



Office of the  
**Ombudsperson**

**Building a culture of fairness**

# **FOURTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT**

**From June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2024**

**INDEPENDENCE • CONFIDENTIALITY • IMPARTIALITY**



# TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## Mandate of the ombudsperson

At the University of Ottawa, the ombudsperson’s mandate is “to provide an independent, impartial and confidential process to help members of the University Community pursue the just, fair and equitable resolution of disputes.”<sup>1</sup>

We receive complaints or requests for assistance from members of the University Community related to their experience at the University. We provide them with information and advice on a confidential basis about relevant policies and procedures, their rights and responsibilities, their options and available resources.

Depending on the nature of the situation, the needs of the individual and the steps already taken, the ombudsperson may also, with the consent of the individual, “use various modes of intervention” – for example, shuttle diplomacy, informal search for a solution, or detailed review of the complaint. Finally, the ombudsperson may also “make recommendations and bring them to the attention of the University or Student Unions”.

## 2023-2024 Report

This annual report covers the period from June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2024. It includes quantitative and qualitative data on our services, examples of cases, comments and recommendations on issues observed during the year, and an update on themes and recommendations presented in the last report.

**See in particular the remarks and recommendations about graduate studies on pages 14-15, and about accessibility and academic accommodations on pages 19 to 21.**



I take this opportunity to announce the arrival of Chanelle Bouassali, who has held the position of assistant ombudsperson since mid-October 2023. A graduate of the Telfer School, Chanelle completed studies in business management, conflict management and negotiation. Prior to joining the Office of the Ombudsperson, Chanelle worked as a legal assistant, primarily in the areas of family law, corporate law, and wills and estates.

**The work of our office rests on developing relationships based on communication and respect. I thank the many people who reach out to us and take the time to explain the difficulties they face. I also thank all the employees, administrators and student leaders who, through their answers to our questions, help clarify procedures and resolve issues.**

**– Martine Conway**

<sup>1</sup> Policy 127 - Ombudsperson: <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/policies-regulations/policy-127-ombudsperson>

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# I. 2023–2024: YEAR IN REVIEW

## 1. Facts and figures

From June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2024, we processed 650 service requests from 350 students (254 at the undergraduate level, 85 at the graduate level, and 11 others), 28 employees, 98 admission applicants, and 174 others. Although we had noticed a sharp increase in requests in 2022–2023, this year the numbers returned to previous levels.

We received fewer requests from **admission applicants** (98). Most (80) were general inquiries, mainly from international students, about undergraduate level programs (66.3%) and graduate level programs (33.7%), in English (72.5%) and French (27.5%).

The others (18) reported technical or communication difficulties (7), or complaints (11) contesting the criteria used in decision-making. For example: which studies should form the basis for calculating

admission averages; how to account for work or personal experience; whether a language test is necessary; or how to consider exceptional circumstances. One of these files involved an error that was corrected (and the person was admitted). See also section III.3 about mature applicants on page 17.

The “**other**” category (174 in total) includes other members of the University Community, as well as parents (about 12.6%) and members of the public (about 78.2%). In 2023–2024, parents became involved in financial matters (scholarships, fees, residence agreements), requests for accommodation of a disability, and their student’s experience in a course or program. Members of the public often expressed opinions about how the University or student groups dealt with matters related to current international affairs.

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

Year	Students	Employees	Admission applicants	Other	Total
<b>2023–2024</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>650</b>
2022–2023	419	38	218	129	804
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 Table 3 for details of academic issues.

In 2023–2024, more students asked us for help with financial matters (65), e.g.: exemption or refund processes, collection activities, scholarship eligibility. Student issues in the “other” category (54 in total) were related to administrative, technological or communication challenges, as well as issues outside the University's sphere (e.g.: off-campus housing).

Among the employees (28 in total), approximately one third consulted us on issues related to their workplace (communication, relationship with a co-worker or manager, stress or absences due to interpersonal issues or lack of support or resources). In this regard, it is very important to continue implementing the strategic framework for mental health and wellness, and to offer training and guidance for supervisors and managers.

The “other” questions from employees (11) concerned administrative or technological issues, partly related to the launch of WorkDay.

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

Type of problem	Students	Employees	Other*	Total
Academic issues	131	0	12	<b>143</b>
Admission	7	0	98	<b>105</b>
Student association	5	1	0	<b>6</b>
Relational conflict	4	1	1	<b>6</b>
Human rights	21	2	4	<b>27</b>
Academic support	5	0	0	<b>5</b>
Financial (fees, funding)	65	3	7	<b>75</b>
Harassment	1	1	1	<b>3</b>
Workplace	0	8	1	<b>9</b>
Residence	30	0	3	<b>33</b>
Security	3	0	0	<b>3</b>
Graduate supervision	15	0	0	<b>15</b>
Student's conduct	3	1	1	<b>5</b>
Professor's conduct	6	0	2	<b>8</b>
Other	54	11	142	<b>207</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>650</b>

\*Includes admission applicants.

