DISTANCE/ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE: TEACHING ASSISTANT 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 May and in late-November 2020, the University sought the continued input of TAs, instructors and students to gain a better understanding of the online teaching and learning experience to further enhance instructional and learning supports. This report presents a summary of findings from a teaching assistant (TA) survey administered in early May 2021 garnering a 45% response rate with 858 TA respondents.

Transition Experience

- For the winter 2021 term, 20% of TAs shared that it was their first time serving as TA for a distance or online course.
- Nearly 90% of TAs agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses. A jump of 5% from the fall 2020 term.
- Overall, 89% 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 (63%), responding to student questions (39%) and facilitating labs and discussion groups (37%)

Educational Technology

- 97% of TAs indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities.
- By a margin of 36%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use.
- A jump of 10-25% was observed in reported ease of use of platform features, as compared to the fall 2020 term.

Challenges Experienced

- The top three challenges identified by TAs were the lack of student motivation (at 42%), not having face-to-face interaction with students (at 40%), and engaging students in an online modality (at 39%).
- 30% of TAs indicated that the workload was more during the winter 2021 term, as compared to a prepandemic term with an equivalent TA contract load.

Supports Used

- 65% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors with just over 30% indicating participation in TLSS TA orientation events/webinars.
- Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services used, all were reported as “very” helpful by over 60% of TA respondents.
Acknowledgements
This survey was coordinated by the Office of the Vice-Provost Academic Affairs in collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Support Service. Particular thanks go to the Office of Institutional Research and Planning for administering the survey and for their expertise and support with each step of the process. Thanks also go to the Vice-Deans and student service administrators who reviewed early drafts of the survey on short notice.
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 and January 2021 with the goal of learning from recent experiences, and to continue to enhance instructional and learning supports, the University Ottawa sought the input of all teaching assistants (TAs) who received contracts during the winter 2021 term. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of a TA survey administered in early May 2021. It should be noted that 858 responses were received from across faculties, representing a 45% 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
For the winter 2021 term, 20% of TAs shared that it was their first time serving as a TA for a distance or online course – over 36% of respondents had been initiated to serving as a TA online in the fall term. An exception to the average was in the Telfer School of Management, where 38% of responding TAs indicated that it was their first time serving as a TA online. 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. Nearly 90% of TAs agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses (up from 5% in the fall). 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 (25%) or technical (37%) questions (a decrease of about 5% from fall). When asked if it was easier to perform TA responsibilities online, 46% of TAs agreed (of which 28% strongly agreed). Overall, 89% of responding TAs indicated that they feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in upcoming terms. Overall, 5-10% increases in levels of agreement with the seven statements were noted when comparing to responses from the end of fall 2020 (15% increase from June 2020). Faculty level differences are highlighted in Figure 1.
Should I be offered a contract for the fall 2021 term, I feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course
I had the hardware and software necessary to fulfil my responsibilities as TA
I had sufficient internet access to fulfil my responsibilities as TA
I felt adequately supported as a TA
I knew whom to contact if I had instructional questions
I knew whom to contact if I had a technical problem
I found it easier to perform my TA responsibilities in a distance/online modality
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 (at least 50% of their 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 63% of respondents. Differences between respondents by faculty are presented in Figure 2. No significant changes were noted from the fall 2020 term.

**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 in decreasing order of reported usage.

Nearly all responding TAs (at 97%) indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities. By a margin of 36%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use. Overall, a jump of 10-25% was observed in reported ease of use across tools, as compared to data from the fall 2020 term. The ranking of web conferencing tool usage in Figure 3 is largely consistent across faculties – a notable exception is a significantly larger usage of Google Docs (at 77%) and YouTube videos (at 52%) by TAs in the Faculty of Education.

Regarding features used, over 75% of TAs reported using the chat and screen share features as well as the virtual campus grading tool in the context of their core 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.

