

REPORT

“Micro” Task Force to Address COVID-19's Impact on Assessments of Academic Performance

Background and Context

Since the onset of the pandemic in Quebec, academic staff have navigated the varied effects of COVID-19 on their work at McGill. Like many other universities in North America, McGill decided to allow pre-tenure faculty to defer their year of reappointment or tenure consideration by one year. It has, however, become apparent that this measure alone may be insufficient to ensure equity in the assessment of academic performance. Even with permission to take additional time prior to reappointment or tenure consideration, there remains a need for guidance about how those charged with assessing academic performance should account for the impacts of the pandemic on academic performance, particularly since these impacts will differ among colleagues. Concerns have been especially acute for colleagues who, since March 2020, have done the following: assumed increased care responsibilities, faced increased personal health risks, seen their research activities interrupted or halted (e.g., interrupted experiments, delayed lab renovations or equipment delivery/repair, research with human participants, performance-based research), or taken up additional duties (e.g., clinical, teaching, service) on account of pandemic conditions.

Given these circumstances, and the fact that the impact of COVID-19 on academic work will persist for some time, the Provost convened a “Micro” Task Force (micro given its small size, short timeframe for doing its work, and discrete mandate (see below)) to examine this matter and make recommendations to ensure full and fair assessment of academic performance.

Mandate

This Task Force was struck to study the issue of academic performance assessment in the light of circumstances arising from COVID-19 and make recommendations to:

- a) provide academic staff with a fair opportunity to explain any impacts of COVID-19 on their academic performance in the contexts of merit, reappointment, tenure, and promotion, and
- b) ensure that those charged with assessing the performance of academic staff (Chairs, Deans, reappointment and tenure committees, merit committees, the Provost) understand that COVID-19 will have affected colleagues in varied and sometimes important ways, and that assessments of academic performance must accord due consideration and weight to the impacts of COVID-19, so as to ensure equitable outcomes.

Membership

- Angela Campbell (Chair) (Associate Provost, Equity & Academic Policies)
- Lesley Fellows (Vice-Dean, Academic Affairs, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences)
- Tynan Jarrett (Director, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion)
- Uzma Jamil (Senior Research Equity Advisor)
- Robert Leckey (Dean, Faculty of Law)
- Catherine Lu (Professor, Faculty of Arts, MAUT VP Internal)
- Janine Mauzeroll (Professor, Faculty of Science, MAUT President)

Process

The Micro Task Force met throughout the Fall 2020 term and January 2021. It reviewed concerns that had been brought forward by members of academic staff within the Faculties to the Office of the Provost & Vice-Principal (Academic) and to MAUT to discern how best to address the two questions that formed its mandate. The Micro Task Force considered how best to address these concerns against the backdrop of the following factors:

- the University's regulatory and policy framework;
- recognition that while COVID-19 has affected the work of all colleagues, its effects on individual staff members will vary in terms of nature, intensity, and duration;
- an understanding of the anxiety that many colleagues, especially those who do not have tenure, are experiencing, especially as to whether they can be assured of fair assessment of their work given the change in current working conditions and in some cases an increase in professional and personal responsibilities;
- maintaining our commitment to excellence, while understanding that the assessment of what amounts to "excellent" (or, in tenure-based language, "superior") teaching, research, and service might have to be adjusted given current conditions, which appear likely to persist in some form for some time. Any adjustment to expectations related to reappointment and tenure should be determined at the Department level, through a collegial process.

Informed by the feedback received, the Micro Task Force aimed to provide University-wide guidance while respecting local collegial processes and the vast diversity of practices and cultures across the University. It will be up to individual units to operationalize the Micro Task Force's recommendations in their respective contexts. For the sake of simplicity, reference in this document to a "Chair" may include a Director or Dean of a Faculty without Departments, as the case may be.

