TRANSITION TO DISTANCE/ONLINE LEARNING:
STUDENT SURVEY
July 2020

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

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, University of Ottawa courses transitioned to distance/online instruction in March 2020. To gain a better understanding of this transition experience and plans for spring/summer courses, a survey was sent to professors, teaching assistants and students. This summary report presents the findings from the student survey sent at the end of June 2020 garnering a 26% response rate with more than 11,000 students.

Transition Experience

- 56% of students shared that they had never taken a distance/online course before.
- Over 75% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses.
- Only 43% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to transition to distance/online instruction for the fall semester (15% neither agree nor disagree, 36% disagree or strongly disagree, 5% N/A).

Educational Technology

- Zoom was the most used web conferencing platform at 67% and reported as the easiest to use. In terms of use, this was followed by Adobe Connect (55%) and Microsoft Teams (37%).
- 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 recordings of synchronous class sessions were reported as the most used approaches by 65% and 59% of students respectively. These were equally deemed to be “very” helpful by a margin of 20% over other approaches.
- Quizzes and discussion boards were listed as the next most used and helpful approaches.

Challenges Experienced

- Students listed distractions from family/roommates and the psychological strain of isolation as the most challenging experiences of remote and online learning. Closely followed by the lack of in-person interaction with classmates and instructors.
- International students, graduate students and survey respondents in French indicated experiencing fewer moderate or significant challenges overall.

Supports Used

- Between 60-80% of students are aware of institutional support services and resources, however, fewer than 20% of students used them during the transition to distance/online instruction. A single exception of over 40% of students reported the use of the University’s COVID-19 information website.
Table of Contents

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3
Context ...................................................................................................................................... 4
Distance/Online Transition Experience .................................................................................. 4
Educational Technology Used ............................................................................................... 5
Course Formats and Instructional Approaches ....................................................................... 8
Challenges Experienced .......................................................................................................... 10
Supports Used ....................................................................................................................... 12
Suggestions for Instructors Preparing Distance/Online Courses ......................................... 13
Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments ............................................................. 14
Appendix A - Top Instructional Tips from Students ............................................................... 15

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, numerous changes to course modality and pedagogical practices took place in very short order. To learn from these experiences, and to further enhance instructional supports, such as the availability of online technologies, how-to guides, and training options, the University Ottawa sought the input of all students having been enrolled in a course during the winter 2020 semester and the spring/summer 2020 semester. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of this student survey. It should be noted that responses were received from across all faculties and represented 26% of the 42,433 distinct students enrolled in the aforementioned semesters. 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 Transition Experience
Overall, 86% of the qualified respondents said that all courses for which they were enrolled were transitioned online. Of these respondents, 56% of students shared that they had never taken a distance or online course before this spring’s COVID-19 related course transition. Of the remaining respondents, 26% of students stated having taken 1-2 courses online, and 18% having taken more than 3 courses online before the winter 2020 semester. A notable exception were students from the Faculty of Education, where all but 12% had previously enrolled in distance and online courses. Also, 13% more respondents in French had experienced distance/online courses than respondents in English.

To gauge the level of readiness of students who transitioned from face-to-face to distance/online learning, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five 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. Over 75% of students agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses. Responses across faculty affiliation were very similar with the exception of the Faculties of Education and Medicine for which students had a significantly higher level of agreement for the last three statements in Figure 1 (e.g. support, preparedness, contact re tech problems). Other notable differences included overall higher levels of agreement among graduate and international students. Overall, only 43% of responding students indicated that they feel prepared to transition to distance/online instruction for the fall semester (15% neither agree nor disagree, 36% disagree or strongly disagree, 5% N/A). Both undergraduate and Canadian students feel the least prepared with only 41% responding positively for each of group.

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1 Students not enrolled in courses in the winter or spring/summer semesters (approx. 7%) were not presented with questions about their distance/online learning experience.
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 tools/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: WhatsApp, YouTube Live and WebEx.

