



Office of the
Ombudsperson

Building a culture of fairness

FIFTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT

From June 1, 2024 to May 31, 2025

INDEPENDENCE • CONFIDENTIALITY • IMPARTIALITY



TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

“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)*

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.”¹

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”¹.

2024–2025 Report

This annual report covers the period from June 1, 2024 to May 31, 2025. It includes quantitative and qualitative data on our services, examples of cases, as well as comments and recommendations on issues observed during the year.



In Part III of the report, we discuss a few recurring themes, before looking at three topics concerning graduate studies, and at difficulties related to processes for absences at examinations.

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

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

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I. 2024-2025: YEAR IN REVIEW

1. Facts and figures

From June 1, 2024 to May 31, 2025, we processed 543 service requests from 372 students (270 at the undergraduate level, 88 at the graduate level, and 14 others), 21 employees, 71 admission applicants, and 79 others.

Compared to last year, we received a few more requests from students, while overall numbers were down. A felt increase in workload was related primarily to the increased complexity of some cases, and a higher demand for coaching services. See page 5 for a summary of issues brought to our office by **students** and **employees**.

We received 71 requests from **admission applicants**, 53 of them being general inquiries about admission procedures, deadlines, programs offered, prerequisites and requirements, or scholarship opportunities. Two thirds of these requests came from international applicants. They concerned undergraduate programs (66%) and graduate programs (34%), in English (72%) and French (28%).

Among the other admission applicants (18), several were looking for information about options for readmission or for upgrading before a new application, and others reported issues or complaints about certain processes (e.g.: password, document upload), about criteria or decisions (when their application was not accepted), or about the inflexibility of certain deadlines.

The “**other**” category (79 in total) includes other members of the University Community (6), job applicants (6), members of other institutions (6), parents (19), and members of the public (42). In 2024-2025, some members of the public had questions about the University's services; others expressed opinions regarding social media communications by individuals affiliated with the University. Parents became involved in financial matters, requests for accommodation of a disability, and their student’s experience in a course or program.

TABLE 1: Service requests by type of person

Year	Students	Employees	Admission applicants	Other	Total
2024-2025	372	21	71	79	543
2023-2024	350	28	98	174	650
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

Table 2 presents the issues raised by the persons who consulted us. See Table 3 for details of academic issues.

Compared to the previous year, **students** asked us for help more often regarding academic matters and academic support needs (177 and 14, respectively, in 2024–2025, compared to 131 and 5, respectively, in 2023–2024) and less often regarding financial processes: registration fees, collection activities, eligibility for scholarships (38 compared to 65 in 2023–2024). Student issues in the “other” category concerned administrative matters

(for example to obtain documents), or technological or communication difficulties related to various services.

Among the **employees** (21 in total), about one third consulted us on issues related to their work environment (labour relations, communication with colleagues or managers), others faced communication difficulties related to administrative processes, a few sought to resolve financial matters, and, among “other” questions, two needed information on how to handle conflict of interest situations.

TABLE 2: Issues by type of person

Type of problem	Student	Employees	Other*	Total
Academic issues	177	2	7	186
Admission	3	0	74	77
Student association	7	0	2	9
Relational conflict	4	0	0	4
Human rights	25	2	5	32
Academic support	14	0	1	15
Financial (fees, funding)	38	3	2	43
Harassment	4	1	0	5
Workplace	2	6	4	12
Residence	21	0	4	25
Security	4	0	2	6
Graduate supervision	11	0	0	11
Student’s conduct	4	1	1	6
Professor’s conduct	8	0	0	8
Other	50	6	48	104
Total	372	21	150	543

* 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 2024–2025, we received slightly more requests related to evaluation and grade review processes, requests for academic concessions (see in particular

the comments on pages 20 to 24 regarding processes for absences at examinations due to illness or exceptional personal circumstances), questions related to obtaining or repeating a practicum (at the undergraduate and graduate levels), and program withdrawals (including at the graduate level; on this subject, see pages 17–18).

TABLE 3: Academic issues

Type of issues	Under-graduate	Graduate	Level unknown or other*	Total
Registration	12	2	2	16
Evaluation	37	6	3	46
Academic integrity	3	3	1	7
Concession requests	20	3	1	24
Experiential learning	10	3	1	14
Performance and progress	2	0	0	2
Requirements and options (program)	16	4	0	20
Course or program quality	10	4	2	16
Program withdrawal	14	13	0	27
Miscellaneous	5	4	5	14
Total	129	42	15	186

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

Note: **Graduate supervision issues** (11 in total in 2024–2025) are not included in this table. See Table 2 and remarks on pages 17–19.

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 2024–2025, we received slightly more requests for advice or assistance related to disability situations and accommodation needs within courses and programs. Among these students, we met with individuals who were experiencing fluctuating or emerging health situations for which accommodations were not yet in place, or who were required to submit absence declarations for which a fee of \$60 has been charged since September 2024. See the comments and recommendations on this topic on pages 20 to 24.

