



Office of the  
**Ombudsperson**

Building a culture of fairness

# ELEVENTH ANNUAL REPORT

From June 1, 2020 to May 31, 2021

INDEPENDENCE • CONFIDENTIALITY • IMPARTIALITY



# TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

This annual report covers the period from June 1, 2020, to May 31, 2021, a time when we have been dealing with the pandemic, like everyone else at the University, across the country and around the world. This has, of course, led to changes in the questions we have received and how the Office of the Ombudsperson delivers its services.

Throughout the year, we have observed the efforts and patience of members of the University community to function as best possible in the turmoil created by the pandemic. Remote work and study, virtual meetings and the increased use of technology have created feelings of isolation, frustration and fatigue. But they have also fostered creativity, great resilience and new connections. For some people, the online environment has in fact meant easier access.

The year 2020-2021 presented another challenge for the ombudsperson as our two-person office was cut in half for just over a third of the period covered by this report. I would like to thank Evelyne Poisson, assistant ombudsperson, for her exemplary work and warm approach over the past three years. At the time of writing this report, I am also very pleased to welcome Rebecca Crabbe as the new assistant ombudsperson to the Office of the Ombudsperson.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Advisory Committee of the Ombudsperson and the support of the student associations and the University over the three years since I began my mandate as ombudsperson. Their efforts led in 2021 to the stabilizing of the budget of the Office of the Ombudsperson to ensure its continued staffing with two full-time positions. We are very grateful to them.



**Finally, in this period of constant change, I greatly appreciated the generosity of those who took the time to share with us their problems and their experiences at the University. And I thank all those who have helped us resolve problems for their ready availability. Together we are helping to build a culture of fairness and equity.**

**— Martine Conway**

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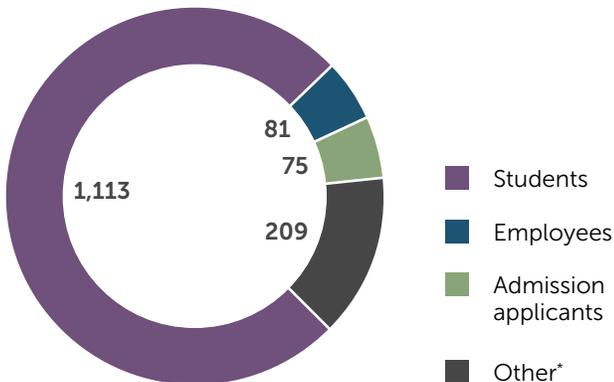
# I. 2018-2021: A LOOK AT THE PAST THREE YEARS

Having started my mandate as ombudsperson three years ago in the spring of 2018, I thought it would be interesting to briefly review these past three years. Looking at our data from June 1, 2018, to May 31, 2021 (see Table 1, page 7), I realized that we answered questions or complaints from **2,000** people!

Among them, there were a number of admission applicants who mostly asked for general information before applying (522), while other applicants (75) actually contacted us about a problem. [See comments about this category of persons on page 7.] After subtracting the former, we can say that, over the last three years, we have responded to enquiries or complaints from 1,478 people who required information-referrals, advice-coaching, or an intervention by our office in relation to a problem or complaint.

## Type of persons

Figure 1: Numbers by type of persons (1,478)



\* (e.g. parents, members of the public, etc.)

Figure 2: Type of students (1,113)

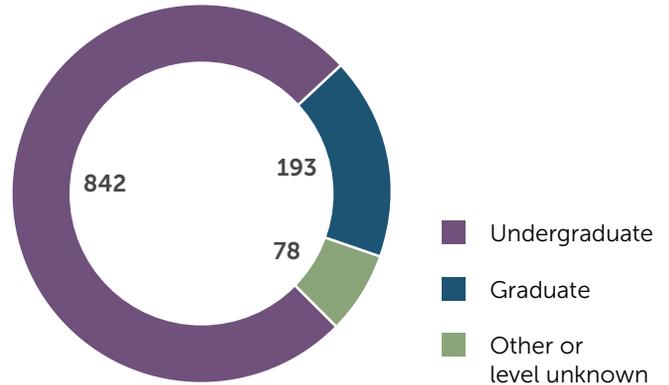
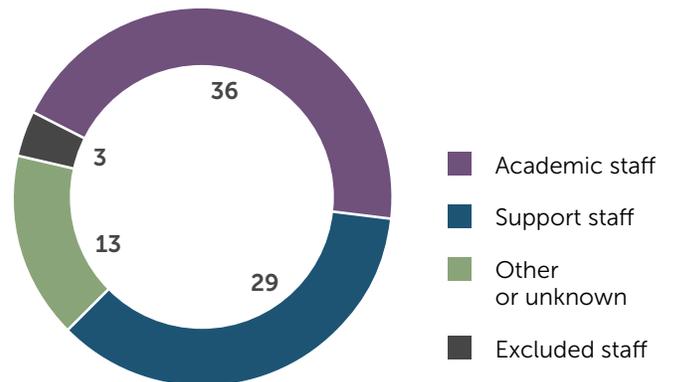


Figure 3: Type of employees (81)