By a margin of 12%, Zoom was the most used platform and was equally cited as the most easy to use platform (although only 50% of survey respondents in French indicated Zoom as very easy to use compared to 69% of respondents in English). The ranking of the platforms in Figure 2 is largely consistent across faculties with the notable exception of respondents from the Faculty of Education where Adobe Connect was most used at 67%. Zoom was observed to be more frequently used by graduate students than by undergraduate students (80% and 63% 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 chat and screen sharing features were most used in their courses, with both screen sharing and document sharing emerging as the most helpful features to their learning. Of particular note, students also mentioned frequent use and helpfulness of web conferencing breakout room features when used strategically by their instructors. See Appendix A for top instructional strategies pulled from student open-ended comments.

Figure 3. Web Conferencing Features Used / Helpfulness for Learning
Other than the web conferencing platforms, respondents noted the use of several other online technologies or features in their courses. Figure 4 outlines the most used technologies as PowerPoint voice-over recordings with 65% of students experiencing this approach in at least one of their courses. The integration of YouTube (or other instructional) 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 SurveyMonkey, Top Hat Monocle and Piazza.

Of particular note, numerous students mentioned in the open-ended comments that 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.

**Figure 4. Other Online Technologies Used / Helpfulness for Learning**

- PowerPoint voice-over recordings
- YouTube videos
- Google Docs or Microsoft Docs
- Participant response tools
- Audio recordings made by the student
- Video recordings made by the student
Course Formats and Instructional Approaches

When asked about the format of the distance and online courses that they experienced, 82% of students shared that online modules were used in at least one of their courses to help structure and organize course content. Students reported that instructors most commonly used, one or a combination of, course readings, recorded video clips (of themselves or pulled from online sources) and synchronous video streaming. 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 synchronous video and audio by students in the Faculties of Law (Common Law section) and Medicine. Recorded videos were experienced most in the Faculties of Science and Law (Civil Law section).

Figure 5. Course Formats Used / Helpfulness for Learning

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 (65%) and recordings of synchronous class sessions (59%) [which are both more granular versions of “recorded videos placed online” listed in Figure 5], were the most used (Figure 6). In terms of use, this was followed by quizzes (54%) and discussion boards (48%). Approaches deemed “very” helpful were also the posting of videos and/or lectures (by a margin of over 20%). Of particular note, numerous students emphasized in the open-ended comments that the use of diverse or participative/active instructional approaches added strong value only when clearly explained and facilitated by the instructor. Graduate students indicated experiencing far more participatory
approaches such as paired or small group work, student presentations and peer-evaluations by 20-40% 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 a greater diversity of approaches, in particular more participative ones). See Appendix A for top instructional strategies pulled from student open-ended comments.

Figure 6. Instructional Approaches Used / Helpfulness for Learning

Overall, there was a strong sentiment that distance and online learning modalities (for which courses were urgently transitioned toward due to the COVID-19 pandemic) 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 and international students shared more positive views (in particular regarding the engaging nature of online learning) as compared to the more negative views shared by undergraduate and Canadian
students. Exceptions to this trend were noted among students at the Faculties of Education and Medicine who held largely neutral or positive views. This was also the case among survey respondents who had previous experiences taking online courses.

Figure 7. Level of Agreement with Distance/Online Learning Experience Statements

Challenges Experienced
When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with a series of experiences lived during the transition to distance/online learning (using a Likert scale), responding students indicated that distraction from family/roommates and psychological strain were by far the most challenging experiences. This was closely followed by the lack of in-person interaction with classmates and 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 Canadian and International student respondents. Overall, Canadian students indicated challenges as either moderate or significant by a margin of 2-18% more than international students. Challenges that appeared as more significant for international
students were: Issues with remote access to software and specialized tools, Issues of accessibility and accommodations, and learning how to use technology. Also of note, was that survey respondents in French indicated experiencing moderate to significant challenges about 10% less overall, compared to survey respondents in English. Similarly, graduate students experienced challenges less significantly by about 10%, compared to undergraduate students. Faculty affiliations for which students experienced the least challenges were Education and Medicine. An additional challenge identified by a few dozen students in an “Other challenges” response option consisted of difficulties connecting from a different time zone.

Figure 8. Most Significant Challenges Experienced (by Canadian/International Status)
Supports Used

While well over half of students are aware of the services, resources and supports listed in Figure 9, in terms of use during the transition to distance/online instruction fewer than 20% of students used any one of those listed below - with the exception of over 40% reporting the use of the University’s COVID-19 information website. For all those that had used the services and supports identified in Figure 9, over 70% of respondents shared that these were at least somewhat helpful to them. Other notable observations were that about 10% more international students reported using the listed services and supports, 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. No significant differences were noted between undergraduate and graduate student respondents.