TABLE 4: Human rights issues

Type of issues	Students	Employees	Other	Total
Religious belief	1	0	0	1
Disability	18	2	3	23
Gender	1	0	1	2
Sex	3	0	0	3
Race	1	0	1	2
Other	1	0	0	1
Total	25	2	5	32

Table 5 summarizes the services we offered in 2024–2025:

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	160	27	12	7	135	341
Advice or coaching	64	43	0	11	7	125
Intervention	45	18	2	3	7	75
Final review	1	0	0	0	1	2
Total	270	88	14	21	150	543

* 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	36
Partly resolved	30
Not resolved	0
No grounds	5
Discontinued by complainant	4
Total	75

Table 7 shows the outcomes of final reviews. We handled two cases. We did not make any recommendations on one of these cases, which involved a request for a retroactive course withdrawal, because the documentation did not match the date of the missed examination.

We conducted a detailed follow-up about a case concerning an admission application. The decision regarding the denial of admission did not lead to any recommendations from us, but a lack of clarity on the website, as well as communication issues, led to two recommendations that were accepted and implemented by the university: the reimbursement of the admission application fee and a clarification of the information on the website.

TABLE 7: Outcomes of final reviews

	Outcomes
Recommendations made and accepted	1
Complaints without grounds	1
Total	2

2. Other activities

The Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson met three times in 2024–2025. The Committee, composed of an equal number of representatives from 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 consists of two people, the ombudsperson and the assistant ombudsperson. The assistant ombudsperson usually manages the first contact with the people who approach our office, and she manages her own caseload (information, general advice, follow-up with relevant academic or administrative units). She is also responsible for the promotion of our services to the student population (for example, in the newsletters of student associations, or by participating in short presentations or information fairs).

We participate in training activities. In 2024–2025, the assistant ombudsperson attended a workshop offered by the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO) on trauma-informed complaint management approaches. She also attended the summer webinar of the California Caucus of College and University Ombudspersons (CCCUO), with a particular focus on the challenges of maintaining impartiality in especially conflictual or emotional situations.

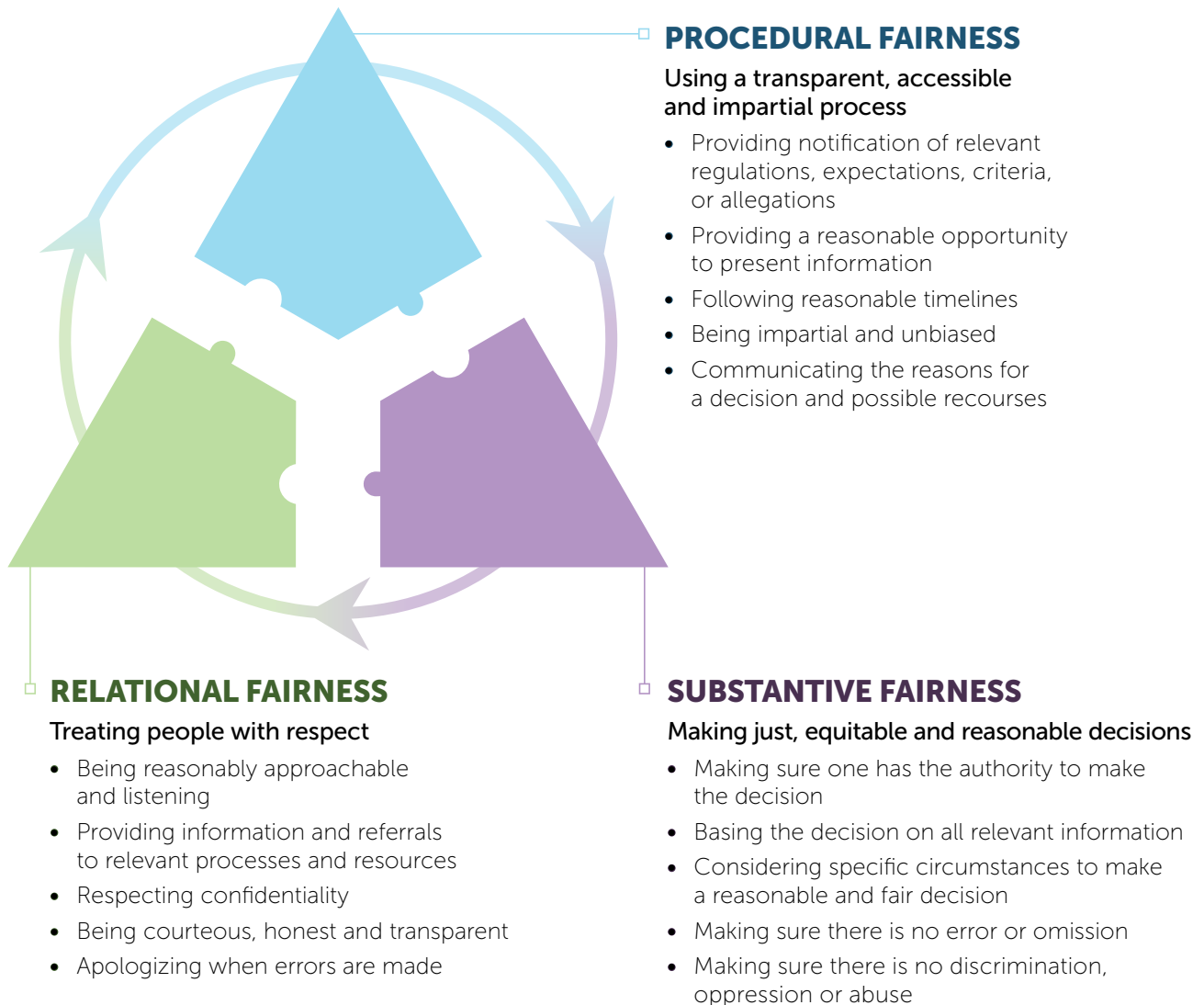
Finally, we participate in professional activities. We attended the joint conference of the FCO and the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) in October 2024 in Victoria, during which the ombudsperson co-presented a session on procedural fairness and the role of ombuds in higher education institutions. We also participated in the ACCUO annual meeting, as well as several of its monthly online meetings on topics such as artificial intelligence, academic integrity, or supervisory relationships.

