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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
**STUDENTS' UNION**

## **Report on Online Learning & Remote Classes**

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## **Introduction & Background**

The University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) represents over 38,000 full-time undergraduate students at the University of Toronto - St. George campus. In addition to administering services and hosting events for students, the UTSU also advocates on behalf of its members to the university administration and to all levels of government. In advancing the needs of the undergraduate student body in its capacity as a representative student government, the UTSU works on files including academic advocacy and issues of policy reform at the University of Toronto.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck Toronto in mid-March 2020, the University of Toronto quickly cancelled all in-person classes. Within a short period of time, all undergraduate classes either moved to an online format or were cancelled entirely. Canadians were encouraged to stay home, and international borders quickly closed. Students struggled to navigate losing sources of income, supporting families, maintaining housing, travelling internationally, and more, all while being expected to attend virtual classes, turn in final assignments, meet deadlines, and write final exams. Academic forgiveness policies were expanded in many divisions across the university; for example, the Faculty of Arts & Science expanded the Credit/No Credit (CR/NCR) system to allow for unlimited usage, including within program requirements, and extending the deadline to apply CR/NCR until after final grades were released. Also in the Faculty of Arts & Science, students were allowed to drop courses after receiving their final grades, without academic penalty. While instructors and administrators did their best to adapt to the rapidly changing circumstances and support students, many students struggled during the shift to online learning.

During the Summer 2020 term, the University of Toronto operated its undergraduate classes exclusively online—only some research operations were allowed to resume on campus. These summer courses benefited from being planned for online delivery, however instructors and students still faced a number of challenges, such as navigating asynchronous and synchronous learning structures, evaluation measures for participation grades, new lecture formats, accessibility, wifi connectivity, and much more. It was during the summer term that the University of Toronto announced that it would be pursuing a hybrid model of course delivery for the Fall 2020 term, with a limited amount of in-person classes and class components, and the majority of classes being offered online. The many challenges posed by online learning, and the overall reduction in the quality of education being received by many students, led to calls for the University of Toronto to reduce tuition fees for classes operating remotely; a position taken by the UTSU and many other



student organizations across the university. However, thus far, the University of Toronto has refused to lower tuition fees, arguing that students will still receive a high-quality education and that current tuition fee levels are needed in order to make necessary investments in digital infrastructure to support remote course delivery.

In August 2020, the UTSU administered an Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey, designed to collect feedback from students who had taken online classes either at the end of the Winter 2020 semester or during the Summer 2020 term. The intention was to use the data to provide feedback to administrators and instructors across the University of Toronto on how best to administer online classes during COVID-19. The survey ran from August 13, 2020 to September 18, 2020, and collected 272 responses. On September 13, 2020, the UTSU Campaigns & Outreach Committee voted to commission this report on online learning and remote class delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, and provide recommendations for course instructors to take into consideration when designing their online courses.

This report uses the results of the UTSU's Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey, as well as findings supplied to us by the Rotman Commerce Students' Association and The Mindfulness Measures Project. The Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey results are broken down into sections and analyzed. After, relevant key findings from both supplementary studies are provided. Finally, the report concludes by outlining the themes of the data collected, and makes recommendations for administrators and instructors, based on the analysis of all three data sets.

This report is intended to be made public, and circulated widely amongst the University of Toronto community, including amongst central administrators, faculty administrators, course instructors and coordinators, faculty and collegiate student societies, and students at the University of Toronto.

The UTSU would like to thank the Rotman Commerce Students' Association and the Mindfulness Measures Project for providing their findings and data in support of this report.

**For any questions regarding this report, please contact Tyler Riches, Vice-President Public & University Affairs at [vppublicuniversityaffairs@utsu.ca](mailto:vppublicuniversityaffairs@utsu.ca).**



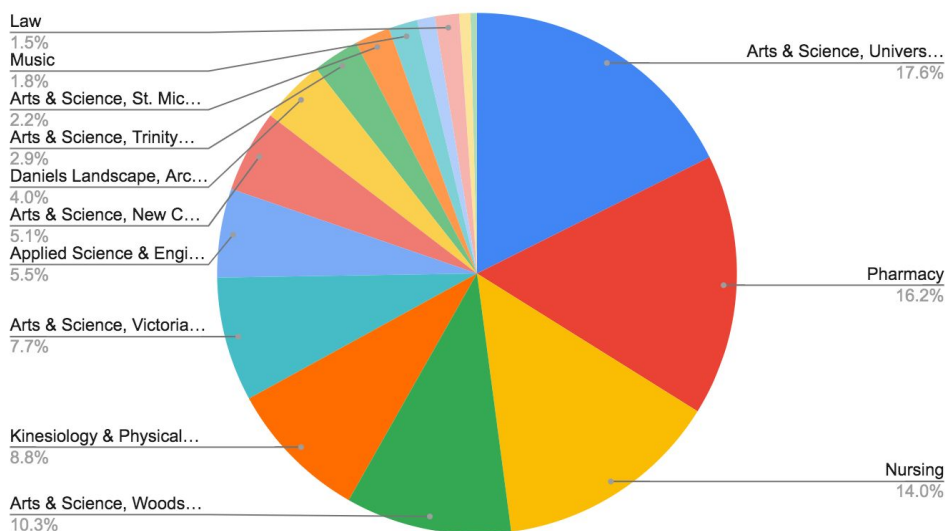
## Analysis of Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey

Questions with less than the total number of responses (272) are indicated as such with a different total number in brackets below the applicable sections or questions.

### Section A: Demographics

#### Which faculty are you enrolled in?

The Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey saw 272 responses over the course of 1 month. Half of all responses came from outside of the Faculty of Arts & Science, most notably from the Pharmacy (16.2%), Nursing (14%), and Kinesiology (8.8%) divisions. Additionally, the survey saw significant engagement from Arts & Science Students at University College (17.6%), Woodsworth College (10.3%), & Victoria College (7.7%). Data from respondents in the Faculty of Arts & Sciences was separated by college for clarity.



Arts & Science, University College: 17.6%

Pharmacy: 16.2%

Nursing: 14%

Arts & Science, Woodsworth College: 10.3%

Kinesiology & Physical Education: 8.8%

Arts & Science, Victoria College: 7.7%



Applied Science & Engineering: 5.5%  
Arts & Science, New College: 5.1%  
Daniels Landscape, Architecture, & Design: 4%  
Arts & Science, Trinity College: 2.9%  
Arts & Science, St. Michael's College: 2.2%  
Music: 1.8%  
Arts & Science, Innis College: 1.1%  
Law: 1.5%  
Medicine: 0.7%  
Toronto School of Theology: 0.4%  
Transitional Year Programme: 0%

### **Arts & Science students only: What is your area of study?**

There was a disproportionate number of respondents belonging to a professional faculty which accounts for the 50% of students who responded "N/A" to this question.

N/A: 50.0%  
Life Sciences: 14.7%  
Social Sciences: 13.2%  
Humanities: 12.9%  
Physical & Mathematical Sciences: 4.8%  
Commerce: 3.7%  
Computer Science: 0.7%

### **What is your year of study (as of September 2020)?**

This data was collected from late August to early September and addressed online learning experiences during both the winter and summer semesters. As a result, we expected a low number of first year respondents which is reflected in the subsequent percentages.

