OFFICE of the UNIVERSITY

Ombudsperson

ANNUAL REPORT



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Portions of this report's narrative were prepared with the assistance of AI to enhance clarity, consistency, and efficiency in drafting while ensuring preservation of confidentiality and privacy. All content was reviewed and approved by the University Ombudsperson.



Ombuds Message

The Office of the University Ombudsperson (OUO) acknowledges that our work takes place on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek peoples. We are grateful to live, learn, and work on these lands, which are bound by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant - an agreement to share and care for the land and its resources in peace and mutual respect.

I am pleased to present the 2025-2026 Annual Report for the OUO, covering the period of August 1, 2025 to July 31, 2026.

This year, 308 visitors brought concerns to our office - an increase of roughly 17% over 2024-2025 and the highest annual volume since the office began tracking requests in 2019. As in past years, most visitors were students and most concerns related to academic standing, decisions regarding departures from academic integrity, and appeals. We also saw continued growth in matters involving accommodations, procedural fairness in non-academic misconduct processes, and requests for support navigating the sexual misconduct and sexual violence policy framework where the OUO continues to serve as the designated resource office for student respondents.

Growth in volume brings both opportunity and strain. It reflects growing awareness of, and trust in, the office as an impartial and confidential resource. It also means more community members are experiencing processes they find difficult to navigate on their own. This serves as an important reminder that fairness is not simply a matter of policy and process design, but of how those who work in the system can apply relational fairness to support access, consistency, and transparency to improve the experience of those on the receiving end of important decisions.

I want to thank Heather Trojek and Kathryn Morrissey for their continued dedication to the office and the community we serve, and extend mounds of gratitude to the many colleagues across the university who responded to our inquiries, welcomed our feedback, and partnered with us this year to help make Queen's a fairer place. As always, I am especially thankful to the students, staff, faculty, parents, and alumni who trusted us with their concerns.

— Norma Barrett

About Our Office

The OUO is an important resource to the Queen's community. We serve the community by helping students, staff, faculty, parents, and alumni understand policies and procedures and by identifying opportunities for improvement from unit to systemic levels.

The OUO Team:

- Promotes procedural fairness in university decision-making
- Offers general guidance to Queen's community members on their rights, responsibilities, and available pathways for resolving concerns through informal or formal processes
- Advises on appropriate procedures and protocols
- Connects individuals with relevant university offices, resources, and support services
- Recommends improvements to university policies and procedures
- Provides training and educational resources
- Identifies and examines systemic issues to support institution-wide improvements

For more information, visit:

>>> www.queensu.ca/ombuds/who-we-are



Norma Barrett, CD, Law '11
University Ombudsperson
Full-time, in-person,
Mac-Corry Room D217



Heather Trojek
Associate Ombudsperson
Part-time (3 days/week)
Fully Remote



Kathryn Morrissey, MEd '14
Intake Coordinator
Full-time (4 days/week)
In-person Mon-Thurs

How We Work

Our Approach

Listen

We are a **confidential** and **impartial** resource. This means we listen without judgment, we don't take sides, and we don't share information with others without consent.

Guide

We guide to enhance understanding of **policies**, **procedures**, **rights** and **responsibilities**. We provide space and resources to explore options and opportunities.

Empower

Our goal is to assist and inform students, staff, faculty, and other community members to facilitate their navigation of university decision-making processes and procedures.

Our Steps

Intake

When visitors reach out to us the first step is a follow up from our office to gather additional information about the concern to determine next steps.

Information, Guidance and Referral

If a visitor's concern is best addressed by another resource on campus, we provide information and guidance, and we help to connect the visitor to the appropriate resource(s) and service(s).

Intervention

When concerns are complex or indicate systemic unfairness, we may conduct a more thorough inquiry to address the concern and to make recommendations to prevent similar concerns from arising in future.

What we often help with:

Understanding Fairness

Providing guidance to help understand how to be fair and how to address unfairness.

Misconduct

Explaining the relevant policies and procedures and helping to explore options on how best to proceed.

Referrals

Helping to connect to relevant university services and supports in a timely way.