II. EXAMPLES OF CASES

In this section of the report, we present on pages 13–14 four case examples that illustrate the work of the Office of the Ombudsperson when providing advice, coaching, or interventions to facilitate communication or the search for solutions.

These four case examples also include elements corresponding to the three dimensions of the Fairness Triangle reproduced below.

Fairness Triangle



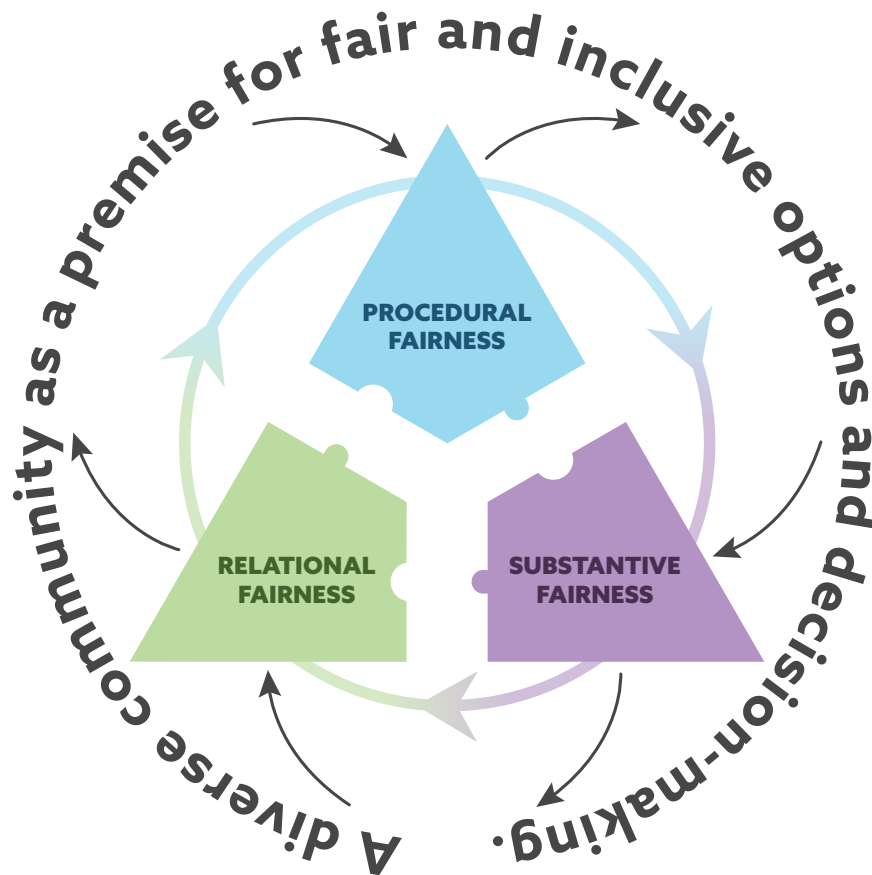
Relational fairness consists, for example, of informing the person, being attentive, and directing them to a resource that can help, if necessary, as seen in the first case example about the residence contract.

Procedural fairness includes elements illustrated in the second case example, such as communicating expectations (for example in a course syllabus) and providing a reasonable opportunity to present information (for example during a complaint process at the department or faculty level).

Substantive fairness often results from a good application of the other two dimensions, which then leads to decisions that reasonably consider all relevant information and particular circumstances. This can be seen, for example, in the final decision made regarding the residence contract. Conversely, the absence of these elements can lead to a decision that is overturned on appeal, as in the case of the complaint about the course.

Finally, as seen in the other two case examples, it is important to remember that the University is a space that includes people from diverse traditions and cultures, from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and with visible and invisible identities representing a wide range of life experiences.

To achieve the University's **equity and inclusion goals**, it is important not only to understand the dynamics among the three dimensions of the Fairness Triangle, but also to seek input from members of the University community and regularly review what and how to communicate, how to structure regulations and procedures, and what criteria to use in decision-making. This interaction about continuous improvement contributes to the development of a fairer and more inclusive environment, which helps build trust between the institution and its members.



