DISTANCE/ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE: TEACHING ASSISTANT SURVEY
January 2021

Office of the Vice-Provost Academic Affairs in collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS)
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 instructors, students and teaching assistants at the end of the fall 2020 term. This report presents the findings from the teaching assistant (TA) survey garnering a 40% response rate with 755 TA respondents.

Transition Experience
- 92% of TAs said that the courses for which they were assigned transitioned online. Of these respondents, 70% of TAs shared that it was their first time serving as TA for a distance or online course.
- Over 85% of TAs agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses. A jump of 10% from June 2020.
- Overall, 88% of responding TAs indicated that they feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in a future term.

TA Responsibilities
- The top three principal TA responsibilities were: Evaluating student work (by 64%), responding to student questions (by 40%) and facilitating discussion groups (by 40%).

Educational Technology
- 95% of TAs indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities.
- By a margin of 30%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use.
- TA use of web conferencing tool features increased by 10-20% when compared to similar data collected in June 2020.

Challenges Experienced
- 43% of responding TAs indicated that engaging students in an online modality was the most challenging experience. This was closely followed by nearly 43% of TAs challenged by no longer having face to face interactions with the students.
- 39% of TAs indicated that the workload in the fall 2020 term was greater than a pre-COVID term with equivalent TA contract load.

Supports Used
- Nearly 70% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors with just over 40% indicating participation in TLSS TA orientation events/webinars.
- Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services used, all were reported as at least somewhat helpful by over 85% of TA respondents.
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Acknowledgements

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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 all teaching assistants (TAs) who received contracts during the fall 2020 term. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of a TA survey administered in mid-January 2021. It should be noted that 755 responses were received from across all faculties, representing a 40% response rate. Survey invitations were sent to students in the language of preference associated with their human resource profile. Respondents could choose to complete the survey in the language of their choice.

Distance/Online Teaching Assistantship Experience
Overall, 92% of respondents said that the courses for which they were serving as a TA were transitioned online. Of these respondents, 70% of TAs shared that it was their first time serving as a TA for a distance or online course. An exception was at the Faculty of Engineering where 39% of responding TAs indicated having served as a TA for one or more online courses before the fall 2020 term. No notable differences emerged between survey respondents in French and English.

To gauge the level of readiness of TAs to take on their tasks in a distance/online modality, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven statements. Figure 1 outlines the percentage of TAs 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. Over 85% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses. Outstanding issues related to poor off-campus internet speed and the need for better equipment, such as a headset with microphone, to undertake TA tasks online. Still, a notable number of TA respondents indicated that they did not know who to contact with either instructional (31%) or technical (40%) questions. When asked if it was easier to perform TA responsibilities online, only 34% of TAs agreed (24% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, 32% disagreeing, 11% N/A). Overall, 88% of responding TAs indicated that they feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in the fall semester. While increases of about 10% were noted when comparing to responses from a June 2020 survey for items regarding necessary hardware/software and internet access, responses to the other statements appear very similar. Faculty level differences are highlighted in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Percentage of Agreement with Online Readiness Statements (by Faculty)

I have the hardware and software necessary to fulfil my responsibilities as TA.

Should I be offered a contract in the winter, I feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course.

I have sufficient internet access to fulfil my responsibilities as TA.

I feel adequately supported as a TA.

I know whom to contact if I have instructional questions.

I know whom to contact if I have a technical problem.

I find it easier to perform my TA responsibilities in a distance/online modality as compared to traditional in-class courses.

Common Law (n=11)  Social Sciences (n=151)  Health Sciences (n=37)  Science (n=127)
Arts (n=115)  Engineering (n=153)  Education (n=16)  Telfer (n=52)
TA Responsibilities

To gain an understanding of the nature of TA responsibilities in association with distance/online instructional modalities, survey respondents were asked to identify tasks associated with their TA contract. Figure 2 outlines TA responsibilities that were identified as a majority part of a TAs role from most to least frequently practiced. Evaluating student work emerged as the most common TA responsibility, identified as a major part of their role by 64% of respondents. In terms of differences between respondents by faculty, TAs from Common Law reported preparing teaching materials and facilitating discussions over 45% more than TAs from other faculties. TA respondents from Health Sciences identified proctoring exams as a major part of their role by a margin of 25% over the respondent average.