Recommendations

1. Because COVID-19's impacts on academic work will differ across colleagues, the Micro Task Force favours a principle-based approach to guide individual assessments of performance, rather than rules that would apply across the board. The Micro Task Force thus recommends that the University adopt the proposed *Guidelines for Assessing Academic Performance in the Face of COVID-19* ("Guidelines" Appendix 1).
2. **Annual meetings with academic staff around merit and performance should be maintained in all years going forward, including 2021.** This is so even for 2021, when merit will be based on the average of a staff member's prior two years' scores (see June 2020 memo from the Provost & Vice-Principal (Academic) and MAUT President Appendix 2). These meetings are especially critical for pre-tenure colleagues. They are also important for colleagues who are on a path toward promotion or another major career objective or milestone. Aside from reviewing the reference year, these annual meetings are also meant to be forward-looking, supporting goal-setting with colleagues to clarify expectations about performance, in particular, what will constitute superior performance.
3. Chairs should **discuss the implications of deferral of reappointment or tenure** due to COVID-19. Chairs will receive training on this at annual sessions for DTCs and UTCs and through the Academic Leadership Forum. The candidate's decision whether to defer tenure consideration in accordance with our Regulations and/or on account of the permission to defer for one year on account of COVID-19 is the

candidate's. At the same time, many candidates could be successful even without the deferral. Moreover, over the longer term a deferral can affect career progression, salary, and pension. Therefore, before deciding to defer, candidates should have the chance to discuss the matter with their Chair to explore whether the deferral is necessary and to understand its consequences. The aim is for the candidate to make a fully informed decision. There is no obligation on the candidate to discuss personal matters in detail. While the decision to defer reappointment or tenure may be discussed and explored with the Chair, the decision ultimately lies with the candidate.

4. We should seek to allay promptly concerns expressed by colleagues about how academic performance in 2021 will be assessed at the time of the **2022 merit exercise**. Our recommendation is that the merit exercise for 2022 proceed as usual, that is, based on the 2021 reference year, yet with the staff member being permitted to include a one-page explanation of how COVID-19 might have affected performance in the reference year. The Guidelines explain the content of this document and that it must be given due weight by those charged with assessing performance for merit purposes.
5. With respect to **reappointment and tenure for tenure-track academic staff**, the following steps are recommended:
 - a. Beginning in 2021, all candidates should be invited to include a one-page submission with their dossiers explaining any effects of COVID-19 on their academic performance (research, teaching, service). Committees assessing these dossiers should follow the Guidelines in terms of considering and giving due weight to this document in the assessment of files.

To this end, we recommend that the Secretariat include in the standard forms for DTC and UTC Reports a space wherein these committees can indicate how they accounted for the candidate's submission regarding COVID-19's effects on their work.

- b. The current year's reappointment and tenure cohorts did not include a one-page explanation of the pandemic's effects on academic performance. Yet, any candidate called to a tending-to-the-negative meeting in the present year, whether in the context of reappointment or tenure consideration, shall be invited to submit a one-page document before this meeting explaining whether COVID-19 adversely affected their academic work and if so, how. Tenure committee reports should explain how this submission factored into the evaluation of the tenure file.
 - c. Although the University has announced that all pre-tenure colleagues may elect to defer by one year their consideration for reappointment or tenure, a colleague's decision in this regard must be understood as neutral to the assessment of academic performance. The reappointment or tenure dossier must be considered on its own terms and reappointment and tenure committees should not consider or discuss their view of the candidate's judiciousness in electing – or not – to defer reappointment or tenure consideration.
 - d. Given the differential impacts on diverse fields of research, individual academic units, such as a Department, should discuss collegially whether "superior" performance in their field ought to be reviewed in the light of COVID-19. If so, discussion would consider what can reasonably be expected of a member of academic staff given (a) rank and (b) the pandemic's impact on

their work. Any decisions made through such a process must be clearly communicated across the academic unit no later than 31 May 2021.

It is essential to note that the criteria for reappointment and tenure at McGill – defined by the [Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff](#) – have not changed.

