Executive Summary

To gain a better understanding of the online teaching and learning experience to further enhance instructional and learning supports, surveys were administered to professors and students at the end of the fall 2020 term. This summary report presents the findings from the student survey sent at the end of November 2020 garnering a 30% response rate (n=2,992) from a representative sampling of the student population.

Transition Experience

- 95% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices and 84% had sufficient internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses.
- Only 48% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to transition to distance/online instruction for the winter 2021 term (notably, 44% of undergraduate respondents compared to 63% of graduate respondents).

Educational Technology

- Zoom was the most used web conferencing platform at 96% and reported as the easiest to use. In terms of use, this was followed by Microsoft Teams (61%) and Adobe Connect (47%).
- While students reported that chat and screen sharing features were most used in their courses, screen sharing and document sharing emerged as most helpful to their learning.

Instructional Approaches

- Pre-recorded video lectures and quizzes were reported as the most used approaches by about 80% of students. These were equally deemed to be the most helpful to student learning, along with the use of polling/brainstorming tools.
- 75% of students shared that synchronous video was used in at least one of their courses with nearly 90% of students stating that synchronous videos were recorded and subsequently posted. This represents a jump from 78% of students reporting the recording and posting of videos in June.
- Graduate, international and students located abroad shared more positive views about engagement and ease of learning with online instruction.

Challenges Experienced

- Students listed lack of motivation and the psychological strain of remote/isolated learning as the most challenging experiences of online learning. Closely followed by the lack of in-person interaction with classmates and instructors.
- International students and graduate students indicated experiencing fewer moderate or significant challenges overall.
- 75% of undergraduate and 53% of graduate students indicated experiencing excessive workloads. 40% of students indicated that they were not coping well with their studies.

Supports Used

- Between 60-90% of students are aware of institutional support services and resources, however, fewer than 30% of students used them. A single exception of over 50% of students reporting the use of library resources.
- Only 37% of undergraduate and 47% of graduate students knew who to contact if they had technical problems.
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Context
In response to the physical distancing measures put in place in mid-March 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, numerous changes to course modality and pedagogical practices have taken place. To follow-up on surveys administered in June 2020 with the goal of learning from recent experiences, and to continue to enhance instructional supports, the University Ottawa sought the input of students enrolled in a course during the fall 2020 term. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of this student survey. Representing a 30% response rate, 2,992 survey responses were received from across all faculties via a representative sampling of the student population. Survey invitations were sent to students in the language of preference associated with their registration profile. Respondents could choose to complete the survey in the language of their choice.

Distance/Online Learning Experience
Overall, 93% of survey respondents said that all courses for which they were enrolled were taught online. Of these respondents, 42% of students shared that they had never taken a distance or online course before. Of the remaining respondents, 32% of students stated having taken 1-2 courses online, and 24% having taken more than 3 courses online before the fall 2020 term.

To gauge the level of readiness of students for the online modality this fall, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements. Figure 1 outlines the percentage of students who selected either strongly agree or somewhat agree from a 5-point Likert scale which also included neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree and strongly disagree as options. Nearly 95% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses, up by about 10% from the end of June. In terms of internet access, 84% of students reported sufficient access, however this figure dropped to 73% for those located abroad. Overall, only 48% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to transition to distance/online instruction for the winter 2021 semester, up 5% from June when asked about feeling prepared for the fall semester. A significant gap of 19% emerges between responding undergraduate and graduate students, where 63% of graduate respondents feel prepared for the winter semester (vs. 44% of undergraduates). Similarly, 58% of students located abroad shared that they felt prepared compared to only 45% of students located in the capital region. Responses across faculty affiliation were similar, with the exception of the Faculty of Education for which students had a significantly higher level of agreement (67% of undergraduate and 81% of graduate students) with regards to feeling prepared for the winter semester online. Other notable differences included overall higher levels of agreement among graduate, international and students located abroad with respect to knowing whom to contact with technical issues. Lastly, the low levels of agreement (38% overall) with the statement regarding knowing whom to contact with technical problems should be noted.
Educational Technology Used
To gain a better understanding of the types of tools and features that students used in the context of their distance and online learning experiences, several questions asked students to identify the web conferencing platforms and related features used and the extent that these were easy to use, and were helpful in their learning. In terms of ease of use or helpfulness for a given tool/feature, this was only asked to the percentage of students who claimed to have used it. Figure 2 outlines the web conferencing platforms most used by students (>10%) and the extent to which these were easy to use. Other platforms for which there was <10% use included: Google Hangouts/Meet, YouTube Live, Skype and WebEx.