2nd: 40.4%  
3rd: 30.9%  
4th: 21.3%

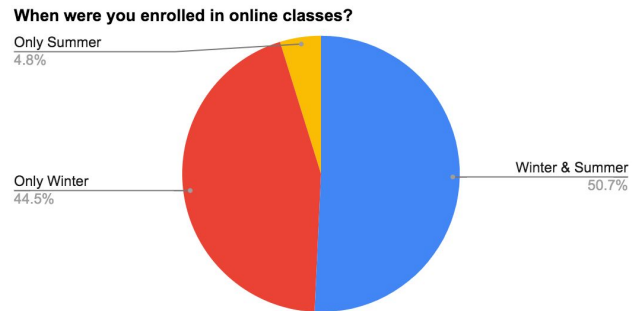


5+: 4.8%

1st: 2.6%

### When were you enrolled in a class that was operating online?

Over half of all respondents (50.7%) attended online classes both in the winter as well as summer semesters. The vast majority of the remaining respondents only attended online classes at the end of the winter semester (44.5%). Additionally, only 4.8% of respondents attended online classes during the summer semester only.



### Were your classes synchronous or asynchronous?

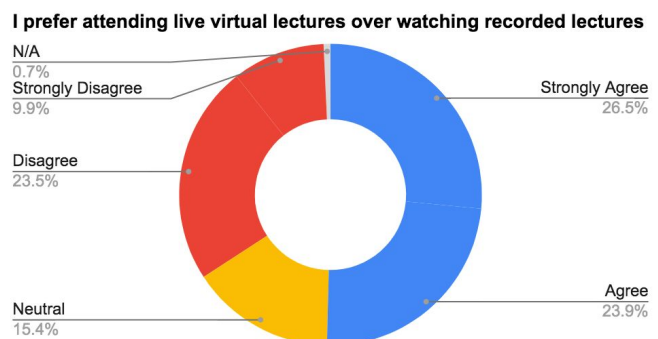
Nearly half of all respondents attended one or more synchronous as well as asynchronous online courses (46.3%). One third of respondents attended mostly synchronous courses (34.2%) and one fifth attended mostly asynchronous courses (19.5%).

## Section B: Agree-Disagree Scale Statements Regarding Live Virtual Lectures

Participants were asked to respond to a set of statements regarding live virtual lectures by choosing either “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree”, “strongly disagree”, or “N/A”.

### I prefer attending live virtual lectures over watching recorded lectures.

Half of all respondents agreed that they prefer attending live virtual lectures over recorded ones (50.4%) whereas one third of respondents preferred recorded lectures over live ones (33.5%). Additionally, a minority





of respondents did not have a strong preference (15.4%).

Strongly Agree: 26.5%

Agree: 23.9%

Disagree: 23.5%

Neutral: 15.4%

Strongly Disagree: 10%

N/A: 0.7%

**I prefer attending live virtual lectures over reading PowerPoint slides with course content.**

The vast majority of respondents said that they preferred attending live virtual lectures over reading slides with course content (76.4%). However, a minority of respondents did not have an issue with course content being taught through PowerPoint slides (13.7%) and a smaller minority did not prefer one over the other (9.2%).

Strongly Agree: 45.2%

Agree: 31.2%

Disagree: 10%

Neutral: 9.2%

Strongly Disagree: 3.7%

N/A: 0.7%

**In live virtual lectures, I prefer asking questions in writing (chatbox, etc) rather than verbally.**

The vast majority of respondents said that they preferred asking questions in live lectures through the chat function rather than verbally (71.6%). A sizable minority of respondents were also neutral on the subject (17.6%), and a small minority preferred asking questions verbally (9.2%).

Strongly Agree: 42.6%

Agree: 29%

Neutral: 17.6%

Disagree: 5.9%

Strongly Disagree: 3.3%





N/A: 1.5%

**In live virtual lectures, I prefer having a dedicated period to ask questions.**

Two-thirds of respondents said that they preferred having a dedicated period to ask questions in live lecture time (64.7%). However, a small minority of respondents did not prefer to have such a period for questions (10.6%). Additionally, one quarter of respondents did not have an opinion on the matter (23.2%).

Agree: 32.7%

Strongly Agree: 32%

Neutral: 23.2%

Disagree: 8.8%

Strongly Disagree: 1.8%

N/A: 1.5%

**In live virtual lectures, I like answering non-graded “knowledge check” questions during lectures to help me stay engaged with the content.**

The vast majority of respondents said that they liked answering “knowledge check” questions, such as through in class quizzes, in live lectures (73.9%). However, some respondents preferred to not have to answer such questions (10.3%). Additionally, some respondents were neutral on the subject (13.6%).

Strongly Agree: 42.3%

Agree: 31.6%

Neutral: 13.6%

Disagree: 6.3%

Strongly Disagree: 4%

N/A: 2.2%

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**Section C: Agree-Disagree Scale Statements Regarding Course Administration**

*Participants were asked to respond to a set of statements regarding course administration by choosing either “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree”, “strongly disagree”, or “N/A”.*



**I prefer when my instructor(s) would post course content at the same time each week.**

An overwhelming majority of respondents said that they preferred when their instructor(s) posted course content at the same time each week (90.4%). Additionally, a small minority of students did not say whether they preferred to have material at the same time each week (8.8%).

Strongly Agree: 58.8%

Agree: 31.6%

Neutral: 8.8%

Disagree: 0.4%

Strongly Disagree: 0.4%

**I wish my instructor(s) would make their courses' Quercus dashboards more accessible and easy to navigate.**

The vast majority of respondents wished that their instructor(s) would make their Quercus dashboards more accessible and easy to navigate (70.6%). Additionally, over one quarter of respondents were neutral on the subject (28.3%).

Strongly Agree: 48.2%

Neutral: 28.3%

Agree: 22.4%

Disagree: 1.1%

**I wish my instructor(s) returned my marked assignments in a more timely manner.**

The vast majority of respondents wished that their instructor(s) returned assignments in a more timely manner (72.4%). Additionally, one quarter of respondents were neutral on the subject (25%).

Strongly Agree: 47%

Agree: 25.4%

Neutral: 25%

N/A: 1.5%

Disagree: 1.1%



**I felt that my instructor(s) and/or TA(s) were sufficiently accessible by email.**

The vast majority of respondents felt that their instructor(s) were sufficiently accessible by email (71%), although less respondents strongly agreed to the statement than those who agreed. Additionally, nearly one quarter of respondents were neutral on the subject (20.6%).

- Agree: 39%
- Strongly Agree: 32%
- Neutral: 20.6%
- Disagree: 5.1%
- N/A: 1.8%
- Strongly Disagree: 1.5%

**I felt that my instructor(s) and/or TA(s) widely publicized office hours well in advance.**

Over two-thirds of respondents felt that their instructor(s) and/or TA(s) published their office hours widely and far enough in advance (66.1%), although less respondents strongly agreed to the statement than those who agreed. However, a small minority did not feel that office hours were publicized enough (10.7%). Additionally, nearly one quarter of students were neutral on the subject (21%).

