: responsibilities in the supervisory relationship

In the previous annual report, the ombudsperson highlighted the enhancement of the graduate studies website, which now provides a detailed list of offices and people students can contact if they encounter difficulties or need support or services during their program.

Since then, the University has also reorganized the academic regulations to separate the regulations common to undergraduate and graduate students (category A) from those that apply only to undergraduate students (category B) or only to graduate students (category C). This change makes them much easier to consult. Regarding graduate studies, the University has also made some very useful updates, particularly with the introduction of a regulation on major research papers, and clarifications of the regulation on thesis.

Taken together, the regulations that apply to graduate studies help clarify the roles of thesis supervisors and advisory committee members or examiners during the evaluation stage of the thesis by the jury and, where applicable, the defence and final revision stages. The regulations also specify the responsibility of examiners to submit written and detailed reports during the evaluation (to allow preparation for defence and revision, if necessary).

These University-level regulations are less specific in terms of supervisory responsibilities that apply during the program. They mention “supporting the student throughout their program, including in selecting their courses, formulating their research project, and preparing their major research paper or the thesis for final submission” (Regulation C-5.2). Supervisors must also ensure that the student knows what approvals are required before starting the research.

In short, specific expectations regarding the responsibilities of thesis supervisors and, where they exist, members of “thesis advisory committees”, remain subject to the practices

in place in the various programs. In this regard, in the previous report, the University indicated that several programs had developed “their own guide [regarding the supervisory relationship], which meets the specificities of their structure and disciplinary standard.”

### Ombudsperson’s comments

As noted in previous reports, when problems arise in a supervisory relationship, they are sensitive situations where academic, financial and mental health issues can be significant. It can be difficult for students to find timely and constructive solutions, in particular:

- if they do not have access to a statement of specific responsibilities and expectations for thesis supervisors during their program
- if there is no thesis advisory committee in their program, or if there is no statement of the responsibilities and roles of the members of the committee during their program (i.e., especially if their progress in the program depends exclusively on their supervisor)
- if it is not clear that consultation with the program director (or, if applicable, the faculty or vice-dean) can be confidential (and how to ensure that it is so)
- if there is no information available to them on the roles of program directors or, where applicable, the faculty or vice-dean, and on the specific assistance they can provide in finding solutions to problems related to thesis supervision

Without this information, it is difficult to normalize, not only for the student but also for the supervisor, the fact that there may be difficulties in a supervisory relationship, and that the use of other resource persons can help to open the discussion constructively and find timely solutions.

We have seen students hesitate for a long time before seeking help to solve a serious problem. We have also spoken with supervisors who were experiencing difficulties in the supervisory relationship, but who perceived a recourse to committee members or to the program director as damaging their authority or reputation.

In this context, problems may persist or worsen, with repercussions for the student, as well as for the thesis supervisor, in terms of their academic or professional career or their mental health.

In the last ombudsperson report, the University indicated that it had to postpone the development of a supervision guide due to a lack of resources to complete the project. However, it remains important to guide the development of good practices in supervisory relationships and to provide a framework for the development of guides by programs to ensure that they meet specific expectations.

In June 2023, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) published principles for graduate supervision<sup>5</sup>. The paper emphasizes the importance of the mentoring relationship and fostering the intellectual development of students. In particular, the COU mentions that:

(summarized and paraphrased from the original)

- Supervisory responsibilities include regular meetings throughout the program; assistance in developing appropriate and reasonable objectives and schedules; timely, detailed and constructive feedback; healthy and inclusive workspaces such as laboratories; clarification of authorship; mentoring in all phases of research; attention to equity; assistance in navigating financial and ethical issues; etc.
- Program directors must: communicate to students and professors their own role in managing problems and encourage them to consult them early when problems arise; assist in finding solutions and accommodations in the

event of absences or departures of supervisors; and assist in finding another person to lead the thesis if the supervisory relationship breaks down.