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

In 2023–24, we received significantly fewer requests related to registration issues or requests for exceptions (deferred exam, retroactive withdrawal, etc.), but we received slightly more questions about appealing program withdrawals (related to academic performance), particularly from graduate students.

At the graduate level, it is also important to monitor the quality of the student experience in short programs. In two of these programs (from different faculties), some international students experienced difficulties accessing summer classes or French-language internships to finish their program on time. In another short program, after a student failed a one-term research activity, the ombudsperson recommended that a mid-term evaluation be put in place to provide better guidance.

**TABLE 3: Academic issues**

Type of issues	Under-graduate	Graduate	Level unknown or other*	Total
Registration	9	3	3	15
Evaluation	26	2	2	30
Academic integrity	7	2	2	11
Concession requests	16	2	1	19
Experiential learning	5	0	1	6
Performance and progress	0	1	0	1
Requirements and options (program)	15	5	1	21
Course or program quality	11	3	1	15
Program withdrawal	13	8	0	21
Miscellaneous	2	1	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>143</b>

\*Includes unregistered students, former students, special students, parents, etc.

Note: Graduate supervision issues (15 in total in 2023–2024) are not included in this table. See Table 2 on page 5 and remarks on pages 14–15.

**Table 4** identifies the categories of human rights inquiries or 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.

In this context, our role is not to determine the merits of an allegation of discrimination or harassment. It is more about explaining the options and the procedure to follow. If someone comes to us as a last recourse, we can review the procedure that the University followed and make recommendations as needed.

That said, we also offer advice or interventions in situations involving disability-related accommodation requests, especially where an issue would affect academic activities or access to certain services (residence, other).

In this regard, we stress the importance of developing course syllabi that incorporate, within the evaluation process, reasonable and effective options for professors to address the needs of students with disabilities. See pages 19 to 21 for more on this topic.

**TABLE 4: Human rights issues**

Type of issues	Students	Employees	Other	Total
Religious belief	0	0	1	1
Disability	14	1	1	16
Gender	1	0	1	2
Sex	4	1	0	5
Race	2	0	0	2
Other	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>27</b>

**Table 5** summarizes the services we offered in 2023–2024:

- **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 or investigations:** 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	139	40	6	19	261	465
Advice or coaching	48	33	2	6	3	92
Intervention	65	11	3	3	7	89
Final review or investigation	2	1	0	0	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>650</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	47
Not resolved	1
No grounds	9
Discontinued by complainant	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>

**Table 7** shows the outcomes of final reviews or investigations. We addressed four cases. We did not make recommendations on three of the cases, which involved two program withdrawals and one application for admission.

We conducted a detailed review about a request to cancel a residence agreement. The student, who had to cancel her program admission and withdraw from the residence due to mental health issues, encountered barriers due to lack of access to online portals, lack of clarity in procedures, and delays in communication. Housing agreed to issue a financial credit, and we recommended improvements in procedures. See also comments on this topic on pages 22–23, and another example of a case on page 11.

**TABLE 7: Outcomes of final reviews or investigations**

	Outcomes
Recommendations made and accepted	1
Complaints without grounds	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>

## 2. Other activities

The Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson met three times in 2023–2024. 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 Office of the Ombudsperson normally consists of two people. The assistant ombudsperson position was vacant from early June to mid-October, which affected some of our promotional activities during this period.

When she took up her duties, the assistant ombudsperson started by familiarizing herself with the Office's procedures. In addition to mandatory training at the University, she also attended a workshop on universal design for learning. In 2023–24, we participated in monthly online discussions organized by the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) on issues common to post-secondary institutions.

The assistant ombudsperson usually manages the first contact with the people who approach our office. She also manages some of the cases

(information, general advice, administrative follow-up). She is also responsible for the online promotion of our services to the student population (for example, in the newsletters of student associations and the international student office).

Finally, we participated in professional activities. In June 2023, the ombudsperson presented at the annual conference of the ENOHE (European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education) on fairness in decision-making (relational, procedural and substantive fairness) and its application in the post-secondary sector. See the diagram on page 13.

During 2023–2024, we served on the planning committee for the annual symposium of Saint Paul University's Centre for Informal Dispute Resolution (CIDR). Entitled *The Ombuds: Foundations, Best Practices and Development*, it was held on May 6 and 7, 2024 in Ottawa.

