Accountability Plan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Preamble

The Students' Society of McGill University (henceforth SSMU) recognizes the need for increased transparency and accountability in its governance and operations. While certain mechanisms of accountability exist, the past few years have shown an urgent need to readdress and reaffirm accountability procedures at the SSMU. This plan seeks to clarify and expand on existing procedures to encourage more transparency, fairness, and accountability for all SSMU actors and encourage the creation of a culture of accountability, leading to a better SSMU for all members.

Research

Accountability is the requirement to explain and accept responsibility for carrying out an assigned mandate in light of agreed upon expectations.[1] Accountability is used in a variety of sectors as it is a crucial component of ensuring the efficiency and functionality of an organization. Specific to SSMU, there are many ways that accountability can be applied depending on the subject requiring accountability and the associated responsibilities of the person who is being held accountable.

All individuals acting on behalf of SSMU are accountable to their membership, which will be enforced by their supervisors or by a governing body. Employees of SSMU, spanning Executive Officers, regular full-time, regular part-time, and part-time contract workers, are expected to fulfill their mandates, and this is managed by the Human Resources (HR) Department. Additionally, SSMU actors who occupy a position in a governing body/advisory role, including Councillors, Directors, and Committee members, are accountable to their respective governing body and the governing bodies that supersede it.

SSMU is a not-for-profit organization (NFPO), sharing the classification with other student unions. Much of the research completed specifically looks at SSMU as **either a student union or an NFPO,** then the actionable items combine together these shared roles to reflect the SSMU's unique positionality.

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[1] https://sectorsource.ca/resource/file/building-strength-improving-governance-and-accountability-canadas-voluntary-sector

Accountability as an NFPO

Although SSMU is recognized as a not-for-profit organization, few academic or professional resources make the distinction between not-for-profit, non-profit and non-governmental organizations. The literature used in this plan uses the term NGO, however the principles of academic research are transferable to SSMU's structures, so long as the distinction between NGO and NFPOs is made clear and understandable. Non-governmental organizations is a broader term used to define groups that operate outside of government oversight to provide services to others.[2] Not-for-profit organizations (NFPOs) is a legal category for corporations and is defined as those corporations that do not generate capital (profit) in their operations and activities, and this includes the Students' Society of McGill University.[3]

According to The Global Development Research Centre (GDRC), there are several principles of accountability: (1) clear specification of responsibilities and authority, (2) provision of guidance and support to the responsible party, (3) regular monitoring and assessment of needs and responsibilities, (4) timely and appropriate action to address issues[4]. Accountability can be applied in several directions, each of which utilize a different mechanism and encourage accountability through different receiving parties.

Upward Accountability

Upward accountability applies to those with authority over the organization, including government agencies, institutional authorities, donors, and external policies. It should be acknowledged that as a student union, SSMU has a unique relationship towards McGill as an institutional authority, where it is simultaneously a reciprocal relationship (as outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement) and contains a delicate power relationship (as is the nature of a student union for a university). Due to this unique positionality, McGill could be classified as simultaneous upwards and horizontal accountability.

Upward accountability is managed through **reports** and **evaluations.** Reports, including disclosure statements, provide oversight agencies and donors with a summary of the NGO/NFPO's activities. Evaluations are an examination administered by the oversight agencies where the organization's activities are compared against a standard and provided some quantifiable response that demonstrates their achievement or failure against the standard. In both cases, the organization is mandated or voluntary participates to demonstrate its compliance with the regulations, policies, and laws that govern its conduct.

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[2] https://canadacommons.ca/topics/non-governmental-organizations/
[3] https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-7.75/
[4] https://www.gdrc.org/ngo/accountability/accountability.html

Downward Accountability

Downward accountability applies to those who the organization has a responsibility towards, including beneficiaries (like individuals accessing SSMU services) and target audiences. The main mechanism for downward accountability is **participation**. Participation ensures accountability by allowing those with a personal stake give their perspective on the actions and impacts of the organization in its work. Participation can be done through volunteering, employment, and consultations. To implement downward accountability, NGOs/NFPOs must consciously create opportunities for beneficiaries to participate and pursue feedback regularly.