## Top three issues

### Undergraduate students

	Percent
Academic issues	48.0%
Fees and funding	11.9%
Human rights	7.1%

### Undergraduates: academic issues

	Percent
Evaluation	38.4%
Concession requests	13.1%
Academic fraud	10.1%

### Graduate students

	Percent
Fees and funding	24.4%
Supervision	13.0%
Progress and program withdrawal	10.9%

### Employees

	Percent
Workplace	52%
Human rights or harassment	21%
Interpersonal conflict	6%

## Services

Figure 4: Undergraduate students

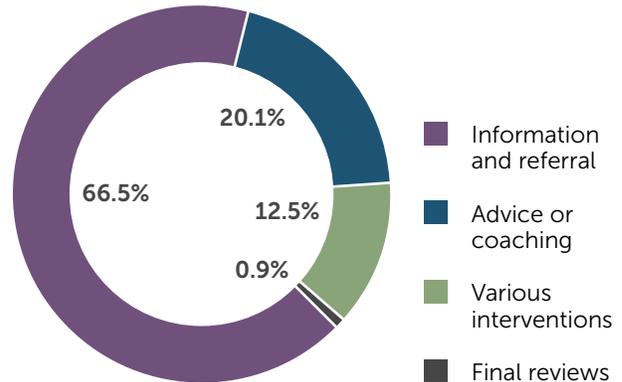


Figure 5: Graduate students

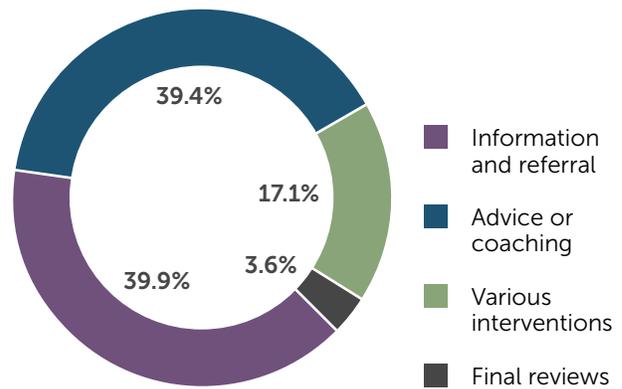
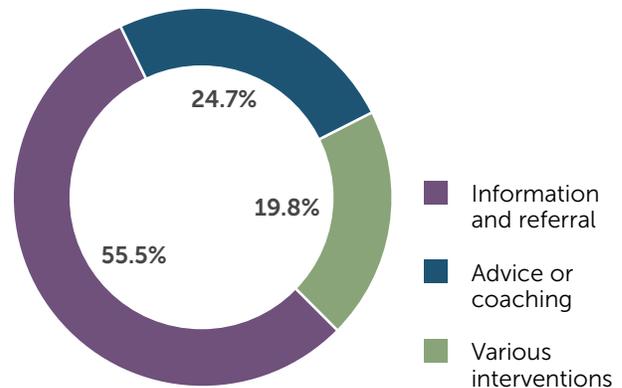
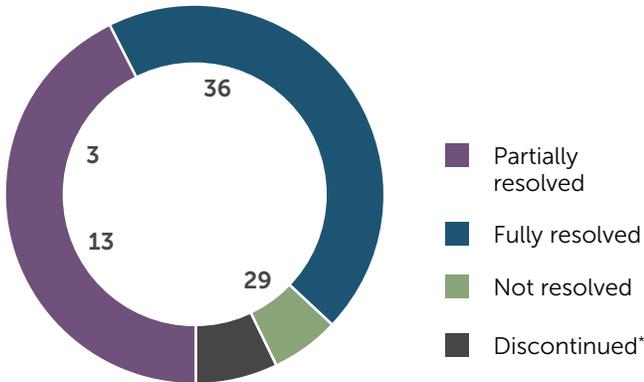


Figure 6: Employees



## Outcomes of interventions and final reviews

Figure 7: Various interventions (191)



\*Withdrawn or abandoned by the complainant.

### Final reviews (16)

	Total
Recommendations made and accepted	6
Complaints without grounds	10

## Key systemic recommendations

### (In progress)

- **Mental health and well-being:** Create a clear and centralized FAQ to inform students about their academic options in case of illness or personal difficulties
- **Supervision (graduate studies):** Clarify the responsibilities of the parties in a supervisory relationship, including the steps and resources to help students and professors solve problems
- **International students:** Create a roadmap for problem-solving mechanisms and services

### (Implemented by the University)

- **Complaints of sexual violence:** More systematically clarify to all parties their rights and available resources
- **Admissions:** Clarify review and appeal processes
- **Academic accommodations:** Reminder to faculties of the need to consider requests for retroactive accommodations on a case-by-case basis

## II. 2020-2021: OUR SERVICES BY THE NUMBERS

During the period from June 1, 2020, to May 31, 2021, we responded to requests for services from 696 individuals (see **Table 1**), including 389 members of the student body (327 undergraduate students, 54 graduate students, and 8 other students), 21 employees, 171 admission applicants, and 115 other persons. This is an increase from 2019-2020, even though the figures remained stable for the first three types of persons. The increase occurred among members of the public who contacted us in greater numbers.

In general, we received a greater variety of questions from **students and employees** regarding one-off academic and non-academic issues (communication issues, technical issues, rule changes, etc.). This type of situation required finding information or solutions quickly in a context of more or less permanent change. We have also faced more situations where a lack of communication has led to normally avoidable difficulties or strained relationships.

