

Extract II from the March 20 2013 Senate Meeting Minutes

Senator Lu asked the following question:

Whereas Senate had an open discussion on innovative learning environments, with a particular focus on massive open online courses (MOOCs) at its January 23, 2013 meeting;

Whereas, at this meeting, there was no indication that a decision was going to be made in the near future about whether or not to make MOOCs part of the academic mission of McGill University;

Whereas at the February 19th, 2013 Senate meeting, neither the Principal nor the Provost informed Senate of any impending decision to join a MOOC consortium;

Whereas an email was sent to the university community on February 20th announcing that McGill had joined the edX (MOOC) consortium, and thanking “Deans, Senators, students and professors...who have made valuable contributions to this important development, and particularly the members of the Academic Working Group on Innovative Pedagogy”;

Notwithstanding the constraints which may have been involved during the negotiations with the edX consortium, why was Senate not informed of the context surrounding its ‘open discussion’ on MOOCs and not subsequently made aware of such negotiations?

Why didn’t the Academic Working Group on Innovative Pedagogy report its insights and recommendations to Senate before any decision was made to involve McGill in the development and delivery of MOOCs?

Senator Masi, Provost, answered as follows:

Thank you for your questions.

Innovative pedagogies, including but not limited to MOOCs, have important implications for McGill’s success in harnessing the potential of new and emerging technologies in order to improve teaching and learning. In all of the presentations of ASAP 2012 to Senate, which I believe have occurred at least a half-dozen times, I have placed considerable emphasis on the importance of innovative pedagogy, technology-assisted instruction, and improving the undergraduate experience.

Let me outline the circumstances surrounding McGill’s affiliation with edX.

McGill Statutes, Article 3 states, and I quote, “the Principal may initiate any project which the Principal considers beneficial to the University, and may present to the Senate or the Board of Governors” Joining the a MOOC consortium has, for some time, been considered as potentially beneficial to McGill and, in broad outline, while not in

specific details, Senate and one of its main committees, APC, have had several opportunities to discuss MOOCs and edX.

ASAP 2012 has an entire section dealing with innovative pedagogy and a specific proposal work to develop something that I labeled “MILE” or McGill Innovative Learning Environments. Specific references to MOOCs and consortia are made in that document under strategies and actions 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8. I admit that Senate only endorsed ASAP to the level of objectives and I agreed to bring back to Senate or Board any items requiring governance approval. It is fully my intention to do so when and where appropriate.

The decision to partner with edX, a not-for-profit enterprise founded by MIT and Harvard University and now with the participation of 10 other institutions worldwide, provides McGill a technology platform that can make courses available to on-campus students and to a potential audience from around the world. Indeed, last time in Senate I answered a question about alternative learning management systems.

Regarding the particulars of Senate’s role, in October Senate endorsed ASAP, which included MILE (and MOOCs): see strategies 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8, and the specific action items listed under them. If and when new credited courses or authorized McGill programs may be offered via this consortium for McGill credit, Senate or APC will have an opportunity to discuss these issues again.

In my closing comments to the Senate meeting in which we discussed MOOCs and consortia participation, including edX, I summarized several take-aways from the conversation: (1) McGill should occupy the MOOC space, and do so (2) deliberately; (3) our community is interested in using MOOCs as a means of enhancing campus-based learning, and (4) also for extending accessibility. Entering the edX consortium qualifies under all counts. The alternatives were carefully assessed (Udacity, Coursera, edX, going it alone).

Several working groups including more than thirty academic leaders from Faculties and McGill's pedagogical support teams were active in exploring the possibilities and will remain active as we move into this arena.

I understand the intention of the questions to get at Senate’s role in either arriving at the decision to join or to have the right to endorse or approve of such an affiliation. Article 6 of the Statutes states: Senate “shall exercise general control and supervision over the academic activities of the University with special reference to the development of the curriculum and courses of study.”

As I have noted, information about MOOCs, and indeed even about edX among other consortia, has been shared with Senate and APC, as is appropriate.

However, Senate does not have responsibility for approving contracts of the edX type.

On the other hand, following a recommendation from the Finance Committee, the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors was asked and did pre-approve the McGill-edX partnership on 15 February 2013, contingent on the understanding that no operating budget funds would be used for this purpose.