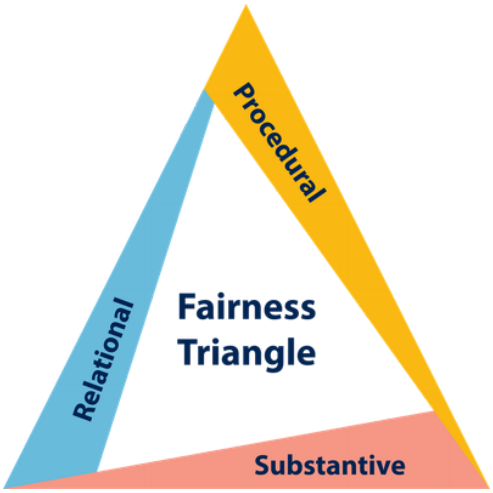
Appeal Processes

Sharing information and resources to assist with navigation of appeal processes and procedures.

Conflict Coaching

Facilitating discussions to promote problem-solving and empowering individuals to effectively address their concerns.

Assessing Fairness



A central role of the Office of the University Ombudsperson is to help ensure fairness in processes and procedures.

Fairness is a concept that each of us innately understands but it can be challenging to explain in words and to demonstrate in actions. The way in which fairness applies, or doesn't, and how it should be considered depends on the context — the people, the place and timing, and the thing at stake for those at risk of being on the receiving end of an undesirable outcome.

The Fairness Triangle* provides three dimensions to consider fairness as it relates to administrative decision-making. **Procedural fairness** considers how a decision was arrived at. **Substantive fairness** considers the "what" of the decision. **Relational fairness** considers how those impacted by a decision were treated. While not expressly indicated, **equity** is an essential element of fairness and decision-makers must consider how individual differences affect the equitability of decisions and their outcomes.

The boxes below outline some of the criteria we use to assess concerns of unfairness.

Procedural Fairness

- Was enough information given about the decision being made and the evidence it is based on?
- Was a meaningful opportunity to be heard provided?
- Was the decision-maker open-minded and unbiased?
- Were the procedural steps followed?
- Were reasons for the decision given?
- Was information about the avenues for review or appeals provided?

Substantive Fairness

- Did the decision-maker have the authority to make the decision?
- Was the decision based on relevant information?
- Was the decision made in good faith?
- Were the correct facts and policy considered?
- Was there a rational connection between the evidence presented and the conclusions reached?
- Was there a clear explanation of how the regulation or policy was applied?
- Was the decision made in a reasonable timeframe?

Relational Fairness

- Were the decision-maker and others involved in the process approachable?
- Were individuals treated with dignity and respect during the process?
- Was confidentiality respected?
- Were those involved in the decision-making honest, direct, and forthright?
- Was information conveyed clearly to the individual receiving it?
- If missteps occurred, were they corrected quickly with apologies where appropriate?

**the Fairness Triangle was first conceived by the Office of the Ombudsman Saskatchewan. It has been adapted by the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons and is widely used by those who work in the field of administrative law and justice.*

2025-2026 At a Glance

308
TOTAL INQUIRIES

24-25	23-24	22-23
264	181	192

Year over year comparison

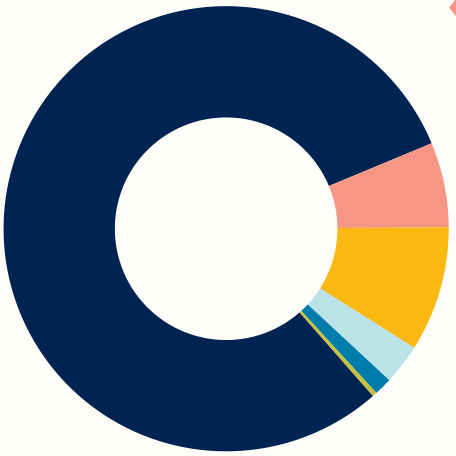
60% received by email

23% received online

7% received by walk-in

7% referred

2% received by phone



VISITOR TYPES

- Student (247)
- Other* (28)
- Parents (19)
- Staff (9)
- Faculty (4)
- Alumni (1)

**Other includes prospective students and requests for information from Ontario Ombudsman*

Student Visitors by level of study:

- 73% Undergrad
- 15% Post-BA, Cert & Dip
- 7% Masters
- 5% PhD

STUDENT CONCERNS BY FACULTY

- Arts and Science 39%
- Health Sciences 23%
- Smith Commerce 12%
- Smith Engineering 12%
- Law 9%
- Education 5%

