

# **The help they've asked for**

## STUDENTS' NEEDS FOR FALL SEMESTER LEARNING

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Memorial University conducted a survey of students during June 2020 asking for their technology capabilities for the upcoming fall semester. A summary of the full survey can be found here: <https://citl.mun.ca/studentsurveyresults.php>. In one long answer question, students were asked:

*What will you need to help you in completing your course work in the fall semester? Some examples include, but are not limited to: access to software, particular services, additional information, academic accommodations, or access to a system. Please provide details below or leave text box empty.*

Responses to this long answer question allow us to dive deeper into the challenges students face. Major themes consist of the:

- tension between asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods;
- availability of help (discipline-specific help centres, technology help, library resources, various student supports);
- desire for lecture recordings, online notes and a detailed schedule of course activities and course requirements; and
- availability of instructors for online office hours.

Running through all the major concerns outlined by students is the need for better communication, more information, understanding and flexibility on behalf of instructors and administration.

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Memorial University offered a survey to students to gather their capabilities and needs for the upcoming Fall 2020 semester that is to be instructed remotely or through online courses. This survey sought to collect students' technical capabilities, as well as their learning preferences and study situation, and offered opportunity for open-ended feedback. This report summarizes the open-ended responses to the following question:

## METHODS AND APPROACH

There were 1,764 responses to this question. The survey contained 4,081 responses equaling a 43.2% response rate to this question. The raw responses were divided up into three groups with CITL staff members reviewing each response and tagging (assigning a theme) each comment according to the content of the response. There could be multiple tags per comment. The CITL staff members then summarized the content of the responses for the tags they identified.

These three groups were later combined into a single list, and tags were compared among the three separate groups and combined into similar themes. Once similar themes were identified across the whole dataset, the task shifted to combining these themes into larger themes and identifying key points that were extracted to provide an overall summary of these themes. These themes were then sorted into major and minor themes for the survey responses. Major themes consist of ideas or concepts that received over 150 mentions among the responses. Minor themes received between 40 and 150 mentions among the responses. Major and minor refer to the frequency of appearance of ideas, and not the overall importance of that idea to the success of students studying for the fall semester.

## MAJOR THEMES

### **Asynchronous vs Synchronous**

Like the quantitative survey data, there was clear polarization in comments with people strongly preferring one of the two approaches with the majority preferring asynchronous approaches.

Students who preferred asynchronous approaches cited the flexibility it provides to work around technical and work/life challenges in order to complete their education. Asynchronous approaches also help students work around time zone related issues as they are not able to travel to campus, Newfoundland and Labrador, or even Canada. Having recorded lectures or educational media made available, along with course notes were the most commonly referenced approaches students preferred.

Common among students who preferred either approach, was that they preferred having a structured course schedules that clearly outlined the expectations and pacing of the course. For synchronous approaches, students preferred pre-scheduled classes at consistent times. For all approaches, students wanted a clear schedule of when work should be completed (i.e.: complete a particular reading by week three) and due dates for assessments.

Students who preferred synchronous enjoyed the routine and the fact that they could see their classmates and instructor. Students also liked when synchronous sessions were recorded for later viewing, so they could review topics as necessary.

There were few negative comments about asynchronous approaches, however some students would still enjoy some synchronous components during their asynchronous classes to maintain a sense of connection with instructors and classmates.

The negative comments about synchronous approaches were more pronounced. Students expressed frustration at the multitude of synchronous platforms used (Online Rooms, Webex, Zoom) and would prefer that instructors standardized on a single platform. Some students mentioned the strenuousness of sitting on video calls for hours per day for their courses resulting in fatigue and headaches. Technology/internet problems were also a commonly mentioned. When the sessions are not recorded, that impacts these students worse as there is no opportunity to catch up.

*"Remote courses with required live-video classes are very strenuous, and being forced to sit in front of a computer for large portions of each day is very draining, especially considering we then have to spend significant time completing course work outside of "class time" online as well. Reducing the amount of remote instruction, or offering pre-recorded lectures for half of the scheduled class time would be very, very beneficial. Especially for mental health."*

*"I would need Asynchronous approaches so I do not miss anything being said in the lecture and can see the powerpoint later on. It is SO difficult to keep focused for the entirety of a synchronous lecture in my home with all of the distractions around me and missing something my professor says is stressful, this approach would greatly help that so I can go back to review the lecture."*

*"Like how professor xxxxxxx did narrated slides for xxxxx xxxxx: those were very helpful."*

## Software

Students provided a long list of software packages that they would require access to in order to complete their studies. This consisted of software that is already available to students freely, to software specific to their discipline or software that is available on specific lab machines only. Some students mentioned that if they are required to purchase software or services to complete their studies, this should be included/freely available.

