



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

**Report of the
University Ombudsperson
2021-2022**

**By
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Concerns in 2021–2022

- ▶ 405 complaints (up 13% from 2020-2021); including new (358), carryover (33) and reopened (14) cases
- ▶ Wide variety of issues, complicated by the unprecedented conditions of the pandemic, vaccination mandates, etc.
- ▶ Most serious:
 - Increasing anger, disrespect, incivility, mental health issues
 - Graduate students' concerns
 - Lack of accurate information in University communications
 - Exceptional delays in the resolution of AI allegations

Terms of reference

- ▶ Independent, impartial and confidential
- ▶ Provide assistance to all members of the University (students, faculty, staff, alumni)
 - who fall under the responsibility of the Governing Council and where resolution of the member's complaint is within the authority of the Governing Council; and
 - have been unable to resolve their concerns about their treatment by established appeals and other procedures.
- ▶ Ensure procedural fairness and just and reasonable outcomes.
- ▶ Cannot decide but can advise, recommend and review

Basic approach

- Advise
- Refer complainants to other offices within the University
- Mediate with the responsible office(s)
- Conduct more extensive inquiries
- Promote a culture of fairness, equity and dignity for all

- Rules of thumb:
 - Neither advocate for complainant nor administration
 - Fairness to all: process, decision, participation

1. Stress, incivility, mental health

- ▶ Accentuated by the pandemic
- ▶ Members of the University on all three campuses tried very hard to make the best of these unprecedented conditions.
- ▶ The pandemic is not over. Many still experience unusually high stress levels, including the legacy from COVID isolation. The University cannot lower its guard.
- ▶ We must all contribute to a culture of inclusiveness and civility.

2. Graduate students

- ▶ Maltreatment, from bullying to neglect, has long been problematic. Regularly raised by predecessors and recognized by SGS.
- ▶ Pleased to report that the number of complaints leveled out in 2021–22.
- ▶ SGS moving to implement recommendations of 2020 report, *Promoting a Healthy Lab Culture*, and strengthening Center for Graduate Mentoring.

Yet new concerns

- ▶ Overall number of graduate student complaints increased from 72 to 97, or 35%.
- ▶ The Office of the Ombudsperson will continue to monitor the types and volume of graduate issues.

3. Inadequate communications

- ▶ Out-of-date websites, broken and orphan links, and lack of accurate information about whom to contact
- ▶ Also regularly raised by previous Ombuds.
- ▶ Not a technical issue but organizational.
- ▶ Administration offers divisions help in monitoring websites and promises to raise issue with academic leaders. But ultimately falls back upon ‘divisional autonomy’.

Recommendation

- ▶ Develop an institutional best–practice guide for transparency and accountability of information
- ▶ Accurate, accessible information, especially contact information of all those responsible for student services, should be considered a basic right at U of T

4. Academic integrity

- ▶ While number of cases dropped, length of delays increased, with some extending to more than two years. Not all delays could be attributed to the pandemic. Other factors included lack of divisional resources.
- ▶ While the numbers are small as a percentage of the student body, they are extremely serious for those affected; in some case, they put students' entire careers on hold.

Recommendations

- All divisions should review policies, processes and timelines to ensure procedural fairness, including timely decisions
- Strengthen oversight of divisional governance, i.e. annual statistics presented on the regular agendas, not just in ‘consent agenda’
- Develop an institutional AI strategy



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Questions and
suggestions welcome!