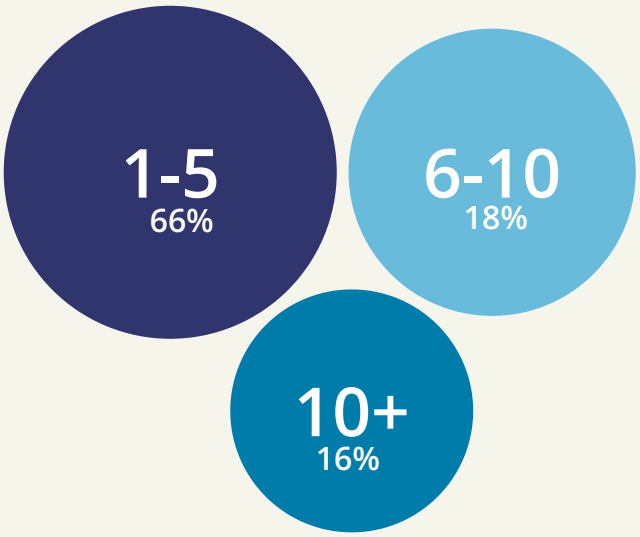
2025-2026 At a Glance

TOP 10
CONCERN TYPES

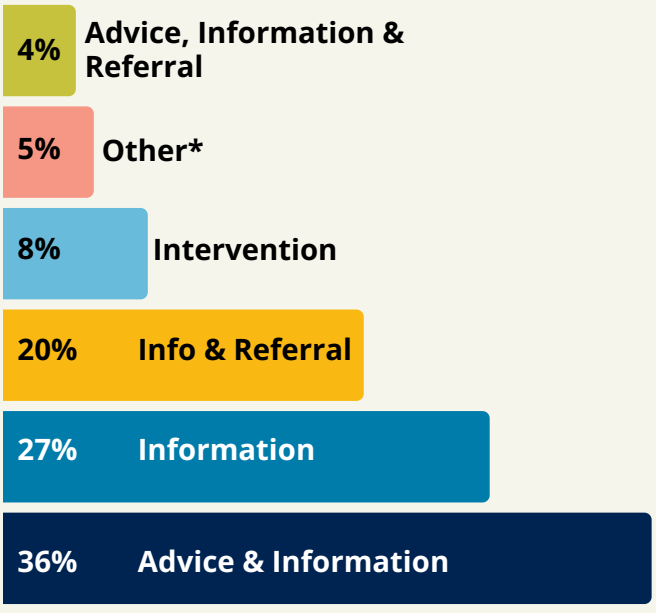
49%		Academic
17%		Misconduct - DFAI and NAM
9%		Interpersonal
7%		Other*
7%		Financial
5%		Sexual Violence
2%		Employment
2%		Residence
1%		Harassment & Discrimination
1%		University Student Appeals Board

Other includes concerns related to admissions from prospective students and requests for information from Ontario Ombudsman

Average Contact Points/Visitor



Actions Taken By the OUO



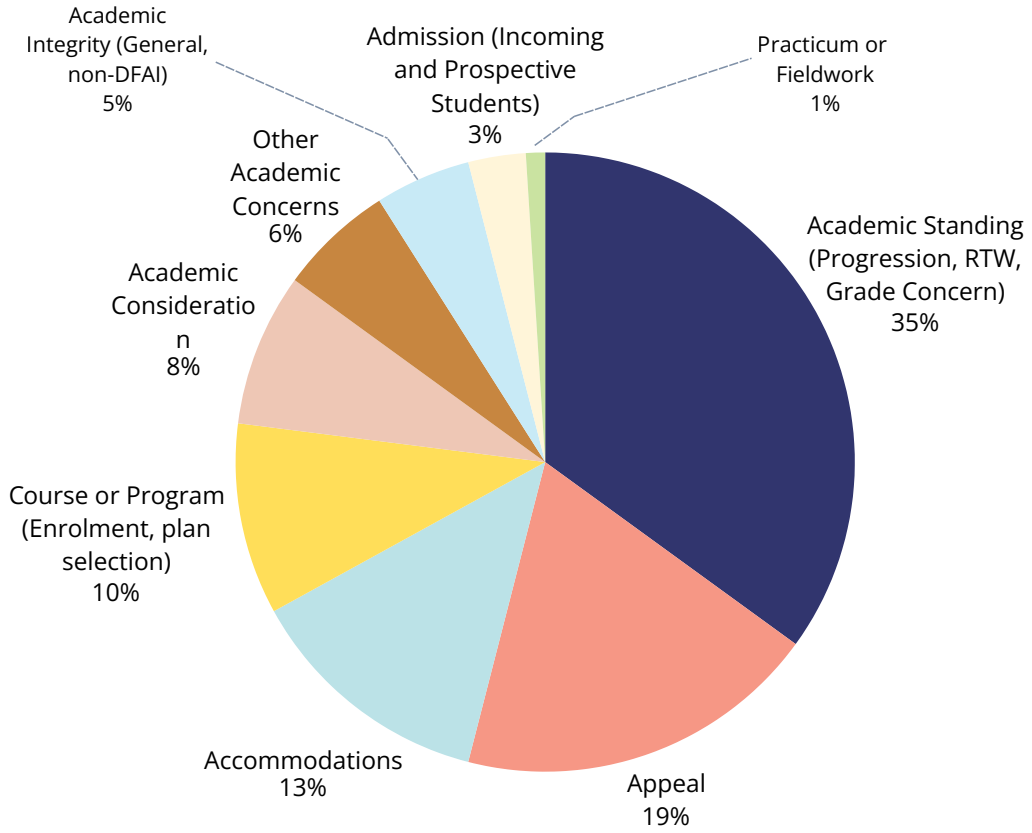
Other includes files closed due to lack of follow up response from visitor and matters outside scope of OUO terms of reference