Cancellation of a residence agreement (intervention and advice)

Housing Services referred an undergraduate student to our office after numerous unsuccessful attempts at communication. The student believed she had demonstrated sufficient grounds to obtain a cancellation of her residence contract for medical reasons, and she expressed her frustration that it had not been granted. However, Housing Services explained to us that they had repeatedly communicated the process to follow and the documentation to provide, without success.

After speaking with the student and reviewing her communications with the service, we were able to confirm that there had been a lot of communication efforts on both sides. However, there was also a misunderstanding regarding the cancellation criteria related to illness. The student had not submitted the necessary documentation, even though she had provided a medical note and explained her situation.

Housing Services reviewed the file at our request, after clarifying information was submitted. Since the required medical treatment included a recommendation not to live in a communal environment, a contract cancellation was granted retroactively, while respecting the 30-day notice clause provided in the contract.

Complaint and appeal regarding the quality of a course (advice and coaching)

A graduate student had enrolled in a directed studies course. Following a failing grade, the student appealed within the department and the faculty. The department addressed some syllabus-related concerns and conducted a review of the grade (which did not change the result).

The faculty refused to consider the student's other arguments, as it concluded that the department had made no error in the grade review process.

The Ombuds Office provided advice to the student, before an appeal to the Senate Appeals Committee (SAC), about how to present the points he had attempted to raise during his appeals to the department and faculty. The SAC granted the student a retroactive withdrawal from the course. It based its decision "on the matters raised regarding multiple syllabus modifications and feedback timelines".

Access to practicum opportunities in French (intervention and recommendations)

Three international graduate students from the same program shared with us their difficulties in finding a practicum in French in the Ottawa region. The practicum is compulsory in the program, and these students, admitted to the program in French, were at a disadvantage because available positions, both on campus and in the Ottawa region, often required sufficient knowledge of English to be able to function in that language with clients or supervisors.

We provided guidance to students on various issues and stayed in touch with them until they confirmed that they had successfully secured a practicum. We also gave feedback to the program coordinators on the stress experienced by these students, along with recommendations for clearer and more proactive communication regarding the realities of the process to secure a practicum.

For example, it is important for students to know in advance that they may need to extend their search to more French-speaking regions, for example in Quebec, and that they manage their budget and housing arrangements accordingly.

We also asked the program to consider how to improve the availability of French-language practicum opportunities for students in the French program (who are recruited domestically and internationally).

Making a change of employee benefits (intervention - facilitated communication)

An employee wanted to change her insurance coverage options after the birth of her child and told us that she had not received the response she needed in time to make the change according to the available process.

With her consent, we contacted Human Resources and explained the situation, as well as the questions that needed clarification. Human Resources then offered to get in touch directly with the employee and with the insurance company to provide a solution suited to the situation.

Feedback from members of the University Community

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

The office was objective and impartial. I was impressed by the professionalism, knowledge of university policies, and empathy demonstrated.

I really appreciate the resources and guidance you have offered. Your support has been invaluable as I navigated this situation.

I am happy to share that the appeal was approved. I would like to thank you so much for your support, I highly doubt this would have been possible without you.

I want to thank you for the help you provided to me, and the insight into how I might advocate for myself in the future. I was able to reach out to managers and feel that this issue has been resolved. Thank you for your generous time and help. I will be in contact in the future if I face further issues.

III. ISSUES ADDRESSED IN 2024-2025

1. General comments and update

This year, we noticed an increase in the complexity of a greater number of cases we worked on, either because the situation involved multiple issues, or because the main issue affected the person's ability to continue in a program or at the University.

This resulted in an increase in the time spent providing advice and coaching to people who were looking to solve a problem or who were preparing an appeal or a special exemption request. Some of the departments and faculties we communicated with told us that they had noticed a similar trend of having to handle more complex cases.

Handling course-related complaints

We want to draw the attention of academic leaders handling course-related complaints because these situations sometimes involve multiple issues.

When a student raises a concern about their academic results, they are usually directed to Regulation A-9 on grade reviews and appeals as this is generally the process to follow. But we encountered some situations in which a complaint concerned both the grade and the quality of the course, or the grade and the relationship with the professor, and where this second aspect of the situation had not been addressed. (See, for example, the case summarized on page 13.)

A well-founded complaint regarding the quality of a course or learning experience may not have an immediate solution that can benefit the student (or group) who raises it. However, it is important

not to reduce such a complaint to a grade review process (which, in such a situation, is also unlikely to provide a solution).

The issue can directly affect the outcomes in a course or program. If so, it is important to address the elements of the complaint, whether through a grade review if possible, through a formal process where relevant, or through a review of the student input and steps to prevent a recurrence of the problem or mitigate of its consequences on students.

Themes raised by employees

We do not receive many requests from employees, and their questions generally concern workplace relationships or an administrative issue. But this year, several employees discussed their attempts at accessing specific training or educational activities at the University or professional workshops or conferences in their field, and the difficulties they had encountered in this context.