Some students asked that software or online services be upgraded/improved and that software that is required be compatible with their operating system (Windows, MacOS, ChromeOS, Linux, Android or iOS). The qualitative summary of the survey provides a breakdown of platforms students have access to.

Two students asked for VPN software to allow for remote access to Memorial resources from their locations. A number also requested tutorials and troubleshooting documents for required software or third-party services they are required to use.

## Hardware

Students mentioned needing access to computers (or better computers) as they felt they did not have the capability to participate in remote instruction for the fall. Many students do not have access to printers or printing services (as reflected in the quantitative data), as well as webcams, microphones and scanners. Some students mentioned that hardware subsidies would be beneficial to allow them to purchase the required equipment. Some students without a printer suggested a pickup service to address their printing needs.

Even if hardware was available in their household, some students will struggle with accessing that equipment. Some households have multiple university students attending, along with parents working from home and physical devices are not available at all times due to high demand or there is no space available for study.

*"I have a nearly decade old desktop computer  
(with no camera) on a tiny desk, in a tiny apartment."*

## Academic Accommodations

Many students mentioned academic accommodations, either by those words alone, or with those words and a further explanation of their meaning. It became clear through the responses that not everyone used those words the same way. Some students were concerned they would not receive their existing academic accommodations coordinated through the Blundon Centre. Others were concerned that the Blundon Centre software was not accessible in their location. Some students mentioned specific physical disabilities, such as hearing impairment and the lack of live or recorded transcription services that allow them to participate in online learning. Others were looking for access to specific software to help them learn in a remote mode.

Other students used the phrase in a more generic sense, and instead were looking for more understanding from instructors and more flexibility in course work and assessments. Due to the additional stress of remote learning and potential technical problems they may face, students felt they should be accommodated with extra time or understanding if they were to face any challenges.

## Help Centres and Information Availability

Students requested access to academic help centres (Chemistry, Physics, etc.), and other (traditionally) on campus services like academic advising, counseling and the writing centre through an online medium. Students also really want more information regarding how remote instruction will work in general, and how it will work for their specific program (labs, coop, work-terms, etc..)

Students also asked for remote access to tutors for their disciplines. They also requested tutorials on how to use the hardware expected of them (computers, webcams, etc..) in addition to the software and services that will be required (Brightspace, SPSS, etc..).

## Lecture Recordings and Instructional Media

Many students commented that they wished lectures were made available for later review, or that pre-recorded lectures were published instead of live classes. Those who had experienced pre-recorded lectures found the consistency problematic. Some suggested that Memorial provide software, hardware and training/professional development to help improve the quality of teaching. Subtitles and transcripts were also requested for this type of media.

## On-campus Access, Labs and the Library

Several students suggest that campus should be opened for classes, study, labs, residency, or library access. Overall, the limited COVID-19 caseloads were the main reason for this feeling, and the feeling that remote instruction would not result in as good of an education compared to on campus instruction. Students felt that smaller classes and labs could be configured such that distancing could be maintained and the learning experience safe. A few students suggested a hybrid of online and on campus studies to help promote distancing but still allow for the on campus learning experience when appropriate.

Students with heavy lab load would want access to on campus lab spaces, or at a minimum, information on how labs will work for their courses and programs. Some students request access to computer labs, or computer lab software from home.

Opinions on the library break down into two main categories, using the library as a place to study and allowing it to be opened for accessing non-digital resources. Students want the library opened, with restrictions, as a place to study due to lack of computing resources at home (computer access and printer access), or due to a lack of quiet study spaces at home because of their home-life situation (family responsibility issues, roommates, kids, or parents who are working remotely). They also want it opened as a pickup/drop-off location for resources.

## Assessments and Course Load

Many students discussed the examination process and requested more open book exams or other assessment types, and no (or better) online proctoring solutions. Students commented on various online proctoring methods that they have been subjected to, with negative comments about them all, preferring other assessment types, or at least consistency between instructors. Students found the exam invigilation process too imitating. Students wished to have more flexibility around assessments, more time due to their home situation, more choices, or more flexibility. Students commented that it takes longer to read from a screen, and is more strenuous, and therefore additional time is needed.