The symposium brought together 150 people, both face-to-face and online, from the region, other Canadian provinces and internationally. We also benefited from the participation of Canadian, American and European associations of ombudspersons in higher education.



Symposium planning committee: Jean-François Rioux, Martine Conway, Chanelle Bouassali, Kirstie Brewer, Brent Epperson, Danielle Stordy

## II. EXAMPLES OF CASES

### **Cancellation of the residence agreement (intervention and recommendations)**

A student with significant mental health issues had deferred her admission from September 2023 to September 2024 by submitting a medical certificate to Admissions. She contacted our office in the winter of 2024 because of issues with the residence agreement. She had a bill for more than \$8,000 even though she had never moved in.

Her attempts to resolve the situation with Housing had been unsuccessful because the cancellation of that agreement is separate from the procedure to defer admission, and requests are not accepted retroactively. Because her account was in arrears, she could not proceed with registering for September 2024.

After reviewing the exchanges between the student, Admissions and Housing, the ombudsperson highlighted several communication and navigation issues related to the residence agreement termination request procedures (see pages 22–23 on this topic).

Housing then agreed to recalculate the notice based on the date the medical note was submitted to Admissions (August 2023), which reduced the cost to approximately \$1,000 and resolved the situation.

### **Request for reimbursement of registration fees (advice and intervention)**

A student asked for help after her request for reimbursement of the fall 2023 registration fees was denied. The student had withdrawn from her classes in late October for medical reasons, after the deadline for withdrawal with financial credit (late September).

While talking to the student, we suggested that she identify more precisely the period during which her health situation had deteriorated, as well as the date when she actually stopped attending classes or submitting assignments. (That date was earlier than her action to withdraw.)

We also facilitated communication between the student, Health Services and the Reimbursement Committee about obtaining a new medical note and submitting a second appeal. The Committee subsequently granted a 50% refund.

### **Clarification of requirements for graduation (guidance and coaching)**

In September 2023, an undergraduate student who was returning to school after a break due to family reasons encountered difficulties obtaining advice on enrolment. He indicated that he had not received prompt responses, and that his department and faculty appeared to have given different answers.

The arrival of new students in September may affect the response time of undergraduate faculty offices. Having had to modify his program to complete it more quickly, the student had changed minors and needed to confirm the courses he

had to complete in fall 2023 and winter 2024 to ensure that the degree requirements were met by April 2024.

While talking to him, we helped him determine the pressing issues for September, and how to communicate effectively with the faculty in person or virtually. We also suggested he meet with an academic advisor in October, and we helped him clarify the issues and questions he should ask then about his options. This approach enabled him to obtain his degree, as planned, in spring 2024.

## Access to courses to complete a program (communication facilitation)

A group of international students in a 12-month graduate program contacted our office because they had no response from the faculty or department after two emails a week apart asking for urgent help with summer registration.

This registration was supposed to allow them to complete the program, but a scheduled course had been cancelled. With the start of the semester fast approaching, and the choice of courses no longer matching the remaining requirements, they were worried that they would be left without a solution and feared that there could be significant repercussions on their student status and finances.

By following up, we were able to confirm that the faculty was looking for solutions, but that neither the faculty nor the department had acknowledged receipt of the emails, nor had they communicated a deadline for a response. We therefore stressed the importance of communication in such situations, and summarized some additional issues raised by the group.

At the same time, we provided the group of students with two updates while the faculty was completing its analysis of a problem that was complex (changes in planning processes earlier in the year, availability of professors, students with different academic requirements left to be completed). The faculty then communicated individualized solutions.

## Feedback from members of the University Community

The comments provided here provide an idea of what people were seeking from the Office of the Ombudsperson.

*Thank you for listening to me, helping me understand what is available to me, and helping me set up support. I can't thank you enough for everything you've done to make me and my parents feel more comfortable. (new student — undergraduate level)*