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></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoom</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Google Docs</td>
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<tr>
<td>YouTube videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adobe Connect</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Challenges Experienced

When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with TA related work experienced in winter 2021 (using a Likert scale), the top three challenges identified by TAs were the lack of student motivation (at 42%), not having face-to-face interaction with students (at 40%), and engaging students in an online modality (at 39%). Figure 4 highlights, from most to least, the percentage of respondents identifying particular TA related experiences as either a significant or moderate challenge. Overall, a 5-10% decrease in reported challenges was observed compared to the fall 2020 term. Survey respondents in English and in French shared similar results.
When asked to describe the workload related to their TA responsibilities during the winter 2021 term, as compared to a pre-pandemic term with an equivalent TA contract load (if applicable), 30% of TAs indicated that it was more (a decrease of 10% from the fall term). Responses regarding TA workloads were quite similar across faculties. No notable differences were observed between language of survey response.
Supports Used

In terms of professional development, support services and resources, Figure 5 outlines reported awareness, use and helpfulness of these supports during the winter 2021 term. 65% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors with about 30% indicating participation in TLSS TA orientation events/webinars. While most supports/services were used by 20–40% of responding TAs, this represents a slight decrease from data collected at the end of the fall 2020 term. Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services used, all were reported as very helpful by about 60% of TA respondents (if somewhat helpful is included, overall scores increase to above 95%). No notable differences emerged by respondent language.

**Figure 5. TA Awareness, Use and Perceived Helpfulness of Support Services**
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, instructional video clips and online guides (see Figure 6). Overall, an increase of 10-15% in reported likelihood of service/resource usage was noted, compared to fall 2020.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mail support</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short instructional video clips</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short online guides</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinars on instructional strategies</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinars on technological tools</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support group</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Question and Answer sessions</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web conferencing support</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person workshops on instructional strategies*</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone support</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person workshops on technological tools*</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in lab support*</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation with a TLSS Specialist</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*once permitted again.
With regard to resource or training related topics, over 80% of TA respondents shared the greatest level of interest in themes related to student engagement in online learning and the evaluation of student work. Overall, respondents in French demonstrated a 5% greater interest across topics compared to respondents in English. Results remain unchanged from those collected in the fall 2020 term.

Figure 7. Topics of Interest for Future Resources and Training
Lessons from the Dual Role of Student and TA

68% of the TA survey respondents were also enrolled as a student in a course in the winter 2021 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 348 responses.

1. A greater appreciation/understanding of the need for flexibility & accommodation. (n=87)
   “It made me a lot more understanding of what the students were dealing with. I also had experienced how other professors chose to teach their courses, and use my experience of what did or did not work to make changes to my own TA responsibilities."

2. Increased availability to support students and provide feedback. (n=44)
   “En tant qu'étudiante, j'apprécie qu'on prenne le temps de répondre à mes questions ou qu'on me rassure les procédures ou évaluations. En tant que TA, j'ai transposé cela dans mes actions. Je me suis montrée ouverte et réceptive aux besoins des étudiants. J'ai répondu aux courriels, tenu des rencontres, etc.”

3. Experiencing distance/online learning did not influence the undertaking of responsibilities as a TA. (n=28)
   “Je ne pense pas avoir modifier ma responsabilité en tant qu'AE à cause de mes expériences étudiantes à distance. J'ai fais ce qui devait être fait, mais en ligne c'est tout. »
   “The way I performed my TA responsibilities did not significantly change.”

4. Putting more efforts to keep students engaged. (n=25)
   “YES. I had several professors that did not rise to the occasion of distance education & adapting to online lecture delivery. It was very challenging. This encouraged me to try harder to make the content accessible and engaging for my students, in order to not contribute to the burden of online learning & poor educators.”
   “I have found that students tend to be far less engaged online; thus, I have had to work very hard to increase engagement and participation within my DGDs.”