For example, an employee was told that there was no funding within their faculty to participate in a professional activity, whereas someone with the same role in another department of the University and with less seniority had been granted permission.

Another person told us that it was no longer possible to obtain an adjustment to working hours in their unit in relation to pursuing an academic program. And a third person, who had received permission to participate in a training activity, later had to give it up after a staffing change in their sector.

As we all know, the pandemic had disrupted practices and awakened expectations regarding online work or flexible schedules, for example.

And at this time, the University is in a phase of transformation with goals that include both optimizing service delivery and supporting its staff in their career development objectives.

It can be complex to organize departmental priorities while managing competing requests to participate in professional development activities. And we do not know if the situations reported to us are representative of the broader experience of employees on this matter.

We mention this topic because it has come up several times this year, and because good talent management contributes to employee satisfaction and retention. It is important to consider what mechanisms and criteria to adopt across the University to facilitate equitable access to training and career development tools.

University's response

Human Resources (HR) is currently reviewing the regulatory framework for professional development to clarify it and better communicate it to the university community. This review includes the career development fund, refresher leave, and flexible work arrangements. A learning management system will enable tracking and the formalization of activities related to the regulatory framework.

At the HR Forum, Human Resources introduced the first talent management framework. This framework will ensure the integration of management practices, among others, for learning, performance management, and skills development. We also launched the revised

performance management program, which promotes sound people management, the importance of dialogue, goal setting, and discussions on professional development. Performance management is a lever for engagement, development, and recognition among employees. Following the establishment of objectives, a report will provide us with information on development goals to better understand staff needs and determine the necessary investments. The university continues its efforts in professional development through its leadership development program, learning pathways for administrative services, and training in service excellence. (Translation)

Registration dates (update)

We had discussed with the University the process by which registration dates for an upcoming term are determined (according to the number of course credits earned by a student).

For students with an accommodation involving a reduced course load, it takes longer to reach certain levels. This does not generally cause a problem, but since registration for the fall and winter terms occurs in the spring, a gap may occur, in some cases and at certain stages of a program, in accessing certain required courses (third-year courses, for example).

The Registrar has since established, together with the faculties and the Academic Accommodations Service, a process to make adjustments, where necessary, on a case-by-case basis.

2. Graduate studies: academic guidance, supervision, and intellectual property

In the previous annual report, the ombudsperson noted the publication on the University's website in October 2024 of the *Guide to Best Practices, Roles and Responsibilities – Graduate Supervision* (the Guide) and the accompanying *Graduate Supervision Form* (the Form).

For a better implementation of the principles outlined in the *Guide*, we had emphasized the importance of communicating to students and faculty members, in a proactive and systematic way:

- concrete tools and approaches to constructively address problems in the supervisory relationship and promote the informal and fair resolution of disagreements or conflicts
- information on the standards regarding intellectual property applicable to their discipline, on questions to raise at the beginning of a relationship or project to establish mutual expectations, and on the documents or people to consult, if necessary, within the academic unit and the faculty.

Academic guidance

During 2024–2025, graduate students no longer had access to the Student Rights Centre, a service of the undergraduate student association whose staff helps students prepare and present appeals. Graduate students are now directed to their graduate student association (GSAÉD).

As a result, our office was more frequently contacted by graduate students who were appealing a program withdrawal, particularly among members of the international student population, and who were seeking advice on this matter.

In this context, we have noticed gaps in understanding regarding Regulation C-4 (academic standing for graduate studies) and the options and processes related to exceptional personal circumstances or illness.

At the graduate level, unless otherwise specified in the regulations in certain programs, the minimum passing grade is C+, and two failures in the program (whether in courses, the thesis, the comprehensive exam, or the thesis project) or two unsatisfactory progress reports lead to program withdrawal. This information is available but not necessarily well understood by students.

- For example, a student who fails the first attempt at the comprehensive exam is generally allowed a second attempt. But if the student has already received a grade of C in a course, the first attempt at the comprehensive exam will be considered a second failure in the program, leading to automatic withdrawal.

Among the students who consulted us, and particularly among international students, several had experienced exceptional personal situations or illness during their first year at the University, but had not utilized options such as deferred exam requests, reduced course loads, etc.

If they documented their exceptional situation during an appeal of a program withdrawal to the faculty or the Senate Appeals Committee, it was often not enough to change the decision (either because they had not used available options or because they had several failures in a session, for example).

It is important to remember that international students may come from a very different culture or academic system (where, for example, mental health is not discussed, or where students are allowed to retake any failure in a final exam, etc.).

In addition, they are subject to enrollment requirements related to maintaining their study permit, and they may face financial concerns, and real or perceived pressures regarding the need to complete what they have started.

I also note that several had been admitted to short, course-based master's programs, and therefore sometimes took three or four graduate courses in one term.

Recommendations

Review how communication is conducted for newly admitted graduate students to ensure that they not only receive but also fully understand the University's regulations during their first semester (which may not be in September), and that they know how their program advisors and administrators can guide them in exploring their options when they encounter exceptional situations.