Among **admission applicants** (171 in total), we mainly received requests for information (82%) from international students, which were referred to undergraduate admissions services, financial aid services or academic units (for graduate programs). We received a smaller proportion (18%) of complaints or requests for reviews. They were directed towards an appeal process, or our office became involved to clarify information or resolve the issue.

In the “**Other**” category (115 in total), we receive requests for services from other members of the University community such as researchers or medical residents, as well as from parents, job seekers and members of the public. This year, we received more comments and complaints from members of the public not directly connected with the University. These individuals (67) responded to high-profile situations such as discussions about anti-racism, freedom of expression and academic freedom. They also denounced behaviours or comments exchanged on social media outside the University setting.

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

Year	Students	Employees	Admission applicants	Other	Total
2020-2021	389	21	171	115	696
2019-2020	389	24	185	56	654
2018-2019	335	36	241	38	650
2017-2018	318	20	146	91	575
2016-2017	402	26	150	99	677
2015-2016	316	28	91	105	540

**Table 2** presents the issues raised by those who consulted us. See tables 3 and 4 for details of academic and human rights issues.

**Students** raised mainly academic (or academic support) issues and financial issues (fees, loans, grants). Graduate students also discussed problems relating to the supervisory relationship. Student issues listed in the last row of Table 2 in the “Other” category (71 in total) represent 18% of the questions raised by students at all levels. They include issues related to administrative processes, communication,

access to documents or services, technological difficulties, and issues outside the University’s sphere (for example, about immigration or tenancy agreements).

**Employees** (21 in total, including support and teaching staff) consulted us primarily on issues related to their workplace and conflict with colleagues or members of the student body, and less often to resolve administrative or access-to-service issues.

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

Type of problem*	Student	Employees	Other**	Total
Academic issues	197	1	0	198
Admission	16	0	169	185
Student association	10	0	2	12
Relational conflict	0	2	1	3
Human rights	22	0	3	25
Academic support	12	0	0	12
Financial (fees, funding)	49	1	2	52
Harassment	2	1	2	5
Workplace	2	8	0	10
Residence	9	0	0	9
Security	0	0	0	0
Graduate supervision	10	0	1	11
Student’s conduct	1	3	5	9
Professor’s conduct	4	0	8	12
Other	71	5	94	170
<b>Total</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>713</b>

\* A person can have more than one issue.

\*\* Includes admission applicants.

**Table 3** details the academic issues raised by students of all levels. In addition to questions about evaluation processes or about allegations of academic fraud, they include issues related to enrolment (e.g. pre-requisite courses), graduation requirements, progress through a program (e.g. minimum average to meet), access to certain options or courses, etc. In this year of transition to virtual and hybrid modes, we also had more requests for help related to the quality of the academic experience.

The most complex situations are those related to requests for concessions (e.g.: requests for deferred examinations, requests for course withdrawal), especially when they are retroactive or when they involve personal or family situations that are difficult to document, or mental health issues affecting academic performance. People often require specific advice before submitting a complete request, or they need an intervention to facilitate communication or resolve a problem. See also the comments in section V.2, pages 20-21.

**Table 3: Academic issues**

	Under-graduate	Graduate	Level unknown or other*	Total
Registration	15	2	1	18
Evaluation	57	3	2	62
Academic fraud	20	1	0	21
Concession requests	19	0	0	19
Experiential learning	4	1	0	5
Progress and requirements	14	3	0	17
Course or program quality	17	2	0	19
Program withdrawal	5	6	0	11
Miscellaneous	22	2	2	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>198</b>

\* Unregistered, former, and special students

Note: **Graduate supervision issues** are not included in this table. See table 2.

**Table 4** identifies the types of human rights complaints we receive. If internal recourses have not been exhausted, we refer the person to the Human Rights Office for issues related to discrimination or harassment.

We dealt with a number of disability accommodation issues (12) that required, for example, informing about resources and explaining processes (if the person had not yet applied), or helping to resolve communication or accommodation issues. Several of these situations involved problems during an examination (additional time not implemented by the professor, interruptions beyond the student’s

control). Depending on their severity, these situations were sometimes resolved through a deferred exam or grade revision.

We also received questions related to race discrimination (9). Half of these complaints involved situations related to the University, including opinions about how to respond to the use of the N-word in the classroom. The other half involved student exchanges on social media. These situations were beyond the scope of the University of Ottawa and the people involved in these exchanges often belonged to different institutions.

**Table 4: Human rights issues**

	Student	Employees	Other	Total
Age	0	0	0	0
Disability	12	0	0	12
Sexual orientation	1	0	0	1
Sex	1	0	2	3
Race	8	0	1	9
Other	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>25</b>

**Table 5** summarizes the services we offer:

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

**Table 5: Services offered by type of person**

Service	Under-graduate	Graduate	Other students*	Employees	Other**	Total
Information and referral	218	22	7	9	269	525
Advice or coaching	64	25	0	7	4	100
Intervention	42	7	1	5	13	68
Final review	3	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>696</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 clarifying information to move a file forward, discussing criteria or reasons for a decision, seeking a solution, drawing the attention of a service or Faculty to an issue that was not communicated or understood, or facilitating communication to defuse a conflict.

