Memorandum:

To: Mark Seasons, Chair, Course Evaluation Project Team
From: Brian Forrest, Teaching Fellow, Faculty of Mathematics
CC: Mario Coniglio, Associate Vice-President Academic
    Stephen Watt, Dean of Mathematics
Re: Response to the Report of the Course Evaluation Project Team

By way of background, the Faculty of Mathematics began the process of converting from paper to online course evaluations in 2013. As part of the lead up to this transition the leadership group within the Faculty had a number of significant discussions about the nature of our existing process, about the types of questions we were asking, about how course evaluations were being used, and how they might be used in the future. While these discussions were taking place, this group was conscious of the possibility of a future common instrument to be used across all faculties. As such, the implications for the Faculty of adopting a common course evaluation questionnaire have been under serious considered for some time.

In formulating this response to the Project Team’s report, I recently met with the current Chairs of four departments in the Faculty. (The Director of the David R, Cheriton School of Computer Science was unable to attend the meeting but has been informed of the main take-aways, as have the Dean and Associate Dean Undergraduate and all three have had an opportunity for input on this document prior to its submission.) While the leadership group has changed substantially over the last few years it would seem that the Faculty’s views on matters relating to course evaluations have remained remarkably consistent. As such, this memo is intended to be a summary of my assessment of the opinions and concerns of the senior leadership of the Faculty of Mathematics.

The primary focus of the Faculty as it concerns course evaluations is certainly consistent with the goals of the Project Team; that the course evaluation instrument should provide meaningful and productive feedback about the nature and quality of teaching in our courses. To this end we believe that regardless of the model adopted the choice of questions is an extremely important factor in assessing the potential success of the process. We know that the Project Team also shares this opinion.

One concern that may be more specific to Mathematics than to other faculties is the desire to preserve the relevance of our historical data. There are a number of questions on our current survey that have been in place for many years. This allows us to make comparisons between an individual instructor’s performances in a given course offering with historical norms, as well as to track that individual’s relative performance over the years. This is useful for annual evaluations, for providing feedback to the instructor concerning areas that need improvement, and for tracking improvement. We use weighted averages of the Likert scores from individual questions to determine scores for an instructor in three categories: Preparedness, Delivery and Effectiveness, as well as a final summary of all three as an overall assessment.
It is also worth noting that perhaps unlike other faculties, a significant amount of the service teaching in Mathematics is done in courses that are not under the direct control of any specific academic unit. For this reason, the Faculty has always been aware of the value of commonality in our course evaluation survey so we are not adverse to this notion on philosophical grounds.

With respect to the current proposal, there is general satisfaction with the idea of going forward with a cascading model. This model appears to be structured to address the desire for a degree of commonality across the institution while allowing faculties and instructors the ability to customize the instrument to meet their own specific needs. However, we felt that full acceptance of the cascading model would only be possible once the actual questions were known. With this in mind here is a summary of our position at this time:

1. **Number and nature of common questions:**
   - The change from paper to online evaluations has resulted in a fairly noticeable decrease in response rates. This is consistent with what other institutions have experienced after moving to online evaluations and we do not expect this to change radically. We are concerned that a substantially longer set of questions may lead to survey fatigue and hence to a further erosion of the response rate. We feel that the common portion of the survey should be limited to at most 6 questions with 4 being a number that is viewed as ideal. In response to the addition of common questions, we would undertake to reduce the number of questions in the Faculty portion of the document accordingly. In this respect, the closer that any of the common questions might be to any of our key existing questions the easier it will be for us to eliminate parts of our existing survey without significantly impacting the integrity of our historical data.
   - The Faculty would want to have significant input on the choice and wording of questions in the common part of the survey. We feel that the choice of questions and the way they are worded is a fundamental part of this process. Certainly, the Project Team would agree with this assessment. While we recognize the many hours of work that the subcommittee has put into researching and designing sample questions, we did have some concerns with respect to a few of the examples in the proposal. We also feel that we have considerable expertise within the Faculty in both the design and assessment of surveys of this type. So we do believe that we can have a positive role in this regard.
   - In choosing questions for the common part of the survey care should be taken to ensure that the questions apply broadly across disciplines. This again is something that we are sure the Project Team would agree with in principle. However, the nature of the questions that might fit this description could vary across campus.

2. **The use and availability of the data:**
   - The Faculty acknowledges that there may be very good reasons for common survey questions across the institution. However, at this time we have not been given any information on what plans there are in place, if any, for the use of this data beyond the practices that are currently in place within the faculties. In particular, are there plans to use the common data for internal comparison purposes, and are there specific plans to use
the data to address external concerns or demands? Answers to these questions could well impact the nature of questions to be chosen.

- The Faculty shares the Project Team’s position that the quality of our teaching is of paramount importance to our institution. Currently, the course evaluation survey plays a significant role in our assessment of teaching quality, and we anticipate that it will continue to do so. However, we also recognize that there are limits to what a student driven-survey can tell us about the effectiveness of our teaching. A similar statement can be made with respect to the survey’s role for stimulating improvement in our teaching. So we agree that the new instrument should only be part of the overall teaching evaluation process.

- The Faculty has made the Likert scores for all of our courses available to all of our students for many years and strongly supports the position of the Project Team that this practice be more widely adopted. We do also agree that the results of the open-ended questions should only be available to the instructor.