DISTANCE/ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE
STUDENT SURVEY
WINTER 2021

Office of the Vice-Provost Academic Affairs in collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS)
Executive Summary

Stemming from the findings of surveys administered in June and in late-November 2020, the University sought the continued input of students, instructors and TAs to gain a better understanding of the online teaching and learning experience to further enhance instructional and learning supports. This summary report presents the findings from the student survey sent in early May 2021 obtaining a 26% response rate (n=2,596) from a representative sampling of the student population.

Transition Experience

- 95% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices and 85% had sufficient internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses.
- 59% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to transition to distance/online instruction for the fall 2021 term (notably, 57% of undergraduate respondents compared to 66% of graduate respondents). This is an increase of 10% from fall 2020 and over 15% from spring 2020.

Educational Technology

- Zoom was the most used web conferencing platform (by 97%) and was reported as the easiest to use. In terms of use, this was followed by Microsoft Teams (67%) and Adobe Connect (41%).
- While students reported that screen sharing and chat features were the most used in their courses, screen sharing and document sharing emerged as most helpful to their learning.

Instructional Approaches

- Quizzes and pre-recorded video lectures were reported as the most used approaches by about 75% of students. These were equally deemed to be the most helpful to student learning, along with flexible assessment and assignment deadlines.
- 85% of students shared that synchronous video was used in at least one of their courses with nearly 90% of students stating that synchronous video clips were recorded and subsequently posted.
- Data regarding level of engagement and ease of learning online from winter 2021 represent an increase of 15% over the fall 2020 term, particularly for graduate students. That said, 57% of student respondents indicated feeling stressed about their winter 2021 course work.

Challenges Experienced

- Students listed lack of motivation, too many assessments at the same time, and the psychological strain of remote/isolated learning as the most challenging experiences of online learning. Closely followed by a lack of sense of community and/or belonging and difficulties with mental health.
- International students and graduate students indicated experiencing fewer moderate or significant challenges overall.
- 55% of undergraduate and 41% of graduate students indicated experiencing excessive workloads, representing a decrease of 20% and 12% respectively from the fall 2020 term. 30% of students indicated that they were not coping well with their studies, a decrease of 10% from the fall.

Supports Used

- Over 65% of students are aware of institutional support services and resources, however, fewer than 25% of students used them – except for the use of library resources (72%) and library services (49%).
- Only 46% of undergraduate and 51% 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 and late-November 2020 with the goal of learning from recent experiences, and to continue to enhance instructional and learning supports, the University Ottawa sought the input of students enrolled in a course during the winter 2021 term. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of this student survey. Representing a 26% response rate, 2,596 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, 92% of survey respondents said that all courses for which they were enrolled were taught online. Of these respondents, 53% of students shared that the 2020-2021 academic year was the first time they had taken an online course. Of the remaining respondents, 23% 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 in the winter 2021 term, 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. Overall, 95% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses, this is similar to the fall 2020 term, but up by about 10% from the end of June 2020. In terms of internet access, 85% of students reported sufficient access, however this figure dropped to 78% for those located abroad. Overall, only 59% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to participate in distance/online instruction for the fall 2021 semester, up by over 10% from fall 2020 and up 15% from June 2020. A gap of nearly 10% emerges between responding undergraduate and graduate students, where 66% of graduate respondents feel prepared for the fall semester (vs. 57% of undergraduates). Responses across faculty affiliation were similar, with the exception of the Faculties of Education and Medicine for which students had a significantly higher level of agreement with regards to feeling prepared for online courses in future terms (73% and 71% respectively). 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. While improved by nearly 10% from fall 2020, the low levels of agreement (46% 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 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 30%, 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, however variations of usage are noted. For instance, the Faculties of Engineering and Medicine, as well as the Telfer School of Management, are large users of Microsoft Teams with over 85% of respondents using this platform in at least one course. Similarly, 60% of responding students from Telfer attested to using Adobe Connect as well. Adobe Connect was also observed to be more frequently used by undergraduate students than by graduate students (45% and 25% respectively). These results remain very similar to data collected in the fall 2020 term.
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 80% 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. 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. Students happily noted that an increase in instructors had begun recording and posting classes over the 2020-2021 academic year. A notable variation across faculties included greater use of the whiteboard feature by students in the Faculty of Engineering.
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 video recordings made by instructors (88%) and PowerPoint voice-over recordings (67%). The integration of videos made by instructors, YouTube videos, library resources 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 are most useful to 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 once again shared that it was a burden to learn nearly a dozen different online tools across their courses in the fall and winter terms.
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 quizzes (75%) and pre-recorded video lectures (75%) were the most used (Figure 5). In terms of use, this was followed by paired or small group work (69%) and discussion boards (66%). Compared to past terms, paired/group work, use of polling/brainstorming, student presentations, guest speakers and peer-evaluation have increased in reported use (see Figure 6). This appears to indicate a greater use of more interactive and participative instructional approaches. Leading the pack of most helpful approaches is the implementation of flexible assessment/assignment deadlines at 97%. This is followed by the use of quizzes (93%) and posting of videos lectures (91%). 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 20% 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, journaling and flexible deadlines).
Figure 5. Instructional Approaches Used / Helpfulness for Learning

