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, a survey was sent to professors, teaching assistants and students. This report presents the findings from the teaching assistant (TA) survey garnering a 48% response rate with 918 TA respondents.

Transition Experience

- 83% of TAs said that the courses for which they were assigned transitioned online. Of these respondents, 91% of TAs shared that it was their first time serving as TA for a distance or online course.
- Over 75% of TAs agreed that they had the necessary devices and internet access to fulfil the requirements of their distance/online courses.
- Overall, 83% of responding TAs indicated that they feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in the fall semester.

TA Responsibilities

- Evaluating student work and responding to student questions were tasks that over 90% of TA survey respondents identified as part of their role.
- With the transition online, about 45% TAs indicated that exam proctoring was no longer asked of them.

Educational Technology

- 90% of TAs indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities.
- By a margin of 20%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use.

Challenges Experienced

- 34% of responding TAs indicated that students not knowing how to use technology was the most challenging experience.
- Overall, English respondents indicated challenges as either moderate or significant by an average margin of 10% more than French respondents.

Supports Used

- Before the transition, 65% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors, 50% reported participating in TA orientation events and 38% being coached by fellow TAs. Following the transition, this dropped to 45%, 7%, and 21% respectively.
- Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services, all were reported as helpful by over 75% of TA respondents, regardless of whether it was used before or after the transition to distance/online instruction.
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Acknowledgements

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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 teaching assistants (TAs) who received contracts during the winter 2020 and the spring/summer 2020 semesters. The following document is a summary report of the main findings of a TA survey administered at the end of June 2020. It should be noted that 918 responses were received from across all faculties, representing 48% 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 Transition Experience

Overall, 83% of respondents said that the courses for which they were serving as a TA were transitioned online. Of these respondents, 91% 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 Education where 65% of responding TAs indicated having served as TA for an online course before the winter 2020 semester. No notable differences emerged between survey respondents language.

To gauge the level of readiness of TAs whose work transitioned from a face-to-face to 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 75% 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 a headset with microphone to undertake TA tasks online. A majority of TAs indicated that they knew whom to contact with instructional questions, however, only 49% knew whom to contact if they had technical problems. When asked if it was easier to perform TA responsibilities online, only 30% of TAs agreed (25% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, 37% disagreeing, 8% N/A). Overall, 83% of responding TAs indicated that they feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in the fall semester.
Figure 1. Level of Agreement with Transition Experience Statements

- It was easier to perform my TA responsibilities in a distance/online modality as compared to traditional in-class courses
- I knew whom to contact if I had a technical problem
- I knew whom to contact if I had instructional questions
- I felt adequately supported as a TA during this transition
- I had the hardware/software necessary to fulfil my responsibilities as TA
- I feel prepared to serve as TA in a distance/online course in the fall
- I had sufficient internet access to fulfil any new responsibilities as TA

Health Sciences (n=44)  Arts (n=115)  Science (n=173)  Social Sciences (n=174)
Telfer (n=38)  Engineering (n=202)  Education (n=19)
TA Responsibilities

To gain an understanding of the nature of TA responsibilities and possible shifts in these responsibilities following the transition to distance/online instructional modalities, survey respondents were asked to identify tasks associated with their TA contract and the extent to which they completed these tasks before and after the mid-March transition. Figure 2 outlines the nature of TA responsibilities from most to least frequently practiced. Evaluating student work and responding to student questions were tasks that over 90% of TA survey respondents identified as part of their role. In terms of differences between the pre/post transition to distance/online modalities, the most significant was with exam proctoring. With the transition online, about 45% TAs indicated that this was no longer asked of them. Apart from the management of online course content which increased by 6% overall post transition, all other TA tasks appeared to be diminished by an average of 7% following the transition online in mid-March.

