

## **Administrative Response to the 2016-17 Annual Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson**

**October 2017**

### **Overview**

The Terms of Reference for the Office of the University Ombudsperson state 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 *2016-17 Annual Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson* is Professor Ellen D. Hodnett’s second annual report as University Ombudsperson.

### **Response**

The Administration thanks Professor Hodnett for her continuing service to the University of Toronto. The Administration has corresponded and collaborated with the Office of the Ombudsperson on several occasions over the last year and greatly values her deep understanding of the University and her expertise and sensitivity in handling cases and difficult situations. Professor Hodnett’s knowledge of and respect for the role of University Ombudsperson is exemplary.

The *2016-17 Annual Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson* makes no formal recommendations. The *Annual Report* offers detailed summary statistics of the Office’s work, including which constituencies sought assistance, how often, and which general topics were addressed. The *Report* also provides constructive considerations surrounding the visibility of the Office to encourage use of the Ombudsperson services in general.

The *Annual Report* notes that in 2016-17, the Office of the Ombudsperson handled 339 cases, a marginal increase from the 316 cases reported in the year prior. These cases primarily reflect enquiries from constituencies within the jurisdiction of the Office: undergraduate students, graduate students, administrative staff, faculty members, and alumni. However, most of the increase in the total number of cases stemmed from enquiries by individuals who were not within the jurisdiction of the University Ombudsperson as defined by the Terms of Reference for the Office of the Ombudsperson. The Administration is sensitive to the jurisdiction challenges faced by the Office and recognizes that they can put considerable demands on the time and energy of the staff in the Office. The Administration appreciates that even in cases where it did not have jurisdiction, the Office undertook to offer referrals and advice. This is emblematic of the staff’s dedication and professionalism. At the same time, the Administration acknowledges that, should the Office’s workload change, responding to individuals who are not considered constituents may place a difficult strain on the Office.

The *Report* also makes reference to a recommendation from last year concerning student accommodations in cohort-based and “lock step” programs. The Office requests a progress

update on the working group that was convened to identify procedures and best practices for student accommodation in such programs.

The working group developed a document entitled “Best Practices: Ensuring Academic Quality & Success When Meeting Accommodation Needs of Students in Professional Programs”. It provides guidance to professional programs, especially those with structures or requirements connected to professional standards and/or safety (patient or student) that pose challenges when it comes to accommodating students who require extensive modifications. The best practices document covers a program’s lifecycle, from recruitment to graduation, addressing proactive program design and communication as well as accommodation practices. The document provides examples of practices and resources already in place at the University of Toronto and elsewhere. A penultimate draft was discussed at the group’s September meeting and will be finalized this fall.

In addition, this summer, all divisions that participated in the working group assessed their websites and other communications tools in view of the best practices. Divisions reported on their findings at the September meeting, and discussed their plans to close any gaps in communications this academic year. Support for implementing best practices in divisions will be facilitated by a new position – Accommodations Specialist – created in Accessibility Services. Working with professional divisions, the Accommodations Specialist will develop an understanding of the academic and professional contexts and requirements of professional programs in order to support solutions to complex accommodations scenarios, and develop resources to support decision making around accommodations.

Finally, the Administration commends the ongoing outreach initiatives and measures taken to further engage with the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) and University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) communities. The Administration applauds the efforts made by the Office of the Ombudsperson to increase visibility and expand avenues for communication, such as the increased use of social media and the use of Skype for meetings. Nevertheless, the *Report* explains that it remains a challenge for the Office of the Ombudsperson to engage with the academic and administrative staff at UTM and UTSC. The Administration agrees that further examination of outreach and communications to those campuses is warranted. In this context, the Administration welcomes input and suggestions from the Office of Governing Council and the Office of the Ombudsperson. As one University with three campuses, the tri-campus nature of the role of Ombudsperson inherently requires a proactive approach to continuously explore new possibilities and avenues to be present, visible, and available. The Administration notes that the successes of other tri-campus offices and initiatives that have considered similar issues – for instance, the Equity Offices or the Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre – could be instructive examples as the Office examines different approaches. Raising awareness about the services offered and promoting engagement with students, staff, and faculty at all campuses is of paramount importance in fulfilling the Office’s mandate.

### **Concluding Observations**

The Administration is pleased to see that members of the University community continue to avail themselves of the services of the Office of the Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson is an important resource in our community. The Administration extends its sincere thanks to Professor Hodnett and her team for their dedication to the students, faculty, and staff on all three campuses of the University of Toronto.