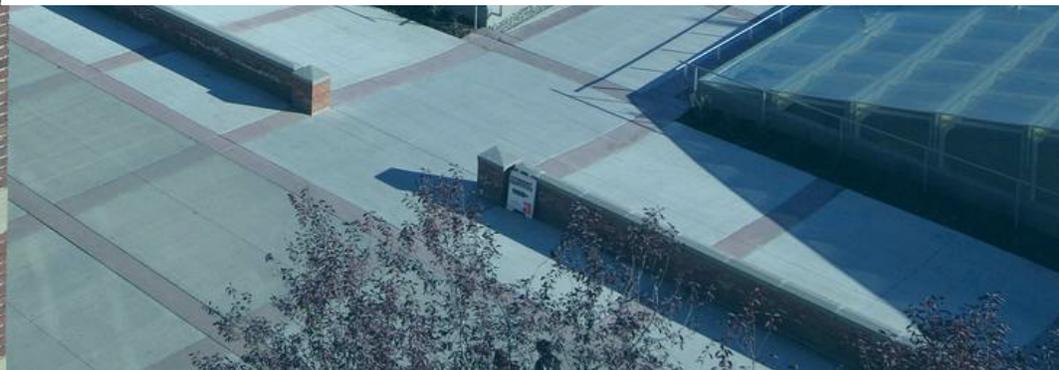


**Annual
Report**

2024 -2025

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

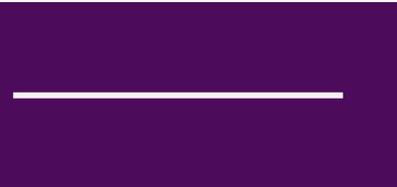


SAIT

Southern Alberta
Institute
of Technology

Prepared by:
Jeff Stransky
Katherine Mak

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A Word from the Ombudsperson

As Ombudsperson, I am an impartial, informal, independent, and confidential resource who guides visitors through difficult situations and advocates for due process and fair outcomes. For many of the 400+ inquiries received this year, my role functioned like an energy-dispersal system—a floodgate or heat sink—where concern, frustration, and exasperation could be safely released in a confidential, judgment-free environment. Through these interactions, Ombuds visitors are able to slow down, articulate their concerns, consider alternative perspectives, and better understand their options for how to proceed. As emotional intensity diminishes, rational problem-solving increases, making sensible outcomes more achievable with less time, effort, and institutional risk, while also supporting learning for everyone involved.

At its core, the Ombuds role is about helping people feel heard and treated fairly, and better equipped to navigate complexity. Ombuds work frequently begins in moments of frustration or uncertainty, but it often concludes with clarity and moderation. That progression, repeated hundreds of times each year at SAIT, underscores the Office of the Ombudsperson's contribution to a respectful, resilient, and well-functioning community.

Jeff Stransky
Ombudsperson



I recently heard a colleague profess that one of the big challenges of being an Ombuds is that no one ever reaches out to let you know they're having a good day. On the contrary, folks who contact the Ombuds have generally encountered some sort of difficulty that's causing them significant stress. In many cases, they unreasonably presume that their situation will conclude in a worst-case scenario. For me, it can be difficult not to develop a distorted view of the overall mood on campus, and it's sometimes hard to avoid the feeling that SAIT is a gloomy, angry, anxiety-ridden place.

In reality, over 98% of the SAIT community **didn't** reach out to the Office of the Ombudsperson for help in 2024-2025. I like to believe that I hear from only a small portion of the population because, despite the imperfections inherent in a publicly funded postsecondary institution, SAIT is a place where most challenges can be resolved not only through the application of well-written policies and procedures, but through thoughtful, professional, and respectful dialogue. Not gloomy at all. It's actually a pretty civilized place to study, work, and live.

WHAT IS AN OMBUDSPERSON



The Ombudsperson serves an important role at SAIT, acting as an impartial and independent resource for students, faculty and staff, and others with a connection to the institution. The Ombudsperson provides a confidential and accessible avenue through which individuals can seek assistance on how to resolve their concerns.

SAIT's Ombudsperson works with individuals to explore options and strategies for addressing disputes, whether they involve academic concerns, interpersonal conflict, or other challenges encountered in the learning environment. By offering guidance and facilitating constructive dialogue, the Ombudsperson helps members of the SAIT community find solutions that align with the institution's values and policies.

