

Question

TO: Senate

QUESTION FROM: Senators Sebastien Duckett and Madeline Wilson

RESPONSE FROM: Senator Christopher Manfredi, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic)

SUBJECT: Question Regarding Tuition and Fee Reimbursements in Light of COVID-19 and Broader Academic Implications

MEETING DATE: May 13, 2020

PREAMBLE: In the days following the March 11th classification of the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic, McGill University announced the suspension of all classes and exams for what would end up being two weeks. No plans were made to make up for instruction lost during this suspension. On March 30th, many courses resumed via remote instruction, and did so until the culmination of the Winter 2020 semester.

Because of their very nature, some courses were unable to transition to remote learning. In many of these cases, students paid for and received the credits for which they were enrolled, but no further instruction was delivered after March 16th, the first day of the two-week suspension. This was the case in, for example, performance-based classes in the Schulich School of Music, where large and small ensemble courses, private lessons, and graduating student recitals were not resumed. Additionally, in the Faculty of Science, some lab sections were unable to be moved online. In these situations, students paid for and received credit for these courses and sections, while only receiving a portion of the instruction that those credits are designed to represent.

Calls for partial or total refunds for course and university fees have been issued by numerous groups on and off of our campus¹. Most notably, students have called for prorated refunds for A) instruction lost during the 2-week university closure and B) courses in which instruction was physically unable to resume. In these cases, University administrators have communicated to student leaders that these possibilities will not be entertained at this time².

In situation A outlined above, the average full-time, international, undergraduate student in the Faculty of Arts lost approximately \$610 worth of instruction in the 2-week university closure alone³.

¹ Appendix A: Open Letter from the Music Undergraduate Students' Association (MUSA)

² Appendix B: Response from Dean Ravenscroft to Open Letter from MUSA

³ Calculation based on 5 courses taken during a 13-week semester at 3 credits per course.

In situation B, the very nature of the credit-based system is called into question. Asking students to pay for credits without receiving the instruction those credits are designed to represent substantiates sentiments regarding the overly transactional nature of a University-level education.

Students have also called for the partial reimbursement of other centrally-collected ancillary fees for which the associated services were rendered inaccessible due to the short and long-term University closures, namely the Student Services fee and the Athletics and Recreation fee. While the University as a whole has not indicated an intention to grant partial reimbursements for these fees, Athletics and Recreation has been in regular contact with students regarding the potential issuance of reimbursements for independently-collected fees, such as the cost of intramural participation.

At some American universities, students have [pursued legal action](#) against their schools, seeking reimbursements for tuition and fees.

QUESTION:

1. What is McGill University's stance on issuing refunds to students for instruction lost during the University closure (March 16, 2020 - March 27, 2020)?
2. What is McGill University's stance on issuing refunds to students for courses that were physically unable to resume in an online format?
3. What is McGill University's stance on issuing refunds for fees collected for services that are unable to be accessed during the University closure?
4. When students pay tuition to McGill University, are they paying for instruction or are they paying for credits?

RESPONSE:

Thank you for your question, Senators Sebastien Duckett and Madeline Wilson.

The University had recognized early on that the issue of refunds would be on the minds of our community, therefore a working group was quickly convened to determine what measures could be undertaken, within the directives established by the Quebec Ministry of Education. The resulting principles - governing what refunds for interrupted activities would be given and why - were then published on the McGill website on April 24, 2020. (See *Principles Governing Refunds for Disrupted Activities*, hereinafter referred to as Principles) <https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/article/mcgill-operations-student-services/principles-governing-refunds-disrupted-activities>.

QUESTION 1: The Principles outlined on the aforementioned website provides the position of the University with respect to refunds, i.e. that there is no refunding of tuition for courses that are completed and for which students receive credit. This includes the two-week suspension for classes, teaching labs and exams.

QUESTION 2: As per directives from the Quebec Ministry of Education, McGill made all efforts to offer students ways to finish their Winter 2020 term, in ways adapted to the current emergency situation. For courses that could not be resumed online, alternatives were found to provide assessments that enable students to complete the courses and met the course requirements.

QUESTION 3: As mentioned in the Principles, in cases of non-academic services paid for individually, such as parking and Fitness Centre membership, the prorated amounts corresponding to the portion of the services not rendered or adequately substituted are eligible for reimbursement.

As for ancillary fees (e.g.; student services fee, information technology charge, athletics and recreation fees), they are a contribution to the general establishment and operation of a service, provide ongoing support for students throughout the year and are not associated with immediate or short term activities associated with individual students. The fees are paid for the general operation of the service and so no refund will be provided.

QUESTION 4: When students are paying for tuition, they are paying for an education, where faculty transfer their knowledge to their students and ensure that their students can demonstrate that they have acquired that knowledge through a rigorous assessment process, resulting in the awarding of credits contributing towards a degree.

Appendix A: Open Letter from the Music Undergraduate Students' Association (MUSA)



April 8th, 2020

Dear Dean Ravenscroft, SSoM Executive Committee, Provost Manfredi, Deputy Provost Labeau, and Principal Fortier,

The COVID-19 pandemic has become one of the greatest interruptions to regular academic instruction in recent memory. Accordingly, a number of unprecedented decisions have been made by the McGill University administration that have had huge impacts on the lives of its students. We commend the hard-work and dedication that has been shown by all levels of the university; however, a number of these decisions have disproportionately had negative effects for music students. It behooves us as the elected representatives for the Schulich School of Music student body to bring these concerns to your attention.