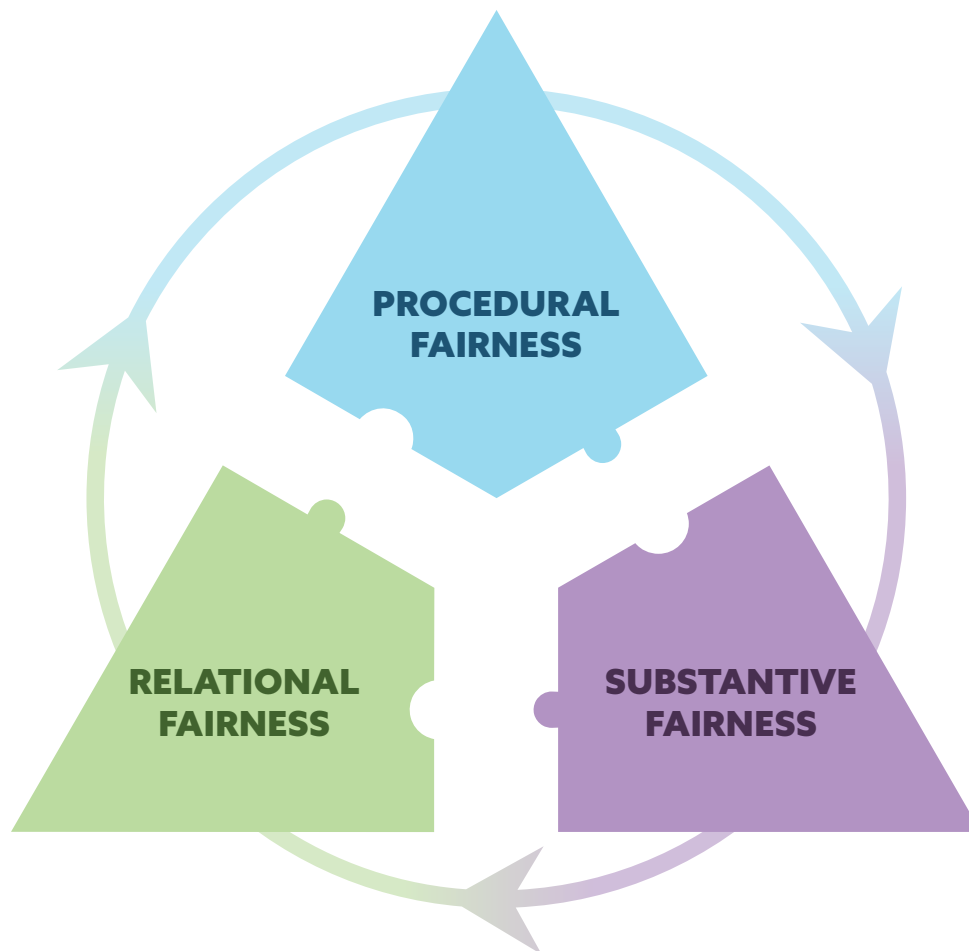
*I would like to thank you again for talking to me and helping me organize and resolve my issues with the administration. Without you, I would not have been able to make sense of the circumstances and understand the next steps. (student — undergraduate level)*

*Thank you for clarifying the options to resolve our situation. Thank you for keeping us informed and guiding us through this procedure. Please know that I appreciate all your updates and negotiations on our behalf. (students — graduate level)*

*There were many obstacles along my path to graduation, and I would not have been able to overcome them without your intervention and support. I am very grateful for all your work to ensure proper procedures are followed.*  
(student – graduate level)

*Thank you very much for your support. You can't know how much it meant to me. As a part-time teacher, I have a lot of insecurity, so thank you very much.*  
(part-time teaching staff)

## The Fairness Triangle



*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)**

# III. ISSUES ADDRESSED IN 2023–2024

Members of the University Community seek our services on a variety of issues, which leads us to make recommendations or suggestions during the year to improve the University's communication or procedures. Some departments or faculties also consult us when updating their procedures or policies.

**This year, I would like to acknowledge the work done to develop a best practice guide to better support students and supervisors in a graduate**

**supervisory relationship. In this regard, Section III.1 of this report provides recommendations on next steps.**

During 2023–2024, we provided input on a variety of other topics, and we thank the departments and faculties involved for their openness to considering our input. Sections III.2 to III.4 summarize the follow-ups and recommendations made on three of those other topics.

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## 1. Supervisory relationship and authorship in graduate studies

In previous reports, the Office of the Ombudsperson recommended the development of a supervisory guide that “clarifies responsibilities for thesis supervision, including good practices for developing productive and respectful mentoring relationships, and incorporating accessible and informal resolution procedures for problems and conflicts.”

During 2023–2024, the Office of the Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies worked on drafting the *Guide to Best Practices, Roles and Responsibilities — Supervisory Relationships at the Graduate Level*.

As part of this process, the Office of the Ombudsperson provided comments on the draft document, specifically highlighting the importance of the following:

- ensure that professors as well as students are proactive in using the recommended approaches and tools to foster the development of a good supervisory relationship

- provide tools and procedures to discuss expectations not only at the beginning of the supervisory relationship but throughout the program
- ensure that students and professors also have proactive discussions regarding expectations for intellectual property and authorship
- clarify resources that can be consulted confidentially within and outside the faculty in the event of problems or conflicts in the supervisory relationship.