Broadly, the Ombudsperson:

- Creates a culture of fairness, inclusivity, and respect
- Raises awareness of institutional policies and procedures
- Supports individuals in their path to self-advocacy
- Ensures individuals understand their rights and responsibilities
- Assists with dispute resolution where possible
- Refers to other SAIT or external resources when they are not able to assist
- Identifies systemic issues and provides recommendations for change





THE FIVE PILLARS

Five foundational pillars underpin the role of the Ombudsperson at SAIT. Collectively, they serve as a framework to provide a fair and equitable approach to addressing concerns and issues encountered by students and the broader SAIT community.



Independent



Impartial

Confidential



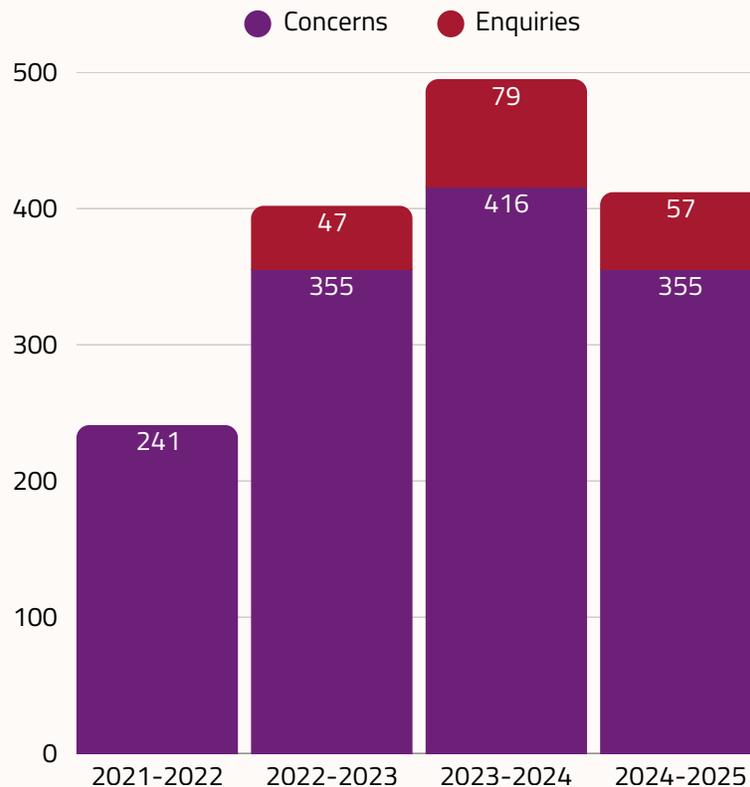
Accessible

Informal



THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Overview of Incoming Enquiries and Concerns