**Figure 2. TA Responsibilities (by Faculty)**
Educational Technology Used

To gain a better understanding of the types of tools and features that TAs used in the context of their distance/online instructional responsibilities, several questions asked TAs to identify the tools/features used and the extent that these were easy to use. In terms of ease of use of a given tool/feature, this was only asked of TAs who claimed to have used it. Figure 3 outlines the learning platforms, web conferencing tools and features most used by TAs and the extent to which these were easy to use. It should be noted that if selections of “somewhat easy to use” were equally added, values for almost all platforms and features below would sit between 85-95%.

Nearly all responding TAs (at 95%) indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities. By a margin of 30%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use. The ranking of web conferencing tool usage in Figure 3 is largely consistent across faculties, with the exception of Telfer where Microsoft Teams was reported as most used by TAs and Engineering where Zoom and Microsoft Teams were used an equal amount.

Regarding features used, over 75% of TAs reported using the virtual campus grading tool as well as the screen sharing and chat features in the context of their responsibilities. While the level of usage across respondent language was similar overall, survey respondents in English found the features to be very easy to use by an average margin of 10% more than respondents in French. Usage of Zoom and Microsoft Teams, along with their respective features, increased by 10-20% when compared to similar data collected in June 2020.

Figure 3. Web Conferencing Platforms and Features Used / Ease of Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Easy to use (very)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus (Brightspace)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoom</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Docs</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube videos</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adobe Connect</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges Experienced

When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with TA related work experienced in fall 2020 (using a Likert scale), 43% of responding TAs indicated that engaging students in an online modality was the most challenging experience. This was closely followed by nearly 43% of TAs challenged by no longer having face to face interactions with the students. Figure 4 highlights, from most to least, the percentage of respondents identifying particular TA related experiences as either a significant or moderate challenge. Overall, survey respondents in English and in French shared similar results. Faculty affiliations for which TAs experienced the fewest challenges overall were Education and Common Law.
When asked to describe the workload related to their TA responsibilities this term, as compared to the fall term of 2019 (or a term with an equivalent TA contract load), 39% of TAs indicated that it was more – 11% indicating that the workload was more than twice as much. While quite close overall, TA workloads were noted as greatest by respondents in the Faculty of Health Sciences, with 55% reporting this as higher than the fall 2019, or equivalent, term.
Supports Used

In terms of professional development, support services and resources, Figure 5 outlines reported awareness, use and helpfulness of these supports during the fall 2020 term. Nearly 70% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors with just over 40% indicating participation in TLSS TA orientation events/webinars. While most supports/services were used by 20-40% of responding TAs, this represents a jump in usage of about 10% from similar data collected in June 2020. Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services used, all were reported as at least somewhat helpful by over 85% of TA respondents. No notable differences emerged by respondent language.

**Figure 5. TA Awareness, Use and Perceived Helpfulness of Support Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Service</th>
<th>Aware (%)</th>
<th>Used (%)</th>
<th>Helpful (%)</th>
<th>Helpful (very) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching by the course instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS) Webinars</td>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How-to guides about Virtual Campus (Brightspace) and/or webconferencing</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Services</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching by fellow TAs</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos about Virtual Campus (Brightspace) and/or webconferencing</td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus (Brightspace) e-mail, online (live chat) or phone support</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube videos</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles or blog posts found online</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication/Consultation with the TLSS</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training by CUPE (the TA union)</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty based technical or pedagogical support</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Continuity and/or Teaching Remotely Webpages</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked about the likelihood of using specific services, training or resources to support future distance/online instruction, there was a significant preference among TAs for forms of remote support such as e-mail, online guides, instructional video clips (see Figure 6). In terms of webinars, an average of 10% more survey respondents in French indicated an interest, than respondents in English. A notably higher proportion of respondents in English noted a likelihood of using e-mail support, group Question and Answer sessions and drop-in lab support*.  

Figure 6. Likelihood of Using a Specific Service or Resource (by respondent language)  

*once permitted again.
With regards to resource or training related topics, over 75% of TA respondents shared the greatest level of interest in themes related to student engagement in online learning, the evaluation of student work and the facilitation of online group discussions. Overall, respondents in French demonstrated a 10% greater interest across topics compared to respondents in English.

**Figure 7. Topics of Interest for Future Resources and Training**

- Strategies for engaging students in online learning
- Tips to effectively evaluate student work
- Setting up and facilitating group discussions online
- Grading features in Virtual Campus
- Ensuring accessibility in online course development
- Setting up a distance / online exam
- Basics of Virtual Campus (Brightspace)
- Using Zoom
- Using Microsoft Teams
- Using Adobe Connect

![Bar chart showing topics of interest for future resources and training.](chart.png)
Lessons from the Dual Role of Student and TA

65% of the TA survey respondents were also enrolled as a student in a course in the fall 2020 term. When asked if experiencing distance/online learning as a student influenced how they undertook their responsibilities as a TA, the following themes emerged from 197 responses.