Horizontal Accountability

Horizontal accountability applies to groups with ties to the organization, where neither party has authority over the other, including partnerships and peers (like the MoA with McGill University or relationships to other student unions). The main mechanism for horizontal accountability is **self-regulation of the sector**, where these groups work together to maintain accountability across their organization and provide feedback on internal and external processes. This collaborative relationship is typically done through specific roles and individuals tasked with maintaining and utilizing pre-existing relationships to improve performance. This form of accountability is also highly motivated by the collective desire for the sector to remain efficient, productive, and have a positive reputation.

Internal Accountability

Internal accountability applies to those individuals and groups internal to the organization, including employees and internal governing bodies. Internal accountability cannot be easily enforced through physical mechanisms, but is instead created by encouraging and normalizing a culture of **personal accountability, non-judgement, teamwork and asking for help as needed**. Personal accountability is the ways in which an individual ensures they are adequately equipped to address their responsibilities. This can be actualized by hiring individuals who strongly identify with the mandate of the position and the mission statement of the group, explicit training on de-escalation and accountability for supervisors, and anonymized feedback.

Accountability as a Student Union

The McGill Student Union Democratization Initiative (MSUDI henceforth) addresses several key ideas that intersect with the mission of this Accountability Plan. The MSUDI describes SSMU as highly bureaucratic, emphasizing that the sizable divide between representatives and the student body makes for an inefficient and often divided government that cannot appropriately discern, and

therefore cannot represent, student needs. The MSUDI suggests a **focus on smaller faculty and union collaborations**, the **dissociation of day-to-day operations from authority**, and generally **encouraging membership participation**, to create a more 'direct democracy' that will circumvent the problems of a larger student union like the SSMU. Membership participation can be encouraged by informing the student body regularly about student union actions, consulting with a wide range of actors to make more informed decisions, emphasizing student participation in general assemblies and public meetings, prioritizing accessibility in all regards, and remaining receptive to feedback and comments from students.[5]

Research into other student unions has demonstrated that the most common methods of ensuring accountability are through **complaint forms, clear procedural policies, and designated committees/individuals**. Complaint forms were clearly displayed under the main page or 'contact' subheading of the official student union website, and allowed the submission of supporting documents and suggestions for possible resolutions. Clear accountability and disciplinary procedures were typically outlined in the relevant policies or equivalent, but were also explained in layman's terms on their website page dedicated to managing complaints (to increase the accessibility of the information). Finally, each student designated a specific body, committee, or individual whose responsibility it was to ensure procedural fairness in managing complaints and/or maintain accountability for all individuals under the student unions. In most student unions researched, concerns or complaints related to Equity and Sexual Violence were managed by a separate system of reporting and different procedures.

The Importance of "Normalization" in Accountability

Socially entrenched norms equate responsibility with accountability, leading to the belief that the act of introducing a mechanism or action towards accountability ensures its success. However, actual accountability requires consistent follow-through on actionable items and continuous intervention otherwise it will never be prioritized by the responsible parties.

Conceptual changes in the system form from the cyclical relationship between the individual actors and the systems that guide and motivate them, where each influences the other towards efficiency and balance (not too much work to overburden, but not so little to never achieve goals). Additionally, while responsibility can be placed upon individuals, accountability requires voluntary intrinsic motivation, which can only be obtained in a healthy and collaborative workplace. The goal of this plan is not to create unattainable new responsibilities, but rather to introduce and continuously encourage positive behaviors that will form a work culture more conducive to accountability. This introduction,

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[5]

https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/McGill-Student-Union-Democratization-Initiative-Policy-2021-11-15-to-2026-05-01-1.pdf?x77765

coupled with adequate structures to support SSMU actors as they engage in these activities is referred to as 'normalization'.

