

**RESULTS OF ELECTRONIC ACADEMIC COMMITTEE MEETING**  
**January 28, 2014**

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|----|---|-----------------|
| 1. | Minutes of November 26, 2013  | <b>AC-13-51</b> |
| 2. | Chemistry<br>CHEM 493                      Adv Phys Chem Lab<br>Renumbered from [-393]; title, description,<br>pre/co-requisite, restriction<br>3 credits | <b>AC-13-52</b> |
| 3. | Computer Science<br>COMP 691                      Thesis Research 1<br>Credit weight change from 2 credits<br>3 credits                                   | <b>AC-13-53</b> |
|    | Program Changes:  |                 |
|    | - M.Sc. in Computer Science   | <b>AC-13-54</b> |
|    | - M.Sc. in Computer Science - Bioinformatics Option   | <b>AC-13-55</b> |
|    | - M. Sc. in Computer Science - Computational Science and Engineering Option   | <b>AC-13-56</b> |
| 4. | Biology<br><b>Program Changes</b><br>- Honours in Biology   | <b>AC-13-57</b> |
|    | <b>Program Retirement</b><br>- Ph.D. in Biology - Developmental Biology   | <b>AC-13-58</b> |

**Items 1 to 4 were approved.**

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| 5. | Feedback on Proposed Revisions on Policy on Course Evaluations (Also sent to Chairs/Directors) | <b>AC-13-59</b> |
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**Anatomy & Cell Biology - Justin Kollman**

No comments.

Comments from Chair -

**Atmospheric & Oceanic Sciences - Daniel Kirshbaum**

All of the changes look sensible to me. One question, though - is it reasonable to state somewhere that hand-written comments will be transcribed to electronic format to protect the anonymity of student responses? I believe that this is already the McGill procedure, which maybe should be highlighted.

Comments from Chair -

**Biochemistry - Julie St-Pierre**

Regarding the course evaluation, I just want to stress that I think that it is important to inform the study about the importance of these evaluation.

Comments from Chair - Albert Berghuis

Thank you for allowing us to provide feedback on the proposed revisions. Having gone through the altered course evaluation policy, and having discussed this with the chair of our departmental curriculum committee, I'm happy to tell you that we have no concerns or objections to any of the proposed changes.

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**Biology - Thomas Bureau****Comments from Chair – Graham Bell**

I sent this document to our Undergraduate Committee. They had the following comments.

1. Evaluations should end before the beginning of the examination period. The merits of doing this are obvious and the argument for extending the evaluation period is unclear.
2. The new policy is qualitatively different from the old policy because it includes a new objective: "Course evaluations at McGill shall be used: as one indicator of the quality and effectiveness of teaching". Since this is to be obligatory ("shall") it deserves more extended discussion than changes in details.
3. Biology has its own TA questionnaire which we think more appropriate than this version.

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**Chemistry - Amy Szuchmacher**

Many colleagues in my department have expressed concerns with the extension of course evaluations into the final exam period. With the intensity that some students approach final exams, they fear that the course evaluation will reflect student opinion of the final exam rather than the course as a whole.

**Comments from Chair -**

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**Computer Science - Bettina Kemme**

2 things were confusing

1) New 5.1 indicates that core questions 3 and 4 refer to teaching assistants instead of the instructor, but the questions in new 5.2 (old 6.2) still refer to the instructor. What now?? Are the instructor questions removed??

2) New 6.1

If the evaluation period now includes the exam period then I think different questions are needed. In particular, the questionnaire should have a specific exam question. Otherwise, some bad mood about an exam that is considered unfair/too difficult etc. will likely be reflected on questions 1-4, although the exam is mostly orthogonal unrelated to questions 1-4.

For instance, in COMP 202 we are now experiencing with multiple choice questions. This is due to the large number of students and the reduced number of TAs. We provide to use these TAs to provide more feedback during the semester, and thus, needed a faster mechanism to do the grading of the exam.

Multiple choice is not ideal, but it really has nothing to do whether the student learned a great deal from the course. Also, in the first years for COMP 202, my estimate is that we will not quite have the right multiple choice questions, thus a specific question on the exam will help us get better, so it would be really helpful.

**Comments from Chair -**

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**Earth & Planetary Sciences - Anthony Williams-Jones**

My comments on item 5 are 1) 5.1.a.ii I don't understand why core questions 3 and 4 should refer to teaching assistants rather than the instructor, if the course has teaching assistants. The instructor should still be evaluated. Questions that refer to teaching assistants should be added and not replace those referring to the instructor. 5.1.b.i. I would prefer to see uniformity within academic units and would therefore not be in favour of allowing instructors to include questions. 6.1. Delete the word "may" after "Units". There are two "may" in the sentence. 8.1. Commonly, the response rate is less than the target percentage. I believe that it would be unfortunate not to pass on the results of an evaluation to students because the response rate has been inadequate. To not do so would be to deprive students of potentially valuable information for selecting courses. The response rate should, however, be reported. The real challenge is to find means of increasing the response rate.

Comments from Chair -

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**Geography - Lea Berrang Ford**

I don't have any concerns with the revisions to the policy on course evaluations. I can bring this to our March departmental meeting, but don't see anything there that should substantively raise hackles (Tim can correct me if otherwise).