We are grateful for the development of this document, which has been available on the website since the end of October 2024. Every year, our office receives requests for assistance in resolving issues in supervisory relationships. In general, we have noticed:

- a need for tools and resources within academic units to help facilitate informal problem solving
- a need for information and advice on expectations and standards on authorship and intellectual property issues.

On this second point, we have received questions about the publication of articles during the program, the publication of the thesis (or articles drawn from the thesis) after the program, and more generally about the standards that make it possible to determine who owns an idea or a work, in whole or in part.

The standards governing the inclusion and order of authors of a publication vary widely across disciplines. Decisions may also depend on specific arrangements or employment relationships between students and faculty. Information available online often presents general principles that do not clarify standards in a particular discipline.

Finally, research is often done in teams, and, in graduate studies, it involves a supervisor. In this context, it is not clear how one determines who originated an idea, approach or method.

Students and new faculty members more often tend to have little specific information on these questions. They do not always know when and especially how to discuss such issues with their thesis supervisor or colleagues who are perceived to have a great deal of influence in their discipline.

The guide developed at the University recommends a discussion between the student and the thesis supervisor on expectations regarding intellectual property and authorship. In this regard, we particularly note the importance of the following element:

- *The student should be well-informed about norms in the field and an active participant in the creation of any agreements or arrangements pertaining to intellectual property and joint authorship.* (Graduate Supervision Form, 2024, section 14)

For students to be active participants, they require access to clear information about the standards in their discipline and who to consult, if needed, within their academic unit or faculty.

The world of research and graduate studies is an environment in which many people feel pressure to be successful. In such a context, it is important to normalize (in the sense of recognizing that it is normal) the occurrence of problems, disagreements, or needs for clarification. It is also important to help members of the University Community develop their ability to handle difficult or complex situations.

## Recommendations

To better support the implementation of the supervisory guide, I recommend that faculties and academic units proactively and systematically communicate to students and faculty:

- a)** where to find tools, concrete approaches and support for:
  - i)** constructively addressing problems in the supervisory relationship
  - ii)** facilitating the informal and fair resolution of disagreements or conflicts
- b)** where to find information on:
  - i)** authorship and intellectual property standards and traditions applicable to their disciplines
  - ii)** topics to be addressed in discussions about mutual expectations regarding authorship
  - iii)** documents and resource persons to be consulted, as required, within the academic unit and faculty

## 2. Review of policies on professionalism and dispute resolution

In professional programs, there are usually expectations in terms of conduct, and procedures that allow for gradual intervention, informally or more formally, depending on the situation.

As part of a review of its procedures related to issues at placement sites, a professional program asked us to comment on a draft text explaining the procedure to be followed to try to resolve problems constructively and informally before they become more complex.

Given the importance of interpersonal relationships during placement activities, we welcome this initiative, which aims to clarify the responsibilities of the various parties and to clearly communicate elements such as procedures for informal resolutions, available resources and confidentiality issues.

Another faculty also began a process of reviewing its policies, including the one on professionalism. In this context, we contacted the Dean to provide feedback on those policies and related procedures.

More generally, 2023–2024 was a year in which universities had to continue thinking about issues such as freedom of expression and polarization of opinions. We observed situations where the expression of opinions in a work or study environment, or on social media, led to interpersonal conflicts or complaints.

In this complex context, the elements of reflection we raised with these academic units could be relevant more widely, which leads me to summarize them here.

We begin by highlighting the positive aspects of a phased approach that makes it possible to resolve certain situations quickly and informally, thereby fostering the development of a healthy environment and constructive communications.

We remind administrators that, even at the informal stage, disciplinary processes must be accompanied by procedural protections (such as the right to be informed and to respond to an allegation, the responsibility for impartiality in decision-making, etc.). These protections increase with the severity of the allegations or possible consequences.

But then we note the differences in power and knowledge that often exist in situations of interpersonal conflict or polarization of opinion in educational and work environments. Finally, we stress the importance of not encouraging the suppression of marginalized voices out of a desire for harmony<sup>2</sup>.

### Procedural Fairness

Using a transparent, accessible and impartial process

- Providing notification of relevant regulations, expectations, criteria, or allegations
- Providing a reasonable opportunity to present information
- Following reasonable timelines
- Being impartial and unbiased
- Communicating the reasons for a decision and possible recourses

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, North American anthropologist Laura Nader used the term “coercive harmony” in her critique of informal conflict resolution processes aimed at compromise and consensus, but that could also silence the expression of grievances or differences.



## Comments and suggestions

The items listed below do not necessarily have easy answers, but they provide an opportunity to reflect on the issues to be considered when reviewing policies and procedures that may lead to disciplinary action. I hope they will be useful to other units within the University.