Year in Review

This section reviews the concerns brought to the OUO during the past reporting year, organized into four broad groupings: academic matters, non-academic matters, administrative matters, and systemic/policy reviews.

ACADEMIC MATTERS

Academic concerns accounted for 150 matters or 49% of the OUO's overall volume in 2025-2026, which is consistent with the proportion seen in each of the past several years, though the absolute number of academic matters has grown alongside the overall volume.



Matters related to academic standing, including Requirements to Withdraw, academic jeopardy (probation), and progression decisions were the single most common type of academic concern, followed by requests for guidance on navigating multi-level appeal processes.

A recurring theme this year involved visitors who had followed the guidance of an academic or program advisor in good faith, only to later learn that the guidance was incomplete or inconsistent with the applicable policy or regulations, which sometimes led to consequences for graduation timelines or program eligibility. In several such cases, the OUO's role was to help clarify the correct process, and, where appropriate, to raise the resulting fairness concern with the relevant faculty administrator.

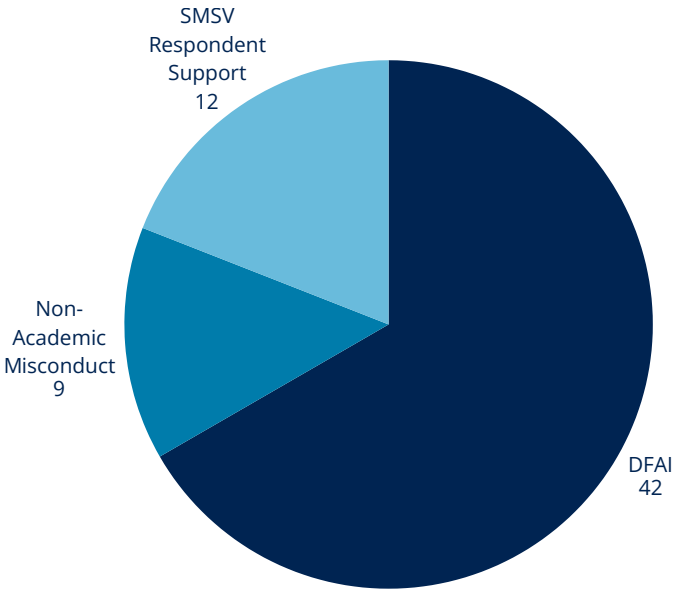
Academic accommodations concerns also represented a significant portion of matters this year, most frequently involving delays or breakdowns in implementation, whether due to instructor error, administrative processing issues, or staff turnover within accommodation offices, that in turn affected exam scheduling, assignment grading, and course progression, at times with tangible downstream consequences such as unanticipated travel costs or jeopardized graduation and employment timelines. A number of matters raised concerns of a more systemic nature, particularly within professional and clinical programs, where students described tensions between accommodation needs and professionalism or competency expectations, and, in several cases, potential discrimination or a broader culture of ableism; these matters were often referred to or coordinated with the Human Rights and Equity Office. Where appropriate, the OUO worked directly with instructors, Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS) advisors, and faculty administrators to help facilitate the resolution of individual concerns and to raise fairness issues arising from accommodation implementation.

Questions and concerns related to academic integrity generated a substantial and growing volume of contact this year. While the majority of academic integrity related matters arose from respondents facing misconduct proceedings (see next section), a growing number of inquiries related to the use of generative artificial intelligence in coursework, fairness of use by instructors or administrators particularly with respect to assessment practices, and concerns of being disadvantaged by the unfair or unauthorized use by classmates or group work colleagues.