Figure 2. TA Responsibilities Before and After Transition to Distance/Online Modality

- Evaluating student work
- Responding to student questions by e-mail or office hours
- Proctoring exams
- Facilitating discussion groups or tutorials
- Managing online course content in the Virtual Campus
- Preparing teaching material
- Facilitating lab sessions
- Teaching a class session

![Chart showing the percentage of tasks before and after mid-March transition. Evaluating student work and responding to student questions were tasks that over 90% of TA survey respondents identified as part of their role. In terms of differences between the pre/post transition to distance/online modalities, the most significant was with exam proctoring. With the transition online, about 45% TAs indicated that this was no longer asked of them. Apart from the management of online course content which increased by 6% overall post transition, all other TA tasks appeared to be diminished by an average of 7% following the transition online in mid-March.](chart.png)
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 “very” 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 80-95%.

Nearly all responding TAs (at 90%) indicated using Brightspace in the context of their TA responsibilities. By a margin of 20%, Zoom was the most used web conferencing tool and was equally cited among the most easy to use (although only 57% of survey respondents in French indicated Zoom as very easy to use compared to 71% of respondents in English – a similar gap was observed for Microsoft Teams). The ranking of web conferencing tool usage in Figure 3 is largely consistent across faculties.

Regarding features used, over half of TAs reported using the virtual campus grading and assignment tools. TAs affiliated with the Faculty of Education made the most use of the varied features listed below, followed by TAs affiliated with the Faculty of Engineering. 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 French respondents.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Used</th>
<th>Easy to use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus (Brightspace)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adobe Connect</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>YouTube videos</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus grading tool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus assignment tool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Screen share</td>
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<tr>
<td>Document sharing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Google Docs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Video or audio recordings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion boards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polling/quizzing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Annotation tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whiteboard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs / Wikis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

- Used
- Easy to use
Challenges Experienced

When asked to identify the level of challenge associated with TA related work experienced during and after the transition to distance/online learning (using a Likert scale), 34% of responding TAs indicated that students not knowing how to use technology was the most challenging experience. This was closely followed by 31% of TAs challenged by the psychological strain of working remotely. Figure 4 highlights, from most to least, the percentage of respondents identifying particular TA related experiences as either a significant or moderate challenge. Also represented in the figure below are differences in the level of challenge noted between TAs who responded to the survey in English and those who responded in French (an indirect proxy for working language). Overall, English respondents indicated challenges as either moderate or significant by an average margin of 10% more than French respondents. Challenges that appeared as more significant for English respondents were: psychological strain, communicating with students, holding virtual office hours and providing feedback on student work. Faculty affiliations for which TAs experienced the fewest challenges overall were Education and Science.

![Figure 4. Most Significant Challenges Experienced (by Survey Response Language)](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>English (n=639)</th>
<th>French (n=131)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students not knowing how to use the technology</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological strain of working remotely</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with students</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding office hours for student drop-in/questions</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues with remote access to software and specialized tools</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up tests/exams</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of accessibility and learning accommodations</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues with technology not working</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing feedback on student work/progress</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning how to use new technological tools/features</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up course content in virtual campus</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with the course instructor</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supports Used

In terms of professional development, support services and resources, Figure 5 outlines reported awareness, use and helpfulness before and after the transition to distance/online instruction. Before the transition, 65% of TAs reported that they were coached by course instructors, 50% reported participating in TA orientation events and 38% being coached by fellow TAs. Following the transition, this dropped to 45%, 7%, and 21% respectively. All other services and resources were used by fewer than 30% of TAs either before or after the transition. Regarding the perceived helpfulness of supports and services, all were reported as helpful by over 75% of TA respondents, regardless of whether it was used before or after the transition to distance/online instruction. Overall, responses were similar across faculty affiliation, with the exception of the Telfer School of Management where an average of 25% fewer TAs reported being aware of supports and an average of 15% fewer TAs indicated using support services. No notable differences emerged by respondent language.

Figure 5. TA Awareness, Use and Perceived Helpfulness of Support Services Before and After Mid-March
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, webinars, and phone/web conferencing support (see Figure 6). In terms of webinars and workshops, an average of 15% more survey respondents in French indicated an interest in webinar and workshop training sessions, than respondents in English. No notable differences were observed across faculty affiliations.