- In the context of a complaint against an individual following interpersonal conflict or a polarized exchange of opinions, to avoid hasty judgements or errors about what action to take, it is important to consider the context that led to the conflict, and the power relations (real or perceived) between the individuals involved. Attention to procedural elements that ensure unbiased hearing of facts is essential.

- If interim measures are considered necessary (e.g. to enable people to avoid one another during a complaint process), it is essential to do so impartially, and to communicate those measures in such a way that they are not confused with disciplinary measures.
- When the situation is known in the work or study environment, it is important to proactively think about what can be communicated to try to avoid misinformation while respecting confidentiality.
- Finally, regardless of the outcome of the complaint, it is necessary to plan how to support those involved or affected, directly or indirectly, during the process, and how to help them reintegrate and rebuild a positive atmosphere after the process is concluded.

## 3. Mature applicants

As a result of questions raised by two applicants for admission, we noted a need to clarify the concept of “mature” applicant. Applicants who have not previously studied at the post-secondary level or who have interrupted their studies for some time after encountering obstacles may be considered for admission without necessarily or only relying on previous academic results.

For example, for admission to certain programs, the University may also take into account exceptional situations that have affected previous results, the relevance of the person’s work experience, their ability to undertake studies now, etc.

However, it is important to know that it is the University that determines when and how to consider an application under the “mature” category. That is, a person who has completed some full time post-secondary education may still be refused admission based on their previous results, even if those results are rather old or not directly related to the planned program.

## Action and follow-up

- Our discussions with Admissions led us to request a clarification of the section of the website dedicated to this category of admission. (At the time of the preparation of this report, the wording was being revised to provide greater clarity and transparency.)

## 4. Procedure to request reimbursement after late withdrawal from courses

The web page that explains the procedure and criteria for submitting a request to the Student Account Reimbursement Committee after a course withdrawal is very informative, but we noticed that navigating to this page was complicated for students and their families because it was too far in the site structure.

A request must be related to an exceptional situation (illness, death, etc.) and the student must submit documentation related to this situation and the date on which their participation in the courses ended. (See the case example on page 11.) It is therefore essential that students

facing these situations have ready access to information on the criteria to be met and the documentation to be provided.

### Action and follow-up

- We asked the student accounts unit to create a new tab on the main page of their site. They did so quickly and communicated to their partners the link to be updated on related webpages and in communication campaigns.

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

### 1. Situations of justified absence from exams or delay in submitting work

In the 2022–2023 report, we highlighted several issues related to managing justified absences from exams or justified delays in submitting work.

A new stipulation limiting deferred evaluations to one per course (Academic Regulation A-8.6) had been interpreted differently within faculties. The lack of consistency led to confusion in following procedures, or errors and appeals.

In addition, literal application of the regulation limiting deferred evaluations to one per course could have the effect of limiting options for granting justified academic accommodations in instances of fluctuating medical conditions.

In this context, to ensure consistent, fair and non-discriminatory application of the regulation, the 2022–2023 report presented examples of best practices for incorporating proactive solutions into the course structure and highlighted the need to clearly communicate to the student population and professors the criteria and procedures to be followed to manage requests related to justified situations of absence from exams or delay in submitting work.

In fall 2023, I met with members of the Council on Undergraduate Studies to discuss concerns about the regulation limiting deferred evaluations to one per course, and to encourage more inclusive design of courses and evaluation methods. In May 2024, in its 2021–2023 report, the Senate Appeals Committee also raised concerns about the formulation and implementation of Academic Regulation A-8.6.

Since then, the Regulation has been amended. A-8.6 no longer addresses requests related to delays in the submission of work. It only covers mid-term and final exams. It also no longer limits deferred evaluations to one per course.

However, this change is recent and was followed by the introduction of a new fee for deferred exams. In addition, for forms of evaluation other than exams, students are referred to the procedures outlined in the syllabus. These procedures are not always designed inclusively (see IV.2).

#### Comments

It is too early to assess the implementation of the amendments to Regulation A-8.6. In this context of change, it is important to be vigilant about the following:

- the accommodation measures that must be considered so as not to harm people with disabilities financially or academically; and
- differences, not always justified, that may exist between courses or programs in how justified situations of absences or delays are handled.

Section IV.2 also provides recommendations for incorporating solutions when designing courses and evaluation methods.

## 2. Accessibility and academic accommodations

In the 2022–2023 annual report, we discussed the importance of integrating **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** more systematically into teaching and course evaluation methods. Proactive use of this approach reduces the need for individual accommodations and the time spent implementing them.