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

Legend:
- Use
- Helpful (Very and Somewhat)
- Helpful (Very)
Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, 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, this appeared to decrease somewhat as the year progressed. Figure 7 highlights the ease and engagement with online learning as well as perceived level of stress. Among the variations, it was noted that graduate, international and students located abroad shared more positive views (in particular regarding the engaging nature of their online learning experiences) 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. The data regarding engagement and ease of learning in an online modality from winter 2021 represent an increase of 15% over the fall 2020 term. That said, it should be noted that, overall, 57% of student respondents indicated feeling more stressed about their winter 2021 course work (32% strongly agree and 25% somewhat agree).

Figure 7. Level of Agreement with Statements Regarding Ease/Engagement with Online Learning

- I felt more stressed about my coursework this term.
- My distance/online learning experiences were engaging.
- I found it easier to complete coursework in a distance/online modality as compared to traditional in-class courses.
- I found that I learn just as well, or better, in distance/online learning as compared to traditional in-class learning.
Challenges Experienced

When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with a series of experiences lived during their distance/online learning in the winter 2021 term (using a Likert scale), responding students indicated that overall, a lack of motivation, too many assessments at the same time, and the psychological strain of remote learning, were the most challenging experiences. This was closely followed by a lack of sense of community and/or belonging and difficulties with mental health. 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. On average, undergraduate students indicated challenges as either moderate or significant by a margin of nearly 15% more than graduate students. Challenges that appeared as more significant for undergraduate students included: lack of motivation, too many assessments at the same time, and difficulties with mental health, whereas graduate students indicated their top challenge as the lack of in-person interaction with classmates. 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 learning to use technology. Compared to the fall 2020 term, an overall decrease in challenges of 10% is observed. Among possible reasons for this drop, the continued enhancement of online courses and students further adapting to the online context.
Figure 8. Most Significant Challenges Experienced (at Undergraduate/Graduate Level)

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

Undergraduate | Graduate | Canadian | International
Workload

When asked to describe their course related workload in the winter 2021 term, as compared to their expectations coming into the term, 55% of undergraduate students and 41% of graduate students indicated that it was more. This represents a decrease of 20% for undergraduate and of 12% for graduate students from responses collected at the end of the fall 2020 term. It should be noted that when asked to compare the winter 2021 term workload to a pre-COVID term with the same number of courses (if applicable), 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 reported as greatest by students in the Faculties of Science, Engineering and the Telfer School of Management.

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

![Figure 9](image_url)

As presented in Figure 10, over 30% of students overall indicated that they were not coping well with their studies during the winter 2021 term. While high, fortunately this is an improvement from 40% in the fall 2020 term. Graduate students appeared to cope better than undergraduates by a margin of 18%. Nearly 85% of respondents from the Faculties of Education, Medicine and Law (Droit civile section) shared that they were coping at least somewhat well, as opposed to the Faculty of Law (Common Law section) where only 55% of students claimed to be coping at least somewhat well. No notable differences emerged across Canadian/International status, respondent location, or language of respondent.
Most Helpful Actions by Professors

When asked about the nature of actions by professors that were most useful in helping them cope with the challenges of this past term, over 1,294 students responded. The following themes emerged as the most frequent responses.