The Senate meeting of 20 February, as you will recall, was on Tuesday, not Wednesday as is normal practice and discussions with edX on legal matters was still underway during that Senate meeting which were concluded later that evening. The announcement of new edX members, including McGill, was embargoed by the consortium until the next day, so I was not permitted to share information about these arrangements prior to that date. Senators have been involved in the campus-wide discussion about opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning at McGill. Our long-standing interest in harnessing technology to transform teaching and learning is articulated in ASAP 2012, developed with broad consultation across the University, and with principles and outline endorsed by Senate and the Board of Governors.

The plan's Major Strategic Objective 2 emphasizes "innovative delivery of educational programs" and "innovation" is one of its cross-cutting themes. In addition, ASAP 2012, which was endorsed by Senate in October 2012, includes discussions of the McGill Innovative Learning Environments and MOOCs and specific strategies and related action items.

Further, on 23 January 2013, Senators engaged in an "Open Discussion on McGill's Learning Environments" about the impact of MOOCs on teaching and learning. APC also had several discussions of MOOCs, and will continue to do so. When ready for presentation to Senate, additional presentations, likely in the Fall 2013 or Winter 2014, will come to Senate.

In keeping with Senate's responsibility for courses and programs, let me assure you that any new credited courses or programs offered by means of the edX platform will come to Senate through the normal governance approval paths.

I also want to emphasize that no funds from the operating budget will be used for the design, development and delivery of MOOCs, which be based exclusively on philanthropic support.

It is relevant to note that more than a decade ago, on 12 September 2001 Senate was advised that McGill had agreed to join other universities in Universitas21 and the Thompson Learning Company to establish U21Global to offer university courses by means of Internet delivery. At its next meeting in October 2001, Senate approved an APPC report that resolved "no course offered by McGill University and approved by the APPC in the name of Senate can be disallowed for credit in a program of study on the sole basis of its mode of delivery."

Participation in edX will ensure that McGill has the tools, data, network of leading university collaborators and expertise to shape our 21st century approach to teaching and

learning. Indeed, the University participates in several academic consortia, such as the AAU, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, U21, the U15, and others, which provide platforms for data sharing and institutional research. None of these affiliation agreements come to Senate for endorsement or approval.

In addition, edX is a platform for the design, development, and delivery of technology assisted courses and as such is not limited to MOOCs. Like the AAU and the U15, the edX consortium will also house and make available for research a data repository for exploring questions about the pedagogical efficacy of digital tools as well as an opportunity to share insights and practices with like-minded institutions. In addition, a platform, Desire to Learn or D2L which is the engine underlying myCourses at McGill and which affects some 3600 courses per term, had considerable input from the academic community prior to being chosen, but was, and did not need to be, brought to Senate for endorsement or approval.

As I noted earlier, I have convened an “Academic Work Group on Innovative Pedagogy” as an advisory group to me as the Provost with members from Faculties and McGill’s pedagogical support teams from TLS and CCS, to help define the expression of the MILE proposal and to investigate options for innovative teaching and learning.

Work Group members conducted a review of the existing and emerging consortia for MOOC offerings. After a rigorous analysis of a number of leading online programs, they determined that edX—as a not-for-profit enterprise primarily concerned with using information to enhance teaching and learning on campus—offered the best fit with McGill’s mission and ambitions. Many deans who spoke at the open discussion on MOOCs provided significant insights from those working groups’ deliberations.

Not all things about which I get advice from the academic community can be brought to Senate for information, discussion, deliberation, or approval. I have, always brought to this body those items that the Statutes require, and much more. Let me close by saying that in my opinion, negotiations with edX went much better thanks to the insights I gained from Senate feedback on ASAP and MILE and especially from the open discussion on MOOCs and for that I thank the Fellows of Senate.

Senator Lu reiterated that her question regarded the process undertaken before this decision was announced, particularly why Senate had held an open discussion without being informed of the pending decision. She suggested that the silence betrayed Senators’ expectations. Several Senators echoed this sentiment.

Senator Mooney pointed out that ASAP had merely suggested that McGill would investigate the value of MOOCs while the lack of a proper frame of reference around the open discussion was unfair and disrespectful to Senators. Senator Nystrom suggested that the discussion would have proceeded in a very different format if Senators had been made aware.

The Provost responded that the decision to join edX was rather a matter for the Board of Governors given the financial nature of the decision. He added that he felt there was a general consensus in January that MOOCs were a space for McGill to occupy in some shape or form. Senator Mendelson added that course approval lay mostly in the faculties and was reported to Senate.