

Senate Question regarding the allocation of government funding for students with disabilities
18 March 2015 Senate meeting

How is the University planning to allocate these funds to ensure they are used for their designated purpose? What is the timeline for distribution? Which McGill units and services will these funds be distributed to?

Which units and stakeholders are being consulted in this allocation process (e.g. Students, Student Services, the OSD)? How will the University ensure this process is transparent?

Will any of this funding be used to hire more staff for the OSD given the aforementioned budget constraints that affect their operations?

Answers provided by Prof Anthony C. Masi, Provost Prof Ollivier Dyens, Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning)

We thank Senators Rourke, Greenspon and Benrimoh for their questions. However, we also want to rectify some misinformation presented in the preamble of their submission to Senate at the same time.

The Office for Students with Disabilities provides important services to McGill students, and the University is committed to supporting its activities. OSD does in fact already have significant resources at its disposal, including an operating budget of approximately \$800,000 for FY2015, provided largely through student fees, but also through consistent support from the University's operating and capital budgets and the work of other units across McGill.

McGill currently reports over 1300 students with disabilities – nearly 40% of all students reporting disabilities counted across the full network of universities in Quebec, yet our student body is actually under 12% of university enrolments in the Province. McGill is committed to supporting the needs of disabled students and in fact has not waited for government allocations to do so.

The Ministry allocated a total of just under \$9.3M, of which \$7.5M was allocated as a function of the number of number of students in need across the full network of Quebec universities. The remaining \$1.7M was allocated in support of specific, related projects. A joint committee has been struck to examine how best to divide the envelope in future to ensure equity among the various institutions.

The interpretation that “this envelope is mean to be spent on improving services for students...” is an imprecise translation of the original French document. The *règles budgétaires* give no specific instruction for how the majority of the funds are to be spent (the French equivalent of “spent”, “dépensé”, is not used). They indicate, rather, that « Ce réinvestissement permettra de soutenir l’organisation et l’offre de services aux étudiants en situation de handicap... »

While “information about the timing and disbursement of this funding has not been communicated by the University to the McGill community”, this is true only insofar as it is not common practice to communicate details of any such disbursement to the community at large. The implication that details have been intentionally obfuscated on this issue is misleading. The University’ financial statements are a matter of public record and the annual Budget Book provides a full accounting of planned expenditures.

The assertion that “the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) will no longer receive direct funding from the government as in past years, and expects a budget shortfall of approximately 15% for the next academic year” is a misrepresentation of the *McGill Daily* article cited as the source for the statement and well as the overall budgetary situation. The *McGill Daily* noted only that OSD’s future funding was “uncertain”, based on the former director’s claim that no future funds had been promised to the Office from University administration. At the time of publication, 16 February, in fact no unit at McGill had a definitive budget allotment for the coming year.

While is it true that OSD will face “budget restrictions” in the coming year, this is true for every unit other on campus as well. In the wake of reductions in government support of universities, McGill finds itself in a position of budgetary constraint. All units are being asked, out of necessity and financial exigency, to work efficiently and effectively with reduced operating budgets – a situation likely to persist for the next several years. All units are also required to adhere to a restricted hiring policy.

To clarify the record, it is McGill University, and not OSD, that is “legally-mandated” to provided certain services to students in need and the University has every intention of honouring and indeed exceeding that obligation. OSD is not the only unit at McGill providing services to students with disabilities. The Faculties and University Services both, for example, commit significant time and resources to the support and accommodation of students with differing needs. Initiatives undertaken in recent years to aid students with disabilities include reviewing curricula in the Faculties in line with universal design methods; ensuring that services offered to students across campus are sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities; taking into

account special needs when redesigning and upgrading classrooms and lab space; and partnering with CEGEPs to ensure a smoother transition to University for students with disabilities.

The University has already invested significant resources in these and other activities, and in fact spends several times the amount provided by the MESRS grant in question.

To be clear, the funding envelop in question was provided as part of the overall annual government grant the university receives and was intended for the support of students with a range of specific needs, including, but not limited to, students directly assisted by the OSD. The precise amount that was allotted to McGill was defined through a set of measures employed by the Ministry to determine institutional funding in accordance with reported activities at each institution.

The unrestricted envelop of approximately \$1.2M provided this year is part of the overall university budget from which much more than \$1.2M has been allocated for services to students with disabilities and other needs across the University. In essence, then, the funds have *already* been distributed. There is no pending disbursement to OSD or to any other unit. There has been NO misdirection of these or any other funds allocated to McGill.

That said, the University has made a conscientious effort to exempt from cuts those expenses related to teaching, research and services provided to students, including students with disabilities.