1. **Being flexible, understanding and accommodating.** \( (n=582) \)

   “A few [professors] were very flexible and understanding. They didn't let the circumstances hinder our overall learning and accommodated well with shorter standardized tests and open-book application exams.”

   “Flexibility and understanding by professors in terms of deadlines and any technology issues were most helpful.”

2. **Being available to support students via office hours, quick e-mail replies, Q & A sessions, and provision of prompt feedback.** \( (n=222) \)

   “Support through timely feedback from professors. They replied on time with feedback and were always available.”

   “Answering e-mails quickly and resolving concerns quickly was very helpful. It was easy to feel disconnected and not fully understand things, so I was often seeking clarification. thankfully my professors were always willing to help.”
3. Recording/posting live synchronous lectures, slides and notes. (n=185)

« L’enregistrement des cours a été incroyablement utile, car vu que la qualité de l’apprentissage était virtuellement pareil si j’allais au cours synchrone ou non, ça m’a permis de mieux organiser mon temps pour mes études. Je comprends que c’est un privilège mais honnêtement je dirais que cette fonction a permis d’améliorer la qualité de mon éducation car j’ai pu y prêter l’attention requis. »

“I liked professors who posted their notes ahead of time without blanks so that I could use the class time to listen and take notes rather than trying to copy down what was missing from the PowerPoint slides. I also liked when professors posted their lecture slides with the shared screen so that if a class was missed there was a place to find the information or if you missed something in class you could go back to look for it.”

4. Setting clear expectations, being organized, and communicating with students. (n=81)

« Bonne organisation, attentes claires, enseignement efficace, ressources pertinentes, activités pratiques qu’on peut mettre en application, travaux ou productions avec des consignes claires, défis atteignables, activités stimulantes. »

5. Having synchronous lectures. (n=67)

“1 liked the synchronous class in one of the courses, and the other one was totally web-based which was very difficult to cope.”

« Les cours synchrones ont été le plus utile pour moi et s’apparente le plus des cours normales en personnes. Je trouve que c’est très difficile de jongler des cours où il faut écouter une multitude de vidéos asynchrones. »

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 winter 2021 term, fewer than 25% of students used any one of those listed below - except for the use of library resources (72%) and library services (49%). For all those that had used the services and supports identified in Figure 11, between 65-95% shared that these were at least somewhat helpful to them. Identified as helpful by the greatest 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. 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
- Library services
- IT Support Service
- uOttawa COVID-19 website
- Faculty-level academic program office
- Career services
- Wellness website & Wellness programming
- Academic Writing Help Centre
- Student Mentoring / Faculty Help Centres
- Personal Counselling
- Academic GPS website
- Sports facilities and recreation services

Bar chart showing awareness, use, and helpfulness of various support services and resources.
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, 835 students shared their thoughts. The following themes emerged as the most frequently mentioned.

1. Be empathetic, understanding, flexible and accommodating. (n=160)

“Flexible deadlines would be incredibly helpful, being available during exam periods to answer questions, and providing time at the end of synchronous lectures for individual Q & A or hosting office hours (same with TAs).”

“Please be empathic and understanding of challenges students are facing at home. Professors have ZERO clue what challenges students face at home (multiple jobs, stressful living situations, lack of sufficient internet, social isolation) and they need to be kinder to students. This is my 4th year and some professors completely ruined my 4th year experience by being harsh and too by the book.”

2. Be creative with instructional approaches – engaging and stimulating live and pre-recorded lectures. (n=137)

“I would suggest professors make the online classroom more dynamic and active, incorporating pools, story sharing, and other tactics to engage students and maintain their focus to make the most of the synchronous learning.”

“Engage with your students, be open minded, use new and innovative ways to teach instead of traditional static teaching. We live in a new era and we should take advantage of this online learning platform and technologies. There’s so much we can do with this instead of just handing out ppt presentations and talking. Make the effort to engage, connect and teach students.”

3. Give a reasonable workload, not make assessments more difficult, and provide sufficient completion time. (n=111)

“Maintain regular workload and do not give extra work just because we no longer have to commute. Care about your students because this increased workload has plummeted mental health. I have never been so low in my life and [this level of workload] just made it worse.”

“Please do NOT make your exams harder. Online classes do not mean that it is easier for us students to learn!”