5. Using knowledge and familiarity with platforms and tools to support students and instructors. (n=13)
   “Since I had to use them as a student, I was much more knowledgeable on the internet tools needed for my job as a TA and could assist students and the professor in that way.”
Suggestions for Professors Preparing to Teach

When asked to share their top suggestion for professors preparing to teach in the upcoming academic year, the following key themes emerged from the TA responses (n=278).

1. **Establish clear expectations and regular communication with TAs and students. (n=70)**
   
   “Clear expectations. The issue with the course I TA was that I, nor the students, knew the expectations. And the communications with the instructor was lacking. In the end, it could've been a great experience, but the instructor was difficult to work with and teach for.”

2. **Be creative in the teaching delivery to facilitate student engagement. (n=60)**
   
   “Try to find other ways to engage students in class other than just lecturing over Zoom etc. For instance, break-out room activities, interactive activities, engaging discussion/games.”

3. **Be mindful of students’ and TAs’ workload. (n=46)**
   
   “Give students less homework; it’s impossible to keep up with the grading and I can’t imagine what the students are going through. OR get more TAs per course.”

   “Reasonable workloads for students and TAs. Expecting TAs to grade multiple long assignments (term papers, reflections, and group projects) for a class of 100+ students, plus grade tracking, office hours, emailing with students for a 65-hour contract is unreasonable.”

4. **Redesign courses with methods of assessments that suit the online modality. (n=46)**
   
   “Don’t rely on what worked in classrooms; there are too many resources out there on virtual pedagogy to pretend what you used to do will work in exactly the same way, with the same effect, in the online context.”

   “Take-home exams make more sense than synchronized and timed exams when online.”

5. **Be more flexible, understanding and accommodating with students, TAs when teaching online. (n=44)**

   “Please set up a reasonable time for correction/deadlines and manage students' expectations. Be kind and flexible. Everyone is overwhelmed and trying their best. Being a TA and a student in the pandemic is also overwhelming for us (the TAs) so please consider how our mental health is also fragile.”

   “Be flexible with students' challenges (personal, health, emotional, etc.) and make accommodations when possible. Also, synchronous online proctoring with TAs is ineffective, as it exacerbates existing inequities (e.g. students who cannot afford multiple cameras, students who have poor Internet access, etc.)”
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 winter of 2021, 367 TA respondents had specific comments to share. Below is a summary of the most frequently emerging themes along with several representative excerpts.

1. The need for institutional support for instructors, TAs, and students on navigating online modality and having the necessary equipment to successfully complete their duties. (n=39)
   “I feel like one of the biggest needs for TAs in a remote access are tablets/laptops with touch screens. They facilitate the experience for all parties involved and are a much more efficient way to conduct DGD’s (especially in a technical class like the one I served). Not having any kind of assistance from the school to lend tablets and other necessary equipment to TAs is in my opinion a mistake, because TAs are expected to pay for the tool by themself for the sake of their students which is what I did.”

2. The need for more instructor and TA communication, collaboration and support. (n=25)
   “Professors need to adapt their course for online use, and that responsibility should not fall on the TAs. TAs already have their hands full with other responsibilities. My professor leaned too hard on his TAs and poorly supported them.”
   “Having a positive and supportive relationship with the prof. was foundational to my ability to interact with students and to be helpful to both prof and students.”

3. An overall positive experience with online/distance education. (n=21)
   “I had the privilege of working with a great supervisor and this made it much easier for me to provide greater services for my students. Also, I received a lot of delighting comments from my students which has motivated me to always be more prepared and willing to improve myself.”

4. Increased uncompensated workload. (n=17)
   “The amount of time we now spend answering emails and working online is not accounted for in contracts. Always inadequately, and sometimes not at all. I can spend hours a day answering student emails and that is not factored into my contracted hours. Or, if I log it as worked time, there is push back. The number of hours we are contracted for need to be increased to account for this.”

5. Worried about students’ welfare and lack of quality education received. (n=10)
   “The return to the classroom is very important, and I worry that incoming online students will not get to experience many of the benefits of in-person learning which are critical for personal development.”