Comments from Chair – Tim Moore

FACSCI Chairs had a fairly moribund discussion about the changes:

By default, results are released (previously required agreement) – someone said that TLS has investigated the legality of that;

Much confusing discussion about whether lengthening the period was good, bad or didn't matter, some concern over the use of 'shall' in the document, which the eminent Professor Bell told us was stronger than 'will'; but the use is fairly vague;

Some concern on the evaluation TAs and the 'space' taken up by that.

Thus, no major concerns from Chairs, Laurie will convey them to higher-ups.

tim

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**Library - PSEAL - Sara Holder**

Item 5.1 a ii states "Core questions 3 and 4 referring to teaching assistants rather than instructor, if the course has teaching assistants." Does that mean that the usual core Q. 3 & 4 (as stated in the new 5.2) will ask for the students' opinion of the TA rather than the instructor if the course has TA's? If that is not the intent then the wording is confusing.

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**Mathematics & Statistics - Vojkan Jaksic**

Comments from Chair - Jacques Hurtubise

1) Not sure that extending the evaluation period past the exams doesn't bias the quality evaluations more than they are already, mixing in with questions as to whether the course is difficult or not.

2) Not entirely sure that having opt-out rather than opt-in for faculty evaluations being public meets privacy regulations; but presumably this is an easy thing to check with University lawyers. It certainly would not if they were students' results being posted.

Otherwise ok.

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**McGill School of Environment - Kathy Roulet**

Item 5 – circulated to George McCourt – MSE Associate Director Undergraduate Affairs. His comments:

Hi Kathy,

I agree with the changes. I really like that they have flipped 6.1 about the length of time allowed for the evaluation process. Including the exam period should be the norm and not the other way around. Of course instructors can still opt out to only include the term but now they have to do this. The student feedback on the final exam should be included as a norm.

My only question was for 3c and 12.1c which has a statement about “as one indicator of the quality and effectiveness of teaching”. I was curious what else they use to make a determination of teaching effectiveness?

George

Comments from Director -

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**Microbiology & Immunology - Gregory Marczynski**

By core questions, do you mean the same questions asked of all instructors at McGill? Of instructors within their departments?

Perhaps core question should be defined.

Also only 2 core questions for the instructors seem low.

Otherwise, it sounds good to me.

Comments from Chair - J. (Quim) Madrenas

I am fine with the proposed revisions.

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**Pharmacology - Barbara Hales**

I think that the proposed revisions on course evaluation policy are appropriate.

Comments from Chair -

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**Physics - Guy Moore**

Needs a bit of proofreading.

Comments from Chair - Peter Grutter

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**Physiology - Anastasiya Nyzhnyk**

I have no objections to Item 5, Proposed Revisions on Policy on Course Evaluation. There is a minor typo in part 6.1 of this section, the word 'may' used twice.

Comments from Chair -

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## Psychology - Gillian O'Driscoll

There are several issues that we would like to see addressed in this document. I received a number of concerns from faculty that I raise below. I am sorry I could not get it back to you on Friday; I wanted our comments to be informed by the scientific literature on on-line student evaluations.

### A. The extended 6 week evaluation period:

- 1) Final grades are submitted for many courses before the extended evaluation period closes. The document should include specific assurance that final grades will not be available to students until after the window of evaluation has closed.
- 2) The vast majority (if not all) of on-line evaluation studies in university settings have evaluation periods closing before the exam period (I could not find a single counterexample?). The importance of avoiding exam performance confounds is explicitly stated in several published papers.
- 3) Recent experimental and quasi-experimental studies document the effect of exam performance on student ratings.

Bottom line: evaluation after exam periods compromises the data, and creates the risk that professors will be tempted to set easier final exams to please students.

### B. The obligation to implement the extended evaluation period unless an exception is granted:

The extended evaluation period compromises the external validity of the ratings without raising return rates to acceptable levels. This should not be the university's default option, and it should not require any special permission for the unit to choose the scientifically stronger option.

### C. The low thresholds for publication/acceptance of the data as valid.

When the university introduced on-line evaluations, it argued that response rates were not lower on-line than in-class. It further argued that administrative reminders and interventions by professors could address any shortcomings.

The fact that the University now proposes to codify response rates as low as 25-30% as acceptable -- response rates that are well below what is acceptable in any scientific survey -- is an admission that this claim was wrong (the wrongness of the claim has been obvious for several years in our department, with roughly 33% of evaluations completed by students enrolled in our courses).

The university should not be encouraging people to accept bad science, nor should they pretend that bad science is good science. Rather, they should create the conditions for good science. Whether it involves introducing incentives, having ratings done in-class on cellphones and laptops, or other methods, the university has an obligation to improve the product and deliver on its promises. Writing these response rates into the regulations is asking the faculty to accept the product as irremediably broken, and that for student evaluations cost and ease of administration trumped all other considerations.

### Comments from Chair - David Zuroff

I don't think we have a lot to say - mainly that the threshold should be set higher and that more should be done to make that happen.

I'll ask Gillian to send you a short written summary within the next few days.

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Alex Norton – Computer Science

All proposed changes seem beneficial to the student body so I'm in support of them. No suggestions come to mind.