By a margin of 35%, Zoom was reported as the most used platform and was equally cited as the most easy to use platform. The ranking of the platforms in Figure 2 is largely consistent across faculties. An outlier in terms of platform usage was noted via respondents from the Telfer School of Management where, Microsoft Teams and Adobe Connect were reported to be used by 90% and 73% of respondents respectively. Adobe Connect was also observed to be more frequently used by undergraduate students than by graduate students (52% and 25% respectively).
Figure 2. Web Conferencing Platforms Used / Ease of Use

Figure 3 indicates the most used web conferencing features as well as the level of agreement regarding how helpful they were to student learning. Students reported that screen sharing and chat features were the most used features in their courses, with both screen sharing and document sharing emerging as the most helpful features to their learning. Equally notable is that over 75% of students shared that synchronous video was used in at least one of their courses with nearly 90% of students stating that synchronous videos were recorded and subsequently posted. This represents a jump from 78% of students reporting the recording and posting of videos in June. It was made particularly clear by students in their open-ended recommendations that they strongly encourage instructors who host synchronous class sessions to record these and post/link them in virtual campus. Students mentioned this as helpful for review of the course material, in case they experienced internet connection issues during class or if they were having trouble joining the class at a stipulated time because of a significant difference in time zones. Notable variations across faculties included greater use of the whiteboard feature by students in the Faculties of Engineering and Science as well as a greater use of breakout groups by students at the Faculty of Education.
Other than the web conferencing platforms, respondents noted the use of several other online technologies and features in their courses. Figure 4 outlines the most used technologies as PowerPoint voice-over recordings with 64% of student experiencing this approach in at least one of their courses. The integration of YouTube videos as well as collaborative editing tools such as Google or Microsoft Docs were scored highest in terms of helpfulness for learning. Other technologies mentioned by students included Top Hat Monocle and Padlet.

Two themes of note stemming from open-ended comments were: 1) the use of diverse technological tools and features were most useful to them as learners when the purpose of the tool/feature was carefully explained and instructions as to their use were clearly described; 2) that instructors should be mindful of the number of different tools and platforms being used. Many students shared that it was a burden to learn nearly a dozen different online tools across their courses in the fall semester.
Instructional Approaches

When asked about instructional approaches used in their distance and online courses and the extent to which these were helpful in their learning, students reported that pre-recorded video lectures (81%) was the most used (Figure 5). In terms of use, this was followed by quizzes (79%) and discussion boards (67%). The top seven approaches reported as most used in Figure 5 have each increased in reported use by about 20% when comparing with similar data collected in June (see Figure 6). This appears to indicate a greater use of more interactive instructional approaches. Approaches deemed most helpful were also the posting of videos lectures and quizzes, as well as the use of polling/brainstorming tools. Of particular note, numerous students emphasized in the open-ended comments that the use of participative/active instructional approaches added strong value when clearly explained and facilitated by the instructor. Graduate students indicated experiencing more participatory approaches such as student presentations, paired or small group work and peer-evaluations by about 10-30% compared to undergraduate students. No major differences emerged in approaches reported by students across faculties (with the exception of students affiliated with the Faculty of Education who reported the use of a greater diversity of approaches, in particular more participative ones such as paired/small group work, student presentations, polling and journaling). See Appendix A for top instructional strategies pulled from student open-ended comments.
Figure 5. Instructional Approaches Used / Helpfulness for Learning