We also stressed the need to **identify the essential requirements**<sup>3</sup> of courses and programs, as this provides a solid foundation upon which to base course and evaluation design, as well as academic accommodation options. This point is illustrated by two contrasting examples of requests for accommodation that we came across this year, in the first case showing an incorrect refusal to accommodate and in the other case a justified refusal.

In the first case, a request for accommodation, approved by the Academic Accommodations Service, was denied by the professor. The requested change (flexibility of deadlines and/or format for certain elements of continuous evaluation) did not meet the requirements or rules that the professor had communicated in the syllabus.

But the rules set by the professor were not based on essential course requirements, and the request for accommodation was justified given the fluctuating nature of the student’s medical situation. In this context, we spoke with the professor and asked the faculty (Vice-Dean) to intervene to help the professor and student find a solution.

**We also pointed out to the professor the importance of considering essential requirements before refusing an accommodation. And we stressed that there are a variety of methods to incorporate flexibility into the course design and evaluation itself, which enables professors to reduce the time spent implementing individual accommodations.**

In the second case, a professor granted part of the accommodation requested by a student but refused to replace group work by individual work. Again, the professor referred to the requirements communicated in the syllabus.

What is interesting about this second case is that group work was in fact an essential requirement of the course. This was a capstone course incorporating an experiential learning project whose essential component (given the nature of the program) was the ability to contribute to the work of a team. (It should be noted that the form of participation could reasonably be adapted to the student’s situation.)

As in the first case, the situation led to multiple exchanges between the student and the professor. The student continued to request individual work to which he believed he was entitled based on accommodations previously approved and implemented in other courses. In response, we noted that the professor did not mention the concept of essential requirement (probably because for him it was obvious).

**Clear communication of the nature of this “essential requirement” at the beginning of the professor-student exchanges would have prevented delays and frustrations (probably mutual), and more quickly resulted in a form of participation in group work tailored to the student’s needs.**

Focusing on UDL and essential course requirements is work that requires the collaboration of faculties and the Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS). It is particularly important to:

- guide and support professors in their efforts to better understand and integrate universal design and accommodation concepts

<sup>3</sup> 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 (...)”

- support students by providing them with clear, effective and consistent accommodation procedures
- educate the University Community about legislated requirements and dispel myths or misunderstandings that may continue to impede inclusive approaches or reasonable accommodations.

In 2023–2024, Student Health, Wellness and Support, which includes the Academic Accommodations Service, completed its consultations and report on the academic accommodation optimization project. Out of this important work, we would like to particularly highlight the following developments:

- a three-year work plan to better integrate UDL to reduce the need for accommodations and ensure compliance with legislated standards
- a pilot project on the use of UDL in fall 2023 in a large enrolment course, followed by presentations to faculties
- UDL promotion and training for professors
- stated goals for improving and simplifying procedures and communication (both between departments or services, and with professors and students).

We also noted that during the consultation phase, professors expressed a need for more assistance in implementing accommodations, and a preference for having fewer accommodations to manage.

## Recommendations

In this context, the following recommendations echo the ones in the previous report. They are aimed at greater compliance with legislated standards and at reducing the need for individual accommodations.

### To the faculties:

- Ensure that there is a systematic framework in place to review and identify essential requirements<sup>3</sup> for each course, and support professors in understanding what is an essential requirement to facilitate the broader adoption of UDL
- Establish good practices to remove barriers unrelated to essential requirements in designing courses and evaluating work; and in particular:
  - adopt an inclusive and proactive approach to determining viable academic solutions to justified situations of absence from evaluations and delays in submitting work
- Include a mandatory statement on accessibility and academic accommodations in all lesson plans.

### To the University:

- Adopt a statement on accessibility and academic accommodations and add to Regulation A-2.4 *Course syllabus for Undergraduate and Graduate Studies* the requirement to include this statement in the syllabus.

### 3. Requests to cancel the residence agreement

In 2023–2024, we received 33 requests for services regarding residences. Just over half (19) concerned various administrative procedures (response time, choice of available residence, procedures for requesting repairs, responsibilities in case of damage, cleaning costs, problems between roommates). The other problems (14) concerned requests to cancel the residence agreement.

In the 2022–2023 report, following a review of cases concerning students leaving the University for medical reasons, the Office of the Ombudsperson made several recommendations to improve communication, accessibility and integration of the various procedures for requesting termination of expenses related to the residence agreement, meal plan and bus pass.

It is important to remember that after August 15 (for a residence agreement starting in September) and after November 30 (for an agreement starting in January), students requesting the cancellation of their residence agreement are required to find a student with a similar profile who agrees to take over the agreement.

In addition, because the person cancelling or deferring their admission loses access to their uOttawa email, some common procedures (such as making a cancellation request or posting an advertisement) may be inaccessible. The agreement also states that requests are not considered retroactively.