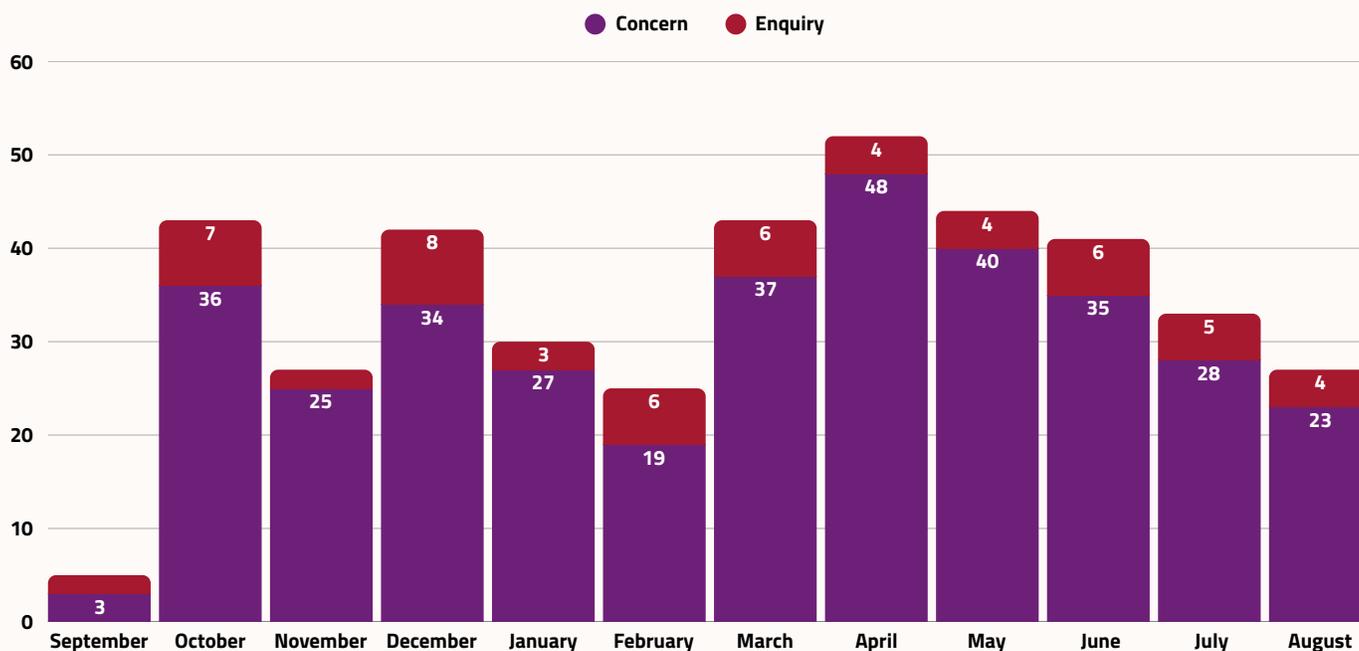


When a new case is presented to the Office of the Ombudsperson, it is categorized either as a **Concern** (a matter raised pertaining to an individual’s experience as student or staff) or an **Enquiry** (a policy/procedure-related matter or a proactive consultation to discuss, e.g., how to fairly manage an individual situation).

In 2024-2025, the overall number of cases opened at the Office of the Ombudsperson declined from 495 to 412, a 17% decrease from the previous year. No clear explanation exists for this decline, however it may reflect (a) reduced demand following the 7-week Ombudsperson vacancy July-September 2024, (b) the initial absence of consultative relationships between SAIT community members and the new Ombuds, and (c) reduced capacity in the new Ombuds’ first few months at SAIT.

The downward trend in demand for Ombuds support has already proven to be temporary. Fall 2025 traffic data show a resurgence of demand through the first quarter of the 2025-2026 reporting year.

Monthly Distribution of Incoming Enquiries and Concerns, 2024-2025 (n=412)



The volume of new inquiries at the Office of the Ombudsperson is generally higher in November, December, and January (an accumulation of issues arising during the fall term), and also in March, April, and May (similar accumulation during the winter term). In 2024-2025, however, the number of incoming cases did not surge as expected in November, January, and May. The following observations suggest possible explanations for the decline:

