Mathematics & Statistics postdoc program – Procedures

- The department has a postdoc coordinator (Tom Salisbury in 2012), but proposals are adjudicated by a committee of 3, set up by the coordinator once it is known what proposals will be made. The adjudicating committee must be at arms length from all proposals, so the coordinator may or may not be on the committee, depending on whether he/she has a conflict of interest with one or more proposals.
- The funds the committee has available consist of $25K coming as a grant from Fields, $13K from the departmental budget (the postdoc fund), and roughly $40K consisting of 5 half-courses at roughly $8K each. A total of $78K.
- The Fields money can be awarded to a single postdoc, or split among 2 postdocs. The split need not be 50:50. Fields does not want its funds spread among more than 2 postdocs. This postdoc(s) is designated as the Fields-York postdoc for the year in question.
- The 5 half-courses are not guaranteed, but this represents the maximum number one department can receive under the CUPE contract. Our department normally does receive the maximum, but we are never sure that this will be the case until after our list of names is submitted to the Dean and subsequently approved. Therefore postdoc award letters should include such phrases as “subject to budgetary approval” and should maintain flexibility about the sources of funding that should be used. The possibility of teaching should be mentioned, but not promised, eg “Duties may include teaching, to a maximum of a single one-semester course”.
- The committee should base its decisions on multiple criteria, such as the quality of the postdocs, the impact of the postdoc on the research program of the supervisor, the ability of the department to adequately supervise a postdoc’s research, the need for postdocs to acquire teaching experience in order to find permanent jobs, and the impact of departmental funding on making things happen that wouldn’t be feasible otherwise.
- The adjudicating committee should be prepared to make at least some decisions before the “common pdf date” set each year by NSF. This is a date NSF promises to make its pdf decisions by, and major US universities agree not to require decisions by. See www.ams.org/profession/employment-services/deadline-coordination/deadline-coordination
  The date for 2012 is Feb 3, 2012. The point is that after that date, some of our applicants may need to respond to other offers, so unless we are prepared to make offers before then, we may lose out on good candidates. This is the reason for the coordinator circulating a December call for proposals with an early deadline (Jan 18 in 2012).
- This does not mean that all decisions need to be made by then. For example, postdocs participating in Fields thematic programs are often still not decided at that point in time. Even if names are not set by our internal deadline, faculty are requested to indicate by the deadline whether they will be bringing forward proposals later, so that the committee can make an informed decision about how many decisions to make initially, and how many to hold back till further information arrives. Proposals can also be partially funded initially, with the option of adding further funds later if necessary. The committee or the coordinator should be in touch with proposers once the initial decisions have been made, to ensure that both proposers and the committee can make adjustments as new information is received.
- Once decisions have been made, the supervisor must finalize a budget with Kate Singh, prior to having the Chair issue a formal offer to the postdoc. Susan Rainey has a template letter that the supervisor can make changes to. The postdoc coordinator can be consulted for advice about the wording of the letter, but it is the supervisor’s responsibility to initiate preparation of the letter, and to ensure that the wording is appropriate. The timing of letters
will vary, depending on the situation of the postdoc. Generally the later the letter is prepared, the more precise the terms can be, but enough time must be left for immigration/work permit issues to be addressed.

- Given the limited departmental funding available, it is typically the case that the bulk of a postdoc’s salary comes from research grants. It is also the case that larger research groups will access departmental funding more often than individuals. (Eg groups with a CRC, an Ontario Early Researcher award, or enough researchers to permit pooling of NSERC grants). For example, both CRC holders in the department typically ask for at least a half-course of teaching in every competition. This is to be expected, and is the department’s contribution to the maintenance of these long-term initiatives.
- At the same time, the committee should be sensitive to the high impact having an occasional postdoc can have on the research of an isolated researcher in the department. Isolated researchers often require more funding than a single half-course in order to make their budgets work, but in compensation they typically apply less often.
- The committee should also take advantage of opportunities to use departmental funds to leverage other sources of funding. For example, faculty involved with a Fields thematic program may be able to get a postdoc for a whole year by coming up with only a half-year’s funding (if the postdoc is fully funded directly by Fields during the 6 months of the thematic program).
- Canadian work permits for foreign postdocs require that there be a single employer at any one time. So if money is being pooled from several universities (or York and Fields), one institution must write the invitation letter, pay the postdoc, and invoice the other institutions for their share. In the case of a postdoc at Fields for 6 months and at York for 6 months, it is typically simpler to have separate invitations for each 6 month period (and therefore two separate work permits), even though this it is more expensive for the postdoc to make two applications. Foreign postdocs must be advised of the correct procedure to follow in this regard.
- Decisions are rarely simple and straightforward; there is often a multi-stage process in which part of the budget is allocated initially, and then adjustments are made over time. Not all postdocs accept their offers, and sometimes they receive tenure-stream offers from other places after accepting our offer. Obviously, we would never insist on their turning down such offers, so it often happens that funding and courses gets reallocated even into the spring and summer. Sometimes postdocs get other funding (eg Fields-Ontario pdf’s) which also allows us to reallocate our funding.
- If there is a “typical” allocation it would be supporting 7 postdocs; 2 not teaching at all and receiving $12,500 each (from the Fields money), and 5 each teaching a half-course and receiving $2,600 of the postdoc fund (ie roughly $10,600 each). The “typical” allocation is almost never exactly what happens, as each budget is somewhat unique. For example, in 2011/2012 the department supported 8 postdocs, in the amounts $15K, $13K, $10K, $9K, $8K, $8K, $8K, $7K. This included 2 postdocs participating in the Fields geometry program. It would be unusual to split the funding among more than 8 postdocs, and in some years there might just be 5 or 6. There is always a tension between supporting as many as possible, and supporting so many that the actual impact of the money is trivial. There are typically a handful of additional postdocs in the department, who are supported entirely from research grants.
- When allocating teaching, the committee should be convinced that the postdoc’s language skills are adequate. Sometimes the supervisor’s assurance is all the committee has to go on, but CV’s or reference letters can be combed for supporting information. Prior teaching
experience is an asset in terms of assuring the committee that the postdoc will do an adequate job. The committee must balance this against the fact that postdocs without teaching experience have the greatest need to teach (in order to be able to get jobs afterwards). The latter seems to be more of an issue with postdocs intending to seek jobs in North America, and less of an issue with European postdocs. Postdocs should not teach more than one half-course per year at York. At the end of the day, it is the supervisor’s responsibility to ensure that their postdoc does an acceptable job of teaching (and to fix problems if they arise).

• There will be variation in postdoc salaries, depending on the area. Typically the minimum feasible salary is $40K per year, but in some areas (especially applied ones), it is not unusual to have salaries closer to $50K. Numbers in between are also common. Committees should particularly scrutinize supervisors’ budgets if it looks like unusually low or high salaries are being contemplated, and may certainly request clarifications in such cases. It is not uncommon that supervisors get awarded less than they ask for. But if the committee cannot make an award that makes the postdoc offer viable, then it is better to make no award at all.

• The possibility of postdoc teaching in other units (e.g., Glendon, ESSE) should be kept in mind. This likely wouldn’t enter into decisions made in January or February, but could be considered in years when we have a large number of candidates. The Dean of FSE has offered to try to find teaching for Math postdocs outside the department. Such teaching might not have as much impact on employability as teaching in our department, and might only be accessible to postdocs with some experience in other disciplines (or who speak excellent French, in the case of Glendon). Summer teaching can also be considered, but for purposes of CUPE exemptions summers get lumped with the preceding Fall/Winter.

Prepared by Tom Salisbury (Jan 2012)