



Redesignating Digital Learning Services

Recommendations to address the affordability of microtransactions

Brief - February 2019

Introduction:

The University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) represents approximately 43,500 full-time undergraduate students at the University of Toronto. In addition to providing services and resources for students, the UTSU plays a major role in advocating for improvements and changes to student services more broadly. In advancing the needs and interests of the student body as a recognized student government, the UTSU plays major consulting roles in both governmental and administrative policies, such as in the Ministry's *Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines* and the University of Toronto's *Compulsory Ancillary Fee Policy*.

Digital Learning Services (e.g. McGraw Hill, TopHat, WileyPlus) bring a number of benefits: they have potential to increase participation and engagement for some students, and they can provide additional resources and supports for students who are struggling. Unfortunately, the unanticipated costs associated with these services can often pose a significant financial barrier. Unlike textbooks, the University cannot provide access to these services through short-term library loans, nor can they be resold and traded among students. The cost of these services must be analyzed alongside their contribution to the quality of learning in the classroom, not only for professors, but for the student body as a whole.

Therefore, it is the view of the University of Toronto Students' Union that the university must update existing policies and evaluate a number of short-term and long-term options that could better allow students to deal with these costs. This report outlines background policy information and student perspectives on the use of these digital services, based on responses from more than 540 students to an online, anonymous survey. We then investigate solutions found in other major Ontario universities, before proposing a number of short-term and long-term potential solutions with their potential implications.

Background Information:

Under the current *Guidelines on the Use of Digital Learning Services*, costs for students can be up to \$650 per year for a full-time courseload (assuming an average of 5.0FCEs per term), and the purchase of classroom response devices such as iClickers is not included in that \$65 threshold. These mounting costs have a significant impact, especially on low-income students who are unable to anticipate these costs when enrolling in their courses.

Currently, the University of Toronto offers alternatives which make it easier to meet the costs of attending university; for example, making textbooks available in library course reserves and making public computers available for students without laptops. Students can also save money by purchasing used textbooks and personal electronic devices. However, no such alternatives exist for digital learning services.



In a recent survey of 540 students conducted by the UTSU, over 95% of students reported they had been forced to pay microtransactions during their time at university, which counted for between 5% and 25% of their final grade. Amongst survey respondents, 85% support a ban on microtransactions (11% neutral, 4% opposed) with 63% responding that these services had little to no positive effect on their learning.

Opinions at the University of Toronto:

Survey respondents were invited to provide anonymous feedback in a comment section. Amongst the 540 respondents, 159 expressed various opinions and concerns about their experiences with digital learning services, with many also offering solutions to address costs. Several distinct themes emerged and quotes below have been selected to represent the most frequent themes which could be found in comments.

Students reported that digital learning services **were a significant factor in their course selections**, with multiple low-income students reporting their difficulty dealing with unanticipated costs. Overall, comments demonstrated these costs were significant to student budgets and even when they exceeded the \$65 threshold, students nonetheless felt pressured to pay for these services. Students also requested that the university establish financial aid to assist low-income students with covering the costs of microtransactions.

“I have friends who have had to drop courses because they couldn’t afford to pay.”

“Professors should be REQUIRED to provide a free alternative to iClicker participation, (MindTap, TopHat, etc) so that students who cannot pay for these services are not penalized. The precedent for this has been set through the creation of course reserve textbooks - students who cannot afford to buy the textbooks can fulfill all course requirements by using the course reserve textbooks.”

“Because OSAP/UTAPS/scholarships cannot help needy students pay for these extra fees, they seem quite out of line. Either include them in tuition...or remove them.”

Students recognized that both iClickers and weekly online quizzes could be helpful for their learning but expressed frustration about **the number of different services they were expected to purchase**. With free alternatives on Quercus, with some students proposed that the University of Toronto simply adopt a campus-wide standard, limiting the number of possible services that students must purchase.

“I have been basically forced to buy all 3 of the listed microtransactions (tophat, mindtap, iclickers) to receive full marks in courses.”

“I’m not opposed to iClickers - they are a one time purchase that can be used over and over for different classes and can be resold when they are no longer needed. I am opposed to microtransactions that are online and time limited with no resale value.”



“Perhaps not a ban but maybe we decide as a campus one service to use. Maybe only iClickers.”