This includes communicating to students the implications of Regulation C-4 and the options and resources for proactively dealing with exceptional situations. It also means raising awareness among faculty members about the need to direct students to regulations and resources in a timely manner.

Supervisory relationship

Among the other cases of program withdrawal in 2024–2025, there were also files in which the parties alleged, on the one hand, a lack of progress in the research project and, on the other

hand, problems in the supervisory relationship. It is very difficult to distinguish between these two types of allegations at the time of a program withdrawal appeal.

During the year, we noticed that the students who consulted us were not aware of the *Guide* on graduate supervision or the *Form* published in October 2024. This is partly explained by the newness of these tools. We offered them advice and drew their attention to certain sections of the *Guide* or the *Form* where they could find a basis for having a conversation with their thesis supervisor or with program administrators or advisors about the issues they were trying to address.

Remarks and recommendations

We want to stress the importance of proactively communicating to students and faculty the existence of the graduate supervision *Guide* and *Form*, and the expectation that the two tools must be used to establish and maintain constructive foundations in the supervisory relationship.

We also recommend that the *Form* be completed not only in the first year but also reviewed each year as progress is made through the various stages of the program. This allows students and supervisors to update their mutual expectations regarding the submission of work and feedback during research activities, and to address other emerging topics such as intellectual property issues.

Intellectual property (update)

As noted above, in the previous report, we highlighted the need to better communicate to students the standards related to intellectual property in their discipline, as well as the resources to guide them in their discussions with their thesis supervisor on this topic.

The University's website includes information about the principles governing commercialization and patents. That said, the questions we receive more often concern the clarification of intellectual property in the context of ongoing or upcoming publications, and in particular the "authorship" of ideas or methods contributed during a collaboration within a research team or more generally during a supervisory relationship. In these contexts, it is common for intellectual property to be shared.

This year, we also received questions from two students regarding documents they were asked to sign without understanding their meaning. In one of these situations, the form to be signed and the funding offer also referenced documents that were no longer current.

They were told that the document to sign was a mere formality to participate in the work of a research laboratory, but the document specifically included the statements "I agree to assign ownership of all Intellectual Property I create, develop or produce (...) to (...)" and "I (...) permanently waive my moral rights (...) in respect to such Intellectual Property".

Following the consultation, one of these students drafted another document in agreement with the principal investigator, and the other was referred to their vice-dean for clarifications.

It is important to note that students "retain the copyright" of their thesis (Regulation C-7.13.1) and must also indicate in the thesis, which is developed under the supervision of the supervisor, any contribution by a third party (Regulation C-7.5.4).

Follow-up and recommendations

We discussed these situations with Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. We stressed the opacity of the language used in the documents we had observed, as well as the need to ensure that students have access to relevant information to understand any document they are asked to sign.

It was clarified that the offers for soft-funded research bursaries will soon be made in a more uniform way through WorkDay, which will also eliminate the use of outdated forms.

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies also encourage annual review of the supervision form (the *Form*), on which section 14 addresses the importance of discussing the issue of intellectual property. But we emphasized that students need access to information and resources to be able to participate knowledgeably in any discussion about intellectual property with their thesis supervisor.

We therefore recommend accompanying the supervision *Guide* and the *Form* with a tool for clarifying concepts related to intellectual property and copyright in relation to a thesis, not just about commercialization and patents, but in a broader context and about current or future publications.

Each discipline has its own standards, and each situation will, of course, have its particularities. The aim would then be to clarify general principles and questions to be considered by both students and faculty members, to better guide their interactions on this matter. It would also be necessary to include the office to be consulted by students in each discipline for any clarification.

Continued



University's response

"The Office of the Vice-Provost for Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies launched a new module this year on Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR). Graduate students newly admitted in September 2025 and afterwards will be required to complete this module as well as the module on academic integrity (corresponding to Regulation A-4 on academic integrity and academic misconduct). The RCR module focuses on publication practices and authorship, the supervisory relationship, the analysis, collection, and preservation of data and information, intellectual property (guidelines on copyrights, patent rights), as well as the resolution of conflicts of interest and commitment." (Translation)

3. Absences at examinations: fees charged and academic support

Regulation A-8.6 concerning the justification of absences due to illness or exceptional personal circumstances has undergone changes in recent years.

In 2024–2025, the process was the following:

- An absence from a midterm or final exam had to be reported using the online absence declaration form. It was not necessary to provide supporting documentation for the first exam absence in a course; documentation was required for any additional exam absence in a course.
- For absences from other assessments or for delays in submitting assignments, students were required to contact the course instructor and follow the procedures outlined in the course outline.

In April 2024, the Board of Governors had approved a \$60 fee for submitting a declaration for an absence from a midterm or final exam.

