

Minutes of the meeting of the **Academic Policy Committee** held on Thursday 10th November 2011, from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m., Room 302, James Building

Present: A.C. Masi (Chair), A. Bouchard, E.Y. Clare, H. Dinel, I. Henderson, W. Hendershot, M. Kreiswirth, M. Luke, C. Mandato, S. McDougall, M.J. Mendelson, A. Misra, P. Perez-Aleman, J. Potter, C. Urbain (for C.C. Cook), M. Wanderley, C. Weston, H.M.C. Richard (*Secretary to the Committee*)

Regrets: W. Adams, C.C. Cook, K. Dalkir, O. Gautheron, R. Goldstein, L. Hendren, R. Mayor-Mora, L. Stone, W. Thomson,
Guest: P. Smith (item 5), M. Nahon (item 7)

Documents circulated at the meeting: *none*

APC agreed to the Provost's proposal that Dr Philip Smith, Associate Director of the Academic Unit Reviews Office, be invited to attend the meetings of APC as a resource person.

05.01 Proposed agenda

The proposed agenda was adopted.

05.02 Minutes of previous meeting held on 27th October 2011

The minutes were approved as circulated.

05.03 Business arising

None.

05.04 Report on approvals by Board of Governors, 1st November 2011

The proposal to create the Indian Ocean World Centre in the Faculty of Arts was approved by the Board of Governors on 1st November 2011.

05.05 APC Subcommittee on Academic Unit Reviews

Professor Ian Henderson presented the two proposals.

a) Subcommittee proposal to APC (11-APC-11-31 a)

The composition of the Subcommittee, as proposed, will be composed of four members two of whom will be recruited for each review, from a list comprising APC members and persons who have consented to serve. It was commented that recruitment should be broadened so that APC members are not overly burdened.

b) Summary template (11-APC-11-31 b)

The five questions were taken from the Academic Unit Review Policy approved by Senate. It was understood that those questions may not be equally relevant to all academic units.

APC approved the two proposals. The first review to come to APC will be that of the School of Architecture.

05.06 Council of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (CGPS) - 2011 Annual Report (11-APC-11-32)

The Annual Report from the Council of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies was received.

05.07 Revised Thesis Review Procedures

- Senate Question regarding revised thesis review procedures and Response (11-APC-10-30)
- Changes in thesis examination procedure - Memo for APC, from Martin Kreiswirth, Associate Provost (Graduate Education), Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, 3rd November 2011 (11-APC-11-33)

The Chair explained that Senate does not discuss procedures and therefore referred to APC the question as to whether the Revised Thesis Review Procedures, implemented by the Graduate Studies Office as of 1st September 2011, contravene the relevant policy. The Provost proposed that APC attempt to understand the concerns

expressed in the Question to Senate and see whether the Response given was adequate. The Provost would then bring APC's response back to Senate at its next meeting. APC's deliberation should focus on the question as to what extent the procedures, existing or proposed, reflect or compromise the policy and whether the concerns expressed by Law Senators Richard Janda and Richard Gold require further consideration. Suspending the new practice until it has been more fully reviewed was not seen as serving students fairly.

Professor Martin Kreiswirth, Associate Provost (Graduate Education) and Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and Professor Meyer Nahon, Associate Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, outlined the situation regarding thesis review procedures at McGill and elsewhere, and McGill's intentions. To have an external reviewer for Ph.D. theses is not a common requirement and practice: among universities that are members of the American Association of Universities (AAU), only the two Canadian universities, University of Toronto and McGill, have that practice, which is shared by all Canadian universities. The practice appears to be specific to Commonwealth countries. It is indeed uncommon in universities in the United States to send Ph.D. theses beyond the university for review. Harvard, Stanford, and U.C. at Berkeley do not even impose thesis examinations. A search has shown that no debate has been held in the past twenty years on whether or not McGill should retain previous procedures for securing thesis examiners. The question raised at Senate would appear to be based on a misunderstanding of the reasons for changing the procedures. Extensive consultations were carried out and are summarized in Professor Kreiswirth's answer to Professor Janda's question in Senate. Also, the text in the annual report from CGPS to APC provides reasons for the procedure changes: "These procedures give increased flexibility to the units in choosing the most qualified thesis examiners; align McGill with the practices of our peers; ensure greater consistency across units; and streamline examination procedures while maintaining quality assurance based upon the arm's length of examiners." Some of the issues raised at Senate were brought up during the consultation, concerns regarding conflict of interest in particular. The new procedures were considered to be an improvement: they alleviate conflict of interest concerns by clearly identifying what constitutes conflict of interest; they also allow a speedier thesis review process and are consistent with those at other universities, namely in Canada and the U.K.

In the discussion, the following points were made:

- Bringing conflicts of interest upfront and providing a list of instances is beneficial: what constitutes a conflict of interest is no longer left to personal judgment; the most obvious rules regarding conflicts of interest have been identified.
- While conflicts of interest cannot be fully eliminated, it is the perception of conflict of interest that may matter.
- Conflict of interest guidelines do not apply to the Ph.D. internal examiner.
- The elimination of the thesis supervisor as a possible internal examiner is an important step to achieving an arms-length review.
- A policy that requires external reviews for Ph.D. theses is valued especially in fields for which it would be difficult to find the level of expertise that the student deserves at the home university. The new procedures enhance the policy: they allow freedom in the selection of external reviewers and latitude in the way they are selected.
- Certain faculties at McGill may consistently invite external examiners to be physically present at the defense, as is the custom in France and some other universities in Canada. Such a practice, if made compulsory, would require a central fund or system to cover the expenses entailed.
- The new procedures depend on goodwill, academic responsibility and professional integrity.

As a conclusion, it was stated that the new procedures could be viewed as having enhanced the process, increased effectiveness and efficiency, and removed a point of conflict of interest by removing the supervisor as examiner.

APC's position was that the Committee was convinced that the new procedures meet the requirements of the policy requiring external Ph.D. theses reviews that avoid conflicts of interest. **It was agreed that APC's position would be conveyed to Senate in APC's next regular report** (433rd Report, for the meeting of Senate on 7th December 2011).

05.08 Other business

None.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.