

CYCLICAL REVIEW OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS:

RESPONSE FROM THE DEPARTMENT

We thank the members of the review committee for a careful and judicious review of the Department and its programs.

The review committee has drawn attention to the substantial and ongoing upward trend in the department's research standing, to the quality of our teaching programs at all levels, and to the valuable contributions that members of the department have made to other parts of the university. We appreciate these observations, as well as the committee's emphasis on our need for a number of new positions as soon as possible, given our extraordinarily high student-staff ratio.

We are essentially in agreement with all of the recommendations that the committee made. In this document, we will enumerate what we take these recommendations to be, in order to state and clarify the set of steps that the Department should now take.

Committee recommendations and the Department's corresponding plans.

Recommendation 1 (pages 3, 4):

The University should continue to be supportive of the Department's hiring, allowing simultaneous offers for the same position in at least some cases. This recommendation is echoed on page 4, where the necessity of recruiting new faculty is emphasized.

Response.

We of course agree, and we recognize and appreciate the University's general support of our desire to hire academics of a very high calibre. We will continue to postpone hiring if we cannot find people that meet the standard that we and the University expect, as the report underlines. We do expect that making simultaneous offers for the same position will significantly lower some of the barriers to hiring we have experienced in recent years.

Recommendation 2 (page 5):

The department needs to consider concerns raised by the student panel and the Economics Students Association survey. These concerns include a possible alternative paths to the Honours program, the role of calculus in the Majors program, writing content and the use of full-year courses.

Response.

The department will certainly take these concerns seriously.

It is indeed true that it is relatively difficult for students to switch from the Majors program to the Honours program. While this is to some degree inevitable, it may be true that we could find ways to allow students more time before becoming committed to the Majors program; we note that the switch in the other direction, from Honours to Majors, can be undertaken without penalty at any time through January of the U1 year. However, we believe that a part of this problem arises from students from outside Quebec

given advanced standing, to U1, who would find it easier to find their way if they were admitted to the longer-120 credit program; we understand that a University committee is considering this, and our own decisions will have to take into account the actions of this committee. Some of the problem would apparently be alleviated by a reduction in admissions to the short 90-credit program.

We also agree that there are unwritten advising rules that arise in response to University procedures that are not well known. Nonetheless, we do try to provide extensive information, including written documentation (the Honours program description contains substantial detail both about the program itself and about switching in and out of it) and additional beginning-of-term advising hours.

We will undertake two specific actions in response: (i) we will convene a small committee to consider possible changes in the content or structure of the Majors program;¹ (ii) experienced advisors will be asked to prepare a written codification of some of their knowledge.

Recommendation 3 (pages 5,6):

The department should consider strategies to limit the number of students entering undergraduate programs, perhaps particularly the Majors program. Some students have expressed concern about the difference in mathematical levels between the Honours and Majors programs, and believe that the Majors program should have more mathematical content. The department should consider this.

Response.

These points will be considered, and the committee reviewing the Majors program can address them. Before actively moving to limit student numbers, however, we think it would be prudent to see whether the current high enrollments persist: we note that, not only at McGill but in general, Economics enrollment tends to be countercyclical: that is in times of economic distress, enrollments tend to increase, presumably reflecting greater interest in the subject. We may therefore see some decline over the next few years as the effect of the recent recession gradually fades. This is, of course, far from clear: we believe that there are a number of reasons for the increase in our student numbers, most of which will remain in place.

As well, many of our students are from programs other than Economics (International Development Studies, for example) so that changing requirements in Economics programs will have no effect on these enrollment numbers.

Nonetheless, the possibility of including some more calculus in the Majors program will to some extent address this concern. This is one of the points that a review committee for the program will have to consider.

Recommendation 4 (page 6):

The development of written guidelines for advisors should be considered, along with the possibility of increasing the number of advisors.

Response.

¹This was done for the Honors program some years ago, and the Majors program is indeed due for an overall review.

The idea of written guidelines for advisors, based on the experience of those who have served for many years in this capacity, is a good one, as we have already noted. We note also however that the Department has a number of programs: Minor, Major, Honours, Qualifying Year, Master's, and PhD. Different members of the faculty are specialized in providing advising for different programs; it is too much to expect that all faculty members would learn the rules for multiple programs. Therefore the idea of a period during the semester in which all professors advise undergraduates appears impracticable to us. Because of the complexity of rules at the University level as well as the department level, it is important to have specialized advisors who are expert in particular programs. The development of written guidelines for the undergraduate programs should however enhance the effectiveness of the existing program-specific advising teams.

Recommendation 5 (page 6):

Recruitment to the Ph.D. program should emphasize quality of students rather than quantity. Attention should be paid to the timing as well as amount of University-level awards to entering students.

Response.

The department is fully in agreement with this recommendation and welcomes any aid from the University to make more attractive offers to high-calibre potential doctoral students.

Recommendation 6 (page 7):

The department should consider suggesting that students register for courses at other universities in Quebec to reduce the pressure on our own courses. Hiring of one or two more dedicated faculty lecturers would have an immediate impact on the undergraduate programs.

Response.

While we understand the first suggestion, we are somewhat reluctant to capitulate, as it were, by sending our students elsewhere. With careful recruiting, the Department expects to be able to expand its course offerings and handle the high demand for courses, while continuing to maintain the quality of teaching that is expected in our Department. We certainly agree, however, that when lecturers of a very high level of ability become available to us, we should take advantage of the opportunity. The Department has in fact hired one more faculty lecturer, on a one-year appointment for now, since the time of the cyclical review.

Recommendation 7 (page 7):

The Department can improve conditions for undergraduate students by providing additional information, making the rules for transition in either direction between Majors and Honours programs better known, and possibly by adding internship courses or dividing full-year courses into two parts.

Response.

These are reasonable suggestions, which will be considered by the committee reviewing the Majors program.

Recommendation 8 (page 9):

The Department needs to hire more faculty both to cope with the increase in student numbers, and to cope with the possibility of retirements over the next few years. The Department should be as flexible as possible in this hiring, in order to take advantage of opportunities that arise.

Response.

We entirely agree and are doing our best to do precisely this.

Recommendation 9 (page 10):

The department should continue to make a conscious effort to raise its female representation and sustain a diverse population.

Response.

We entirely agree. The Department has hired a female faculty lecturer since the time of the cyclical review; nonetheless effort is constantly required because the proportion of new PhD's awarded to women is relatively low in economics. The Department will of course continue to put forward this effort.