- Agree: 39.3%
- Strongly Agree: 26.8%
- Neutral: 21%
- Disagree: 8.1%
- Strongly Disagree: 2.6%
- N/A: 2.2%

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**Section D: Agree-Disagree Scale Statements Regarding Interpersonal Relations & Online Learning**

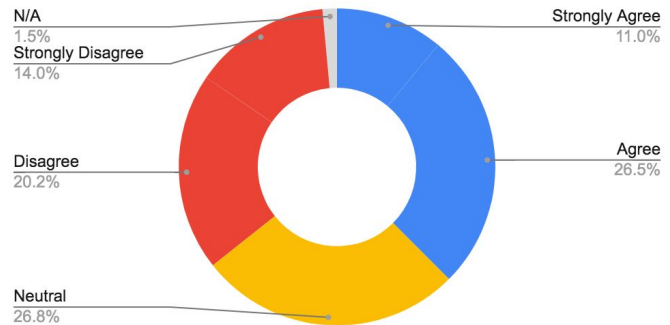
*Participants were asked to respond to a set of statements regarding online learning's impact on interpersonal relations by choosing either "strongly agree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", "strongly disagree", or "N/A".*



### **I like being “set up” with assigned groups of fellow students for study groups or tutorials.**

Over two thirds of respondents had strong opinions on this subject; approximately one third saying that they like being set up with assigned groups of fellow students (37.5%) and the other third saying that they do not (34.2%). Additionally, over one quarter of students did not have a strong opinion on the subject (26.8%).

**I like being “set up” with assigned groups of fellow students for study groups or tutorials**



Neutral: 26.8%

Agree: 26.5%

Disagree: 20.2%

Strongly Disagree: 14%

Strongly Agree: 11%

N/A: 1.5%

### **I find it difficult to make relationships with my classmates online.**

A vast majority of respondents said that they find it difficult to make relationships with their classmates online (75%). A sizable minority of respondents did not have an opinion on the matter (17.3%).

Strongly Agree: 41.5%

Agree: 33.5%

Neutral: 17.3%

Disagree: 5.1%

Strongly Disagree: 1.8%

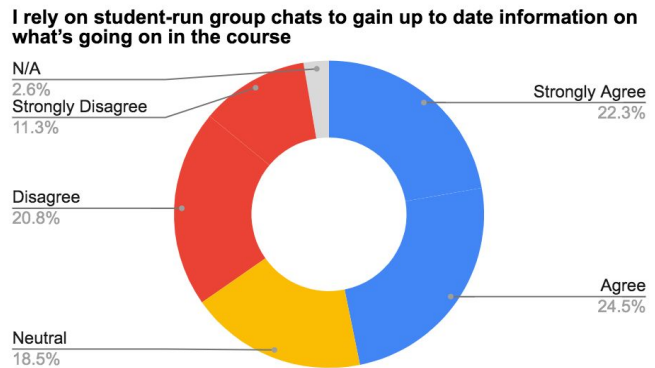
N/A: 0.7%

### **I rely on student-run group chats to gain up to date information on what’s going on in the course.**



Nearly half of all respondents said that they relied on student-run group chats for information on what's going on in their courses (45.6%). However, one third of respondents said they did not rely on them (33.8%). Additionally, a sizable minority of respondents did not have an opinion one way or the other (18%).

Agree: 23.9%  
Disagree: 22.8%  
Strongly Agree: 21.7%  
Neutral: 18%  
Strongly Disagree: 11%  
N/A: 2.6%



**My academic productivity has significantly decreased in an online environment.**

A majority of respondents said that their academic productivity significantly decreased in an online environment (57%). However, nearly one quarter of respondents did not have that experience (23.5%). Additionally, a significant minority did not think that much had changed for them (19.1%).

Strongly Agree: 36%  
Agree: 21%  
Neutral: 19.1%  
Disagree: 16.5%  
Strongly Disagree: 7%  
N/A: 0.4%

**My mental health has significantly decreased since online learning was introduced.**

Nearly one half of respondents said that they have seen a decrease in their mental health since the introduction of online learning (48.6%). However, nearly one quarter of respondents disagreed with that assessment (23.4%). Additionally, over one quarter of respondents did not think that much has changed for them (27.6%).

Neutral: 27.6%  
Agree: 25.4%



Strongly Agree: 23.2%  
Disagree: 15%  
Strongly Disagree: 8.4%  
N/A: 0.4%

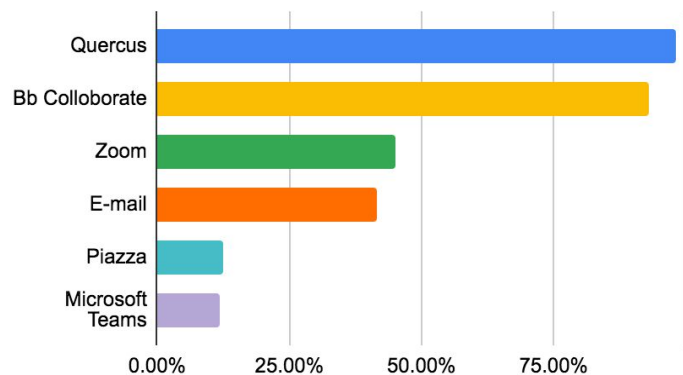
## Section E: Further Questions Regarding Course Administration

### What online platform(s) did your instructor(s) use to administer the course(s) you were enrolled in? Select all that apply.

Nearly all respondents said that their course(s) were administered through Quercus and Bb Collaborate (98.2% & 93% respectively). Additionally, nearly half of respondents said that their course(s) were administered via Zoom and e-mail (45.2% & 41.5% respectively). Finally, a sizable number of respondents reported that their course(s) were administered through Piazza and Microsoft Teams (12.5% & 11.8% respectively). Respondents reported over a dozen of other sites and softwares that they interacted with, displaying the diversity of online platforms that students were expected to use in the initial months of online learning.

Quercus: 98.2%  
Bb Collaborate: 93%  
Zoom: 45.2%  
E-mail: 41.5%  
Piazza: 12.5%  
Microsoft Teams: 11.8%  
Facebook: 1.5%  
Slack: 1.1%  
TopHat, Sharepoint, MyMedia,  
Youtube: 0.7% each (2.8% total)  
PowerPoint w/ audio,  
CrowdMark, Phone, Google Docs/Drive, Discord, Pepper, Skype, Miro,  
Gathertown: 0.4% each (3.6% total)

Most popular online platforms for course administration



### For students who enrolled in one or more asynchronous courses: How did your instructor(s) administer course content? Select all that apply.



(235 responses)

This question was geared specifically towards respondents who enrolled in asynchronous courses. The vast majority of respondents said that their courses were administered through pre-recorded lectures (88.5%), PowerPoint slides (75.3%), and course readings (67.7%). Additionally, nearly one third of respondents said that they were expected to interact with 3rd party videos such as movies and YouTube videos as part of their course content (31.1%).

Pre-Recorded Lectures: 88.5%

PowerPoint Slides: 75.3%

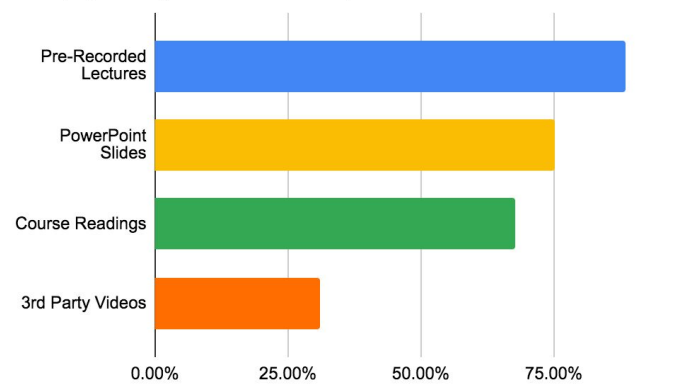
Course Readings: 67.7%

3rd Party Videos (i.e. movies, documentaries, youtube videos etc...): 31.1%

Case studies/reviews: 0.9%

Virtual Lab Subscriptions, Phone call, PowerPoint Slides w/ Audio, E-mail: 0.4% eac

**Most popular asynchronous online platforms for course administration**



### **How were your course(s) exam(s) scheduled and administered?**

The survey identified four principal means of delivery for final examinations:

1. Synchronous exams that required students to enter a testing “space” online and complete what was required of them in a short window of time, similar to what was expected in-person.
2. Synchronous exams that were open to be completed for a characteristically asynchronous period of time, such as 24 or 48 hours, but would need to be completed within a short time frame once begun.
3. Asynchronous exams where students were given 24, 48, or 72 hours after receiving instructions and questions to complete but were not policed as to the amount of time they took to do it.
4. Asynchronous exams that took the form of assignments, in which students were given a due date approximately one week to one month following the assignment date.