1. **A greater appreciation/understanding of the need for flexibility & accommodation. (n=61)**

   « Je pense que de savoir ce que les étudiants étaient en train de vivre avec le changement à l'apprentissage en ligne (l'ayant vécu moi-même) m'a permis d'être plus flexible et de mieux comprendre les obstacles et les difficultés que les étudiants étaient en train de vivre. » (SCIENCE)

2. **Experiencing distance/online learning as a student had little or no influence on my TA responsibilities. (n=31)**

   “My experience as online student did not really affect my way to support students online. This is mainly due to the fact that my master courses content are not delivered the same way as bachelor courses. It's not the same pedagogy.” (ENGINEERING)

3. **More cognizant of the mental health impacts on students. (n=28)**

   “Yes, my experience with online learning influenced how I undertook my TA responsibilities. I feel that given the mental/cognitive stress related to COVID, students need continuous feedback mechanisms with their professors. In this manner, the shift to online learning has to take the form of a modified blended course. While it can be challenging to get to know students through the online learning portals (Brightspace and Zoom, for example), I felt that the onus was on the teaching staff (professor and TA) to reach out to students to ensure that they were supported enough as students sought to achieve their learning objectives.” (SOCIAL SCIENCES)

4. **Increased accessibility to students including promptness in replying to emails and extra office hours. (n=26)**

   “Knowing that this was a very challenging time for all students and that the learning curve online tends to be particularly steep, I added extra office hours and tried to make myself as accessible as possible to the students. (SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT)

Other themes included: Greater efforts in learning the educational technology and supporting students with the technology; drive to find better strategies to engage students online; and actively setting and discussing expectations and feedback with students.
Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments

When asked to elaborate and comment on their recent roles and responsibilities as a TA for a distance/online course during the fall of 2020, 218 TA respondents had specific comments to share. Below is a summary of the most frequently emerging themes along with several representative excerpts.

1. **Increase in workload.** \((n=50)\)

   “I believe that moving to online learning has many TAs having to spend much more time doing their tasks. I also found that if you are paired with a professor who is not as computer literate then you were asked to help more with figuring out the IT issues and assist with running the IT side of the course. I do not think this is reflected in our contracts or taken into consideration.” (SOCIAL SCIENCES)

2. **The need for better institutional support to manage workloads/technical issues/TA guidance.** \((n=26)\)

   “TAs work is at the behest of the professors they serve--- and it was a nightmare with one of my profs in particular. I think [the university] needs to figure out how to better support TAs to do their job well, but there needs to be a LOT more support to profs, because TAs bear the burden of their stress, anxiety and inability/ incapacity/ unwillingness to engage with the online reality in which we are living in a way that sets themselves, their class and their students up for a successful experience. [...] I worked WAY over the hours I was supposed to, but no one is monitoring or really cares--- everything just needs to get done, and my main concern is for the poor undergrads trying to stay afloat in all of this--- but it was really a trying experience as a TA last term--- we need to do better.” (ARTS)

3. **The lack of compensation for the increase in workload and personal costs.** \((n=23)\)

   “The university did not provide or offer to provide any hardware or internet access to help me conduct my TA roles. It was all based on my personal computer, headphone, personal internet bundle etc. Which effected my financial situation as I had to but a new equipment and to upgrade my internet bundle in order to fulfill the duties.” (ENGINEERING)

4. **An overall positive experience with online/distance education.** \((n=22)\)

   “Obviously, it's a difficult time to learn and teach. But I think the University and its students have done an admirable job adjusting to this current reality. It's not the same, but there are actually some advantages in online learning (like increased accessibility and attendance). So I try to take comfort in that.” (COMMON LAW)

5. **Difficulty communicating with course instructors.** \((n=15)\)

   “I found it difficult to communicate with the teacher by email. Response time was very long. Maybe TA communications should be on a forum or chat room instead of the same email
box. I also noticed that the course load was too much. The students could not keep up, but there was nothing I could do but offer my attention and help.” (SOCIAL SCIENCES)

Other themes included: Difficulty promoting student engagement; Difficulty with online grading/marking; Online/distance instruction as a detriment to quality learning.