To complete this change, social values related to 'politeness/manners' must be unlearned or changed and SSMU is aware of the discomfort and concerns that accompany unlearning social values. SSMU must take into consideration how people will respond and understand SSMU's actions towards accountability from the perspective of these social values, then do the difficult work of dismantling the current 'work culture' for one that more appropriately meets the demands for accountability. This is why, when referring to the introduction and continuation of new strategies for accountability, SSMU will use a process of 'normalization' to ease the individual burden of SSMU actors wherever possible and give new life to the system that guides these actors in their work.

Below are the most common suggestions for creating positive and holistic accountability in professional settings: [6] [7]

1. Determine and communicate clear goals about the execution and expected results of actionable items.
2. Avoid goals that contain broad concepts or neglect concrete achievable goals.
3. Connect goals directly to the organization's values or mandates to inspire and motivate individuals towards achieving their goals.
4. Ensure that goals are divided into equal and manageable sections, and are dispersed throughout an organization– not rely solely on a single individual or mandate.
5. Request and provide regular updates about the progress towards goals, including realized or potential issues.
6. Encourage transparency and collaboration in achieving goals, regularly providing contentful feedback and verifying the support needs of others.
7. Recognize and celebrate progress towards goals, especially in circumstances where individuals have previously communicated difficulties in their achievements. Balance critical feedback with recognition of efforts and understanding towards the circumstances that may have resulted in difficulties.
8. Encourage those in leadership roles to lead by example and demonstrate clear initiative and interest in shared goals. Acknowledge faults or difficulties as they arise and avoid placing blame on individuals.
9. Habituate individuals to accountability by implementing smaller measures towards accountability before implementing larger measures.

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[6] https://www.gallup.com/workplace/257945/ways-create-company-culture-accountability.aspx
[7] https://www.upwork.com/resources/what-is-accountability-in-a-workplace

Public Accountability Plan

Strengthening of Media Relations

SSMU shall normalize the organization of a semesterly press meeting and it shall be integrated into the responsibilities of the President of SSMU. In addition to the President, the Vice-President (External Affairs) and either the Communications Manager or General Manager shall attend these meetings to receive feedback and forge stronger relationships with ~~to~~ press entities. The President will also consult with the Secretariat ~~Dais~~ in advance of the meetings to brainstorm ideas and questions to be presented at the meeting. This semesterly press meeting should also serve as either a reminder of the upcoming General Assembly (to encourage student participation) or a summary of the General Assembly (to inform students of its actions and conclusions) to facilitate press members to encourage more student participation in governance.

The semesterly press meeting will be SSMU's regular means of communication with press entities. It shall be an open dialogue between all parties where press representatives can air grievances or concerns related to the dissemination or accessibility of information, as well as forward concerns of the public to the SSMU representatives. SSMU representatives will also provide adequate space for constructive feedback or suggestions on how to further improve press relations and, through this, repair the perceived disconnection between the students and their governing body. Finally, this meeting should, as needed, involve the discussion of relevant topics and how best for SSMU to address these issues as an advocate for student-run media.

Individuals from local and student-run news organizations will be invited and encouraged to participate. They will be permitted to submit questions in advance and pose them during the meeting, and these questions will be answered to the best of SSMU's ability. SSMU will also prepare a document, ahead of the initiation of this project, that will outline clear procedural regulations on the conduct of these meetings to ensure all parties are treated with respect, dignity, and that the most information possible is provided in the most efficient manner possible.

Accountability to General Assemblies

A general update on the actionable items of policies and plans shall be given twice a year, at each semester's General Assembly meeting, by the Accountability Commissioner, or the President until this position is filled. This general update will include SSMU's progress towards goals outlined in the policies and plans, the completion of Legislative Council and General Assembly actionable items as

defined in the policies and plans of SSMU, any acknowledgment necessary for items requiring attention, and concrete steps for continued improvement.

Communication Accessibility

Clear and regular communication, in both English and French, shall be a cornerstone of SSMU moving forward. SSMU will prioritize the maintenance and expansion of language resources to prevent delays in the release or accessibility of materials from the Society. If and when possible, SSMU actors should be encouraged to utilize their French language skills to alleviate the pressure on official Translators. The Speaker shall meet regularly, at least once per year, with French-speaking groups and SSMU employees tasked with translation to consult on how best to encourage and enforce French-speaking during governing body meetings. This encouragement and enforcement of French-speaking may be done before meetings through a reminder of standards, during the meeting itself when deemed necessary, and afterwards to encourage more French usage moving forward.