**Figure 6. Likelihood of Using a Specific Service or Resource**

- E-mail support
- Short online guides
- Short instructional video clips
- Webinars on technological tools
- Webinars on instructional strategies
- Web conferencing support
- In-person workshops on instructional strategies
- In-person workshops on technological tools
- Drop-in lab support
- Group Question and Answer sessions
- Phone support
With regards to resource or training related topics, over 60% 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. Differences between survey respondent language were observed. As presented in Figure 7, respondents in French demonstrated an average 10% greater interest in the top six topics, as compared to respondents in English.

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

59% of the survey respondents were also enrolled as a student in a course that transitioned to distance/online instruction in either the winter or spring/summer 2020 semesters. When asked if experiencing distance/online learning as a student influenced how they undertook their responsibilities as a TA, the following themes emerged from 227 responses.

1. **I placed greater value on flexibility, communication and empathy (n=62)**
   - “I was more aware of the challenges of online learning and was more compassionate and understanding”
   - “More understanding about time and anxiety related conflicts to getting their work in on time. I just doubled my e-mail communication and availability with students”
   - “I try to be more available for my students as I am facing problems in my course I don’t want them to go through the same. I setup meeting timings with them on daily basis”

2. **My experience as a student did not influence how I approach my role as TA (n=47)**

3. **Being a student provided the opportunity to become more familiar with online tools and features (n=14)**
   - “I had experience with a few platforms during the switch and had developed certain technical aptitudes because of this.”
   - “I understood the functionalities of Microsoft teams from a student perspective. This allowed me to better guide my students that experienced technical difficulties”

4. **My responsibilities decreased/ended after the transition in mid-March (n=12)**
   - “My responsibilities decreased as a TA, and I had less student contact.”
   - “I didn’t get a chance to do TA tasks once it shifted to online platform”
Summary of Themes across Open-Ended Comments

When asked to elaborate and comment on their recent roles and responsibilities as a TA during the recent transition to distance/online course instruction, about 25% of TA respondents had specific comments to share. Below is a summary of the most frequently emerging themes along with several representative excerpts.

1. **Need for compensation adjustments (time/pay/equipment needs) (n=25)**

   “I had to set up an office in my house, buy a webcam, use my personal internet, buy equipment to present, all without guidance or compensation for expenses.”

   « J’ai doublé le temps de mon contrat, par exemple, mon contrat était de 40 heures et j’en ai travaillé 80 car les professeurs étaient incompétents en informatique. Et je n’ai pas été rémunéré pour mon travail »

2. **Need for better support regarding the use of technology for professors and TA’s (n=24)**

   “A lot more support is needed from the course instructors. They should be trained to know how to supervise us in that capacity and should not rely on our (young, tech-savy) abilities to navigate the online learning world. Teachers need that training more than the TAs. I am worried of their lack of tech skills.”

   “I believe more support is needed for working the technology (such a Microsoft teams) – for profs and for TAs.”

3. **Issues with online grading and student evaluation (n=17)**

   “Grading long answer questions of online exams that involve students typing out their answers in text boxes using the Brightspace quiz/assignment tool is difficult. You can’t physically add check marks and keep track of marks assigned. This becomes more challenging when the student contacts you asking for a mark breakdown. I made my own “rubrics” with breakdowns of all marks assigned to all questions and then circled the marks that the students got based on their typed answers. If students emailed me with questions, I then emailed them a picture of this rubric.”

   “I found marking course work to be extremely difficult with the software that I had available to me”

4. **Positive feedback/experience (n=14)**

   “I was lucky. I had the smartest and the most caring professor as my supervisor for the course. He hardly made me break a sweat and so, I am not in a position to make additional comments. This was by far the best TA experience for me, I have had.”

   « J’ai eu la chance d’avoir un professeur extrêmement à l’aise avec Brightspace et avec les autres outils numériques. Nous étions également constamment en relation. Cependant, il faudrait penser aux AE qui n’auront pas cette chance. »