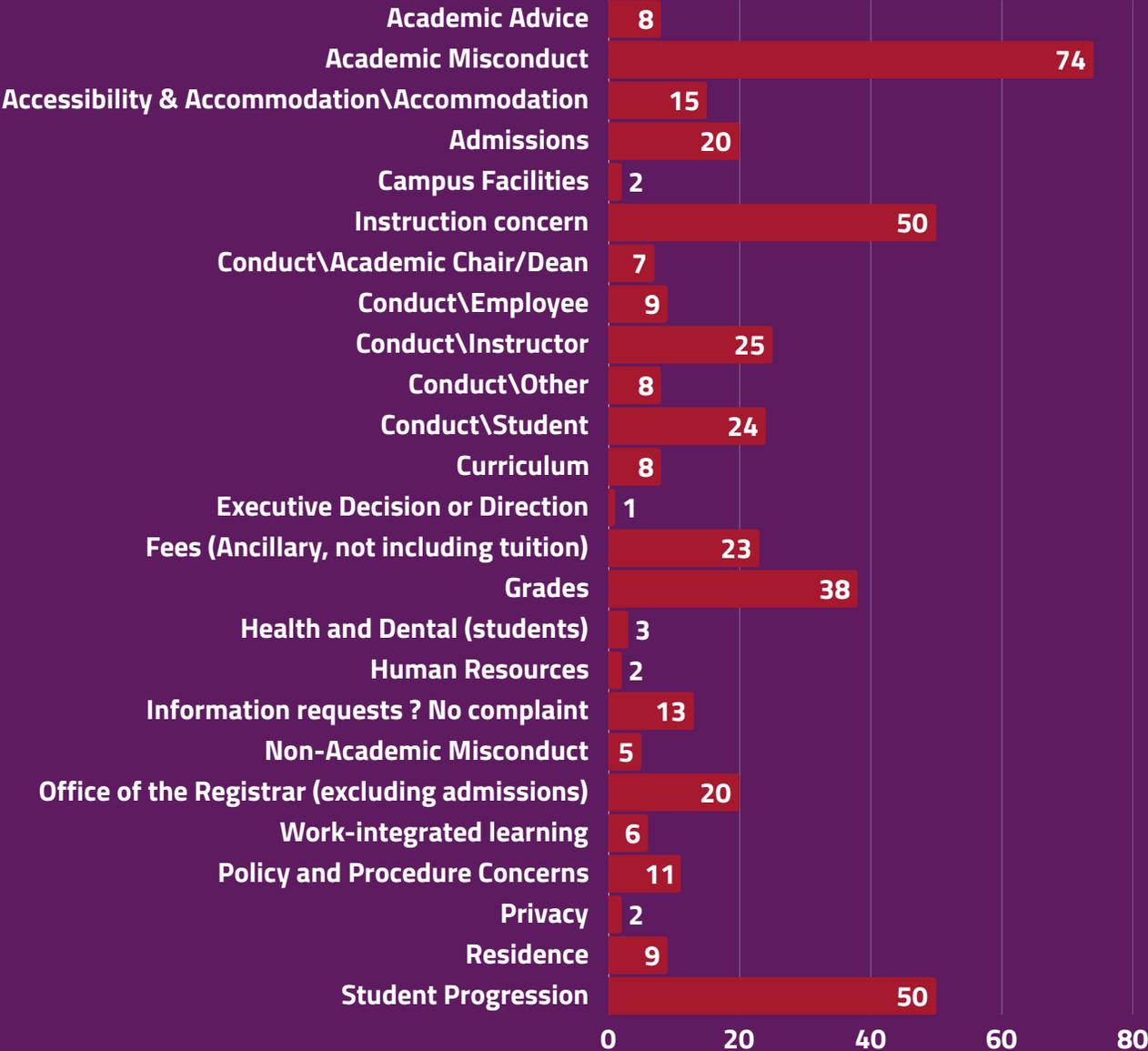
- A mid-term break was introduced at SAIT in November 2024, and students paused their studies for three days where they had not done so previously. This may have influenced a year-over-year overall decline in cases (November 2023=52, November 2024=27)
- Declines in three issue types occurred in January 2025 and May 2025: Student Progression (e.g. academic withdrawals), Grades, and issues related to Admissions or Office of the Registrar. The total year-over-year decline over these three issue types was 16 in January, and 24 in May.
- Small 'Enquiry' numbers suggest reduced staff outreach to the Ombuds for proactive consultation in these particular months.

A noticeably small number of incoming cases were logged in September 2024, the result of the Ombudsperson position being vacant for the first half of that month.

Issues on Closed Cases, 2024-2025 (n=433*)

This chart illustrates an overview of issue types presented by visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson, based on cases closed during the 2024-2025 reporting period.

* Visitors sometimes present multiple issues. The number of Issues (433) exceeds the total number of Enquiries/Concerns (412) as a result.



Top 5 Issues on Closed Cases, 2024-2025



Academic Misconduct, 74.

(32% increase). Total number of issues presented to the Ombuds relating to academic misconduct including first offences (35), second offences (22), and cases for which the exact details of the misconduct were not disclosed (17). No inquiries regarding third or fourth academic misconduct offence allegations were logged this year.



Instruction Concern, 50.

(new issue type previously aggregated within 'Conduct\Instructor'; no comparator data from 2024-2025, however this issue type is believed to have not changed significantly since 2023-2024). These are issues normally raised by students regarding an instructor's administration of a course and/or delivery of course material.



Student Progression, 50.

(36% decrease). This issue type is most commonly used when a student has been academically withdrawn and they are seeking to understand the decision and, often, their option to pursue an Academic Continuance Appeal.



Grades, 38.

(39% decrease). Issues pertaining to grades commonly involve referral to grade appeal options within SAIT's Grading and Progression Procedure.



Conduct\Instructor, 25.