> *Thank you again for all your help throughout this process. I truly appreciate your guidance and support. At times, the process felt confusing and over-whelming, and your clear explanations and resources helped me navigate it and reach a positive outcome.*

MISCONDUCT AND OTHER NON-ACADEMIC MATTERS

Misconduct (departures from academic integrity, sexual misconduct and sexual violence (SMSV), non-academic misconduct), interpersonal concerns, and harassment & discrimination (H&D) related inquiries comprised 96 matters, or 31% of the OUO's volume this past year.



Concerns related to processes and decision-making regarding departures from academic integrity (DFAI) form the largest sub-category within misconduct, the majority involving students who had received a Notice of Investigation or a Notice of Finding and Sanction and were seeking guidance on their options, including how to prepare a response or pursue an appeal. A recurring pattern involved group assignments in which one student's use of generative AI resulted in findings against classmates who had not used it themselves. Visitors in these situations were often uncertain as to how to protect themselves in future group work, and worried about social retaliation and reprisal arising from alerting instructors about their concerns.

The OUO continued to serve as the designated resource office for student respondents in accordance with the Policy on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence Involving Students. The office provided resources and information to 12 respondents. The office also received several concerns about the complaint and investigation process from individuals currently or previously involved in sexual violence matters and has initiated an informal systemic review. The OUO is grateful for the cooperation of Division of Student Affairs with the review which will conclude in the fall of 2026.

Nine matters involved concerns related to non-academic misconduct (NAM), most commonly from students seeking guidance on how to understand and navigate the process, including how to respond to notices of investigation or interim measures, and how to weigh the implications of proposed informal resolutions. Several matters raised more systemic concerns, including procedural fairness in the application of intake processes for harassment and discrimination allegations, and confidentiality breaches when a student athletic team became the subject of public commentary during an active investigation; in the latter case, the office recommended that administrators develop a

communications protocol for NAM matters involving teams or groups. Other visitors sought support in navigating the intersection of NAM with related processes, such as the students-at-risk process and appeals, or with the mental health considerations underlying their conduct.

Interpersonal concerns (27 matters) most often involved supervisory relationships in graduate programs, conflicts with instructors or teaching assistants, and workplace-adjacent concerns raised by students in employment or leadership roles. Most interpersonal concerns are resolved through informal mediation or by providing individuals with information regarding relevant formal complaint processes, such as the Harassment and Discrimination Prevention and Response Policy.

> *Thank you so much for everything you have done for me. I cannot fully express in words how grateful I am for your help.*

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Financial and employment-related concerns together accounted for 28 matters, or 9% of the office's volume.

Financial concerns most frequently involved tuition assessment disputes, including domestic/international fee questions, payment plan administration, and refund eligibility following withdrawal, as well as delays in the disbursement of Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and other financial assistance. Several matters this year involved informal resolutions in which a faculty or administrative office reviewed the matter and determined it appropriate to waive or adjust a disputed charge once the underlying circumstances were understood.

Employment concerns, while smaller in volume, tended to be among the more complex files the office handled, frequently involving staff members navigating administrative leave, return-to-work processes following illness or injury, or workplace relationships characterized by a significant power imbalance. Where a matter fell within the scope of a collective agreement procedure, visitors were advised that the office's role was necessarily limited, consistent with our mandate set out in the terms of reference.

> *Thank you again for your thoughtful response and for the time and care you gave me when I was going through a difficult period. I was grateful for the clarity you provided about the lack of any formal process to address my concern, even though that was difficult to hear. It helped me to better understand the position I was in. I mainly wanted to thank you for your help and kindness.*

SYSTEMIC REVIEWS

In accordance with our terms of reference, the Ombudsperson may initiate a systemic review where concerns raised by individual visitors suggest a broader pattern of unfairness in university process, rather than an isolated decision. The Ombudsperson has initiated one systemic review during this reporting period.

Timeliness of the Sexual Violence Complaint Process

Late in the reporting period, the OUO received a number of related concerns about communications and the pace of the process to investigate and resolve complaints of sexual violence involving student respondents pursuant to the Policy on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence Involving Students. Concerns arose from respondents, complainants, and support persons. Taken together, these concerns were sufficient to warrant a systemic review of timelines and communications practices within the SMSV process, which the Ombudsperson initiated shortly before the close of the reporting period. Findings and any resulting recommendations will be reported in next year's Annual Report. The OUO is grateful for the cooperation of those involved in administering and supporting the SMSV process who have been responsive to the review.