It should also be noted that the solution sought by the individual is not necessarily the one required. As a result, situations that “partly resolved” may reflect several scenarios: clarification of the criteria or steps to be followed, clarification of the reasons for a decision, resolution of a part of the situation, or a solution different from the one initially sought.

**Table 6: Outcomes of interventions**

	<b>Total</b>
Fully resolved	36
Partly resolved	30
Not resolved	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>

**Table 7** shows the outcomes of final reviews. We received two complaints that we closed without making recommendations. One involved an allegation of plagiarism that had been appealed to the Senate Appeals Committee. The other was a situation of discrimination that had previously been the subject of an investigation which concluded that discrimination had been a factor.

One final review resulted in recommendations. These were accepted and implemented by the University of Ottawa Student Union (UOSU) in the context of elections to its board of directors. The problems had to do with documentation and communication to candidates in a situation that could lead to disqualification.

**Table 7: Outcomes of final reviews**

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

## III. EXAMPLES OF CASES

### Grade review

A student requested a grade review after a group assignment. The department head refused the request because the group's other members had not joined the review request. This was a mistake. The regulations had just been clarified on this point and it is permitted to request an individual grade review for group work. The ombudsperson contacted the department, and the grade review went forward.

### Problem during an exam

A student followed the professor's written instructions for submitting answers during a Brightspace exam. More specifically, students could modify their answers, as long as the time provided for the exam had not expired. However, the system prevented the student from changing his answer to a particular question, and the professor refused to accept the answer that the student sent him by email before the end of the exam. After a follow-up from the ombudsperson, the vice dean proposed a solution: omit this question from the calculation of this student's grade.

### Concession request – mental health

A student received a failing grade (incomplete) that she believed was unfair. A discussion between the ombudsperson and the department head clarified that the student had submitted some assignments late, missed many classes and had not submitted several essential course assignments. Considering the student's serious health problems, the ombudsperson informed her how to apply for a retroactive withdrawal.

### Dental insurance

A student needed dental care for her daughter. She explained that she had completed the form and paid the fee in early fall to have her daughter covered by her insurance. In the winter, however, the insurance company informed her that the process had not been completed. We contacted Studentcare and the student association to ask them to clarify the situation, and the student and her daughter were able to obtain dental insurance.

### Payment for hours of work

A part-time employee complained that she had not received her pay in the fall semester despite submitting her hours of work. A discussion between the ombudsperson and her supervisor clarified that the employee had been required to submit her requests several times because she had not understood all the instructions. Other issues included the fact that the employee's account would not accept direct deposits by the University, and in-person access to University offices was limited. After the documents were corrected and processed, the ombudsperson contacted the payroll department to make special arrangements for the employee to pick up her cheque in person before the holidays.

### Registration fees

A master's student was expected to attend ten seminars during his program. These seminars are given by students. They are mandatory program activities but do not require registration or registration fees. However, after meeting his other program requirements, the student was missing one seminar and the Faculty registered him for an extra, unplanned full-time session. This situation was resolved when the Faculty agreed to allow the student to attend a final student seminar without having to register (as had been indicated in the emails the student had received during his program).

## Scholarship

A parent was concerned about the effect of the pandemic on his daughter's financial situation after her recent admission to the University, given that the student did not have the grades she needed to qualify for an admission scholarship in September 2020. After a discussion, Financial Aid and Awards Services clarified that if the student achieved good grades at the University, she could receive a merit scholarship as early as January 2021. Statistics also showed that the possibility to opt for a "satisfactory-unsatisfactory" grade in 2020-2021 (which is not included in the grade average calculation) resulted in more students receiving this scholarship.

## Communication issues

An admission applicant had applied for a master's program. He sent his documents by registered mail during the time when the University was mainly operating remotely. Communication problems occurred when the applicant followed up to confirm receipt of his documents. He was given what seemed like contradictory answers because the documents were received at the University's main postal service, but not at the department. This created considerable confusion, and the student was concerned that the submission deadline might pass and that his application would be cancelled. After the ombudsperson contacted postal services and the Faculty, the confusion was cleared up and communication resumed. The applicant has accepted an offer of admission.

## Supervision (PhD)

A doctoral student was going through a difficult transition during the temporary absence of his new thesis supervisor and amid concerns about the approaching date of his comprehensive examination. The student spoke with the ombudsperson several times to obtain advice

and coaching on how to contact the various parties concerned (thesis supervisor, department, committee members). After the start of the next academic session, the student confirmed to the ombudsperson that communication about the comprehensive exam was advancing and his research was going well.

## Concession request – accommodation

A student was experiencing the exacerbation of a disability during the pandemic. The student also experienced problems with his email account due to the shift to Outlook. This caused a delay in accessing a course component. The professor offered only a few more days to complete the work. Details about the email situation were complicated to explain and the student needed help in finding a more complete solution. The ombudsperson spoke with the vice dean who granted the student a deferred assessment.

"Thank you for your help, patience and compassion assisting me early this year. Nothing I could say would approximate the value of the efforts you made on my behalf."

**(student)**

"Thank you. It has been so helpful and so reassuring to speak with someone who could be a sounding board and bring a fresh perspective."