(similar to Instruction Concern, this issue type is believed to have not changed significantly from the previous year). These issues involved perceived questionable or inappropriate behavior on the part of an instructor, including allegation of some form of discrimination, sexual harassment/violence, or other form of bullying or harassment.

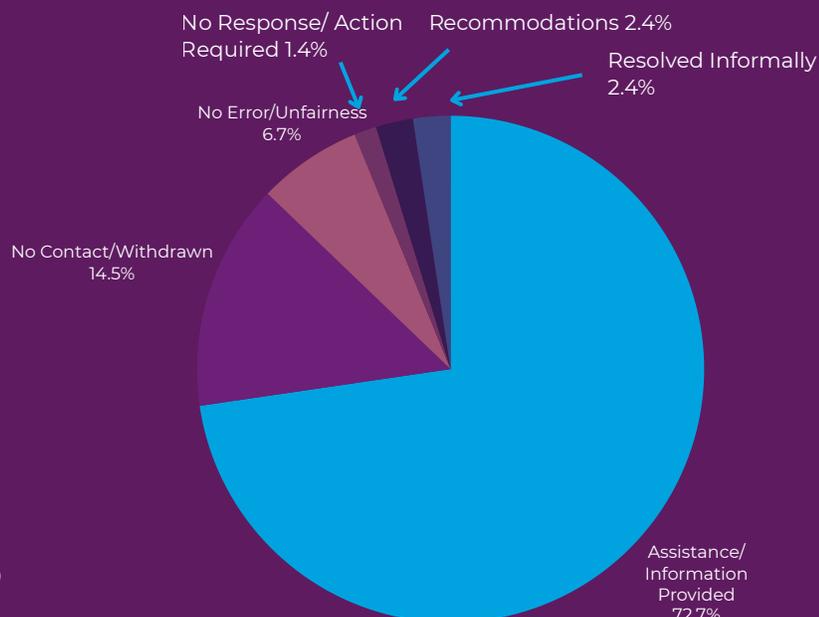
Importantly, a year-over-year change in cases may suggest an overall trend in behavior at SAIT, however this number is likely distorted by the overall tendency of individuals to contact the Ombudsperson for assistance (or not). For example, a 32% increase in the number of academic misconduct cases presented to the Ombudsperson does not necessarily equate to an overall change in the number of reported academic misconduct cases campus-wide.

Issue Outcomes of Closed Cases, 2024-2025 (n=433)

The Ombudsperson seeks to equip and empower visitors to address their concerns independently and without Ombuds intervention. Because the Ombudsperson is not normally notified of the final outcome of a situation, the providing of assistance and information often represents the final point of contact and is therefore the most commonly used outcome type. A much smaller number of cases are actually confirmed to have concluded, e.g. Resolved Informally, No Error/Unfairness.

The No Contact/Withdrawn outcome type represents cases where an individual has reached out to the Ombuds for support, but they subsequently abandon their efforts before assistance can be provided. A visitor's choice to abandon their pursuit of Ombuds assistance is respected. The Ombuds endeavors to provide all visitors with assistance and information and seeks to minimize abandonment rates at all times.

Exact reasons for abandonment are not clear. However, it is possible that as individuals wait for in-depth Ombuds consultation, they also access non-Ombuds services (e.g. Office of the Registrar, Human Resources, Lamb Learner Success Centre) and receive referrals to direct escalation paths or automated institutional procedures (e.g. formal grade appeals). Self-resolution of an issue or disagreement likely also occurs, as does conscious choice by an individual to simply discontinue their efforts to address a concern.



THOUGHTS, THEMES, RECOMMENDATIONS



Documentation of advising communications is a wise investment, especially in conversations about admissions and academic programs.



Cases involving admissions and academic advising constitute a relatively small proportion of inquiries to the Office of the Ombudsperson. Most of the 28 situations encountered this year, however, punched above their weight: they were disproportionately time intensive, they occurred across all types of programs (credit and non-credit), and they shared one or more concerning characteristics:

- Confusion or miscommunication between applicant/student and the institution.
- Higher risk of confusion and miscommunication among individuals with lower English proficiency, often exacerbated by culture barriers and unpredictability in immigration rules and processes for international students.
- Significant actual or perceived financial impact to the student: hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars in forfeited registration deposits or non-refundable tuition.
- Financial impact disproportionately larger for international students.
- Presentation of extensive and sometimes convoluted, repetitive, and/or irrelevant documentation by students, requiring significant staff (usually Ombuds) resources to assess.
- Presumption on the part of applicant/student that discretionary exceptions, especially on compassionate grounds, are an entitlement or otherwise commonplace.