Respondents who were meant to have synchronous in-person examinations before the pandemic said that they were either cancelled and reweighted to previous assignments or changed to be either synchronous or asynchronous in format.

Respondents who experienced synchronous, or timed, final exams commented that their exams would be documents they would download and fill in with text, quizzes that would be completed on an online platform like Quercus itself, or a mixture of both. Students who took their finals using only Quercus reflected that it was more difficult to toggle through the test or go back to past questions; in some cases, students commented that each question they needed to answer was strictly timed with no capability to move back to questions they may have had trouble on. Some students also commented that an instructor would sometimes elect to have two sittings of their final exam to accommodate students in different time zones right off the bat.

*"I found that exams that operate in real-time... were immensely stressful and unnecessary as... if we had any technical difficulties or didn't have a proper environment at home to complete the test in, our marks would significantly be impacted." - 3rd Year Humanities Student*

These types of more restrictive tests, even those that were not strictly timed by question, presented accessibility problems for some students who lost wifi connection in the middle of their tests or were anxious or afraid that they would have connectivity issues. Synchronous tests like these also presented automatic issues for students who lived in different time zones; although most were able to request aid from their instructors, the process of doing so was not always smooth or warranted given the circumstances of the pandemic. Moreover, two separate sittings to complete tests didn't always help given the unique circumstances of U of T students around the world.

*"I was living in a time zone that's 9.5 hours ahead of Toronto and I had to complete one final exam and one final review/ presentation in real Toronto time and they didn't accommodate me with any alternatives so I had to be awake all night to complete the final exams." - 4th Year Architecture Student*

Respondents who experienced asynchronous exams either had 1-3 days after the questions became available to complete the assessment or were given a due date as well as the instructions and questions to be completed in a matter of weeks similar to a "take-home test". Generally, students who had an experience like this commented that their final exams occurred more smoothly than those who experienced synchronous examinations.





*"Having 24 hours to submit a problem set and having a final essay rather than exam were incredibly helpful and alleviated a lot of the stress from the uncertainty of the new online format." - 3rd Year Arts & Science Student*

The asynchronous nature of testing during the first few months of online learning proved especially crucial for many students given the tumultuous circumstances that they needed to adapt to right before exam season in the winter and throughout the summer; they could ensure they had sufficient wifi and computer technology as well as the appropriate space and time to be able to complete their assessments well. However, the survey also reflected that some students felt that instructors took the opportunity of asynchronous exams to make the assessment more difficult or application oriented.

*"I am concerned about the degree of difficulty of the exams. I felt they were somewhat harder compared to evaluations taken in person." - 3rd Year Pharmacy Student*

A majority of respondents commented that their finals were deemed "open-book" by their instructors due to the difficulties of regulating a "closed-book" test online. Some students commented how it was unfair of instructors to mandate a "closed-book" test but only regulate that by way of an "honour code" or a signed "code of integrity" document because those who would use their notes or the internet would have an advantage and would not be able to be penalized.

Some ways that instructors enforced a "closed-book" environment was to police students' movements on their course Quercus pages or by using 3rd party services such as Browser Lock, Exemplify, or ProctorU. Those who attended exams that were officially proctored sometimes ran into additional issues when the proctor made a determination that was unfounded or if they weren't aware of student accommodations. Some students also commented that they were expected to scan or take pictures of their exam materials if they were to be completed by hand.

*"Instructors utilized the built in tracking on Quercus to ensure that students were not navigating away from the exam page during exams." - 2nd Year Nursing Student*

*"The proctor didn't set up my accommodations properly so I had to contact her after for more time." - 4th Year Humanities Student*

Some respondents who experienced synchronous final exams said that their instructors made themselves readily available by a variety of means in the middle of the testing period to ensure that they could be contacted if and when any technological or situational issues arised for students. Some instructors made



themselves available through a constant Bb Collaborate call, through Quercus or piazza discussion boards, or simply via e-mail.

Overall, completing final exams in an exclusively online manner proved difficult for many students given their personal circumstances with technological issues, finding appropriate space, and navigating this all while many were transitioning into new living situations. Online final exams also proved difficult for students in different time-zones who found themselves in the new situation of needing to ask to be accommodated and hope that their instructors would listen.

**In many online courses, students must fulfil a “participation” grade requirement. Describe the method(s) your course(s) used to administer this portion of the grade. Did you find those method(s) accessible to engage with?**

*(231 responses)*

Respondents recorded multiple avenues that course participation was conducted on; some commented that their courses utilized multiple options for participation given the circumstances of online learning. Students had a wide range of opinions regarding each means of participation and the impact of online learning on fulfilling this portion of their grades.

Respondents suggested that synchronous designated lecture or tutorial times were still the favoured modes of participation for many courses. Students commented that their participation marks in these avenues were calculated through some combination of checking attendance, asking questions, commenting, or engaging with material using the chat function or visually and/or verbally (if required). Some students said that they were grouped with others in their lectures or tutorials to engage with the content in smaller settings. Others were expected to deliver presentations, either with a group or by themselves, to fulfill this requirement.

*“[The Instructor] checked our participation in the online classes/modules that were held live. He screenshot the attendance page and marked us on participation based on that. I really liked this because it allows us to be marked based on what we do. I personally go to every lecture so it felt good to be rewarded for doing so. And those who do not attend, would not be rewarded for it.” - 3rd Year Kinesiology Student*

*“Discussions forums and attendance are very accessible and reasonable. I think participation in lecture, in person or online, is not a right way to gage a student's participation or understanding of the material since many students find it difficult to speak publicly.” - 3rd Year Humanities Student*



Requiring attendance at synchronous sessions posed an overall accessibility problem for students, especially those living in different time-zones and/or outside of Canada. In some cases, students signed up for classes specifically because they were asynchronous only to find, once they began the course, that there was a synchronous element; not only was this misleading to students, but also proved to be inequitable as students who participated in synchronous sessions were often showed more favor.

*"[My course mainly used] discussion forums but my instructor advertised [the] class as asynchronous and then made it optional to be asynchronous or synchronous . I had to work full time but a lot of people did the course synchronously and I think this affected my learning as more focus was placed on that method of delivery even though the course wasn't advertised that way." - 4th Year Social Sciences Student*

Another popular form of administering the participation grade was asynchronously through the discussion board function on Quercus. Responses to mandatory discussion board posts were varied, with some students heavily preferring them to visual forms of participation and others heavily disliking them. Some students, especially those who did not usually enjoy synchronous means of participation, found discussion boards relatively accessible due to their asynchronous nature.

Detractors of discussion boards felt that they tended to be forced and artificial as students found it difficult to interact with the other posts "naturally" in a tutorial like manner and would just end up focusing only on whatever they wanted to say. Students who disliked the written and more formal form of participation of discussion boards often disliked if their participation marks were solely based on their performance in them. Students commented that many instructors would not have clear guidelines as to the level of engagement they were expecting from students on the discussion boards, leaving many confused and unable to discern what was required of them. They also commented that the level of effort needed to complete discussion postings to be on par with other students was much higher than the effort they would have been required to make in an in-person setting.