- Pre-recorded video lectures
- Quizzes
- Discussion boards
- Paired or small group work
- Student responses via polling/brainstorming tools
- Student presentations (streamed or recorded)
- Guest speakers
- Peer-evaluation
- Online simulations or games
- Journaling activity
- Online treasure hunts (internet searches)
- Social media
- Collective writing via blogs/wikis

Legend:
- Used
- Helpful (Very and Somewhat)
- Helpful (Very)
Overall, there was a strong sentiment that distance and online learning modalities were less engaging, more difficult and less conducive to learning than traditional in-class courses. However, as indicated in Figure 7 via the percentage of students who selected either strongly agree or somewhat agree, both graduate, international and students located abroad shared more positive views (in particular regarding the engaging nature of online learning) as compared to the more negative views shared by undergraduate, Canadian students and students located in the capital region. Exceptions to this trend were noted among students at the Faculty of Education who held largely neutral or positive views. This was also the case among survey respondents who had previous experiences taking online courses.
Challenges Experienced

When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with a series of experiences lived during their distance/online learning in the fall (using a Likert scale), responding students indicated that overall, a lack of motivation, psychological strain of remote learning, and the lack of in-person interaction with classmates were by far the most challenging experiences. This was closely followed by the lack of in-person interaction with instructors. Figure 8 highlights, from most to least, the percentage of experiences that respondents identified as either a significant or moderate challenge. Also represented in the figure below are differences in the level of challenge noted between undergraduate and graduate student respondents as well as between Canadian and international student respondents. Overall, undergraduate students indicated challenges as either moderate or significant by a margin of 5-35% more than graduate students. Challenges that appeared as more significant for undergraduate students included: lack of motivation, testing and online exams, and professors having trouble using technology. Similarly, Canadian students noted a greater degree of challenge across the series of experiences listed in Figure 8 when compared to international students. Notable exceptions emerged with international students reporting a greater degree of challenge with remote access to educational software and tools, issues of accessibility and accommodation, accessing library resources and communicating with TAs. A notable faculty affiliation for which students experienced fewer challenges was Education, for instance only 17% of students identified testing and online exams as challenging compared to an average of 48% of students across all faculties.
Figure 8. Most Significant Challenges Experienced (at Undergraduate/Graduate Level)

- Lack of motivation
- Psych strain of remote learning
- No F2F interaction with classmates
- No F2F interaction with professors
- Self-directed learning & time mgmt
- Collaborating with others remotely
- Distraction from family/roommates
- Testing and online exams
- Getting feedback on my work/progress
- Completing assignments
- Professors trouble with technology
- Communicating with my professor
- Issues with technology not working
- Communicating with my TAs
- Remote access to software/tools
- Accessing library resources
- Accessibility & accommodations
- Learning how to use the technology

Undergraduate | Graduate | Canadian | International
Workload

When asked to describe their course related workload this term, as compared to their expectations coming into this fall term, 75% of undergraduate students and 53% of graduate students indicated that it was more. It should be noted that when asked to compare the workload from fall 2019 (or pre-COVID term with the same number of courses) to the workload during the fall 2020 term, student responses were nearly the same as those in Figure 9. No notable differences emerged across Canadian/International status, location, or language of respondent. While quite close overall, workloads were noted as greatest by students in the Faculty of Social Science and the Telfer School of Management.