**(faculty member)**

## IV. ISSUES OBSERVED IN 2020-2021

### 1. Building a culture of fairness in a changing environment

“We are very conscious of the need to prepare our students, whatever their field of study. We will favour inclusive, innovative, and nimble teaching, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, nourished by best practices in pedagogy.”<sup>1</sup>

“We wish to remain an employer of choice and are highly attuned to the fact that our success is built on the contributions of our talented and dedicated staff, both academic or non-academic.”<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic has accelerated the need for change, and the University, like all sectors of our society, faces challenges in fostering healthy and inclusive learning and work environments. However, with the publication in June 2019 of the *Transformation 2030* strategic plan, the University was already engaging in major innovation and modernization projects. I will highlight several of them as context for my remarks in this section.

According to the summer 2021 progress report, improvements have included the release in January 2020 of the *Mental Health and Wellness*

*Action Plan* and the appointment of a Special Advisor to design and implement a long-term strategy, the release in June 2020 of the *Indigenous Action Plan*, the appointment in December 2020 of a Special Advisor on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence, the signing in January 2021 of the *Okanagan Charter* aiming to “embed health into all aspects of campus culture,” and the announcement in January 2021 of five initiatives to combat systemic racial discrimination.

This was followed, in August 2021, by the summary report titled, *Towards a renewed Francophonie*, and, in Fall 2021, by a progress report on anti-racism and by the signature of the *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education*.

These are all ambitious and necessary projects, and it is important to recognize the progress already made and the objectives still to be achieved. Implementation of these changes will continue to depend on the input of all members and sectors of the University community who contribute to the identification and implementation of priorities through their comments and effort.

### 2. Transgender and gender nonconforming students: process improvement

In the context of the efforts mentioned above, I would also like to highlight progress made on certain challenges faced by transgender and gender non-conforming persons. Students had shared with us the experiences they encountered

when the University’s platforms and systems failed to systematically identify them by their preferred name. These students were frequently misgendered during certain University-related or classroom activities.

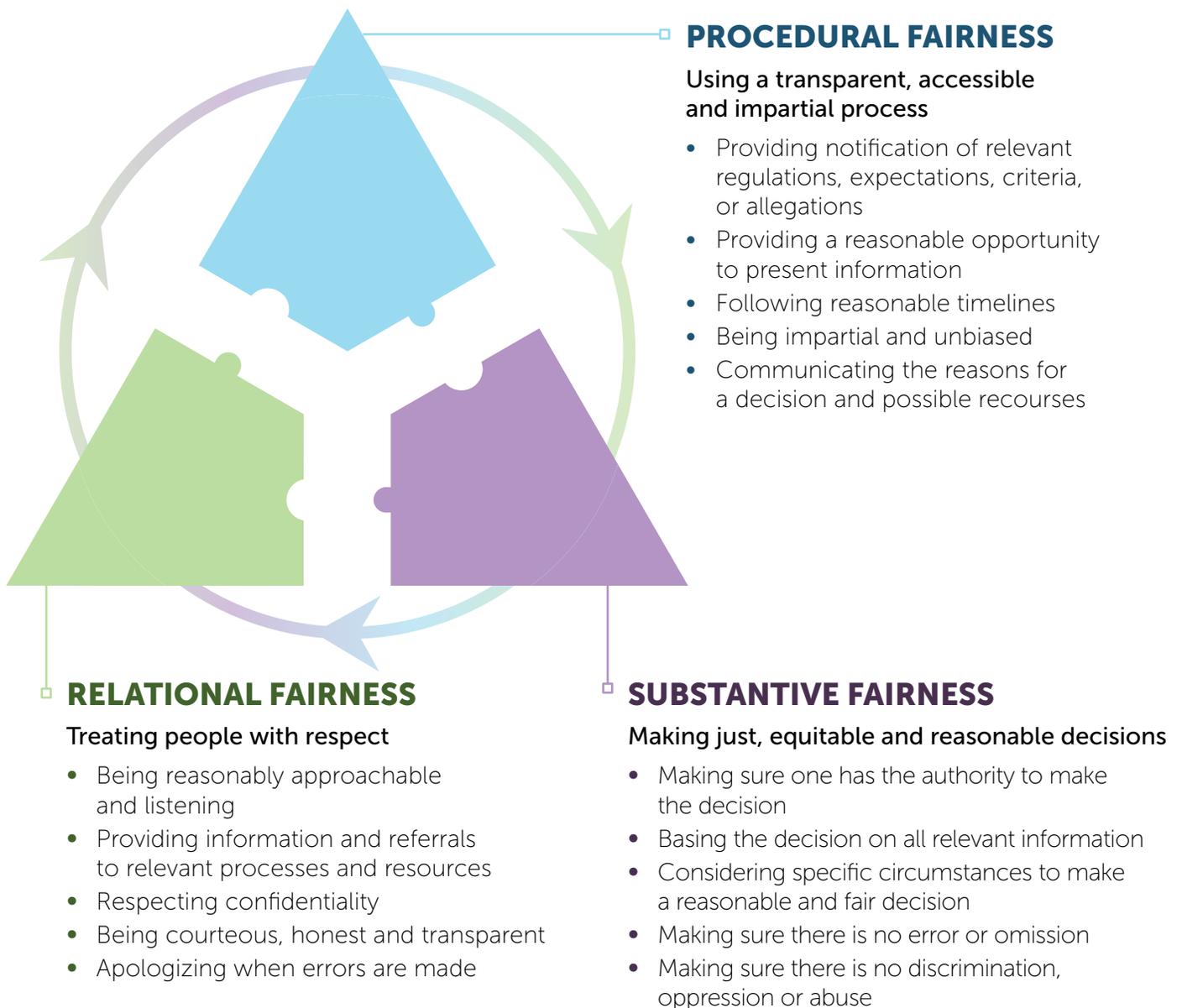
<sup>1</sup> <https://transformation2030.uottawa.ca/en/core-aspirations>

The ombudsperson asked the Human Rights Office and the Registrar’s Office for an update. They referred to ongoing developments in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) planning at the University of Ottawa, with a special focus on progress to integrate the various platforms and systems used by the University for the student population.