Several students also expressed concerns that professors were being offered incentives from digital learning service companies, in exchange for requiring students to buy their services:

“I have even heard profs earning a good chunk of money from these platforms - Robert Gazzale owns shares in TopHat and used to have a TopHat subscription.”

Solutions from Other Institutions:

The University of Toronto is unique amongst peer universities in not offering any strict guidelines with respect to the software or digital learning services which have been designated for use by academic departments. In updating its own *Guidelines on the Use of Digital Learning Services*, U of T should look to other universities for guidance on how to improve its policy to better serve students and faculty.

Both Queen's University and Western University have chosen specific software for standard use across their campus. Queen's website states, “Turning Point has been selected for use at Queen's University. Queen's has taken a leadership role in this area by selecting a single digital student response system for campus-wide use. TurningPoint can be accessed via both physical clickers (available at Queen's bookstore) and through mobile applications”. Similarly, Western University, through PressWestern, “provides information and support for clickers to students, instructors, and administration. Western's officially-supported audience response system is iClicker Cloud by iClicker.”

Advantages of adopting a single campus-wide standard for clicker response are obvious:

- **Students:** they are only required to pay for one service. Western and Queen's also maximize accessibility, with both a mobile app and physical clicker. Students who own mobile devices can download an app for free AND physical clickers can be bought used.
- **Faculty:** having one common system makes it easier for department faculty to receive training and assist one another in using these clicker systems in their classroom.

Administrators at the University of Toronto should take leadership by replacing Top Hat, EcoLab, iClickers and other response systems ***with a single campus-wide standard.***

Proposals:

Based on student feedback, a review of student financial aid literature, and the needs of our members, the University of Toronto Students' Union offers recommendations to address the affordability and quality of Digital Learning Services on campus and improve students' ability to engage with their learning.

1. The **University of Toronto requires professors to demonstrate the need** for using these services.
 - a. Currently, the *Guidelines* state that “instructors are highly encouraged to reach out to...discuss alternatives to commercial on-line resources, including open source on-line resources, or resources acquired through consortial purchasing.”



- b. Given 95% of respondents indicate they have purchased these services, an update to this policy would **explicitly require** professors to demonstrate that free alternatives (i.e. Quercus, open source etc.) are not tangible alternatives before forcing students to purchase alternatives.

***Student Quotation:** “The very fact that quercus has a feature for weekly quizzes and I am sure there is more to explore using this platform, profs still tend to use platforms like wiley and tophat for their convenience.”*

2. Include **the cost of Digital Learning Services** in tuition and ancillary fees, or mention costs in course descriptions online.
 - a. Currently, digital learning services are paid for through microtransactions wherein professors ask students at the beginning of a term to buy a subscription (i.e. EcoLab, TopHat), and include these services as part of a course mark (i.e. 10% participation from iClicker).
 - b. At the end of 2013, the updated *Ministry Framework* allows for universities to include the cost of digital learning services in compulsory ancillary fees. This change would imply that digital learning services (like current systems access fees) are automatically paid as part of student fees, at the beginning of each semester.
 - c. The University of Toronto would prohibit microtransactions and **charge an ancillary fee for the purpose of acquiring digital learning services** for use by all faculty. By changing the way these fees are collected; these fees are included in scholarship and government financial aid calculations, students are able to build budgets accounting for these fees, and the university is able to negotiate with DLS companies directly which reduces costs.

***Student Quotation:** “These programs are essential to our learning and I find many of them help me learn and do my work effectively. I just don’t agree with the prices or the fact we pay for them outside of our tuition. It would be greatly appreciated if we can get these for a reduced cost or have them replace the cost of textbooks (which we pay extra for anyway)”*

3. **Providing students with an alternative method to fulfill their grade** in courses where services are used in grading schemes.
 - a. According to the *Ministry Framework*, students should not be required to pay any additional fees (beyond tuition and compulsory ancillary fees) to meet their degree or program requirements. When Digital Learning Services are included in grading schemes for participation or quiz marks, there is a paywall between students and their grades.
 - b. The *Guidelines* state that when costs exceed \$65/ 0.5 FCE, professors must include in their syllabus an alternative method of assessment. Furthermore, U of T already has allowances for students who choose not to use third-party services (i.e. Turnitin.com). Alternative methods of assessment should always be an option, regardless of cost, to ensure access and reduce barriers that students are already facing.



