

Administrative Response to the *Report of the University Ombudsperson for the Period 1 July, 2008 to 30 June, 2009*

September, 2009

Overview

The Terms of Reference for the Office of the University Ombudsperson stipulates that the Ombudsperson shall “make a written annual report to the Governing Council, and through it to the University community”. In addition, the Governing Council requests an administrative response to each annual report.

The *Report of the University Ombudsperson for the Period 1 July, 2008 to 30 June, 2009* is Professor Foley’s second annual report as University Ombudsperson. Once again, it reflects her understanding of the University, her respect for the role of Ombudsperson, and her deep sensitivity in handling complex and often difficult situations.

The Administration extends its sincere thanks to Professor Foley for her dedication to the University of Toronto and for her outstanding service in the role of University Ombudsperson. The Administration also acknowledges and is grateful for Professor Foley’s committed attention to her Office’s mandate as contemplated by the 2006 *Review of the Office of the University Ombudsperson*.

Response

The *Report of the University Ombudsperson for the Period 1 July, 2008 to 30 June, 2009* is carefully considered, objective, and constructive. The Report makes two recommendations, follows up on a number of matters from earlier annual reports, and details the Office’s outreach efforts.

As Professor Foley notes, addressing systemic issues is a critical part of the Ombudsperson’s mandate. Accordingly, systemic matters are at the heart of this annual report. The Administration continues to welcome and appreciate this perspective.

Recommendations

The Report makes two recommendations:

In order to enhance the University’s ability to meet its goals for accessibility,

- a) That the survey of St. George Campus buildings be updated and the needs for correction of deficiencies be prioritized; and***
- b) That designating high priority building accessibility needs (or accessibility needs more broadly defined) as a fundraising priority for the University be actively considered.***

The Administration accepts these recommendations.

With respect to the first recommendation, it should be noted that, while a prioritized list of deficiencies is an important strategic planning tool, such a list must not be so inflexible as to inhibit the University's ability to capitalize on funding opportunities as they arise. Timely contributions from governments to address deferred maintenance or benefactions with funding for targeted accessibility projects are occasions when immediate priorities may be reconsidered to benefit the overall system.

With respect to the second recommendation, the Division of University Advancement will continue to include – and will raise the profile of – specific accessibility projects, and accessibility initiatives more generally, within its list of fundraising priorities (provided, of course, they come through the usual provostial approval process as informed by the divisions). Such projects and initiatives often struggle to find an audience within the philanthropic community, aside from a few modest sources of corporate support. Philanthropists typically expect accessibility considerations either to figure in the planning of new capital projects or to be considered within the category of deferred maintenance management.

The University is mindful of Ontario's proposed *Accessible Built Environment Standard*, which is also mentioned in the Ombudsperson's report. The University's own standards as described in the document *Barrier Free Accessibility Design Standards*, well position the University to align with the proposed Ontario *Standard* if it is passed into law. Indeed, as the Ombudsperson points out, the University's existing *Standards* in many ways anticipate the provincial *Standard*.

The Administration is committed to a fully accessible environment on our campuses. Progress towards this goal is steady. Nevertheless, the University faces intense trade-offs. The ages of our three campuses' buildings, facilities, and infrastructures – exacerbated by heavy use – present significant deferred maintenance challenges. Our resources are tightly constrained and available funding is typically subject to both federal and provincial rules and restrictions. Additional government funding for accessibility and deferred maintenance, together with innovative approaches to accommodation, will be indispensable to our long-term success.

Additional Observations

The Administration values the Ombudsperson's diligent follow-up on matters raised in earlier annual reports and administrative responses.

Similarly, the Administration applauds the Office of the Ombudsperson's outreach initiatives. The Ombudsperson serves as an important resource in our community. Raising awareness about the Ombudsperson's role and function is valuable in fulfilling the Office's mandate.

At the same time, the statistics presented in the Annual Report are helpful. They show an overall rise in Office's caseload of roughly 7% over 2007-2008 to 236 cases. This represents approximately 0.2% of the population within the jurisdiction of the Office, a proportion that has remained constant over the past three years. This suggests that the systemic approach adopted by the Ombudsperson has been effective, even as awareness of the Office grows and despite the current period of fiscal stress. The Administration remains appreciative of the Ombudsperson's preventive and systemic focus.