



MOTION REGARDING STUDENT CONCERNS ABOUT THE OSD 2020-03-26

Submitted for: 2020-03-26

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| Submitted to: | SSMU Legislative Council | Document no.: | LEG-PUB-MOT-2020-03-26-010 (to be assigned by Steering) |
| Moved by: | Beatrice Mackie <i>Law Representative</i> | Current Status: | <input type="checkbox"/> FOR APPROVAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> APPROVED <input type="checkbox"/> POSTPONED <input type="checkbox"/> COMMITTED <input type="checkbox"/> NOT APPROVED |
| Seconded by: | Jonah Fried <i>Residences Representative</i> | | |

Issue

Although the Office for Students With Disabilities (OSD) continues to provide accommodations to students who need them, certain institutional problems have precipitated a surge in complaints about its services. A Fall 2019 investigation¹ found that many of these concerns have long persisted unaddressed. In light of this report, a survey was conducted last month² to elucidate the most outstanding issues. As we have determined which issues remain most prolific, it is incumbent upon the SSMU to express solidarity with affected constituents and hold the OSD to a higher standard.

Background and Rationale

The OSD provides accommodations for students that need support in the classroom, in examinations, and on campus more generally. It is funded through the Student Services portfolio,³ and its operations are mandated by the provincial government.⁴ Although the OSD continues to serve students,

¹ [SSMU UA: OSD-related Research Report](#)

² [SSMU UA: Survey on Student Experiences with the OSD](#)

³ [McGill Student Services: Services](#)

⁴ [Legis Quebec: E-20.1, Act To Secure Handicapped Persons In The Exercise of Their Rights With a View To Achieving Social, School, and Workplace Integration](#) (2004)



complaints have mounted in recent years, and the OSD's failure to address them jeopardizes its ability to fulfill its mandate.

In Fall 2019, an investigation found that many recursive issues remain unaddressed. Last month, a survey was conducted to determine whether those same issues continue to harm members of the McGill community. It found that the following issues continue to be experienced by an overwhelming number of respondents:

1. Poor quality of notes obtained from OSD note-takers
2. Absence of OSD note-takers for their classes
3. Unprofessional, or anxiety-provoking behaviour from exam invigilators
4. Inability to communicate questions to professors during exams, and likewise, to receive mid-exam changes to their exams from professors
5. Absence of accommodations for Pop-Quizzes
6. Unreasonably long wait times for meeting with an OSD advisor
7. Wrong instructions regarding the location, scheduling and duration of their examinations

Considering that many of these issues occur during exam settings, which are inherently anxiety-provoking scenarios that exacerbate many students' conditions, the existence of these complications imperils the OSD's purpose of accommodating those conditions.

Although the problems that plague the OSD stem from underlying institutional problems, particularly those affecting the way the University is funded and organized, there are measures that the administration could take to rectify them. The OSD's flaws are perpetuated by an institutional view that the OSD should operate on a medical model rather than a social one. Above all, the SSMU should adopt this resolution in order to signal to the administration that it needs to change this narrative. The OSD is not a bandaid, and it is not a police force: it is an essential service that McGill is required to provide for students who experience significant obstacles to obtaining a McGill degree; wherefore, leaving additional untoward obstacles in their path is both counterintuitive and shameful.

Alignment with Mission

The SSMU has a mandate to strengthen the "educational, cultural, environmental, political, and social conditions"⁵ of its members, and the OSD's shortcomings impede on all of those things by making it more difficult for students to succeed at McGill. Consequently, it is incumbent

⁵ [SSMU Constitution: Preamble](#)



upon the SSMU to provoke changes to the OSD in order to ameliorate the social and academic conditions of its constituents who use OSD services.

Consultations Completed

We first met with the SSMU VP University Affairs to discuss ways to advocate for a better OSD service. We passed a survey to understand how often students encountered certain issues and how important these were to them. This survey received about 100 answers and was advertised through notably Facebook, Reddit and Newsletters. We also consulted with a few students who use or have used the OSD in the past and have reached out to the Director of OSD but were left with no convincing answer. A request for information was also made to the OSD two weeks ago, but no answers have reached us as this is being written.

Risk Factors and Resource Implications

There is no significant risk associated with this motion, it rather serves to communicate to McGill that there are issues with the OSD and that the broader student community, not just students that use the OSD, expects more out of this service to students.

Sustainability Considerations

This does not have an effect on sustainability.

Impact of Decision and Next Steps

If this is approved, it will first and foremost show to McGill that students encounter many issues when using the OSD. The results obtained from the survey are convincing proof that the OSD is failing some of its users. The second purpose of this motion is to show to McGill that the broader student community cares about these issues and that it believes that the OSD should be doing better in serving students. These objectives will be achieved through the letter in Appendix A that will be sent to McGill. The next advocacy step is to bring these issues to the McGill Senate through a question or motion to further enquire answers and to incentivise a willingness from McGill to improve this service.