Other Reviews

The OUO conducted preliminary reviews to determine whether a fulsome systemic review was warranted regarding two other matters. The first was in regards to procedural fairness concerns raised regarding the intake and assessment process for allegations of harassment and discrimination. Fairness concerns were efficiently resolved as a result of the preliminary review. The second matter was in regards to fairness concerns arising from the December 2023 decision by the Faculty of Arts and Science to suspend admissions to Arts and Science Online. The preliminary review determined that the concern was isolated rather than systemic, and those involved in raising the concern were provided information and guidance to support resolution.

Staff and Faculty Consultations

In addition to matters raised directly by students, the OUO responded to 30 consultation requests from staff and faculty seeking guidance and support in their own roles this year. These consultations ranged from requests for policy review and feedback, to questions about the interpretation and application of academic policies and procedures. A number of visitors sought guidance on procedural fairness considerations in decision-making, or guidance on navigating the intersection of academic processes with human rights, accommodation, or safety concerns. The office also fielded requests for resources and best practices to support units in their administrative and decision-making functions.

Strengthening Connections

Strong relationships and open communication across the Queen's community are essential to the effective operation of the Office. We are grateful to our many partners within the faculties, central divisions, and portfolios for their continued collaboration and support. We extend particular appreciation to our student government leaders for their thoughtful engagement and contributions.

Key Partners:

- University Culture Committee
- VP Culture, Equity, and Inclusion
- Human Rights & Equity Office
- Office of Indigenous Initiatives
- Office of Complaints & Investigations
- Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Services
- University Legal Counsel
- University Secretariat
- Division of Student Affairs, particularly the Registrar, Admissions, Student Conduct & Care, Residence Life & Services, QSAS, and QUIC
- Centre for Teaching and Learning
- Office of the University Rector
- Alma Mater Society (AMS)
- Society of Graduate & Professional Students (SGPS)
- Associate Deans (Academic) & Directors of Student Services
- Ombuds Academic Appeal Advisors -
  - Dr. Alan Ableson
  - Dr. Donald Sackey
- Queen's Clinical Teacher's Association Ombudsman

Professional Associations:

- Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO)
- Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO)
- Ontario ACCUO Roundtable
- International Ombuds Association

Committees and Working Groups:

- Board of Trustees, Official Observer
- Senate, Official Observer
- Academic Integrity Sub-Committee
- Policy Advisory Sub-Committee
- University Council on Anti-Racism and Equity (UCARE)
- Human Rights Legislative Group
- Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Task Force
- Transcript Working Group
- Rector's Advisory Committee

Noteworthy External Engagements::

- Ombudsperson and Associate Ombudsperson attended the FCO/ACCUO bi-annual conference themed: *Ombuds on Edge: Tackling Challenges, Evolving Practices, Enduring Principles*
- Associate Ombudsperson attended ACCUO Ontario Roundtable hosted by the Office of the Ombudsperson - University of Toronto
- Ombudsperson completed the following professional development trainings:
  - International Ombuds Association Foundations Course
  - Osgoode/FCO Advanced Issues in Ombuds Practice Course
  - Queen's Artificial Intelligence and Law Certificate

Building on Progress -

Strengthening Support for the Queen's Community

As the OUO reflects on a year of record case volume, our priorities for 2026-2027 include:

- Publication of an educational module to support administrative decision-makers, including appeal bodies, in making and communicating procedurally fair decisions
- Completing the systemic review of timeliness and communication practices within the sexual violence complaint process, and reporting resulting recommendations to the relevant offices.
- Continuing to monitor the growth in academic integrity matters involving generative AI, including engaging with faculties on how group-work findings are investigated and communicated to students who were not responsible for the conduct at issue.
- Strengthening coordination with QSAS, the Human Rights and Equity Office, and faculty-level administrators to sustain progress in improving efficiency and collegiality within the academic accommodation implementation process.
- Reviewing intake and triage processes to ensure the OUO's capacity keeps pace with a visitor volume that has grown by more than 70% since 2023-2024.
- Expanding proactive outreach and plain-language resources so that community members understand the OUO's role, and the limits of that role, before a concern becomes urgent.

Building on the observations in this report, our focus in the coming year will be on deepening our impact through proactive engagement, education, and the advancement of fair practices, while ensuring the office's resourcing remains adequate to a growing and increasingly complex volume and range of concerns.



queensu.ca/ombuds