*"The discussion forums were horrible. Normal participation does not require even close to that amount of work. Participation should not be a thing when classes are online, unless you have small group zoom tutorials." - 2nd Year Kinesiology Student*

*"Participation was graded through evaluating the quality of a minimum of 10 posts to discussion boards on Quercus. Although it was somewhat of a challenge to manage my time to complete these posts, I found this method accessible and easy to engage with." - 2nd Year Social Sciences Student*

Other means of participation surrounding class time included sending in discussion questions, responses, or reading reflections through email or by completing short



knowledge based quizzes following or preceding class time. Some students said that office hours were considered by some instructors to be a form of participation. Additionally, many students said that they were required to complete quizzes as a part of their participation mark at some time or another, in some cases each week, in one or more of their courses. Other students were expected to use 3rd party applications, websites, or platforms to complete their participation grades such as YouTube, TopHat, and Piazza.

*"In a French class it was required to watch an assigned YouTube video and complete an online survey-like test as a way to measure participation." - 3rd Year Humanities Student*

*"We were required to speak in either the chat function or out loud during the synchronous lectures. If students could not participate in lecture, they were required to participate in discussion forums on Quercus." - 3rd Year Humanities Student*

**For students who enrolled in one or more courses with lab or practical requirements, how has online learning affected the completion of your grade(s)?**

*(160 responses)*

Arts & Science and Engineering respondents reported that in the winter semester, many remaining labs were cancelled if they could not be completed in person while others were simply switched online; cancelled labs were reweighted if no online equivalent was implemented. Online labs ranged from attending synchronous video sessions, completing data sets at home, participating in discussion boards, and completing quizzes. The Faculty of Kinesiology also either cancelled and reweighted lab requirements or switched them online, with mixed reactions from students.

*"Although in-person lab sessions are unavailable, the online versions were still quite engaging and proper complementary videos demonstrating experiments, techniques and important safety protocols were provided for viewing and preparation before the online lab sessions." - 3rd Year Life Science Student*

*"This really boosted my mark just because I had more time to get my stuff done as I require much more time than everyone else as I have a disability. This was great to have an online course with an amazing professor and great TA, who accommodated me with extra time when I really needed it." - 3rd Year Kinesiology Student*

*"In-person labs were cancelled because MSB was closed. Labs become online (just looking at cadavers images and videos). Significantly poorer learning from really hands-on learning on real 3D cadavers." - 3rd Year Kinesiology Student*

Architecture students reported that they completed their practical requirements through virtual conversations with their instructors on their projects. Computer modeling was used exclusively as physical modeling couldn't be completed and



physical project booklets were replaced by pictures they had to take and submit to their instructors. Some architecture students commented on the difficulty that online learning presented for them in getting proper feedback on their work.

*“As an architecture major, it was very difficult for me to complete my studio course in Winter 2020. It’s hard to communicate ideas and draft works over a timed video call session. I believe I could have performed better if it wasn’t for online learning. We were given extensions though.” - 2nd Year Daniels Student*

Nursing students said that their in-person tutorials were replaced by a mix of online learning solutions. They were required to complete their clinical practicals by engaging with online case studies, discussing them in synchronous sessions and on discussion boards, as well as completing quizzes on the material. Some nursing students said that the switch to online learning was not ideal as they valued the in-person experience to prepare them for the workforce. Other students said that they still gained sufficient amounts of knowledge through online learning even though the real-life element was lost. They also commented on what they felt was slow communication from the faculty on what plans would be moving forward into the Fall in terms of the safety of in-person sessions.

*“Online ‘clinical experience’ doesn’t make up for in person clinical experience. I feel I was very much disadvantaged by having to do clinical online and my confidence and understanding of course material suffered. Furthermore, hands on practice of nursing skills doesn’t happen which again puts us at a disadvantage for when we graduate.”- 2nd Year Nursing Student*

*“We haven’t had any lab/practical experiences in person yet, but will be experiencing them in September. They have already informed us of safety measures being provided (like scheduling only small groups of us at one time). I do feel less confident in my nursing skills without the in-person practice, but so far it has not affected my grade completion.” - 2nd Year Nursing Student*

Students from the Faculty of Pharmacy said that nearly all of their practical sessions, such as injection training and patient role play, were cancelled and reweighted by the faculty after the winter term. However, some students experienced fulfilling practical requirements online, with mixed results. Many students were frustrated with the level of communication that was coming from the faculty in terms of what they could expect for their programs moving forward.

*“Pharmacy MTM labs had to be cancelled and the final grade given was determined from previous completed course work that occurred before quarantine.” - 2nd Year Pharmacy Student*



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*"We performed online virtual simulation labs. They were acceptable, however my computer overheated a few times due to the demand." - 3rd Year Doctoral Pharmacy Student*

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## **Section F: Questions Regarding Accessibility**

### **Did you find that the online platform(s) used in the course(s) you were enrolled in were accessible to engage with?**

*(272 responses)*

Respondents generally found that the platforms that their courses used were accessible. However, a multitude of accessibility concerns were raised regarding all of the various online platforms that the University has been using and how they have affected students and instructors alike.

The survey identified the learning curve that students have seen instructors going through in trying to adapt their teaching styles methods to online platforms, and the difficulties it has created. Students said that instructors would have trouble uploading lectures and would occasionally have to use different platforms to publish their content making it confusing to access and inconsistent in frequency. Students noted that overall, course content has slowly become more lengthy as instructors have used the introduction of asynchronous content as an opportunity to post multiple lectures that go beyond the amount of time that students have allocated towards their courses.

Lecture recordings were identified, nearly unanimously, as the most helpful element of online learning in the midst of the pandemic and all the issues that it has brought. Asynchronous students tended to have trouble when instructors posted PowerPoint slides with audio attached to different sections, especially when they navigated to the next slides automatically, as it became difficult to pause or speed up when needed. Some students also commented on the difficulty of taking notes on their computer while also trying to pay attention to lectures and read slides as they came up, especially if the sessions were not recorded and/or if the slides weren't posted.

Additionally, Quercus has obviously been used very heavily in recent months; students have commented on how poorly organized Quercus pages can impact on their learning process, especially in asynchronous courses. Some students also found



there to be communication issues with their instructors and felt that their grades were not posted fast or consistently enough.

Bb Collaborate and Zoom were demonstrated to be the two main platforms that instructors used for synchronous sessions. Many respondents highly preferred one platform over the other for reasons ranging from ease of access to connectivity issues. Some overall accessibility concerns expressed by students included; concerns that subtitles for recorded sessions have not been widely included, break out groups having organizational issues and creating learning issues for those more familiar with lecture based learning, and lecture recordings from synchronous sessions not being available quickly enough, for enough of time, or at all.

Students said that Bb Collaborate was easier to access because of how it's embedded directly into Quercus. However, many thought that Bb Collaborate tended to create more audio/video glitches and students ran into issues when trying to play back recordings at different speeds. Bb Collaborate was also found to be more difficult to use if not being used on a computer with an embedded or well connected microphone and/or camera. Moreover, students reported that when dialing in from international numbers, the platform charged extra fees, causing issues for international students who have technical issues with their internet or computers.