Once these issues have been made public and there is an acknowledgment of their existence by McGill, we plan on working on finding ways to encourage McGill to work on solving these issues and to on our side see how the service could be improved through possibly the hiring of a researcher through the portfolio of the SSMU VP University Affairs.



Motion or
Resolution for
Approval

BE IT RESOLVED, THAT, the statement in Appendix A be disseminated to the Society’s members via the listserv on April 10th 2020, and

BE IT RESOLVED, THAT, the Executive Committee write an email to Fabrice Labeau, Deputy Provost, incorporating the statement in Appendix A on April 10th 2020;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, THAT, the SSMU Legislative Council mandate the VP (University Affairs) to bring forward a question or motion to the McGill Senate, outlining the demands enumerated in the statement in Appendix A;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, THAT, the SSMU Legislative Council mandate the VP (University Affairs) for the 2020-2021 academic year to hire a researcher to continue uncovering issues within the OSD and ways that they could be remedied.

Results of the
Vote

In favour ()
Opposed ()
Abstain ()



Appendix A : Relevant Appendix

The OSD provides accommodations for students that need support in the classroom, in examinations, and on campus more generally. Although the OSD continues to serve students, complaints have mounted in recent years, and the OSD's failure to address them jeopardizes its ability to fulfill its mandate. In Fall 2019, an investigation found that many recursive issues remain unaddressed. Last month, a survey confirmed that many of these issues continue to affect students. We call upon the administration to acknowledge the barriers that students who use McGill's OSD services face, and ask that measures be taken to improve the OSD.

Note-Takers

Since the OSD stopped paying note-takers, students who use the service have experienced a decline in the quality of notes being provided. Without a financial incentive, OSD Note-Takers cannot be expected to provide reliable notes. If Note-Takers are not OSD employees, they cannot be held accountable for the quality of their notes, either. Not only that, but without a financial incentive, students are not motivated to register to serve as OSD Note-Takers, leaving many students who need notes without access to their accommodation. The administration's aversion to paying OSD Note-Takers suggests that McGill does not view the OSD's services as essential, even though its operations are mandated by the provincial government.

Assessments at the OSD

Likewise, students resoundingly reported that writing their assessments with the OSD caused additional stress. For instance, students have frequently received wrong instructions regarding the location, scheduling and duration of their examinations. Exam settings are inherently anxiety-provoking scenarios that worsen many students' conditions. When the OSD's services cause additional anxiety for students, it falls short of its purpose of accommodating students' conditions.

Additionally, students who write with the OSD do not benefit from the same streamlined communication with their professors that other students receive. Quite often, students at the OSD are unable to ask their professors questions during examinations, because contact with professors is not always established. Corrections to exams are frequently made mid-examination; yet students either do not receive the corrections at all, or if they do receive them, they receive them later than their peers. This discourages students from writing with the OSD.

Pop quizzes present another barrier. Although they are typically not a significant portion of students' class grades, they are still a form of course assessment and students registered with the OSD deserve to have accommodations for them. Yet, in almost every scenario, students must write their pop quizzes with the rest of the class since they cannot register with the OSD in advance. Consequently, students are being denied their accommodations for assessments that the OSD has a mandate to accommodate them for.



Moving Forward

We call on the administration to demonstrate its commitment to its students by improving the quality of services provided by the OSD. To this end, we propose that the administration institute these changes:

1. **Paying Note-Takers:** The lack of compensation has created many difficulties for students, OSD Note-Takers and OSD-registered students alike.
2. **Encouraging Lecture Recordings:** In the survey, students overwhelmingly stated that lecture recordings could mitigate the issues afflicting the OSD's Note-Taking services. Although lecture recording technology is not present in each classroom, and lectures are recorded at the discretion of professors, the OSD ought to encourage professors to provide lecture recordings.
3. **Student Representation on the OSD Advisory Board:** The OSD Advisory Board has a seat reserved for a student. This year, they did not fill the seat, even though many candidates were interested in the position. Consequently, the advisory board of a service made for students does not have any student representation, meaning that actual student issues can be easily overlooked by the administration.
4. **Changing the name of the OSD:** The name "Office for Students with Disabilities" is antiquated and stigmatized. By contrast, the names adopted by other universities such as OttawaU, whose equivalent service is the "Student Academic Success Service", reflects a more inclusive view. Changing the name of the OSD is necessary to alter public perception of the service and the students who use it. Above all, it would represent a stronger commitment to helping students achieve academic success.

Although the OSD's problems stem from underlying institutional problems, particularly those affecting the University's funding and organization, there are measures that the administration could take to rectify them. The OSD is an essential service that McGill must provide for students who experience significant obstacles in obtaining a degree, and the administration must take measures to eliminate as many of those roadblocks as possible without creating new ones.