“You can’t increase the workload, double test sizes while cutting time in half. Also, the amount of required lecture material is severe, too severe.”

4. Record synchronous lectures and post them along with any useful resources. (n=81)

“Record your lectures – this helps to go over content that we did not consume properly because of zoom fatigue.”
5. Be organized and have clear communication and expectations. (n=75)

“Qu’ils nous disent clairement ce que nous aurons à faire dès le départ pour éviter les malentendus.”

“Be organized, be precise and explicit in your information and teaching and setup of Brightspace. For instance, if you are having an asynchronous class format, arrange for a 1 hour/week open Google Meet or Zoom where students can drop in and see the prof. face to face and go over any questions or challenges. Emailing is currently very impersonal and lots is lost in communication behind a screen.”

Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments

When asked to elaborate and comment on their recent experiences transitioning to distance/online instruction, 525 students had much to share. Below is a summary of the most frequently emerging themes along with several representative excerpts.

1. An overall negative experience. (n=100)

“My grades have dipped significantly, and I find it hard to attend lectures. When I was on campus, I never missed a single lecture. Having somewhere to go and no distractions was essential to my motivation. Now I have to work where I relax and I struggle.”

2. An overall positive experience. (n=94)

“I love online teaching. It has allowed me to effectively manage my time and be in a space where I can concentrate and dedicate more time to my studies and overall performance.”

“Àvec l’enseignement à distance je peux réorganiser mon emploi du temps comme bon me semble. J’ai très peu ou pas du tout entendu de commentaire positif sur l’enseignement à distance mais personnellement je trouve que ce n’est pas si mal. Une bonne partie des professeurs offrent des cours de qualité et avec l’enregistrement des cours on peut revoir le cours et comprendre les notions qui nous ont échappé.”

3. Experiencing mental health challenges and the need for effective mental health promotion and support. (n=67)

“My only suggestion is mental health resources. UOttawa talks A LOT about mental health issues and the resources they have, but we don’t actually have resources. Temporary counselling about how to manage time is not helpful. The school needs several counsellors and professionals who are available to students on a regular basis throughout their studies at university. There needs to be one
clear system. Not one million emails about all the resources where phone numbers don’t work, are very difficult to access, and piecemeal. Just invest in good counsellors and professionals and give students unlimited access. And pay those professionals. Expensive, yes. But then you can get rid of all the fake supports. And actually address the issue in a substantial way.”

4. Mindfulness of student workload, not making assessments more difficult and lengthier than before and allowing for sufficient time to complete them. (n=43)

“In my opinion, I found it very unfair that many tests were so much harder than they would have been if we were in person. I understand that tests are hard to proctor online, but for some exams, I felt very stressed and overwhelmed because I would only get one hour to complete an extremely time-consuming exam. Even after sufficient studying I felt that either the questions were just too hard and didn’t reflect what was done in class, or the questions were fair but took a long time to think about and analyze, but that was not possible with the allotted time.”

“Lessen the workload. One prof gave us less than two weeks to complete a 20-page essay (10 page per question) that was the final worth 50% of our grade. Additionally, this was a second year course and was far too difficult and stressful for me and other students in the class to handle.”

5. Appreciation for instructors, administrative staff, and the university at large for their effort and support. (n=38)

“Some professors have been better than others at making online learning enjoyable, but to those who put in the effort -- it really shows. Thank you very much for all you do.”

“I appreciate the unique as well as collective efforts made by the University of Ottawa staff to make this term as manageable and accessible as possible for all the students.”

« J'aimerais remercier mes profs, ils ont travaillés très fort et ils m'on donné une très belle expérience universitaire. J’aimerais aussi dire une grand BRAVO à l'Université d'Ottawa, je crois que le système en place est très bien organisé et accommodante. J’aimerais noté que les cours en ligne m’avantage beaucoup et je trouve que je retiens beaucoup plus de matière qu’avant. J’espère sincèrement que l’Université va continuer d’offrir cette option après la pandémie. »

« La session d’hiver était mieux que celle d’automne, autant nous (les étudiants) que les professeurs avont améliorer nos techniques d’apprentissage et d’enseignement. La session d’hiver était mieux organisée et plus agréable. Belle adaptation de la part des professeurs, félicitation. »