- I note that student associations had raised concerns that students facing financial difficulties might not be able to pay the fee, and that they would then attend exams even if they are sick or in exceptional personal circumstances.
- It is also important to understand that the fee is charged for each declaration, and that a declaration concerning a midterm exam does not necessarily result in a deferred exam. In some programs or faculties, the percentage of the missed exam is added to the final exam percentage, which can then be worth significantly more than the normally allowed maximum of 60%.
- Faculties however indicate that a certain number of initial requests (accepted without the need for justification) did not meet the criteria for exceptions (illness or exceptional personal circumstances), and that administrators and professors are facing a significant volume of requests (which has increased since the introduction of the fee in 2024–2025)

During 2024–2025, we observed the following situations:

- Some students who are absent for medical reasons related to certain disabilities (documented fluctuating conditions) are exempt from the fee. However, this information is not communicated to students, and the process is managed retroactively by the Academic Accommodations Service. (The fee is charged; it is later removed after a verification period that follows the examination period.)
- This process lacks transparency, and some students who could have benefited from the exception related to their disability told

us that they had attended exams despite their medical condition, for fear of having to pay the fee, thus putting their academic performance at risk.

- Some students facing financial challenges also told us that they had attended midterm or final exams despite being ill or experiencing exceptional personal circumstances to avoid a fee they could not afford.
 - This can result in lower grades on these exams and it may lead to probation, loss of scholarship, or program withdrawal.
- Some told us that they had accumulated multiple fees because a declaration must be submitted (and is charged) for each absence from a midterm or final exam in a course. The same illness or hospitalization during an exam period can therefore affect several courses and lead to multiple declarations and fees.
 - Several said they had been charged \$300 or more either within a session or during the 2024–2025 academic year.
- Students who asked Infoservice for exemptions to this fee were directed to their faculty, but several showed us responses from their faculty stating that it is a mandatory University fee with no exceptions¹.
 - This lack of information on the possibility of exceptions—whether according to the criteria for accommodating a documented fluctuating disability, or for another medical cause or an exceptional personal situation to be considered on a case-by-case basis—has contributed to the problems described above.

- In a more extreme case, a student experiencing illness and exceptional personal circumstances had accumulated \$600 in declaration fees in a single semester for absences from midterm and final exams. The faculty had not suggested other options than deferred final exams (some of which had a high weighting leading to failures) and had not waived the fees. (The situation was resolved after the Registrar waived the fees and the faculty granted a retroactive withdrawal for certain courses.)

Follow-up activities and comments

We raised these points during discussions with the Registrar and the Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs. During the spring-summer session, the Registrar's Office and the faculties also had follow-up discussions on this matter.

It is important to note that the faculties had the necessary authority to approve exceptions other than those handled retroactively by the Academic Accommodations Service, but there was no structure in place within the faculties or central administration to do so.

In previous annual reports, the ombudsperson had stressed the important role that faculties play in managing accommodations related to situations of fluctuating or emerging disabilities. (See the reports for 2022–2023 and 2023–2024.)

To avoid creating barriers unrelated to essential requirements in courses, the ombudsperson had also emphasized the importance of using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts, not only in designing a course but also in deciding how to evaluate student performance.

¹ On this point, see the *Update from the University* on page 22.

As pointed out previously, faculties have an academic support role to play in managing academic accommodations and exceptions, for example about:

- situations of fluctuating mental health (during which the student may need more support to assess and utilize possible academic options)
- other emerging conditions due, for example, to an accident or a new diagnosis during the term (when it is too late to set up an accommodation plan with the Academic Accommodations Service in time for exam periods)
- exceptional personal circumstances (such as those experienced by the student who had accumulated \$600 in fees in one session)

On this last point, we were told that members of the committee who had worked on the introduction of the \$60 fee had not necessarily intended levying multiple fees for the same period of illness affecting several examinations.

I note that the implementation of the fee (which requires a declaration for each absence from a midterm or final exam in each course and generates a fee for each declaration) is not structured in a way that prevents multiple charges for the same reason affecting several courses, and that this has created obstacles for some students.

While it is true that some students submitted absence declarations outside the criteria and did not necessarily face financial challenges in doing so, it remains that others have been penalized in their academic performance or financial situation due to the current fee structure.

Finally, we have seen or heard several times the reference to a \$60 fee "for a deferral." Appendix 5 submitted in April 2025 to the Board of Governors regarding absence declarations, for example, mentions a "\$60 fee for absence declaration requests submitted in order to defer an assessment" and states that the regulation "allows students to pay the \$60 fee **and defer their exam** without providing (...)". The document submitted to the Senate indicated that a fee of \$60 had been introduced in 2024 "**for deferred midterm and final exams.**" (Note: translations of the originals with emphasis added.)

It is therefore also important to remember that the fee is currently charged even if the response to the declaration does not result in a deferred examination (either because the request is rejected, or because the weighting percentage of the midterm exam is added to that of the final exam).

Update from the University

In April 2025, the Board of Governors maintained the fee of \$60 for 2025–2026.

The fee was introduced to help reduce the number of non eligible absence declarations and to help compensate for the processing of requests. Following the spring-summer discussions, the Registrar and the faculties have decided to introduce two changes to their processes:

- Faculties will direct students who request a fee exception to the Registrar's Office, which will determine the cases eligible for an exemption (other than exceptions managed by the Academic Accommodations Service).
- The Registrar's Office will produce statistical reports after midterm and final exams to help identify exceptional situations that may lead to other fee exceptions.