The McGill administration has stated that no refunds will be issued for course interruptions caused by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this is of lesser concern to the many students who will be completing their courses online, a number of courses within the Schulich School of Music have been outright discontinued. Additionally, graduating music students who were scheduled to deliver a two-credit recital have had their recitals cancelled without any refund for those credits.

We believe that private lessons, ensembles, coaching classes, recitals, and other courses that have been cancelled without any transition to online learning should see appropriate refunds. While we commend the school's decision to refund a portion of the supplemental fee that is charged for private music lessons, we do not believe that this goes far enough. Students are no longer receiving practical tutelage through the school and should therefore be compensated proportional to lost instruction hours.

We therefore ask the Schulich School of Music and McGill administration to meet the following requests:

1. That music students be issued a refund equivalent to 4/13ths of the cost of the credits for private lessons, coachings and ensemble courses that are not being transitioned online.
2. That graduating music students who have had their two-credit recitals cancelled be issued a full refund for these two credits.

A Bachelor of Music is one of the highest costing undergraduate degrees at McGill University. The precious instruction time we rely on as music students was abruptly cancelled without any form of provision or substitution. In addition, many music students rely on income from contract performances and 'gigs' to pay for their education, all of which have been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our requests are not made from a place of greed.

Our community is hurting and we need your help.

Sincerely,

The Music Undergraduate Students' Association (MUSA)

Appendix B: Response from Dean Ravenscroft to Open Letter from MUSA

From: Dean Music <dean.music@mcgill.ca>
Date: Saturday, April 11, 2020 0:16
To: President MUSA <president.musa@mail.mcgill.ca>
Cc: "Lloyd Whitesell, Prof." <lloyd.whitesell@mcgill.ca>, "Lena Weman Ericsson, Prof." <lena.weman@mcgill.ca>, "Douglas McNabney, Prof." <douglas.mcnabney@mcgill.ca>, "Stephane Lemelin, Prof." <stephane.lemelin2@mcgill.ca>, "Christopher Harman, Mr." <chris.harman@mcgill.ca>, "Isabelle Cossette, Dr." <isabelle.cossette1@mcgill.ca>, "Christopher Manfredi, Prof." <christopher.manfredi@mcgill.ca>, "Fabrice Labeau, Prof." <fabrice.labeau@mcgill.ca>, McGill Principal <mcgill.principal@mcgill.ca>, Tracy Roach <tracy.roach@mcgill.ca>, ASST DEAN <asstdean.music@mcgill.ca>
Subject: Re: Open-letter from the Music Undergraduate Students' Association

Dear MUSA representatives,

We acknowledge receipt of your letter and take note of your concerns.

As you will recall, the School responded quickly after the University closure announcement on March 12, and in consultation with central University leaders, adopted measures to enable students to complete their academic requirements for the Winter 2020 semester with minimal disruption. Particular care was given to make it possible for students expecting to graduate at the end of the term to do so without delay. The measures we approved allow students to receive full credit for work done in courses that could not be delivered remotely when classes resumed on March 30 (because of unavoidable disparities in access to instruments and technology on the part of both faculty and students), and established provisions for alternate modes of assessment of practical exams.

In addition, we requested and received permission from the central administration to issue a partial refund of the Private Lesson Fee, which is levied for registration in practical instruction courses in addition to the regular University tuition fee. That refund was processed centrally in quick time and promptly deposited in students' accounts. The University is not refunding tuition for courses that can be completed and for which students receive credit. This applies uniformly across all Faculties at McGill. There are many courses that were interrupted by the closure and for which fewer hours of instruction than planned could be delivered. In such cases, alternatives were found to provide assessments that enable students to complete the course and to receive credit.

With regards to recitals (i.e. undergraduate practical exams), we understand the disappointment of students who were not able to present the performances they had long been preparing for at the end of the term. Those exams, as you know, are required courses in our undergraduate programs (MUIIN 452 and 482). In order to enable students to graduate without delay, we adopted a different means of assessment for those courses, based on the assessment of students' practical instruction courses, and thus were able to avoid compromising the ability of graduating students to finish their program on time. Through this alternate assessment, we consider that program requirements have been met and students can receive full credit for their work.

As you are well aware from the communications you receive from the Government and University, the situation is still constantly evolving. If we are made aware of any changes that might affect students, we will let you know at the earliest possible moment.

We understand the stress, anxiety and financial pressures that the current crisis causes for students, as they do for many people in our communities. From the beginning of this crisis, we have placed our students' best interests at the heart of our preoccupations, prioritizing the consideration of viable, equitable and flexible

options for students to complete the academic year. We will continue to do so as we plan for the upcoming academic year and wish all of you all the best in the coming weeks and months.

Stay safe and be well.

Sincerely,
Dean Brenda Ravenscroft

Brenda Ravenscroft, Ph.D.
Dean and Professor of Music Theory
Schulich School of Music
McGill University