Open-ended comments made by respondents regarding support services largely mentioned closed or inaccessible services during the months of March and April. Many students shared that their calls and e-mails were unanswered or only responded to weeks later.

**Figure 9. Awareness, Use and Helpfulness of 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, students shared the following themes as their top five responses.

1. **Be accessible and responsive to students via e-mail, virtual office hours and end of class Question/Answer sessions.**
   
   “Be available to talk to students about the course content and their concerns in general. Checking emails more frequently and hold regular office hours online is key to help with the added stress.”

2. **Have live lectures where possible and share recordings of these with students afterwards.**
   
   “The combination of live lectures and videos was the best format I've had so far in my online classes. Seeing the professor and the social aspect really helped me.”

   “Alongside synchronous classes, it would be helpful to have the lectures uploaded. Good for review and helpful when the connections get interrupted and things are hard to follow.”

3. **Vary instructional methods and integrate opportunities for interaction.**
   
   “Use different methods of teaching (not only formal lecture, but also videos, surveys, groups, etc.) and have 10 min. break after each hour as it is more difficult to concentrate over time when online.”

   “Adapt the teaching methods to keep students engaged (screen fatigue is a thing!). The best lessons we had used a combination of chat involvement from students and Kahoot polls, quizzes and small group discussions.”

4. **Troubleshoot technology in advance and acquire the right equipment**
   
   “Ample testing and troubleshooting of technology prior to the first day of classes will avoid much wasted time.”

   « Apprenez comment fonctionne la technologie que vous utilisez. Également, beaucoup de problèmes techniques peuvent être évitées si vous avez le bon matériel (micro, caméra et connexion...). »

5. **Replace traditional exams with more assignments, projects or quizzes when online**
   
   “Focus more on assignments rather than tests to show learning. Online tests are more stressful and difficult due to technical issues (having to leave at least 15 min to make sure there are no submission issues). Can sometimes be distracted by family members. Overall tests were not a great experience. I much preferred the classes that assigned projects. We were still able to show what we knew, be creative, and apply course concepts. This was a much better way to evaluate in my opinion.”
Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments

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

1. The need for patience and flexibility
   “I appreciate my professors’ and the faculty's flexibility and patience during exam season. I was struggling with my mental health during the transition and it was helpful to have some flexibility in deadlines and optional exams.”
   “Please make efforts to build trusting and safe relationships with your students from the get-go so they feel you are a support and flexible during times of crisis such as covid-19. There was a big difference in how my peers and I felt towards the experience with professors who did not make efforts to get to know our class or be mindful of their equity needs vs those who did.”

2. The need for professors to learn, or follow training, regarding the use of technology
   “Listening/watching professors struggle with the tech issues took up class time and ended up not covering all the material. I’d suggest more time for the professors to learn how to use their chosen software and features to not waste lecture time. Training needed for the majority.”

3. Concern regarding the quality of online courses
   “I urge the university to lower tuition. I truly do not feel as though online learning is as beneficial for me as in person learning. Even in an ideal world where there are no technical difficulties, my education is lacking the enrichment I normally gain from building relationships with my peers and professors.”
   “I feel like it was largely a much lower quality of education than in person. The fact we are paying what we were, but for such a lower quality of education is rather upsetting. Especially seeing as this is occurring alongside an economic crisis. Very disappointing all in all.”

4. Too many platforms and applications being used
   “This semester I was using 4 distinct communication software: Microsoft teams, zoom, skype business, adobe connect. That’s too many applications, it should be standardized and enforced by the university.”

5. Positive transition experiences
   « La transition était soudaine donc assez déroutante au début, mais avec le temps et l’aide de mes professeurs qui nous ont énormément accommodés, je m’en suis bien sortie. Ce n’est pas facile d’avoir à faire plusieurs cours en ligne, c’est un grand défi à relever - bravo. »
   “On a whole, the majority of professors did a wonderful job with very little turnaround time. That being said, I hope my professors all get access to quality training as well as support as we transition to the fall session.”
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.