Other students preferred Zoom because they were able to see everyone at once, making synchronous sessions easier to take part in; moreover, students said that using Zoom allowed them more agency over their audio/video settings and recordings were easier to playback at different speeds. However, students also said that Zoom could sometimes be more difficult to use than Bb Collaborate. Firstly, students needed to download the software and even once they had it, they needed to access multiple links for lectures, tutorials, and office hours, whereas joining Bb Collaborate calls tended to be more seamless. The Zoom waiting room has also presented some issues for students. Some instructors have tutorial assistants to help them admit students while others do not, in any case, some students have found themselves missing parts of synchronous sessions being stuck in the waiting room for lengthy periods of time. Students have also expressed privacy concerns for Zoom sessions compared to the more secure Bb Collaborate.

Students also had a wide array of opinions on the matter of the chat function in live sessions. Many saw the introduction of participating in sessions through the chat function as a positive step forward from an accessibility standpoint as another option for those who prefer to or cannot vocalize their thoughts due to having a disability,





dealing with mental illness, or needing to work through logistical issues with their technology or at home circumstances. Other students felt that the chat function became distracting in live sessions, especially when left unmoderated and/or if the questions or comments were not even addressed by the instructors in a timely manner. Some students noted that the chat function provided the necessary space for social interaction that was generally missing from online learning. Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Piazza were also mentioned, to mixed reviews; some students saw them as positive additional tools for moderated discussion.

### **Were you able to access adequate technology to fully participate in online classes?**

*(233 responses)*

The survey reflected that the most pressing issues for students now with online learning is having a stable wifi connection. Students without wifi were forced to go to libraries and cafes, in the middle of a pandemic, to complete their course requirements. Students with insufficient wifi access at home often experienced having to rejoin synchronous sessions multiple times while missing out on crucial material and/or participation marks in the process. The switch to online learning has been especially difficult for students in different countries or in remote locations having issues connecting Quercus and video applications to complete their classes.

Many students said that they had sufficient wifi access but shared a network with multiple family members or roommates at the same time, making their connections more unreliable and anxiety inducing, even if interruptions were more infrequent. Many also commented on the overall complexity of needing to plan around the people they live with to be able to take synchronous classes without distractions or to enable them to take assessments in quieter conditions.

Some students found themselves using their cellular data in order to go to class or complete their assignments. Others went so far as to purchase entirely new equipment for online classes, something that is not accessible for most students to do. Many also cited a lack of financial and accessibility support from their faculties, departments, and instructors when running into technical issues. Moreover, connectivity issues were not isolated to students, as some respondents cited occasions when instructors could not properly administer course material as a result of their poor connections or outdated technology.

Some respondents reflected on the difficulties around securing the appropriate library resources for research purposes given that libraries were physically closed for





many months and most remain shuttered. Students found it difficult to navigate to find what was available to them online; others were either unaware of the library's curbside service or that was not an accessible option for them. Some respondents commented that upon reaching out to library staff, they only received general guidance to existing resources instead of the research help they expected while in-person.

### **For students registered with Accessibility Services, how has online learning affected your personal and academic success?**

*(115 responses)*

Most respondents registered with Accessibility Services said that they were accommodated but that they ran into more roadblocks from Accessibility Services due to the pandemic.

Some students with disabilities or accessibility issues commented that the shift to online learning actually improved their ability to be successful in school, citing the shift towards a more asynchronous learning style as very helpful. Others said that the general anxiety and stress of the pandemic and factors related to the shift to online learning negatively impacted their mental health, including the amount of screen time that became required for them to commit to.

The survey also gathered a sense that the university, its departments, and instructors themselves were incredibly understanding and accommodating at the beginning of the pandemic but seemed to care less and less as online learning norms began to be cemented in the summer term.

Selected Testimonials;

*"Accessibility services have not been able to make sufficient strides to accommodate students in the online learning environment. They email back generic responses when you have a query."- 3rd Year Engineering Student*

*"Instructors were more accommodating with extensions when the pandemic started but I don't know if they'll be as forgiving now that we're starting a semester online instead of transitioning midway through" - 5th+ Year Life Science Student*

*"I'm not registered with accessibility services however as a mother to a toddler I found online learning very challenging when my daycare closed due to Covid. While I received some understanding and flexibility, not all my instructors empathized with my situation" - 2nd Year Nursing Student*

*"I am registered with accessibility services and I think that it is important for me to be in person in order to achieve maximal personal and academic success. Transitioning*



*to online learning in the winter semester had a strong negative impact on my academic drive and focusing abilities, and put me in a position where I felt hopeless with my academics. If instructors could make content [that] need students engagement and discussions, I feel that I would do much better in class” - 3rd Year Physical & Mathematical Sciences Student*

*“For assignments with scheduled due dates I was always accommodated (if I needed extra time it was no problem for professors to give me more time to complete the assignment, however for scheduled tests within a certain time limit in one class my accommodations were completely ignored by the professors. In my person experience regular tests do not work in an online setting and are not accessible whatsoever”- 3rd Year Humanities Student*

*“[Online learning] increased my success. Especially because I require extra time to learn and do everything school related so online course[s] have [given] me that extra time I needed. It was amazing to be calm and not have to worry like I always do during in class lessons [as well as have extra time to complete assignments and exams]” - 3rd Year Kinesiology Student*

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## **Section G: Final Reflections**

### **Summary of reflections regarding positive and negative experiences with instructors:**

Overall, many students felt that their professors worked diligently to engage them in an accessible manner online. However, many also commented on a general increase in anxiety as a result of a perceived inaccessibility of their course content; adapting to discussing content with instructors online proved difficult if they did not make themselves sufficiently available for students and/or if they were not familiar with the online platforms they were using. Students also reported how accommodating and understanding some of their instructors were in light of the pandemic and/or if they were dealing with issues with technology or connectivity while other instructors couldn't care less.

Generally, the more organized instructors were with their Quercus pages, online materials, and timing of postings, the more seamless the student experience was. This included posting lecture slides in advance of synchronous time, posting asynchronous content in a timely manner that did not take more time than indicated in their timetables, and having multiple options to fulfil participation requirements with clear guidelines on expectations. Additionally, one of the most frequently mentioned accommodations was having frequently uploaded and



accessible synchronous lecture recordings; instructors being late in posting recordings, putting time limits on them, or not posting them at all proved incredibly challenging for some students. Moreover, students reported that it was very helpful when instructors held frequent office-hours and/or when they made themselves more readily available for one-on-one conversations.

**Summary of responses regarding students' expectations when entering remote learning versus its realized impacts:**

Many students felt that online learning would allow them to follow a stricter schedule and/or ensure that they'd arrive in synchronous sessions more on-time than they would when commuting for in-person classes. Some said that it did end up being an academically constructive experience while others reported that online learning has had negative impacts on their mental health, sleep schedules, and drive to study or complete course work. Some students also thought that online learning would be less difficult than the in-person experience where as the opposite proved to be true, with many instructors making their assessment more difficult because of the mostly open-book nature of the online learning environment. Although not needing to commute was sometimes seen as a positive change, many students commented on the difficulties associated with not having additional places to study as they normally would on campus with cafes and libraries alike. Students also reflected on completing course related tasks proving to be more difficult than expected without the social element of attending school that many came to take for granted.

Many students have also had to deal with personal issues in light of the pandemic such as moving, sometimes to other parts of the world, as well as navigating new family or roommate dynamics; time zone changes have proved incredibly frustrating for many students, especially when their instructors did not appropriately accommodate them. The effects of social distancing and isolation has had generally negative effects on many students, although some reported that they were able to focus on themselves more and/or found themselves to be more productive than usual. Many students commented that they were already seeing how attending school by staring at a computer screen in a stationary manner with little time to move around has negatively impacted their physical health. Some students were already used to keeping most of their textbook content online before the pandemic but commented that being expected to both read, attend lectures, and complete course work on the computer proved more difficult than expected.