Additionally, SSMU shall take the necessary steps to normalize increased accessibility in communications based on the principles of Universal Design.[8] This implementation will be managed by the Accessibility Coordinator, who will work closely with the ==Secretariat== ~~Dais~~ to increase accessibility specifically for governance matters at SSMU.

The following suggestions shall be implemented before the expiration of this plan to increase communication accessibility:
- Encouraging, then normalizing bilingualism at committee, governing bodies, consultations, and one-on-one meetings.
- Encouraging, then normalizing motion-writers providing a preliminary translation of their motion when submitting to the Legislative Council or Board of Directors.
- Enabling the auto-captioning feature in all virtual meetings, in the language of preference for attendees, unless it is the preference of attendees to go without.
- Normalizing the use of picture description tools in SSMU communications, including social media posts.
- Normalizing the use of a browsable format for listservs that utilizes headings and includes a table of content with links to each section of the listserv.
- Reducing the quantity of inaccessible language utilized in SSMU communications (verbally and written) and clarifying all acronyms and references to external documents to lower the threshold of expertise required for participation.

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[8] https://universaldesign.ie/communications-digital/customer-communications-toolkit-a-universal-design-approach

Open Reception to Feedback

SSMU shall implement a feedback survey, to be managed by the new Accountability Commissioner position, that will be advertised to students at the end of each academic year to receive feedback and inform a plan for the upcoming year on how to address student's concerns or improve SSMU's operations. Vice-President (Clubs & Services ~~Student Life~~), Vice-President (External Affairs), Vice-President (Internal Affairs), and Vice-President (University Affairs) shall utilize their platforms and connections to encourage student participation in the survey. Incoming Executive members will receive a summary of the feedback and specific suggestions/directions as they relate to their mandate.

Additionally, specific departments or areas under SSMU will be encouraged to implement feedback surveys every few years so that students can respond to concerns related to those specific areas under SSMU. The Accountability Commissioner will support, and lead if necessary, the distribution of the surveys and implementation of feedback. The Vice-President (Clubs & Services ~~Student Life~~) shall receive regular feedback via surveys on the efficacy and utility of services at SSMU. The Vice-President (Internal) shall receive regular feedback via surveys on the satisfaction of SSMU actors with their roles and SSMU as an authority. The Vice-President (External) shall receive regular feedback via surveys on external perspectives on SSMU's advocacy and relationships, allowing students to voice their desires and goals in student governance. The President shall receive regular feedback via surveys of the participants of governance meetings to ensure satisfaction and efficacy in the Governance department. The feedback will be normalized as something to encourage and take seriously, with the express purpose of fostering a more receptive and reciprocal relationship.

Governance Accountability Plan

Limits on Confidentiality

The Secretariat ~~Dais~~ will be responsible for enforcing clear limits on confidential sessions to ensure no abuse or misuse of the procedure, and will be tasked with authorizing confidential sessions if they are provided clear justification that demonstrates the pressing necessity for a confidential session. Confidential sessions may only be used when the topic of discussion concerns critically confidential information, such as topics related to Human Resources, legal, or private financial information.

Clarity on Rules & Privileges

The Steering Committee shall work with members of the Governance department to produce a document that clearly outlines and defines the rules and privileges that govern non-voting members attending meetings of the Legislative Council, Board of Directors, or their committees. Once drafted, this document will be regularly updated and readily available to SSMU members on the SSMU website under the 'SSMU Governance' tab. The Speaker or Deputy Speaker will remain readily available via email ahead of and during meetings to answer questions related to the rights and privileges of non-voting members.