In 2023–2024, we received requests for assistance from students having to withdraw from the University for mental health reasons (see the case example on page 11), as well as from international students awaiting study permits. These situations can have significant financial consequences. Therefore, it is important to remove barriers to navigating procedures, and to specifically consider their accessibility, relevance and clarity.

#### Action and follow-up

Last year, Housing Services undertook to review the communication and navigation of the agreement termination request procedures (residence, meal plan). Housing had also started work on developing new online features for fall 2024, which would enable it to ask its partners (Admissions, faculties and other services) to better refer students (and their families) to residence procedures, particularly when students cancel or defer their university admission.

In preparation for fall 2024, our Office specifically followed up with Admissions to recommend clearer communication of information about Housing procedures as soon as students request to cancel or defer admissions.

Since then, Housing has updated the Housing Portal, the web pages regarding residence cancellation procedures, as well as the text of information campaigns and email communications. Housing also created a specific email address for receiving questions and documentation related to requests for exceptions (which should reduce response times).

Housing management also informed us that it had improved its internal procedures related to documenting departures from the residence, and sending follow-up communications (for example, to inform of procedures to use). Communication between faculties and residences has also been better integrated since fall 2023 (to coordinate requests to cancel a meal plan or bus pass after a withdrawal from the University).

## Notes to the University

As I mentioned in the previous report, although the residence agreement provides for the possibility of medical cancellations, this requires:

*(...) 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 and adaptive measures that cannot be met by living in residence (...)* (Clause 1.7 of the residence agreement)

This requirement is not entirely compassionate as it appears to limit medical exceptions to situations in which students have access to a specialized assessment of their functional limitations (a process used to determine accommodations requirements in relation to a disability), to demonstrate that the University could not put in place sufficient support or accommodation measures to allow them to live in residence.

- Given the difficulties and delays in accessing specialists and medical documentation, it is important to consider whether this requirement is reasonable.
- Furthermore, it is not clear that a family without previous experience with a disability or mental health situation understands the implications of clause 1.7 of the residence agreement when accepting the offer of residence.
- Finally, it is difficult for young students to manage complex procedures and meet strict deadlines while managing a precarious medical situation.

## Recommendations

We thank the Housing and Admissions teams for working on revising the texts used in the information campaigns. Given that communication and process improvement activities are still underway, we encourage Housing to:

- a) Continue to engage with its partners (admissions, faculties, other support services) to ensure that students leaving the University are effectively and in a timely manner directed to the residence agreement procedures.
- b) Continue to improve internal procedures (documentation of departures, follow-up communications, clarity of procedures, and ease of access to online procedures).
- c) When a mental health situation has led to withdrawal from the University, consider requests to terminate the residence agreement for medical reasons based on compassionate criteria and, where relevant, do so retroactively.

## APPENDIX A: OTHER STATISTICS

**TABLE 8: Official language used**

Official language used	French	English
All persons who consulted us	16.9 %	83.1 %
Students who consulted us	12.9 %	87.1 %
Students enrolled at the University (Fall 2023) <sup>4</sup>	31.5 %	68.5 %

**TABLE 9: Students - Faculty distribution**

Faculty	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2023) <sup>4</sup>
Arts	5.4 %	11.0 %
Law	5.7 %	4.5 %
Education	6.0 %	6.1 %
Engineering	12.1 %	15.0 %
Management (Telfer)	5.7 %	11.0 %
Medicine	1.5 %	5.7 %
Sciences	7.9 %	12.0 %
Health Sciences	6.9 %	11.5 %
Social Sciences	20.2 %	22.8 %
Unknown	28.6 %	0.3 %

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

Level of study	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2023) <sup>4</sup>
Undergraduate	72.6 %	83.0 %
Graduate	24.3 %	16.5 %
Unknown or other	3.1 %	0.5 %

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/institutional-research-planning/facts-figures/quick-facts>



**TABLE 11: Feedback on our services**

Question	Yes	No
Was it easy to find the Office of the Ombudsperson?	21	3
Did you receive a quick reply to your email, telephone message or letter?	24	0
Was the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson explained to you clearly?	22	2
If you asked that your name not be released, was your concern handled in a confidential manner by the Office of the Ombudsperson?	18	N/A
Did the ombudsperson demonstrate impartiality (objectivity) in reviewing your concerns?	21	3
Did the ombudsperson handle your concern fairly?	21	2
Were you treated with respect?	24	0
Would you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson again?	22	1

**TABLE 12: Feedback (continued)**

Why did you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson?	Total
To acquire information	8
To get advice	14
To facilitate communication with others	10
To determine if I had been treated fairly	10
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	15



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