Selected Testimonials;

*"I find that I am more focused since I don't have to spend 3 hours commuting everyday. I can use that time instead for self-care (e.g. working out, sleeping etc.) or studying." - 3rd Year Kinesiology Student*

*"As an international student, I have been living an unhealthy lifestyle - being awake when everyone is asleep (this was because communication with my peers and TAs were quicker this way)." - 3rd Year Social Sciences Student*

*"I was more motivated to study because I had lectures recorded which helped me learn and study at my own pace and gain a more thorough understanding of the subject. I had a routine where I would cover 3-hours of lecture recording per day and this routine was instrumental in my ability to perform well in these courses." - 2nd Year Arts & Science Student*

*"I thought the workload would be somewhat the same, but after everything was switched to online, I found more than one instructors increasing the workload, giving us lots more tasks to do just because 'we have more time at home.'" - 2nd Year Humanities Student*

*"I used to go to different libraries to study and focus which allowed me to manage my time and motivated me to do work. Since everything shifted to remote learning I find it hard to stay motivated and focus to study at home." - 4th Year Architecture Student*

*"While I think I was able to get the most I could out of the online learning methods that were offered these past two semesters, the isolation that necessarily comes with these measures has made me feel distant or alienated from the things I usually find most fulfilling about school— presence, community, intellectual engagement... I fear many students will slip through the cracks while trying to navigate a big faceless technological system that doesn't deliver an adequate alternative [to in-person learning].... We need to be looking out for those people and not blaming them if these systems aren't compatible with how they learn." - 4th Year Humanities Student*

*"I've skipped way less class than I did in person because there are lots of days I'm too tired to get out of bed, and now I can do school in bed. I'm sure some disabled students or students with chronic illnesses have the same issue. After all of this is over, I'd like to see some things last - for example zoom office hours. I'd definitely go more often." - 2nd Year Life Science Student*

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## **Supplementary Study: Rotman Commerce Survey Findings**

The Rotman Commerce Students' Association (RCSA) conducted a survey within Rotman Commerce to gather feedback from Rotman Commerce students regarding their shift to online learning during the Winter 2020 semester. Relevant key findings are summarized below.

### **Demographics**

The RCSA course survey saw 56 total respondents, however two respondents appear to be the same person, according to the RCSA's findings. Of these respondents, 25 (44.6%) were in first year, 22 were in second year (39.3%), 9 were in third year (16.1%), and 0 (0%) were in fourth year.<sup>1</sup>

### **Academic Policy Changes**

As is policy at the University of Toronto, instructors seeking to make changes to the course syllabus must put such changes to the class for a vote, including changes to the marking scheme. All of the RCSA survey respondents had marking scheme changes proposed by their instructors in at least one of their classes in order to accommodate the shift to online learning, with the majority of respondents experiencing changes to the marking scheme as a result.<sup>2</sup>

A majority of survey respondents also found the changes made by the Faculty of Arts & Science to the CR/NCR policy and the drop course policy to have been advantageous to their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA).<sup>3</sup>

### **Course Workload**

With the shift to online learning, a majority of RCSA survey respondents indicated that they felt their course workload either became harder to manage, or remained generally the same.<sup>4</sup> Respondents cited a variety of reasons for this, including family-related and financial stresses, slow internet, instructors not uploading

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<sup>1</sup> Rotman Commerce Students' Association. (2020). *COVID-19 Course Feedback Survey* [Data set]. Rotman Commerce Students' Association.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*



lectures, and—most commonly—having an at-home environment in which it's difficult to focus on work.<sup>5</sup>

## **Final Exams & Final Assignments**

Since the shift to online learning occurred towards the end of the Winter 2020 semester, many students experienced their final assessments online. The majority of respondents indicated that their final exams and/or final assignments were more difficult than they expected.<sup>6</sup> Respondents cited a variety of reasons for this, namely not having enough time, being given too many questions, or finding that the content that was tested was significantly more challenging.<sup>7</sup> Opinions on whether instructors and teaching assistants marked final assessments more or less harshly, or generally the same, were relatively evenly distributed.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding assessment via final assignment rather than via final exam, respondents were fairly divided on whether they found it less or more work than studying for an exam.<sup>9</sup> A greater proportion of respondents thought that a final assessment allowed them a better opportunity to demonstrate their learning than an exam would have.<sup>10</sup> Respondents were also fairly divided on whether the final assignment was more or less time consuming than an exam would have been.<sup>11</sup> However, a majority of respondents indicated that they would prefer a final assignment over a final exam.<sup>12</sup>

This lack of consensus regarding the difficulty of final assignments could be attributed to the variety of final assignments that were given by individual instructors. It should be noted that the scope and definitions in this question are relatively vague. For example, what constitutes a final assignment is not clearly defined, leaving it open to interpretation by the respondents.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*



The final exams of the RCSA survey respondents used a variety of platforms, namely Crowdmark, Quercus, and ProctorU.<sup>13</sup> A significant number of respondents enjoyed using Quercus, while most disliked Crowdmark and ProctorU.<sup>14</sup> Respondents shared their experiences of these services. Some cited privacy concerns ProctorU and feeling uncomfortable granting permissions or being monitored via the service.<sup>15</sup> Some respondents said that Crowdmark was easy to use, while others said that making submissions through Crowdmark was time-consuming, which made completing their exam in a short period of time more stressful.<sup>16</sup> Quercus, however, received the best reviews, with most respondents who used it saying that it was easy to navigate and easy to use.<sup>17</sup>

### **Course Delivery Concerns**

There were a number of common concerns from respondents regarding course delivery at the end of Winter 2020 were instructors not uploading lectures, instructors being difficult to reach outside of lecture and/or office hours, having difficulty accessing lectures because of slow wifi, and being in a different time zone or being jet lagged.<sup>18</sup>

### **Personal Concerns & Accommodations**

During the shift to online learning at the end of the Winter 2020 term, most RCSA survey respondents found their instructors to have been reasonably accommodating for students with specific concerns or requests.<sup>19</sup> Some respondents shared that their instructors had shifted and extended deadlines, held additional office hours, were responsive to emails, and consulted with their classes to determine how to coordinate a shift to online learning.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*



## Supplementary Study: The Mindfulness Measures Project

The Mindfulness Measures Project was a project by Neha Matharu, Heba Qazilbash, and Mehwish Siddiqui within the Faculty of Arts & Science, and was sponsored by the University of Toronto COVID-19 Student Engagement Award. After conducting a survey with 371 submissions, 316 submissions were deemed valid for data analysis, and on September 4, 2020, the Mindfulness Measures Project published its final deliverable: *The Effects of COVID-19 on Student Wellbeing Among Undergraduates at the University of Toronto: A Cross-Sectional Study*. Relevant key findings are summarized below.

