Administrative Response to the *Office of the Ombudsperson 2019-20 Annual Report*

October 2020

Overview

The Office of the Ombudsperson's Terms of Reference state that the Ombudsperson shall "make a written annual report to the Governing Council, and through it to the University community." The Governing Council also requests a response from the University Administration to each of the Ombudsperson's annual reports. The *2019-20 Annual Report* is Professor Ellen Hodnett's fourth report as University Ombudsperson.

Response

The Administration remains grateful to Professor Hodnett for her ongoing service to the University of Toronto in the role of Ombudsperson. As she has demonstrated over the years, Professor Hodnett's institutional knowledge, compassion, and depth of expertise have served the University and its broad community very well. The President, Provost, and entire U of T Administration welcome this year's report, which showcases her care for the community and her insightful approach to solving common challenges.

As noted in last year's report and administrative response, Professor Hodnett successfully restructured the Office of the Ombudsperson into a tri-campus entity, installing Ombuds Officers on each of the three U of T campuses. We are especially heartened by the success of this restructured model and the relative increase in inquiries as a result of the community's renewed engagement. This success has rested on a well-executed plan and help from U of T Communications, the Office of the Governing Council, and several offices at UTM and UTSC.

The Administration once again thanks Professor Hodnett for conducting a review of the second year of cases managed under the *University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy,* including one new case in 2019-20 along with the six cases from last year. The Administration was gratified to read Professor Hodnett's view that "every case has been handled fairly, with strict adherence to the Policy, as well as with compassion."

The *Office of the Ombudsperson 2019-20 Annual Report* indicates that in 2019-20, the Office dealt with 370 complaints, which were brought forward by undergraduate students, graduate students, administrative staff, and faculty members from all three campuses. The new format of presenting the case statistics from last year continues to be immensely helpful in understanding the scope and variety of the Office's work, as well as the sources and types of cases that it handles. The Ombudsperson notes that some professional managerial staff were hesitant to pursue complaints due to a fear of reprisal; this issue is one of importance and we appreciate it being brought to our attention. We seek to ensure that employees are aware of the resources that are available should they wish to file a complaint, and the safeguards that are in place in the event that they choose to do so.

The Office of the Ombudsperson's recommendations, based on its work this year, are provided below together with the Administration's responses.

Recommendation 1: *All divisions should ensure that information about the academic appeals process is transparent and easily accessed on their websites by undergraduate and graduate students.*

The Administration agrees that accessibility of information and transparency about processes such as academic appeals is critical in ensuring that University community members requiring assistance can find what they need. This recommendation, when implemented by academic divisions, should also help reduce the number of requests received by the Office of the Ombudsperson.

The University's academic appeals process is currently posted in the Policies section on the Provost's Office website. With it appears the framework for the divisional appeals process, which sets out minimum standards, provides 'checklists,' and suggests best practices such that academic appeals are operated fairly and consistently across the University. Divisional appeals processes are linked to from the 'Process Specific Resources & Documents' section of the Office of Appeals, Discipline and Faculty Grievances page on the Office of the Governing Council's website.

In accepting this recommendation, the Administration undertakes to review both websites and ask each of the University's 19 divisions, including the School of Graduate Studies, to provide and/or update their own link/s for inclusion.

The Provost's Office organized a new training workshop this past year on U of T policies and best practices for academic appeals processes for representatives from all academic divisions. This training will now be offered every second year and will include discussion of updates to academic appeals processes. The organizers will note this recommendation and the need for improved communication and transparency on the part of academic divisions.

Recommendation 2: *Each academic unit and campus resource should set up a system to make regular use of web tools to scan for broken links on their websites in order to mitigate student frustration when seeking information.*

The Administration accepts this recommendation and will consider how existing and emerging technologies can be leveraged to reduce the number of inaccurate or broken links on University websites.

The University's web space is complex and distributed; unfortunately, there is no centralized inventory of U of T websites or webpages. Fixing broken links can depend on how a website is created and hosted, and could involve a complete rewrite of the underlying code. Nonetheless,

identifying broken links using the type of tool described in the Ombudsperson's report can be one important step in addressing a larger problem with rapidly changing information.

The University currently runs a service that scans websites for broken links through the Academic and Collaborative Technology team (ACT) within ITS. This is not an automated service and is done at the request of individual units – similar to a one-time audit. ACT is exploring the procurement of a new tool that could be deployed in a self-service way to identify and address broken links more systematically. Provided that procurement is successful, ACT will initiate an awareness campaign over the Fall and Winter to promote the tool's use across academic units and administrative divisions.

Recommendation 3: *University of Toronto websites that currently contain a general contact email for all inquiries should consider adding a list of email addresses linked to specific areas of responsibility within each academic unit and campus resource so student inquiries can more efficiently reach the responsible person or office.*

The Administration accepts this recommendation, which will be conveyed to University Principals and Deans, Vice-Presidents, and Vice-Provosts so that they may work to implement it on their respective websites and other communication channels.

The University has recently made significant inroads in implementing a new service built on ServiceNow, an online help desk tool that tracks, triages, and reports on service requests of all kinds. By way of example, the Human Resources department is using ServiceNow to consolidate myriad connection points into one site, and to triage questions efficiently and effectively, assign queries to appropriate individuals, and provide information that leads to timelier self-service. ITS and several academic divisions have begun to use the tool for IT service management, issuing 'tickets' when help requests are received and tracking service and resolution. The COVID-19 Recovery & Adaptation Unit has also been using the ServiceNow tool under the leadership of U of T Communications to track, refer, and answer questions about the University's COVID-19 response.

In addition to improved web listings for email inquiries, expanding the use of ServiceNow should improve the experience for complainants who use email to send inquiries and resolve complex concerns. More information is available through the Enterprise Service Centre, which can be accessed with a UTORID from the ITS homepage.

Recommendation 4: *Academic and administrative offices should send a quick response, as soon as reasonably possible after an email is received, to acknowledge it and to indicate a reply will be forthcoming within an estimated timeframe, in order to alleviate distress or frustration experienced by complainants. In addition, a reply which communicates caring and interest in the recipient's well-being will be particularly helpful when the message being delivered is not a welcome one.*

The Administration fully endorses this recommendation, which will be discussed among the Tri-Campus Vice-Presidents' group, and Principals and Deans.

It remains a priority for the Administration to foster a caring community across all University campuses and constituencies. The Administration recognizes that, particularly with respect to complex or difficult issues, responsiveness is an important factor in avoiding or alleviating potential frustration. Leveraging the capacity of ServiceNow will address this gap and should result in less distress for complainants as well as for those who are simply seeking information.

Concluding Observations

The Administration is grateful for the insight that the Ombudsperson's Report provides and appreciates the opportunity it affords to examine and address some of the complex and systemic issues at the University. The Office of the Ombudsperson continues to play a vital role in the U of T community, offering deeply considered, compassionate, and responsive assistance to those who reach out to it. The Administration thanks the entire staff of the Office for their work on this report and on behalf of our community throughout the year.