They clarified that the University’s platforms and systems would be integrated by the spring of 2022 to systematically recognize students’ preferred names. They also mentioned that human resources systems are being upgraded, although the process is more complex since these systems also use data external to the University.

### 3. Fairness: importance of the relational dimension

#### Fairness Triangle



In the challenging context of the pandemic, we repeatedly noticed the importance of empathy and listening. Nowhere was this more apparent than in our own practice. Emails from people who consulted us were much more frequent and “transactional.” They sought quick answers to new questions and often presented them in the form of a simple dichotomy: fair or unfair, right or wrong.

The reality was often much more nuanced or fluid in meaning. Without direct, face-to-face contact, we had to adapt how we responded to requests to better identify files requiring a personalized approach, a virtual or telephone appointment, or a follow up with administration in addition to the information requested by email.

This new reality also impacted communication among members of the university community. Yet we witnessed students and employees overcome countless difficulties and frustrations during the pandemic, as long as they treated each other

with empathy in their email exchanges. This was true regardless of the substantive outcome of the inquiry (e.g.: request granted or not granted).

On the other hand, we also had to intervene in several situations that had escalated. These were only resolved once communication had resumed, an explanation was given and the persons on both sides of an issue felt that they were once again being treated as human beings.

In reflecting about the problems we observed, we could see how an empathetic approach—based on the **relational dimension** of the *Fairness Triangle*—often made the difference between a situation that was resolving itself and a conflict that was worsening. Being courteous, taking care to listen and to provide information, apologizing when appropriate, all this helped to de-escalate many situations.

## 4. Handling behavioural issues with good judgment

Dealing with behavioural issues can be difficult. People may find the task challenging, especially in situations where they need to distinguish between unreasonable behaviour and the need for accommodation under the Human Rights Code. In fact, we sometimes notice situations where disrespectful behaviour is tolerated for a long time, even if this approach harms both the person who lacks civility and the people around them.

By contrast, we occasionally encounter situations where the response to a given behaviour lacks nuance or tact. Good practice, of course, is to name the behaviour and ask that it not happen again, while treating the person respectfully and referring them to support services as needed.

When imposing consequences or issuing a formal written warning, the decision-maker must also consider extenuating circumstances that could have contributed to the behaviour. A response that overlooks such circumstances only isolates the person further, without helping them learn from the experience.

The University plans to develop a statement of student rights and responsibilities. In previous years, the Office of the Ombudsperson had raised questions and offered feedback about the process to support students exhibiting at risk behaviours. These topics remain relevant, and we will follow upcoming discussions on these items with interest.

## 5. Challenges to inclusion: practices in some courses

“Yet as we do so, there must be no relaxed ‘return’ to how things were before the pandemic, no ‘old, familiar’ into which we settle complacently. Rather, we must build upon all that has been accomplished and learned at uOttawa since the dawn of the pandemic to continue to break new ground, open new doors and explore new possibilities.”<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the challenges surrounding equity, diversity and inclusion, I am ending this section of the 2020-2021 report with remarks on the experience of students with disabilities who sometimes encounter preventable barriers in their courses.

In several syllabi of different programs, I noticed the following:

- The lack of a statement on academic accommodations
- The possibility of a deferred examination, but only in relation to an illness
- A requirement to provide medical certificates issued only by the University’s health services

Recently, I have also noticed a more frequent use of the EIN (failure) letter grade in syllabi if work is not handed in. Such action is appropriate when it comes to essential course requirements, but this is not always the case. For example, in several situations the EIN grade statement applied to all elements of the course, including assignments or tests that represented a small percentage of the final grade.

Students also told us about participation percentages used without any system for measuring participation (and sometimes without an opportunity to participate). Ultimately, this part of the grade was based on class attendance, and points were lost for one or more absences rather than for poor quality of input or for a lack of participation.

Complaint procedures can seem long or complicated when barriers or accommodation-related issues arise in a course. Most faculties do not have designated Equity and Student Success advisors to help resolve accommodation-related problems quickly and informally between students and faculty.

The situations mentioned above create preventable barriers that are especially challenging for students living with disabilities such as chronic illnesses. We have met students who preferred to accept an unfair situation or to withdraw from a course despite the impact on their grade or their financial situation, rather than take more formal steps after an exchange with their instructor.

Finally, contrary to the wording of some syllabi, Regulation I.9.5 recognizes not only illness but also documented “exceptional personal circumstances” to justify an absence from an examination or the late submission of assignments. We noted that Regulation II.5.3 (applicable to graduate students) is less clear on this point. We have met graduate students—and other students in programs where two failures result in removal from the program—who found themselves in extremely vulnerable situations due to a lack of information at an earlier stage about their options.