### Financial Strains & Financial Supports

Of the respondents to the Mindfulness Measures survey, a majority of respondents experienced some level of financial strains as a result of COVID-19.<sup>21</sup> Most respondents were at least aware of financial support from the University of Toronto available to students, however only 13.6% of respondents had received financial support.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of respondents, when asked whether or not the University of Toronto is doing a sufficient job of supporting students financially during COVID-19, were either neutral/unsure, or disagreed.<sup>23</sup>

### Transition to Online Learning & Remote Classes

The majority of respondents to the Mindfulness Measures survey found that their course workload became either slightly (37.7%) or significantly (24.7%) harder to manage.<sup>24</sup> Respondents cited a variety of reasons for this, including slow internet, financial stresses, or family issues, but the most common reason was an at-home environment that was not conducive to focusing on course work.<sup>25</sup> Finally, when asked how they feel about the accommodations provided by the University of Toronto during the transition to online learning, 66.1% of respondents were satisfied

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<sup>21</sup> Matharu, N., Qazilbash, H., & Siddiqui, M. (2020). *The Effects of COVID-19 on Student Wellbeing Among Undergraduates at the University of Toronto: A Cross-Sectional Study*. Toronto: The Mindfulness Measures Project.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*





to some extent, and 16.5% of respondents were dissatisfied to some extent, with 17.4% remaining neutral.<sup>26</sup>

## **Mental Health**

The Mindfulness Measures survey found that 43.7% of respondents felt that their mental health had gotten worse to some extent since the University closure and the onset of social distancing regulations.<sup>27</sup> 52.2% of respondents agreed to some extent that they felt socially supported after the onset of social distancing regulations.<sup>28</sup> Notably, 75.0% of respondents did not try to access mental health resources during COVID-19, while 11.4% were not able to access these resources.<sup>29</sup> 13.7% of respondents indicated that they had accessed mental health resources, but only 8.9% of respondents found it helpful, while the other 4.8% did not.<sup>30</sup>

## **Academic Support & Accommodations**

According to the final deliverable, the results of the Mindfulness Measures survey seemed to indicate that students' primary concern during the Fall 2020 semester is academics.<sup>31</sup> 13% of respondents indicated that they reside permanently outside of Ontario, while 12% said that they will reside in a time zone outside of Eastern Standard Time (EST) during the upcoming school year.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*



## Conclusion

The findings of the UTSU's Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey, along with the RCSA's Course Survey and the Mindfulness Measures Survey, suggest that students have faced a great number of challenges in navigating online learning at the University of Toronto during COVID-19. These challenges include finances, housing, family, mental health, social life, and academics. With so many areas of students' lives being affected, the challenges of online learning have been exacerbated. The findings of the UTSU's survey clearly suggest that that quality of education at the University of Toronto has suffered as a result of the shift to online learning.

An interesting trend that the results showed was that the majority of students prefer synchronous, live lectures that more closely reflect what an in-person post-secondary education experience would feature. However, there are a number of accessibility concerns that are presented with synchronous, live lectures, particularly for students with poor wifi connectivity and for students residing in time zones outside Eastern Standard Time. Consistent posting of synchronous recordings, including lectures as well as tutorials and office hours where applicable was found to be extremely helpful for these students.

Regarding assignments, many students felt that their workloads had become more difficult to manage as a result of the shift to online learning, as instructors sought to assign weekly mini-assignments, discussion board posts, and more. Additionally, some instructors teaching synchronous courses would assign additional pre-recorded lecture content on top of weekly lectures and other course components. This approach to course assessment appears to have been developed as a means of preventing students from falling behind. While the reasoning behind this shift is clear, it is not evident that constant evaluation is a reliable or effective way of supporting student engagement. 90.4% of students stated their preference for instructors to post course content at a consistent time each week. Thus, understanding and engagement amongst students may be better fostered by ensuring courses have more reliable streams of content rather than more frequent evaluations. In other words, students would benefit from being assigned a lighter volume of course work, with a greater emphasis on demonstrating and understanding course content in an accessible way rather than an emphasis on "participation grades."

Finally, there are a number of challenges regarding final exams and assessments in an online environment. Students found that synchronous exams, such as those



administered on strict timelines via Quercus, were cumbersome, and many feared losing wifi connectivity during the exam. Additionally, while “open-book” exams were common, instructors who opted for a “closed-book” exam often attempted to enforce this via online proctoring using the course Quercus page or third-party proctoring software. These often created inaccuracies and posed privacy concerns for students. The UTSU will need to look further into the issue of third-party proctoring services being used at the University of Toronto. Students had a better experience with asynchronous “take-home” exams, however some instructors took the opportunity to make the exam content significantly more difficult, due to the often “open-book” nature of “take-home” exams.

Taken together, these findings show that students’ reflections on online learning favour close-as-possible adaptations to pre-existing course structures, and greater leniencies for areas in which adaptation is unavoidable. Student preference for synchronous lectures and conventional evaluation formats is overwhelming. Though, in both teaching and evaluation, the diversity of challenges met by students in online learning must be matched by a commitment to academic accessibility in order to ensure that courses are administered equitably. As academic continuity remains a goal of the University of Toronto, this can only be effectively achieved when approaches to course administration meet students where they’re at.



## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the UTSU Online Learning & Remote Classes Survey, the RCSA Course Survey, the Mindfulness Measures Survey, and the needs of our members, the University of Toronto Students' Union makes the following recommendations to University of Toronto central administrators, faculty administrators, program departments, and course instructors:

1. Shifting focus towards more proactive accessibility.
  - The policy should not be to wait for students to reach out before thinking about how courses can be made more accessible.
  - The university, its departments, and instructors should work to ensure that course structures are as equitable as possible to meet students where they're at, during the pandemic and for the foreseeable future.
2. Expand existing academic forgiveness policies and academic deadlines, such as policies relating to Credit/No Credit, and consider implementing new academic forgiveness policies, in order to provide greater leniency and accommodations to students.
3. The university and its faculties and departments must take immediate action to ensure that professors have the technological support they need to properly administer their courses.
  - Including but not limited to; expanding and increasing the frequency of online learning tutorials and tips for instructors, helping them invest in proper equipment such as high speed wifi, and hiring more teaching assistants to both create more student employment and help administrate online content such as moderating live lectures.
4. The university, its faculties, and departments should be urging instructors informally and through concrete policy changes to commit to recording all synchronous sessions, including for lectures, tutorials, and general office hours, and ensure they are readily available in all courses where it is applicable.
  - This is especially crucial for students in different time zones, including international students, to ensure that all students, no matter where they reside, receive the best education that can be provided to them.



5. Encourage a more back-to-basics approach to online learning that does not have students completing an unruly amount of work that they would not normally be required to complete in an in-person setting.
  - This includes micro-assessments such as required weekly quizzes, discussion board submissions, and knowledge check assessments.
6. If they are necessary, offer multiple means of completing participatory course requirements (i.e. “participation marks”) that are also clearly stated and communicated to students so as to ensure that all students' needs and preferences are accounted for.
  - Options could include a mixture of discussion forums, reading responses, and knowledge check quizzes as well as attendance and participation in live sessions for synchronous students.
7. Create clearer guidelines for how many hours of course content is taught via lecture per week, in both synchronous and asynchronous courses, and offer greater recourse for students whose instructors do not adhere to these guidelines.
  - If a course’s lecture section is advertised for two hours per week, for example, guidelines should restrict instructors from mandating that students watch four hours of pre-recorded lectures per week.
8. Offer multiple avenues for dialogue with instructors.
  - Examples include; expanding office hours, offering one on one meetings with students, mounting a dedicated discussion forum for general questions to be answered by instructors, and being more open to addressing questions from students using the chat function in synchronous sessions.
  - Instructors should also be encouraged to indicate their online availability through a comprehensive calendar of their activities on their courses Quercus pages.
9. Alleviate some of the financial burdens faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic by revising the tuition fee framework to reduce the cost of tuition for classes operating remotely, and further investing in the university’s financial aid apparatus, particularly for low-income and international students.



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