

Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on COVID Academic Planning and Policies

MINUTES

Meeting of October 22, 2021 at 8:30a.m. TEAMS Conferencing Application

Present: Chris Buddle (Co-Chair)
Angela Campbell (Co-Chair)
Jennifer Chen
Nancy Czemmel
Claire Downie
Rebecca Fuhrer
Petra Rohrbach
Daniel Weinstock
Laura Winer
Gillian Nycum (resource person)
Elyse Cragg (communications)
Paola Colapelle (secretary)

Communications update

A resource email account (covidadhoc@mcgill.ca) has been created and is posted on the Secretariat website. Its purpose is for the McGill community to address questions, concerns, or feedback directly to this committee. Elyse Cragg will take on the responsibility of monitoring incoming emails. The committee will reassess and explore later if additional support is required, being unsure of expected volume.

The Provost is sending a message to the community on 25 October that will include a link to the committee's website, and the community will see the email address front-and-centre on that website. The committee proposed adding a Q&A section, which would be based on most common questions received, as well as some generated by committee members.

Overview: Accommodations for students

The focus of the meeting on 22 October was a discussion about student accommodations, to provide context related to the current process and to gain a better understanding of scope of requests.

As of the start of the Fall 2021 term, a process has been in place to receive academic accommodation requests from students, arising from incidental absences due to COVID-19. A centralized process via a form filled out on Minerva, which is sent to the Office of the Dean of Students, where a triage process has been put in place. Depending on the nature of the request, it may be addressed by the Office of the Dean of Students or dispatched to different units or Faculties. The Case Management Team is also notified if a student discloses a positive Covid test result, or symptoms, as part of their request for accommodation.

There was a large influx of requests at the end of summer as many students were delayed in returning to Montreal. The number of requests has decreased substantially since, and there are now generally fewer than 10 requests per day, which is reported as manageable by the Office of the Dean of Students, and

Faculties. General feedback has been that overall, the system is working well, even though there is some variation because of the different ways that Faculties manage accommodation processes.

Some of the issues identified by student representatives are the following:

- While students feel that incidental requests are being accommodated, an issue remains for students with chronic issues who cannot be on campus. Students are aware that some classes require in-person attendance due to learning outcomes, but in other cases there is an interest in accommodations such as recorded lectures or simultaneously lecturing with the Zoom platform open during an in-person class. It was noted that some professors will not be comfortable with this idea.
- Some confusion was noted for students who are also employees, in that they must fill out a Self Assessment Form, yet might also have to request accommodations in their role as student.
- There was an observation that a lecture recording does not replace the in-class learning experience, and quality of recordings is sometimes variable.

Discussion:

- The goal of the online accommodation request form for students is to capture short term issues which are COVID-related and not for long-term chronic issues. This process was meant for the Fall term only, but the committee recommends that it remain in place for the Winter term.
- Expectations on accommodations must be realistic when considering the additional workload they may create for staff and faculty. A solution must be found as COVID will remain; some students may never feel safe to be on campus and it is not realistic to think students can complete their degrees online only.
- We should remain mindful and take into consideration that COVID-19 fatigue, and interpretation of symptoms, may have an impact on the possibility of having an increase in students with symptoms who attend in-person classes. Students may feel pressure to attend class, even with mild symptoms. With flu and cold season approaching, other types of ailments will be present. The committee should consider ways to address these issues, including for the Winter term.
- There is a recognition of a distinction between 'feeling safe' in a classroom as compared to 'being safe'; accommodations are meant to focus on ensuring students who need to be safe can still follow their programs, to the extent possible. This does not diminish the importance of acknowledging students' concerns and anxieties about being in class, but this distinction is important in the context of the responsibilities related to accommodations.
- The committee felt that investment in student note-takers was important, as there are current concerns related to the quality of note-taking. Since note-takers are not paid, there are issues finding students to take up this task. The committee highlighted this being a priority going forward.
- Accommodations for instructors will also be the focus of this workgroup going forward, including linking this to the principles for remote delivery discussed previously.

One possible approach to frame this discussion going forward is the following matrix, and using this matrix to highlight current approaches, deficiencies, limits, and opportunities:

	Short-term Accommodation requests (incidental)	Long-term accommodation requests.
Covid-19 context	<i>-to be filled in after further discussions-</i>	<i>-to be filled in after further discussions-</i>
General context	<i>-to be filled in after further discussions-</i>	<i>-to be filled in after further discussions-</i>

Recommendations and next steps:

- There is a recognition that work done by this committee can be considered for the period during and beyond the context of the pandemic, as designing universally accessible courses will be helpful to all and possibly reduce the need for individual accommodations.
- Future meeting may include subject matter experts, such as representatives from OSD and the Dean of Students.
- Some more granular discussions about technological approaches to support short- and longer-term accommodation requests is necessary, and while not all will be applicable in all contexts, there may be additional tools that can be used in the Winter term.
- Communication about accommodations remains important, including the ongoing encouragement for having lectures recorded when possible/feasible.
- The ad-hoc committee **recommends that the online form for students to request academic accommodations continue to be used for the Winter term**, and if adjustments are needed, these can be done before the start of the Winter term.