



Cyclical Review of the McGill School of Environment

McGill School of Environment's Response

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Reviews by:

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The School of Environment welcomes the opportunity provided by the cyclical review to reflect on its role at McGill. We acknowledge the critical nature of the review report, but also view it as an occasion to initiate long-overdue discussions with the university leadership, as well as with groups across McGill interested in sustainability and the environment, about our common expectations for interdisciplinary education and research at McGill.

With joint and associate members in all Faculties, the School can be seen as an incubator where ideas from different academic cultures often collide - and sometimes coalesce, to rethink environmental education and research. There is therefore much to learn from assessing the school's successes and its failures, in particular to inform any future interfaculty initiative that will challenge traditional academic structures.

Below we respond to specific points made by the review committee.

Significant Developments at McGill

The cyclical review highlights that “significant developments and initiatives related to environment such as the MSSSI and the School of Public Policy ... do not involve the MSE.” It further suggests that “MSE, as a collective has, to date, not engaged in that effort”.

As far as we know, no unit has been contributing as a collective to MSSSI, but several members of the MSE have played a leading role in this initiative, including on the advisory committee (3 JAF, 7 MSE Associate Members), as co-leaders of the three main research themes chosen to initiate the MSSSI effort (9 co-leaders, 6 of whom are JAF or MSE Associate Members), or as MSSSI members at large and beneficiaries of MSSSI funding. All three leaders of the MSSSI theme just announced are affiliated to the MSE (1 JAF, 2 MSE Associate Members). These important contributions reveal much about the interdisciplinary research skills and interests of MSE’s members and the close intersection between environment and sustainability research. They illustrate, by extension, the incubator role of the MSE at McGill.

Nevertheless, all this research activity is not identified as ‘MSE research’. The same goes for most research initiatives led by JAF hired through a collaborative process with partner units. Departments normally provide research space and a graduate program to host research activities, but the MSE has no research space of its own and no graduate program that would have helped formalize interdisciplinary research in environment at McGill. The graduate program has been a contentious issue for years, as highlighted by

all previous review reports, and a proposal for such a program continues to face resistance from within McGill. Meanwhile, other institutions in Canada, including UofT, have created Schools of Environment or Institutes, most with competitive graduate programs where environment and sustainability are closely intertwined.

The lack of research space, failure to obtain a graduate program, and a general lack of support has led the cyclical review to conclude that the MSE does not contribute to the research of its individual faculty. Indeed, the report acknowledges a substantial challenge for MSE researchers and for McGill. It is time for McGill leadership in collaboration with the MSE to formulate a transparent plan for the future of interdisciplinary environment and sustainability research at McGill and clarify expectations about the role of the MSE and ways in which it can better support its JAF, while simultaneously being useful to McGill and to the broader environment community.

Undergraduate Programs

MSE Faculty are in unanimous agreement with the Review Committee's finding that, above all else, the undergraduate MSE programs are unique and invaluable contributions to McGill's offerings, and should remain intact.

The School is tremendously proud of its students and of its undergraduate programs which count over 1500 alumni. The continued success of these programs depends, like in any other unit, on the ability to retain and recruit instructors who will be committed to teaching and improving the curriculum. Recruitment has been an issue in recent years, however, as departments prefer to have full positions to joint ones, and there is little incentive for them to pair with us. Moreover, recruiting new teaching team partners from within the University requires payments of teaching buyouts to departments, with consequences on the budget. We have maintained our focus on joint positions, but this has meant giving up one of the three positions that had been granted in recent years by pairing two of our half-licenses. A hiring model that involves lengthy negotiations with Faculties and that makes it increasingly difficult to pair with units is not sustainable, and failure to recruit will eventually have serious consequences on our ability to offer competitive programs.

The Graduate Environment Option

The review committee suggests that the Graduate Option should be discontinued. While we understand the criticisms about the Option, getting rid of the Option at this time

would be counterproductive. The Option has just been revised and these revisions are currently being processed at McGill. The revision provided an opportunity for departments offering the Option to opt out, but most chose to retain the revised version. The new courses that a revised Option proposes are very much in line with McGill's research agenda on environment and sustainability. Moreover, the Option serves a clientele (e.g., Law students) that would not register in an Environment program but wants to acquire environmental knowledge. However, there is also a clear sense that the Option must not be offered at the expense of MSE undergraduate programs and sufficient resources must be available to ensure teaching needs are covered. Because partner units are the main beneficiary (no resources come to the School for training grad students in the Option), they should be able to contribute to the teaching effort to sustain the Option.

The PhD Program

We believe clarity about the bigger picture for interdisciplinary graduate education in environment and sustainability at McGill is needed in order to effectively address the subject of a PhD program. Due to the current opposition to MSE's efforts to propose a graduate program, direction from the University leadership is necessary.

The Review Committee suggests a binary choice of: A) a "small, niche" PhD targeting students that would not fit into traditional units, or B) remove the notion of an MSE PhD, and instead focus on new models of graduate level environmental research and training. We disagree with this dichotomy. We would welcome, even help lead, a process for re-envisioning what the report identifies as "the scope and structure of interdisciplinary environmental research and graduate education at McGill." However, such a process should not ignore the thinking already done at the MSE on these issues, particularly around a graduate program. If interdisciplinary graduate education is of interest to McGill, we note that the MSE has spent considerable time and effort in developing a PhD program that could be offered to the larger environment and sustainability community, therefore serving an important cementing role at McGill.