Figure 9. Actual Workload Compared to Expectations (at Undergraduate/Graduate Level)

As presented in Figure 10, over 40% of students indicate that they are not coping well with their studies during the fall 2020 term. Graduate students appear to be coping better than undergraduates by a margin of 20%. Also, students located abroad appear to be coping better than those in the capital region by a margin of 15%. Nearly 75% of respondents from the Faculty of Education shared that they were coping at least somewhat well, significantly greater than the cross-faculty average of 55%. No notable differences emerged across Canadian/International status or language of respondent.
Supports Used

While well over 60% of students are aware of the services, resources and supports listed in Figure 11, in terms of use during the fall 2020 term, fewer than 30% of students used any one of those listed below - except for 50% reporting the use of library resources. For all those that had used the services and supports identified in Figure 11, over 60% shared that these were at least somewhat helpful to them. Identified as helpful by the most number of users were library resources and services. Other notable observations were that about 5-10% more international students reported using the listed services and supports and rated these an average of 10% more helpful, as compared to Canadian students. Also, 20-25% more graduate students indicated using library resources and services than undergraduate students. Several differences between faculties emerged, however these were dependent on the availability of services and supports offered in their own faculty contexts.
Figure 11. Awareness, Use and Helpfulness of Support Services and Resources

- Library resources
- uOttawa COVID-19 website
- Library services
- Faculty-level academic program office
- IT Support Service
- Student Mentoring / Faculty Help Centres
- Wellness website and wellness programming
- Career services
- Personal Counselling
- Academic Writing Help Centre
- Academic GPS website

Aware
Used
Helpful (Somewhat and Very)
Helpful (Very)
Suggestions for Instructors Preparing Distance/Online Courses

When asked to provide the single most important suggestion for instructors regarding the preparation and facilitation of distance and online courses, 1,008 students shared their thoughts. The following themes emerged as the most frequently mentioned.

1. Maintain realistic workload expectations. \((n=288)\)

   “Please do not say ‘take care of yourself!’ ‘spend time outside!’ ‘mental health is important!’ and then assign us 75 pages of readings in the same email. In other words, be mindful of students’ mental health in more than a superficial way. Take polls throughout the semester to see if your workload is too heavy in general and adjust accordingly.” (SSOC, UGRD)

2. Design engaging and interactive sessions and class materials. \((n=173)\)

   “Create engaging activities. Breakout rooms for discussions/responses are nice to see our peers. Encourage students to share their screen/work to make it more engaging and so we hear other voices/ideas. Talk to us, some of us aren’t getting to speak to many people anymore, take a few min to ask how we are doing/tell us about you, etc. Take opportunities to get us out of our seat/stimulated. The profs that have been most successful to my learning this semester have been doing these things. Thank You.” (EDU, GRAD)

3. Hold synchronous lectures, record them and post them. \((n=142)\)

   “I have found that the synchronous classes, recorded to be re-watched, that I have in my schedule tend to be more engaging and help me to keep my week more structured. […] Live and recordings allows me to find a balance.” (SSAN, UGRD)

4. Be understanding, flexible, and accommodating with your students. \((n=105)\)

   “Please be more accommodating to students as our learning environments are not the most suitable and some requests are impossible as most students do not have all the resources at home and are trying their best to make their shared accommodations a suitable place to study and take part in all other activities in their daily life.” (GEST, UGRD)

5. Maintain open communication with your students, check on them, and collect/apply their feedback. \((n=80)\)

   “Also, speak with the students and LISTEN to them when they have issues or want more feedback, instead of often brushing them off and expecting us to understand things when we clearly don’t know what's happening and are very stressed.” (SSOC, UGRD)

   “C’est aussi important d’être à l’écoute de ses étudiants et de pouvoir s’adapter si le cours n’est pas fonctionnel. Peut être offrir différentes options en début de session pour que les étudiants puissent choisir suite à un vote. Beaucoup de choses changent en ce moment, changeons les pour le mieux plutôt que pour le pire! C’est une occasion rare que les professeurs ont d'inclure les étudiants dans la construction de leur cours et d’écouter leur besoins ou leurs attentes. Une telle approche pourrait aider à diminuer la distance et les barrières entre les étudiants et les professeurs.” (SCIEN, UGRD)
Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments

When asked to elaborate and comment on their recent experiences transitioning to distance/online instruction, 507 students had much to share. Below is a summary of the most frequently emerging themes along with several representative excerpts.