- The faculty of graduate studies is responsible for establishing and enforcing regulations, including providing resources, training and guidance on the supervisory relationship and mentoring, and approaches for dealing with supervisory relationship problems and conflict resolution.

**Note:** The COU mentions the role of the “faculty of graduate studies”. However, the University of Ottawa has adopted a structure without a faculty of graduate studies. Instead, the Office of the Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies provides centralized leadership, and the various faculties oversee the programs.

## Recommendations

I hope that the University will pursue the objective of developing a guide that clarifies responsibilities for thesis supervision, including good practices for developing productive and respectful mentoring relationships, and incorporating accessible and informal resolution processes for problems and conflicts.

In the meantime, the release of the COU publication will hopefully be an opportunity for the University to:

- oversee the development of the guides at the program level by setting timelines for their adoption and content to be covered, including supervisory responsibilities, and responsibilities of thesis supervisors, advisory committee members and program directors in the management of problems or conflicts
- identify and communicate proactively to professors and students tangible approaches and resources for dealing with supervisory relationship problems and facilitating the resolution of problems or conflicts

<sup>5</sup> <https://cou.ca/reports/principles-for-graduate-supervision-at-ontarios-universities/>

## 6. Best practices in workplace support

Over the past five years, the Office of the Ombudsperson received a total of 143 requests for services from employees (see Table 1 on page 4), mainly from administrative and support staff and from professors. This includes the 38 requests we responded to in 2022–2023.

Those individuals raised various issues, but about half, 53.1%, raised issues related to their workplace, including interpersonal communication problems, issues related to workload or performance management, difficulties in a supervisory relationship, and interpersonal conflict. They often sought confidential information and advice on how to manage those situations with their co-workers or supervisors.

In the 2018-2019 report that completed my first year as ombudsperson at the University, I described the impact that poorly managed labour relations or conflict can have on the mental health of those involved. In that context, I emphasized the importance of providing mentoring and communication tools to staff and their managers on how to de-escalate conflict. In fact, Human Resources had training workshops and a mentoring program in place to help develop new skills or improve existing skills.

Relevant advice and support can help resolve many situations. Despite this, I have since observed two situations where there were problems in terms of management and respect with repercussions for all team members. Those situations led to departures and months-long absences due to mental health issues before management understood the nature of the problem and intervened to resolve it.

Staff members spoke to me about a lack of accessible options because formal complaint processes (such as for discrimination or harassment) were cumbersome to navigate or did not really reflect their individual situation. Those individuals often complained that they had no mechanism for providing safe feedback on the people who

supervised them. They did not have direct access to those responsible for leading their unit, and they did not feel safe discussing their concerns with the University.

Mechanisms for resolving these two situations included exit interviews to gather feedback from people leaving their jobs and informed interventions by directors who listened to the teams under their responsibility. Solutions also included guidance for new supervisors. To this end, I would like to highlight the new skill development programs provided by Human Resources to assist both new and experienced leaders.

Following the signing of the Okanagan Charter<sup>6</sup>, recent discussions on the mental health and wellness strategic framework<sup>7</sup> provides an opportunity to adopt proactive and systemic measures to foster healthy working and learning environments. The strategic framework is intended to make uOttawa a “more caring and more compassionate university”. And the Charter’s first call to action is “to embed health into all aspects of campus culture, across the administration, operations and academic mandates.”

### Recommendation

To foster healthy and inclusive working and learning environments, and in particular to help identify needs, issues and problems earlier, and to intervene in a more timely, effective and constructive manner, I encourage the University to consider the more systematic adoption of systemic tools — such as the development and discussion of health and wellness goals within work teams, the training and mentoring of supervisory and management staff on these issues, the use of feedback mechanisms about supervisors and managers, and exit interviews<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> International Conference on Health-Promoting Universities and Educational Institutions (7th: Kelowna, BC). 2015. Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges [O], <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0132754>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/provost/mental-health-wellness/strategic-framework>

<sup>8</sup> Update: Human Resources indicate that, with the launch of WorkDay in May 2023, exit interviews are now part of the departure process.