Ideally, clarity in institutional communications and advising is consistent enough that confusion does not occur. But when it inevitably does, and the confusion is investigated, clear documentation allows for transparency of the institution's perspective. This can enhance the institution's ability to deliver an explanation efficiently, enabling individuals to quickly understand the rationale for a decision that is not in their favour. Involvement of the Office of the Ombudsperson can be minimized or potentially rendered unnecessary. When an oversight or shortcoming on the part of the institution is founded, errors can be corrected and reconciled. The institution further benefits from opportunities to identify process or training shortcomings which, if addressed, can reduce the recurrence of confusion and miscommunication in the future. Documentation of advising conversations, especially in academic advising and admissions settings, should be a priority.

THOUGHTS, THEMES, RECOMMENDATIONS



Honouring the duty to accommodate is as important as ever.



The frequency of cases presented to the Ombudsperson relating to accessibility issues is relatively low. However, the subset of these cases involving an allegation of a failure to accommodate is concerning. To be clear, the area of primary concern is not the securing of accommodations; rather, it is the perceived *delivery* of accommodations, most commonly in an assessment setting. This concern may be the consequence of one or more of the following:

- Training shortcomings among teaching faculty, especially last-minute hires or those unfamiliar with the postsecondary learning environment.
- Accommodation- and compassion fatigue among instructors due to growing numbers of students with formal accommodations, compounded by a high incidence of students seeking *informal* accommodations or exceptions.
- Technology shortcomings, including those relating to the use of lockdown browsers that may be incompatible with students' personal devices.
- Unrealistic expectations among students, shaped by memories of heightened levels of flexibility, tolerance, and compassion experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with regard to assessments.

Establishing and implementing accommodations is a collaborative effort between a student, Accessibility Services, and the instructor and department through which a course is offered. SAIT must continue to prioritize the work of Accessibility Services. Accessibility Advisors (and the Ombuds, when necessary) must continue to guide students on their responsibilities with regard to accommodations. Schools, departments, and Academic Chairs must continue to enable instructors to deliver accommodations as intended and as required under Alberta's Human Rights Act. Finally, instructors themselves must continue to ensure the proper delivery of their students' accommodations in support of their learning.

THOUGHTS, THEMES, RECOMMENDATIONS



Insufficient English proficiency is a concerning barrier to successful, healthy, and fair outcomes.



Individuals with a limited grasp of English reaching out to the Office of the Ombudsperson for support is not unusual but, given the importance of strong English skills in SAIT’s learning environment, it is always alarming. Student support units, academic advisors, instructors, and Academic Chairs would agree that English proficiency is critically important for success at SAIT. Not only must students be able to grasp the concepts and demonstrate their understanding of course material, but they must also be able to stay safe. They also need to be able to navigate unforeseen social or regulatory situations (e.g. an allegation of misconduct) that may arise during their time at SAIT.

English proficiency is important not only in the learning environment, but also in students’ working and living spaces, as well as in situations involving their mental or physical health. When involved in a formal SAIT process, students are commonly permitted access to an interpreter as a measure to assure procedural fairness; however, this is not failsafe. Artificial intelligence and translation applications can be helpful, but they do not replace foundational language knowledge. The temptation to use AI inappropriately almost certainly increases among individuals not only struggling with course material but also struggling with language limitations.

From an Ombuds perspective, requiring an individual to navigate a difficult circumstance in a poorly grasped second or subsequent language is not conducive to a fair outcome. SAIT must continue to place a high priority on assuring that students attending the institution possess a strong level of English proficiency. Doing so enhances students’ ability to succeed not only in the classroom, but in all aspects of their lives during and beyond their time on campus.

CONTACT US



Jeff Stransky
Ombudsperson



PHONE :
403-284-8511



ADDRESS :
MC201, Stan Grad Centre



WEBSITE :
<https://www.sait.ca/ombudsperson>



EMAIL :
ombudsperson.info@sait.ca



**THANK
YOU!**