1. The need for greater understanding, accommodation, and flexibility from professors and faculties. (n=102)

“This term was the most difficult of all. The faculty has done very little to address the academic needs of students during this time. We are expected to do more work than usual. We are drowning in extra lectures, audio recordings, readings and assignments. We should also have received an option to select pass/fail for this academic year given the circumstances. None of us are able to function at the high levels we normally do because of this pandemic. I wish the faculty was more understanding towards the needs of their students.” (CLAW, UGRD)

2. Unrealistic workload leading to student overload and decreased motivation. (n=93)

“The amount of small projects and useless busy work the profs are making us do is unbearable. Thankfully, many profs have cut back, but it feels like I’m back in high school just whipping out assignments to do well without actually learning anything and having no contact with my profs.” (SCIEN, UGRD)

3. Positive and beneficial online learning experiences. (n=74)

“Online classes are the best thing that ever happened in my school experience, I learn much more during online courses, focus much more with no class distractions, and I am motivated more than ever comparing to my previous 4 years. I have more control over my schedule now, I don’t waste time in transportation [...]. Online classes made me more productive and optimistic, I can do much more now with less time wasted and more focus, I was able to take one course more than usual, I opened my small online business, while studying full time, I eat healthy homemade food unlike the past years and I get to spend more time with my family even if we are all studying/working, everyone’s mental health got better. I achieved so much during this period. – Truly, apart from exams being harder and longer, this experience brought the best out of us, personally, mentally spiritually, professionally, and physically. I hope when all passes, we keep online education, it’s fruitful.” (GENIE, UGRD)

4. Negative and disheartening online learning experiences. (n=54)

« Pire expérience universitaire de ma vie. Je ne recommande cela à personne. Mes notes en souffrent énormément. Je passe plus de 10h par jours devant un ordinateur, ma tête fait toujours mal et je ne peux pas me concentrer comme il le faut. Les professeurs ne sont pas adaptés. » (SSAN, UGRD)

5. Mental, emotional, and psychological toll. (n=42)

“My eyes burn by the end of the evening, I’m unable to stay on top of my readings, and not being able to laugh with class members in the hall between or during class has also caused my mental health to plummet. It is so difficult trying to do this from home.” (CLAW, UGRD)
Appendix A - Top Instructional Tips from Students

1. **Record and post synchronous lectures in Brightspace**
   - This helps accommodate students with internet connectivity and tech issues and allows students to review content at their own pace following the lecture.

2. **Be present on screen in both synchronous and recorded videos.**
   - Being able to see the instructor helps humanize the course content and enables a sense of connection between professor/student.

3. **Use videoconference features strategically to offer a more interactive and engaging learning experience (e.g. quizzes, polling, chat, breakout groups, and discussion forums).**
   - This provides a sense of social and emotional connection and helps students reflect and think about the course content.

4. **Organize and post course content ahead of class**
   - To aid students navigate the course content and prepare themselves for class, make full use of the learning modules and features in Brightspace.

5. **Be accessible and respond to students in a timely and caring fashion via e-mail, virtual office hours.**
   - Many students shared that instructors were unresponsive and appeared inpatient. To avoid e-mail overflow, consider posting common questions in a course FAQ and hosting live Q&A periods at the end of each virtual class.

6. **Ensure that you have outlined and regularly reaffirm clear expectations and instructions**
   - To understand the purpose of specific tasks or how to use certain course features, detailed instructions in written and video/audio formats are very welcome by students.
   - Offer an optional course platform orientation as a way of breaking the ice and getting students familiar with the platform features and your expectations regarding their usage.

7. **Don’t assign more work or make existing work more difficult because it is online.**
   - Students are already overwhelmed with adapting to this learning format, not to mention the many personal challenges that they may be experiencing because of the pandemic.