<sup>2</sup> Building the University of Tomorrow — Progress Report (uottawa.ca).  
[https://www.uottawa.ca/vice-president-academic/sites/www.uottawa.ca.vice-president-academic/files/en\\_-\\_t2030\\_progress\\_report.pdf](https://www.uottawa.ca/vice-president-academic/sites/www.uottawa.ca.vice-president-academic/files/en_-_t2030_progress_report.pdf)

## Recommendation to faculties

Issue reminders to professors and instructors about the following points pertaining to syllabi:

- Include a statement on academic accommodations
- Clarify essential course requirements and use E/N letter grades judiciously in relation to essential course requirements
- Clarify the process to evaluate participation (as applicable)
- Do not limit grounds for absences from examinations or the late submission of assignments to illness only, but mention exceptional personal circumstances as well
- Do not require that documentation be provided only by the University's health services
- Include links to relevant regulations, such as: I.9, I.16, II.5

## Recommendations to the University

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

Include the concept of exceptional personal circumstances in Regulation II.5.3, *Deferred evaluation*.

Consider the possibility of introducing Equity and Student Success advisor roles in more faculties to facilitate the implementation of academic accommodations and informal problem solving between students and faculty.

Where this role doesn't exist, clarify the process available to students and faculty for an informal resolution of problems related to barriers or to the implementation of an accommodation.

To conclude this section, I would like to mention another important initiative: the creation of a new support team that offers case management services to University of Ottawa students starting in September 2021. The goal is to propose a "holistic approach to managing their complex academic, health, or personal needs" and to "create a support system that lets students take charge of their lives in a sustainable way". This service is extremely important, especially for students confronting multiple barriers.

Finally, I am including the testimony of a student who wanted to highlight the positive aspects of the changes we lived through. In an environment that increasingly relies on technology and makes us more interconnected with each passing day, we must reflect on the best ways to eliminate barriers and to introduce flexibility and humanity. When we make the effort to build inclusive and fair environments, we improve everyone's experience. Universal or inclusive design principles are critical to achieving the objectives of the University's Transformation Plan.

"Taking my courses online has greatly improved my performance in my classes and has benefited my life holistically in many ways. [With] less time spent travelling, I've had more time to work on my assignments and tasks, I've been able to establish a workspace and a schedule that works better for me, I have experienced greater access to my professors, and I've been able to save money on things that I would normally pay for such as [transportation and meals on campus]. To sum it up, I feel happier, more balanced and am doing better academically as a result."

**(student email, May 2021)**

# V. FOLLOW-UP ON ISSUES RAISED IN PREVIOUS REPORTS

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## 1. Student roadmap

In a previous report, the ombudsperson recommended:

“... the creation of a generic and succinct roadmap for all students on the theme of ‘I have a problem, who do I contact?’, which would identify the main offices for administrative and academic matters affecting all students, as well as academic support services, and the offices to contact within and outside their faculty to resolve conflicts and address complaints.”

### University’s update (summer 2021):

*“We are working toward better dissemination of academic support information (standardization of support information on faculty websites).*

*This is being done in collaboration with the Perspective Web team that is redesigning the website and should be published on the web as faculties begin using the new web platform.*

*At the same time, as part of a pilot project with the Faculty of Arts, we are working on creating a web page to identify the different entities to contact in the event of an academic problem. The web page will be created over the summer and should be live in late August or early September. We are working to identify the best way to align this pilot with the redesign of the website (Web Perspective project). There will be more developments in this area in the fall.”*

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## 2. Concession requests (illness or other exceptional personal circumstances)

In a previous report, the ombudsperson recommended:

“... developing and posting in the Academic Regulations Explained section of the website a document such as a roadmap or frequently asked questions that would bring together and summarize information on the options

(and their implications), processes to follow and resources available when a student experiences a medical issue or exceptional personal circumstances.

*Continued*

The intent would be to present the information in an abbreviated, student-centred manner while including links to existing regulations or information pages:

- requests for deferred examination or the late submission of assignments
- requests for withdrawal after deadlines
- requests concerning fees
- support services, etc.

Once the document is posted on the website, it could also be shared directly with students and a link added to Brightspace.”

In this regard, in late fall 2020, Student Accounts sought feedback from the ombudsperson on its planned redesign of the information related to requests for tuition fee refunds and to the appeal process.

### University’s update (summer 2021):

*“Once the academic support page has been created (see the answer to the previous question), we will add a link to it on the Academic Regulations Explained site.”*

## 3. Graduate studies: supervisory relationship

In a previous report, the ombudsperson recommended that a regulation or guideline be developed to clarify the responsibilities of the parties in a supervisory relationship. In particular:

- the minimum expectations for the role of thesis supervisor regarding the frequency of interactions and feedback
- the resources available to students and thesis supervisors when problems arise between them
- the role of other parties, such as other committee members and program directors, in resolving problems
- the responsibilities when either party requests that a relationship cease

The University responded that it recognized this file as a priority and that research to identify best practices at other universities was underway with the goal to develop a supervisory guide.