Regulation A-8.6 has also been amended to clarify the process of reporting absences. In particular:

- It is still possible not to submit a medical certificate for **a short-term illness** in the case of **a first absence** at an examination (midterm or final) in a course (unless the absence occurs during an exam that has already started).
- An absence caused by a longer-term illness or an exceptional personal situation must be accompanied by supporting documentation from the first declaration.

Finally, the annual report on the Student Wellness sector mentions the activities undertaken in 2024–2025 to promote a broader adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). It also announces the goal of establishing a comprehensive framework for integrating UDL across the University in the future, with additional pilot projects planned for 2025–2026.

Recommendations

We note the improvement that will result from the systematization of a process to direct students from the faculties to the Registrar's Office, and to consider exceptions on a case-by-case basis to the declaration of absence fee.

But it is important to remember that declarations of absences are made due to illness or in exceptional personal circumstances and that a young person facing such situations, especially for the first time or in the context of mental health difficulties, may feel overwhelmed and encounter obstacles in evaluating and using the available options and resources.

Furthermore, there are obstacles to using options other than deferral requests, such as dropping one or more courses, for example, as this can affect student

funding. International students may also fear not being compliant with their study permit conditions.

Finally, given that the message generally circulated in 2024–2025 was that there is no exception to this fee, one may wonder whether students who encounter exceptional situations will come forward in 2025–2026 to their faculty or to Infoservice, and thus whether the process to direct them to the Registrar will function effectively and fairly.

Without having conducted a comprehensive comparison of how other Canadian universities handle requests for exam absences, we gathered general information showing that a significant number of institutions similar to the University of Ottawa do not charge fees for absence declarations or deferred exams, and that among those that have introduced a fee, it would generally be charged if a deferred exam is granted, with a maximum charge of about \$140 or \$150 per term.

- If the \$60 fee is maintained, the system requires more transparency, greater nuance in its structuring and implementation, and increased attention to situations that require individualized support or exceptions.
- Whether or not the fee is maintained, faculties have an important role to play in developing inclusive approaches and options.

Transparency

1. Inform students about the possibility of fee exemptions in certain cases; indicate to them whom to contact and how for situations not handled through the Academic Accommodations Service.

Continued



Academic support

2. Consider the tools available to faculties to more proactively identify students who may need guidance on their options for managing absences in relation to the criteria of regulation A-8.6.
3. Using an approach based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), pay attention not only to course design but also to the mechanisms for assessing student performance to avoid barriers unrelated to essential requirements².

Reconsideration, structure, and exceptions

4. Examine the details of billing carried out in 2024–2025 to determine trends and the cases for which it might be necessary to conduct retroactive follow-up and grant an exemption.

5. Carry out a detailed analysis of the data from 2024–2025 and 2025–2026, the impact of billing on students, granted exceptions, and possibilities for restructuring the fee before the April 2026 Board of Governors meeting to assess whether the \$60 fee should be maintained or eliminated.
6. If the fee is maintained, compare practices from other institutions and reconsider the fee's structure (should the billing be linked to the declaration of absence from an exam or to the writing of a deferred exam, for example).
7. Implement a maximum cost per session or another system to avoid multiple charges arising from the same situation of illness or exceptional personal circumstances affecting several courses.

² 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 (...)”

APPENDIX A: OTHER STATISTICS

TABLE 8: Official language used

Official language used	French	English
All persons who consulted us	19.6%	80.4%
Students who consulted us	17.7%	82.3%
Students enrolled at the University (Fall 2024) ¹	32.0%	68.0%

TABLE 9: Students – Faculty distribution

Faculty	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2024) ¹
Arts	6.0%	10.8%
Law	2.8%	4.7%
Education	8.8%	6.0%
Engineering	11.4%	14.2%
Management (Telfer)	4.8%	11.2%
Medicine	2.3%	6.1%
Sciences	10.2%	11.7%
Health Sciences	9.4%	12.1%
Social Sciences	18.2%	23.1%
Unknown	26.1%	0.1%

¹ <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/administration-services/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 2024) ²
Undergraduate	72.5%	83.5%
Graduate	23.7%	16.5%
Unknown or other	3.8%	0.0%

TABLE 11: Feedback on our services

Question	Yes	No
Was it easy to find the Office of the Ombudsperson?	12	3
Did you receive a quick reply to your email, telephone message or letter?	13	2
Was the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson explained to you clearly?	13	2
If you asked that your name not be released, was your concern handled in a confidential manner by the Office of the Ombudsperson?	10	N/A
Did the ombudsperson demonstrate impartiality (objectivity) in reviewing your concerns?	11	4
Did the ombudsperson handle your concern fairly?	12	3
Were you treated with respect?	13	2
Would you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson again?	12	3

TABLE 12: Feedback (continued)

Why did you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson?	Total
To acquire information	1
To get advice	8
To facilitate communication with others	5
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	9

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



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Building a culture of fairness