- c. Alternative methods of assessment could include (a) requiring students to sign-in for participation marks, (b) allowing students to complete in-person quizzes during office hours, (c) replacing iClicker questions with Quercus options, or (d) providing students with iClickers.

***Student Quotation:** "If they want to use them, they should have to provide another form of evaluating/answering the questions/getting attendance credits that does not require a purchase"*

4. Administrators at the University of Toronto takes leadership by replacing Top Hat, EcoLab, iClickers and other response systems **with a single campus-wide standard.**
 - a. Students being forced to pay microtransactions is already a financial burden, but being forced to pay for multiple different services which do the same thing is an unreasonable additional cost. By adopting a single standard, like other universities have already done, students will be able to minimize their additional costs or could purchase multi-year subscriptions to save money.
 - b. As students, we are supporting iClickers since we believe it is easiest to address the needs of low-income students (by making them available for rent) and they retain resale value for other students, making the cost most similar to textbooks.

***Student Quote:** ""The university should hire its own students to create our own platform. If that fails, only stick to one, i.e. only iClickers. They should be issued to us for free."*

5. Given its capacity, the **University of Toronto develops in-house software** to replace third-party services, which students could access for free.
 - a. Students every year are currently asked to pay for a *System Access Fee* which provides the university with revenue and gives students access to ACORN, Quercus, and UofT Mail. This fee for the 2018/19 academic year was \$55.00. Developing software would allow instructors to use in-class response systems and quizzes and give students free access to additional services.
 - b. Last year, the university spent money to develop Quercus which replaced Blackboard as the primary platform used by professors to post announcements, lecture slides, accept assignments, and operate their courses. This indicates the university has the technical skills required to undergo a large electronic infrastructure transformation.

***Student Quotation** "An alternative: Professor Neumann developed a (free!) tool called TeamUp! For our in-class participation. It's developed in-house, so it's free and it won't leak/steal our data!"*

6. The **University of Toronto could purchase institution-wide subscriptions to major services**, absorbing the cost that is now placed on students.
 - a. The University has significant negotiating power that could be used to negotiate relatively low costs for institution-wide subscriptions to major services. This could operate similarly to the University of Toronto's current campus-wide subscriptions to JSTOR for library materials.



7. Usage and costs of microtransactions can be incorporated into course descriptions, so students can be aware of additional fees at the time of choosing their courses.
 - a. Many lab-based courses currently operating at the University of Toronto make explicit mention of associated lab fees, as these fees could impact student decisions to enrol in the course. By also requiring explicit mention of microtransactions, students could be made well aware of additional expected fees and choose their courses accordingly, based on value they see in the service(s) being used.

8. **The University of Toronto could ban microtransactions** in all their forms.
 - a. This solution has been endorsed by 451 of 540 (85.4%) of respondents to our survey and is seen as the most effective solution for protecting student interests and acknowledging how the increasing costs of university have affected students. Due to the amount of change it would require professors to undergo, it has been listed last but nevertheless deserves mention.

“3/5 classes of my first semester has some type of micro transactions. It’s ridiculous.”

“This year I had to pay \$150 for a single class.”

“This is very much needed, especially after the reduction in OSAP grants.”

Potential Implications:

Among the many proposals mentioned in this report, it is important to analyze which are most feasible in both the short and long term, and analyze the true costs and benefits brought upon by each decision. Some important questions to consider:

- Does it have the potential to harm participation in a course?
- Are there services that are only provided in these microtransactions? (Specifically: why do professors use them in the first place in lieu of free alternatives?)
- What are the costs associated with purchasing campus-wide subscriptions as opposed to developing internal software? Which features ought to be prioritized, and which can be easily made available on Quercus?

Conclusion:

The University of Toronto Students' Union and members of our student body stand firm in our request that policies surrounding microtransactions and digital learning services be re-evaluated to better meet the needs and interests of students. Not only have various conflicts of interest been discovered through our investigations, but it is clear that the vast majority of students surveyed do not see an overall benefit to these services. Usage of these services have been increasing exponentially on campus, but students have overwhelmingly indicated that these services do not improve the quality of their learning experience, that the costs associated outweigh the perceived benefits, and that these services actually interfere with the ways in which they choose courses. We owe it to students to re-evaluate these services and act in their best interest.