- e. The Provost’s Office will monitor overall reappointment and tenure success rates. Current rates of success for those who formally submit applications for tenure are very high (over 90 percent). These rates are expected to remain steady. The Provost’s Office – in particular, the University’s Equity Team – will review all data on reappointment and tenure rates across the University beginning in 2021 and until 2024, including:

- i. Rates of tending-to-the negative meetings
- ii. Rates of reappointment and tenure denials

It will compare these rates to past years and analyze the data through an equity lens, relying on data collected through McGill’s employment equity survey.

- 6. **Communication** is needed to acknowledge the discussion and disquiet within the academic community about how the University will assess academic performance during this unprecedented period that has affected how we do our work. Colleagues – especially junior ones – are concerned that they will be assessed against the same benchmarks as those who have gone up for reappointment and tenure before them. They may also wonder whether, if research progress or plans were scuttled on account of the pandemic (e.g., experiments that had to stop, research travel that was canceled), this will be held against them.

Clear messaging is required to assuage preoccupations regarding inequitable assessments of work performance that might threaten career progression. These messages should be conveyed first through the Principal and Provost, then transition through the Faculties and Departments.

The following are some suggested modes of Communication:

- o Allnotes/MRO
- o What’s New/Reporter
- o Faculty Matters
- o Town Hall(s)
- o ALF (for academic leadership), which will include use of case studies to allow participants to test and apply the principles set out in the Guidelines
- o MAUT communications
- o Secretariat through messaging it issues in connection with its oversight of the tenure and promotion process
- o Targeted messaging within the Faculties (from Deans) based on text provided by central/Office of the PVPA

We would urge periodic communication throughout the academic year, through multiple formats.

APPENDIX 1

Guidelines for Assessing COVID-19's Impact on the Assessment of Academic Performance

This document has been created as a companion document to *the Report of the "Micro" Task Force to Address COVID-19's Impact on Assessments of Academic Performance*. Its two principal objectives are:

- a) to support the ability of academic staff to communicate effectively, in contexts where their academic performance will be assessed, how COVID-19 may have affected their work and productivity; and
- b) facilitate the equitable assessment of academic performance by those responsible for making determinations of merit, reappointment, tenure, and promotion of academic staff (e.g., the Provost, Deans, Chairs/Directors, reappointment/tenure/promotion committees).

1) Governing principles

- Multiple factors have come into play since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that may have affected academic performance and productivity. In many cases, the impact of these factors will endure, potentially for several years, even after we are able to resume pre-pandemic academic life.
- Academic staff seeking reappointment, tenure, and/or promotion will have an opportunity to explain the effects of COVID-19 on their files, documenting especially how pandemic conditions may have slowed down or disrupted their work plans or progress. Likewise, academic staff ought to be given a chance to explain the impact of COVID-19 on their work in the context of the annual merit exercise.
- Colleagues responsible for assessing academic performance for the purposes of merit, reappointment, tenure, and promotion must consider whether and to what extent the onset of COVID-19 conditions affected the staff member's academic performance. The pandemic's bearing on performance will differ from one colleague to the next. Hence, those charged with performance assessment must make a reasonable assessment of the materiality of the circumstances affecting academic performance noted in an annual activity report (merit) or dossier (reappointment/tenure/promotion) .

2) For academic staff: an opportunity to explain

In all situations where their academic performance is assessed, academic staff shall be given a meaningful opportunity to explain how COVID-19 affected their work – whether in nature, scope, or pace. This opportunity to explain the pandemic's impact on work responsibilities shall take the following form of a one-page submission where academic staff may explain how COVID-19 exerted an impact on performance/productivity. Chairs and Directors (or Deans in the case of Faculties without Departments) will encourage academic staff members to avail themselves of this opportunity.

