



**Graduate Students' Association**  
of the University of Ottawa  
Local 94 of the Canadian Federation of Students  
**Association des étudiant.e.s diplômé.e.s**  
de l'Université d'Ottawa  
Section 94 de la Fédération canadienne des étudiant.e.s

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### **GSAÉD response to the report of the Committee on Academic Freedom**

The GSAÉD joins the UOSU and other representatives in expressing our concerns in the report generated by the Committee on Academic Freedom, circulated by the University of Ottawa on November 4, 2021.

The GSAÉD states that our brief consultation with the Committee on Academic Freedom does not infer our support for the content of the report. While we note that several of our recommendations are present, including the creation of a standing committee to review and implement related policy, we consider the overall dissatisfactory report to be biased towards the faculty perspective. Whether by design or not, the limited non-faculty contribution is best exemplified by blatant omission of student representation on this committee and report; this lack of equity in stakeholders' representation should not continue on to the suggested standing committee.

The report spends considerable time defending the rights and actions of academics, while omitting the impact that these faculty members can have on students during the dissemination of sensitive content in teaching and research. While we understand that "the right to be offended does not exist," it should be affirmed that the act of 'bullying' can manifest itself in offensive, discriminatory, or otherwise insensitive actions or speech by faculty, and while academic freedom is a central pillar of our institution, it exists alongside the need to uphold the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization.

The ability versus the necessity to invoke academic freedom as a blanket defense for any approach to discussing high-risk content seem to be conflated in the report. We assert that there should be a distinction between the understanding of academic freedom in research compared to how this content is approached in the classroom. Specifically, while an instructor might choose to engage in particularly sensitive language and content, a clear pedagogical rationale is required to justify this decision and a system should be in place where this can be reviewed. While such procedure exists in research (e.g., research ethics board), it does not in teaching.

There was a missed opportunity in this report to emphasize an ethic of care, establish mutual respect, foster an inclusive environment, and acknowledge the pedagogical responsibilities academics have when engaging with sensitive content. Particularly in the classroom, academics have power. They also convey a voice that reflects on the institution, whether or not this dynamic is acknowledged by the University. No member of the community can absolve themselves of their ethical and pedagogical responsibilities by hiding behind these claims to academic freedom.

Though we are disappointed by this report from the Committee on Academic Freedom, we hope that the University responds appropriately and expeditiously to the concerns raised by the GSAÉD, UOSU, and other community members, in taking these recommendations forward. The needs and rights of all university stakeholders cannot be overlooked in a rush to defend academic freedom, particularly as it applies to the classroom and other campus spaces.



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