The Governance Reform Committee (GRC) shall, before this Plan is set to expire, undertake a complete revision of the Internal Regulations of Elections & Referenda. It will be the responsibility of the Chairs of the Governance Reform Committee to complete these reviews in a timely manner. This complete revision will be focused on implementing clear and strict guidelines for campaigning to increase the accountability and efficacy of campaigns. The GRC shall consider the following suggestions:
- All campaigning individuals will be required to submit an official platform that describes the tenets of their campaign and the action(s) they will be committed to if elected.
- Nomination period will be extended until there are at least 2 candidates running for every position.
- Reintroduction of slates with clear platforms and mandates.
- Limitations on the number of referendum questions and clear guidelines for the prioritization of questions depending on content.

Regular Faculty Consultations

The President of SSMU and the Vice-President (Internal) shall maintain an open and collaborative relationship with the student faculty associations presidents in order to increase accountability for faculty Legislative Council representatives. This open and collaborative relationship will be reciprocal, where either party can discuss feedback with the other to encourage transparency about performance and output of each respective association's representatives. The Vice-President (Internal) in particular will facilitate a relationship through;
- Semesterly 'check-in' meetings to discuss relevant concerns, summarize the activities of the previous semester, and receive/provide feedback on ideas for the upcoming semester.
- Regular email correspondence to discuss issues as they arise and receive feedback.
- Consultations for larger plans and policies that will impact the student faculty associations or their members.

Financial Accountability Plan

Financial Information

The Vice-President (Finance) will release the SSMU's current investments on the SSMU webpage by December 1st every year. This is to ensure that the SSMU is transparent about their holdings and is in line with the existing SSMU policies and plans. Members can request additional financial information from the Vice-President (Finance) who must respond to the request within ten (10) business days, excluding any SSMU closures. The Executive Committee will determine if the requested information can be provided, and to what extent, but adequate justification must be provided to the requestor. Salaries for full-time employees and hourly rates for casual employees will not be provided, though Executive salaries must be provided upon request.

Funding

The Vice-President (Finance) with the Funding Commissioner will provide the estimated amount of funding available in each fund by October 15th every year based on the funds received in the Fall semester. This information must be updated within five (5) business days of the first of every month, or within five (5) business days of a fund becoming depleted. This is to ensure that the SSMU is transparent in the amount of funding available.

Financial Reporting

Twice a year, once during or before the Fall semester and once during the Winter semester, the Vice-President (Finance) will report on the financial state of the SSMU. This report must include the current budget, any budget revisions, and goals for the SSMU's finances for the remainder of the year. The report must be presented to the Legislative Council or the General Assembly.

Accountability Committee and Complaints

The Accountability Committee shall manage all complaints pertaining to a failure to abide by mandate, lack of attendance to obligatory meetings, failure to complete important tasks in a timely manner, or failure to act as a sufficient representative. They will accept complaints from all SSMU actors and members, who must be willing to act as a complainant and provide evidence to

substantiate their claim so that the Accountability Committee can carry out an investigation. The Accountability Committee will then be tasked with examining the evidence and determining the appropriate course of action in a timely manner which can include .

The Accountability Committee has the discretion to propose actions that it deems appropriate to helping resolve the complaint, such as facilitating mediation sessions between parties.

Arising from an investigation, the Accountability Committee may also recommend the implementation of official disciplinary measures, guided by relevant governing documents and proportional to the determined infraction.

The outcome of the Accountability Committee's investigation will be presented in the form of a report to the Legislative Council if its consequences pertain to interests of members of the Society, as outlined in the Terms of Reference. Otherwise, the final report will be distributed solely to the parties involved in the inquiry or complaint.

This report should contain the recommendations arising from the investigation. Some of these recommendations may require additional actions to be taken by the Legislative Council in order for their full effect to be implemented, such as requesting a statement or apology by issued, for the suspension, removal, or resignation of individuals from a position of power, issuing sanctions, or other means by which the situation may be rectified. This is because it is the Legislative Council that holds the authority to mandate these measures through the initiation of motions; by contrast, the Accountability Committee has limited jurisdiction over the implementation of disciplinary measures, only able to recommend but not enforce them.

Even when there are no active complaints, the Accountability Committee will still meet to discuss strategies to be implemented to encourage further accountability, transparency and student involvement in SSMU.