## III. FOLLOW-UP ON ISSUES RAISED IN THE PREVIOUS REPORT

### Communication of tuition fees to international students

In the previous report, the ombudsperson had made recommendations on the communication of tuition fees to international students. The information to be communicated is complex because the cost depends on several factors, such as status in Canada (for example, international or domestic), undergraduate or graduate level, program, course load, and progress through the program.

During 2021-2022, our office provided feedback on the information available on the website and highlighted areas of possible confusion, particularly to understand how costs increase year over year. It was important for international students to understand the basis on which the percentage increase is added the following year, especially since the system that applies to international students is different from the system applied to Canadian students<sup>9</sup>.

The ombudsperson recommended separating the information for international students and making it clearer and more transparent. We also asked that particular attention be paid to applications for financial assistance from international students who may not have fully understood the previously available information and may be experiencing hardship before the end of their program.

During 2022–2023, our office was contacted by the Office of the Registrar to keep us informed of changes made to the site. I would like to thank the teams that worked to redesign the web pages and integrate the clarifications we had suggested. Creating a page for international students helps to better target important messages and add more relevant examples.

As a result of the tuition freezes that occurred between 2020 and 2022, possible confusion about the basis on which to estimate the annual increase in enrolment costs probably did not have an impact in 2022–2023. However, if international students now in second year or beyond did not fully understand the previously available information, they may have underestimated their registration costs for 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 and may have difficulty funding the end of their program.

I continue to recommend that particular attention be paid to applications for financial assistance from international students enrolled in second year or beyond, during 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, and that this situation be considered when identifying their needs and support options.

<sup>9</sup> Differences exist in part because domestic tuition fees are subject to government decisions.

## APPENDIX A: OTHER STATISTICS

**TABLE 8:** Official language used

Official language used	French	English
All persons who consulted us	20.9%	79.1%
Students who consulted us	20.2%	79.8%
Students enrolled at the University (Fall 2022) <sup>1</sup>	30.0%	70.0%

**TABLE 9:** Students – Faculty distribution

Faculty	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2022) <sup>1</sup>
Arts	9.6%	11.0%
Law	3.3%	4.4%
Education	5.7%	6.2%
Engineering	6.5%	14.9%
Management (Telfer)	12.2%	10.9%
Medicine	2.5%	5.4%
Sciences	6.1%	12.5%
Health Sciences	6.9%	11.6%
Social Sciences	16.3%	23.1%
Unknown	30.9%	-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/institutional-research-planning/facts-figures/quick-facts>



**TABLE 10:** Students – Level of study

Level of study	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2022) <sup>2</sup>
Undergraduate	74.7%	83.1%
Graduate	19.1%	16.9%
Unknown or other	6.2%	-

**TABLE 11:** Feedback on our services

Question	Yes	No
Was it easy to find the Office of the Ombudsperson?	10	4
Did you receive a quick reply to your email, telephone message or letter?	12	2
Was the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson explained to you clearly?	14	0
If you asked that your name not be released, was your concern handled in a confidential manner by the Office of the Ombudsperson?	12	2
Did the ombudsperson demonstrate impartiality (objectivity) in reviewing your concerns?	12	2
Did the ombudsperson handle your concern fairly?	12	2
Were you treated with respect?	14	0
Would you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson again?	12	2

**TABLE 12:** Feedback (continued)

Why did you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson?	Total
To acquire information	5
To get advice	6
To facilitate communication with others	10
To determine if I had been treated fairly	7
To discuss options or alternatives so that I could handle the problem myself	6
For the ombudsperson to intervene and to assist with the resolution of the problem	7

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/institutional-research-planning/facts-figures/quick-facts>



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