We make the following observations:

1) the review points to the PhD program offered at the School of Earth, Energy & Environmental Sciences at Stanford, the Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources <https://pangea.stanford.edu/eiper/phd>. This model is close to what has been already designed by the MSE for an interfaculty PhD in Environment and Sustainability at McGill. The design involved a committee that included

representatives from 6 Faculties (AES, Arts, Engineering, Law, Management, Science) and the proposal has been discussed with GPS as an interfaculty program to be as inclusive as possible. Moreover, space will become available in 2020 for graduate students with the renovation of the MSE building downtown. Thus, a PhD program would be feasible immediately, with support from the Deans.

2) The points raised in the review (see section III, “The PhD program”) are actually largely supportive of the need for an alternative PhD model that trains students in a “non-traditional” way, with a problem-solving focus that does not easily fit in traditional departments. The review further points to the emerging view that these are necessary elements of an effective, high profile research program, and highlights the importance of such PhDs to stimulate interactions between advisors. A PhD program would also be important for JAF in partner units that do not have an environmental focus to enable them to pursue their research interests fully.

3) A broad (re)envisioning of the scope and structure of interdisciplinary environmental research and education at McGill would align well with other initiatives, such as the MSSI and the RVH. This process would definitely extend beyond the MSE – possibly ultimately redefining the MSE’s scope within the University. It would require the contribution of recognised research leaders at the University level to create the conditions for productive discussions, and for the highest authority to be willing to invest/engage in making the vision a reality. It would have to be a broad collaborative effort that could address the apparent fragmentation of environmental and sustainability research which could ultimately hurt McGill’s brand and its ability to attract top students, funding, and scholars given the increasing competition. It would require understanding how university governance can adapt to an increasingly interdisciplinary context.

Until such a vision is defined, the MSE should not be prevented from fulfilling its mission. Limiting all potential for sustaining dynamism and growth (through new hires for instance) in a unit that has always been at the center of an interdisciplinary/interfaculty vision at McGill is unlikely to engage the very actors that could drive and ultimately benefit from redefining that vision.

Governance of an Interdisciplinary Unit

Since the last review, a significant change in governance has been implemented at the MSE as the School no longer employs a “rotating model” involving four Deans. Decision-making now involves mainly bilateral discussions between the Director and the Presiding Dean, and with each of the other concerned Deans depending on the issue

(hiring, promotion, etc.). While such a model can facilitate problem resolution at times, one unintended consequence for the School has been the erosion of the engagement of the Dean Council, with the MSE perceived as being mostly at Mac where its budget has been absorbed. Since the other Deans do not have to manage the MSE and its budget, they have little incentive to participate in the decision-making process unless it directly concerns their Faculty. A clarification of the role of the Dean Council, given the current governance model, is long overdue and would be useful for the Presiding Dean and for the upcoming director.

The review report recommends a 'full-time' director. This is a point that had been already agreed on by the previous Dean Council, however the terms for the position have never been clearly defined. If the full-time appointment means focusing exclusively on administering the School, it could be hard to attract a top researcher, especially if the focus is on offering undergraduate programs. As such, the University may consider better incentives for a full-time position that would attract high-caliber candidates. This would be consequent with having a director serving as "a more visible convenor of environmental faculty on campus", as suggested, particularly in the context of promoting a graduate program or a re-envisioning of environmental research at McGill.

Conclusion and Going Forward

The School of Environment remains, through its dedicated students, faculty and staff, a significant hub for environment and sustainability research at McGill. Yet, unit morale is low and the need for action is urgent. The most immediate issues we would like to address with support from the University are: 1) clarifying the governance structure of the MSE with a view to providing the School with the resources, space, and stability it needs to flourish; 2) seeking a definitive resolution of the long-standing question of the graduate program with support from the University; 3) clarifying expectations for MSE research and research training in relation to other interdisciplinary initiatives at McGill; 4) identifying hiring incentives at the University level, either in support of the current joint-appointment model or alternative models if the joint model cannot be sustained. We believe resolving these issues would go a long-way in responding to the concerns raised by the MSE community and the reviewers.

The MSE is a formidable resource encompassing some of the best environmental researchers and educators in the world. As evidence of the quality of MSE researchers, in the recent call for CRC-1 at McGill, no less than four JAF were considered as potential candidates and two were invited to submit a full application. MSE JAF have

supervised/co-supervised 53 MA/MSc, 66 PhD, and 19 post-doctoral scholars in the last five years and have been recognised through the Royal Society of Canada, the Steacie Memorial Fellowship and other significant awards. In the last two years, highly-qualified MSE undergraduate students have conducted environmental research projects within 16 departments across both campuses. JAF have brought valuable environmental expertise to the University, have developed their own network of collaborators within and beyond the MSE, and have greatly contributed to advancing research in emerging fields, such as sustainability. As evidenced by merits, several JAF are considered top researchers in their partner unit. The MSE is also home to award-winning lecturers and attracts outstanding students. In sum, it serves as an incubator for the innovative thinking and actions that are transforming our campus and the education and research landscape.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, compared to other recent initiatives at McGill, the MSE remains the only truly interdisciplinary, interfaculty, cross-campus unit, both in its constituency and its governance. All MSSSI Deans, for instance, are from the natural sciences, and SPP falls under Arts. In bravely trying to bring vastly different disciplinary perspectives together, the MSE has suffered from growing pains and failed aspirations. Yet, day after day, there is evidence that what it could offer - a crosspoint for innovative thinking that transcends boundaries between academic cultures - is sorely needed.