All colleagues will be permitted to include this one-page submission with:

- activity reports for the purpose of **merit**, from **2022 onward**; and
- dossiers submitted for the purposes of **reappointment, tenure, and promotion**, from **2021 onward**.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of factors engendered by COVID-19 that might have affected a colleague's work, which may be cited in these one-page submissions. The submission should refer to the individual situation of the staff member:

- a. increased family care responsibilities
- b. restricted access to research facilities, sites, or other resources
- c. slowed infrastructure development necessary to conduct research (including installation, repairs, and commissioning of equipment)
- d. delayed procurement/acquisition of materials, equipment, specimens
- e. reduced ability to conduct collaborative work due to access restrictions to McGill facilities, partner facilities, field locations, etc.
- f. impact of travel restrictions on performance of duties (i.e., to other location, or back to McGill)
- g. departures of graduate students in light of COVID-19
- h. fewer opportunities for research development, collaboration, and/or dissemination (e.g., cancelled conferences or research workshops; lack of venues to present research; delayed publications)
- i. impact of remote teaching (more time-intensive to prepare, potential effect on student evaluation scores)
- j. inability to carry out usual research, e.g., face-to-face work with human participants, engagement in public performances
- k. personal health conditions that might have required special precautions, reducing ability to carry out academic work
- l. health impacts – including mental health impacts – of COVID-19
- m. expanded duties that may have been required during the pandemic period (e.g., new leadership roles, exceptional teaching duties, added graduate and undergraduate mentorship responsibilities, support given to other colleagues to assist with the move to remote teaching), mindful of the potentially disproportionate impacts on academic staff who are members of underrepresented and equity-seeking groups
- n. reduced duties that may have been arranged with a Department during the pandemic period (e.g., some Departments have decided as a unit to limit the service responsibilities of pre-tenure colleagues during this period)
- o. new or increased forms of work taken up on account of pandemic conditions, particularly to support colleagues, students or the unit/Faculty/University as a whole.

Academic staff do not need to provide supporting evidence for any of the factors cited above (e.g., medical notes or attestations showing canceled conference opportunities). Rather, it is a matter of explaining with some specificity and detail how any factors cited would have redirected, restricted, or augmented academic duties. Indeed, some of the factors cited above will involve disclosure of highly sensitive information. Decision makers for reappointment, tenure, promotion, and merit are already bound to treat information received through these processes in strict confidence; such is especially the case for information disclosed to show how personal circumstances affected academic performance during the pandemic.

3) For Chairs and reappointment/tenure/promotion committee members: assessing with fairness and rigour

The explanations that colleagues provide pursuant to Point #2 above, in the contexts of merit and reappointment/tenure/promotion, must be considered and be given due weight in assessing academic performance.

Additionally, reappointment and tenure committee members charged with assessing the reappointment and tenure dossiers of tenure-track colleagues must follow the following principles:

- A colleague's decision to elect, or not to elect, to defer tenure consideration on account of COVID-19 is neutral to the assessment of academic performance. The reappointment or tenure dossier must be considered on its own terms and reappointment and tenure committees should not consider or discuss their view of the candidate's judiciousness in electing – or not – to defer reappointment or tenure consideration.
- The criteria for reappointment and tenure at McGill – defined by the [Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff](#) – have not changed. However, for those colleagues whose work was adversely affected by COVID-19 in a significant way, assessment should centre on the question: What can reasonably be expected of this member of academic staff given (a) the colleague's rank and (b) the impact of COVID-19 on their work?

As a final point, in all contexts involving the assessment of academic performance, colleagues charged with assessment should bear in mind that the impact of COVID-related decelerations or interruptions in work might take time before becoming apparent. For example, delays in research activity in 2020 might only be seen in 2022 or later given the time it can take from the point of research experimentation/investigation/study to publication or other forms of research dissemination.

These Guidelines will be reviewed annually by the Provost & Vice-Principal Academic (or delegate) in consultation with Faculties and MAUT.

Members of academic staff with questions may contact the [President](#) of the McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT).

Members of academic leadership with questions may contact the [Associate Provost, Equity & Academic Policies](#).

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