### University’s update (summer 2021):

*“The Centre for Academic Leadership wants to create a new workshop to support faculty in their supervisory role. One of these activities involves identifying tools and best practices with the faculties and the Office of the Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. The thesis regulations, which will be updated as part of the review of all academic regulations, will include essential requirements that will also support thesis supervisors and their students in managing expectations.”*

### Ombudsperson’s comments

We are pleased to hear about progress on this important work. We also note that there is information and tools on the graduate and postdoctoral studies site to help establish a good supervisory relationship. Our comments below are therefore particularly aimed at improving communication in complex or conflictual situations, and at clarifying the responsibilities of the various parties and the resources at their disposal.

At the Office of the Ombudsperson, we offer advice and coaching when students or faculty members need help in resolving problems or addressing a difficult stage in the relationship. We also occasionally offer mediation services.

However, we encounter situations where the lack of clarity about the responsibilities of the various parties makes it difficult to intervene and find practical solutions. This has implications for the mental health of those directly involved in the situation (student or faculty). These implications could be minimized with some help before the situation becomes more sensitive or complicated.

We also note that students or faculty members who encounter difficulties in the supervisory relationship may feel isolated or avoid seeking help for fear that the situation may not remain confidential. They may then end up in a difficult long-term situation or one that becomes unmanageable.

Finally, program directors do not necessarily know where to find help when they are required to intervene in conflict situations or to whom to refer students or faculty members who are in conflict situations.

One of the pillars of the University's strategic plan, *Transformation 2030*, is agility<sup>3</sup>, which means "a state of being that will allow us to gracefully evolve in step with the world around us" in a context of "constant technological change."

In this section, one of the strategic actions is to "enhance graduate supervision." This certainly involves technological change, but also good interpersonal tools.

## Recommendations for next steps

It is important to provide online information to students, faculty members and program heads to:

- normalize the fact that difficulties or conflict situations may arise
- refer them to resource persons within their program and Faculty, and clarify the confidentiality of these interactions
- clarify the roles and responsibilities of other parties (within the supervisory committee, the academic unit and the Faculty) to help seek fair solutions
- refer them to other confidential resources as needed.

It is also important to:

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

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<sup>3</sup> <https://transformation2030.uottawa.ca/en/agile>

## APPENDIX A: OTHER STATISTICS

Table 8: Official language used

Official language used	French	English
All persons who consulted us	28.6%	71.4%
Students who consulted us	21.5%	78.5%
Students enrolled at the University (Fall 2020)*	30.0%	70.0%

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

Table 9: Students – faculty distribution

Faculty	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2020)*
Arts	13.1%	11.3%
Law	3.9%	4.1%
Education	4.1%	5.9%
Engineering	9.3%	14.0%
Management (Telfer)	5.4%	11.0%
Medicine	0.8%	5.4%
Sciences	6.2%	12.6%
Health Sciences	6.2%	10.9%
Social Sciences	14.9%	24.0%
Unknown	36.1%	0.7%

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

**Table 10: Students – level of study**

Level of study	Students who consulted us	Students registered at the University (Fall 2020)*
Undergraduate	84.1%	83.8%
Master	9.5%	10.8%
PhD	4.4%	5.0%
Unknown or other	2.0%	0.4%

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

**Table 11: Feedback on our services**

	Yes	No
Was it easy to find the Office of the Ombudsperson?	29	4
Did you receive a quick reply to your email, telephone message or letter?	32	3
Was the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson explained to you clearly?	29	6
If you asked that your name not be released, was your concern handled in a confidential manner by the Office of the Ombudsperson?	27	--
Did the ombudsperson demonstrate impartiality (objectivity) in reviewing your concerns?	33	2
Did the ombudsperson handle your concern fairly?	33	2
Were you treated with respect?	32	2
Would you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson again?	32	2

**Table 12: Feedback on our services (continued)**

Why did you contact the Office of the Ombudsperson?	Total
To acquire information	11
To get advice	16
To facilitate communication with others	13
To determine if I had been treated fairly	11
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	19



Office of the  
**Ombudsperson**

Building a culture of fairness



# ALTERNATIVE TEXT AND DATA FOR FIGURES

## Type of persons

Figure 1

Numbers by type of persons	Total
Students	1,113
Employees	81
Admission applicants	75
Other*	209
Total	1,478

\* (e.g. parents, members of the public, etc.)

Figure 2

Type of students	Total
Undergraduate	842
Graduate	193
Other or level unknown	78
Total	1,113

Figure 3

Type of employees	Total
Support staff	29
Academic staff	36
Excluded staff	3
Other or unknown	13
Total	81

## Services

Figure 4

Undergraduate students	Percent
Information and referral	66.5%
Advice or coaching	20.1%
Various interventions	12.5%
Final reviews	0.9%

Figure 5

Graduate students	Percent
Information and referral	39.9%
Advice or coaching	39.4%
Various interventions	17.1%
Final reviews	3.6%

Figure 6

Employees	Percent
Information and referral	55.5%
Advice or coaching	24.7%
Various interventions	19.8%
Final reviews	0.0%

## Outcomes of interventions and final reviews

Figure 7

Various interventions	Percent
Partially resolved	42.7%
Fully resolved	44.3%
Not resolved	5.9%
Discontinued*	7.1%

\* Withdrawn or abandoned by the complainant