The Accountability Committee shall regularly report to the Legislative Council as per the Terms of Reference. present a report to the Legislative Council and Board of Directors at the end of each semester that summarizes the number of complaints received and how they were addressed as it pertains to matters of SSMU actors as elected/representative officials if they are already publicly available, but will not include information that may infringe upon HR employment information.

The membership of the Accountability Committee must be adjusted to reflect the wide applications of accountability under SSMU. All individuals selected for a role in the Accountability Committee must show there are no conflicts of interest and be free of concerns related to bias or unwillingness to participate. The proposed new committee membership should be as follows:
- Accountability Commissioner (Committee Chair, non-voting);
- Up to three (3) members of the Secretariat (non-voting) One (1) member of Dais (non-voting);
- SSMU's Governance Manager (non-voting, optional);

- One (1) member of the Human Resources department (non-voting, optional);
- ~~One (1) Member at Large with experience sitting on a governing body of SSMU;~~
- Two (2) Directors, who may not be Councillors or Officers;
- Two (2) Members at Large, who may not be Councillors or Directors.

The members deemed 'optional' within the membership of the accountability committee shall refer to those individuals who will remain available for consultation and will be mandated to attend if their presence is requested by the Accountability Commissioner.

Members at Large shall be recruited by the ==Secretary General== ~~Governance Manager~~ using all channels of communication available to them, including SSMU social media, newsletters, the banner on SSMU's website, and job posting websites. In advertising this position, the ==Secretary General== ~~Governance Manager~~ will emphasize the benefits of committee participation for students, and work with other SSMU actors to strategize incentives for student participation in student governance.

The Accountability Committee will, through its conduct, encourage a culture of collaboration and involvement, where non-members are consulted regularly to get a complete understanding of various elements of SSMU and for any accountability concerns. Parties which must be consulted or included in any discussion of creating or applying accountability mechanisms are:
- One representative from the Human Resources Department (if the subject relates to an employee of SSMU).
- One representative of the Governance Department (if the subject relates to an elected official of SSMU).
- One individual who is neither an elected official or an employee of SSMU (to ensure procedural fairness and external participation).

Responsible Person(s) for Accountability

Accountability Commissioner

SSMU shall hire an individual under the title 'Accountability Commissioner' who shall be responsible for chairing the Accountability Committee, maintaining accountability for SSMU actors, and ensuring the execution of actionable items from Policies and Plans. The funding for this role will not leverage a fee and will instead be taken from SSMU's existing funds.

This 'Accountability Commissioner' shall be a regular employee of the Society, but operations of accountability will be kept separate from regular departments of SSMU. Similar to Elections SSMU, the Accountability Commissioner shall work independently but collaboratively with ==parties including but==

not limited to the SSMU Executives, the Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, other members of the Governance Department, Governing Bodies, or individual employees to execute their mandate. They will report directly to the Internal Counsel and Corporate Secretary, ~~Governance Manager,~~ who will also ensure sufficient accountability themselves and training on governance matters and Executive mandates to adequately prepare them for their role. The Accountability Commissioner will also receive training from the Human Resources department to address topics including handling of employees and equity.

In the creation of the mandate for this position, the following shall be taken into consideration:
- SSMU's broader goal of creating a culture for accountability.
- Clear procedural guidelines on how the Accountability Commissioner will evaluate accountability and manage failures to meet expectations to ensure the individual hired into the role is well-equipped to complete the mandate.
- Clear limitations on authority to ensure no abuse of power.

The Accountability Commissioner shall be an employee of the Governance Department and their training will heavily intersect with the training of other Governance employees to encourage a collaborative nature and promote in-depth understanding of governance matters. In addition to regular training, they shall~~, at the beginning of every academic year,~~ seek out all Executive Officers once per Fall semester and once per Winter semester, to ~~and~~ gain an ~~a basic~~ understanding of their role~~, and~~ responsibilities, and priorities, ~~as well as~~ their personal preferences in leadership to guide their approach to accountability for the upcoming year, and to share accountability-related resources and frameworks to guide mandate adherence and progress. They shall be hired in the same time frame as regular employees, and will be held to the same standard throughout the hiring process.