Many students do not have access to quiet spaces suitable for writing assessments at home, and would like on campus space made available for that purpose. There are also challenges around computer access, internet access and offshore access suitable for writing an online proctored exam. A number of students mention keeping the pass/fail system for the duration of remote instruction. A number of students mention that they felt instructors added additional course work because many students were now at home. Some students felt that there should be limited assessments per week as



students facing a full course load found that they had a large amount of assignments to complete. Some students continued to work, or took on additional family responsibilities, and did not feel that was fair as they did not have the available time.

*"How are you supposed to allow for supervised washroom access with exams being invigilated online? Alternative exam arrangements should be available to all students."*

*"I have completed many online only courses through MUN and am finding that the remotely delivered courses have a heavier workload. I would respectfully suggest that instructors who are delivering the remote classes take into consideration the online aspect of the courses and try to make reasonable workloads."*

*Extend due dates for assignments, because people are still struggling with the effects of the pandemic. For example, during the spring semester I still had to teach my children with their online studies. But my instructor would not allow me an extension for an assignment and insisted that I lose 20% which I found to be unfair. I ended up dropping the course because of the lack of accommodations."*

## MINOR THEMES

### Textbooks and Resources

Many students requested that textbooks be available digitally and be made freely available. However, some prefer physical texts and wish to have a pickup service from the library or quick shipping options available from the bookstore. Some students commented that because the bookstore was not opened, they were not able to source their text books before intersession ended.

Students requested that booklists should be made available before classes start in order to get textbooks shipped. There are also other resources that students need from the bookstore, like art supplies, lab supplies, etc.. that will be a challenge for the fall semester.

*"Won't be able to access hard copy textbooks as I live in the Caribbean"*

*"I need access to print textbooks. It may seem convenient to have online access to texts, but I can't take my desktop computer to bed with me, nor do I want to. Since Memorial Bookstore was closed for the spring intersession, I had to go to third parties to procure my texts. The intersession ends in under a week and I still haven't received all of my textbooks. It's been a disaster."*

*"Access to free textbooks. Typically I purchase textbooks second-hand but I live in a remote area and I would not be able to do so from my current location. Buying 5 brand new textbooks is unrealistic when considering their cost and how little professors actually reference them."*

### **Instruction Quality**

Some students want instructors to be more accessible, caring and flexible given the circumstances. Students wish instructors had a better understanding of the technology systems they are using so that they can better teach, and troubleshoot their own problems. Students requested better supports to instructors around technical training so they can handle problems that arise throughout the semester. Some students want detailed class notes made available while others prefer recorded lectures over notes. Better communication from instructors regarding the course requirements was requested by many students.

### **Communication**

Students requested more interaction with professors. Some complained that it was difficult to meet real time with professors, other complained that instructors were not responsive to email. Students requested a way to meet instructors outside of Brightspace, in a synchronous mode. Some students are finding the asynchronous approach, and the lack of office hours, as a real challenge to their engagement and understanding of the material. Students noted that the course requirements and schedule were not always clear in their Winter and Spring courses.

*"In past, we could able to see profs at the corridor and ask questions, or visit them in their room. Now with online, besides the lectures, it is not able to communicate with profs."*

*"Very clear, in depth instructions and concise syllabi with dates and expectations laid out."*

## Technology / Technical Issues

Students request tutorials and training for systems they must use as part of their learning, but are not familiar (such as Brightspace, MS Office, or third party software systems used in their courses). Students mention struggling with hardware problems, internet connectivity problems, and power outages during their previous learning (synchronous session and online exams). They wish instructors were more understanding of these technical problems and would be more lenient/flexible on assessments where this becomes a problem. Students also wish to have more IT support available when they are learning remotely. Students also mentioned the hardware limitations they have at home, and how they would like a single calendar of all due dates within Brightspace.

*"Understanding and accommodation of teaching from professors if internet access is lost during a quiz, video conferencing, or other live instructional time"*

*"I also think it would be beneficial to not penalize students if they are unable to attend a lecture, unless there is a set schedule. The end of the winter 2020 semester saw profs scheduling random class meetings at various times throughout the day, and penalizing or reprimanding students if they were unable to attend. "*

## Internet Access

Internet access, speed and consistency is a major concern for many. Studying in a rural area with limited internet is a large challenge. Some students mentioned having access to financial assistance to get better internet services. Household challenges were mentioned in these responses as well with multiple internet users in the household affecting performance and ability to participate in online classes at the required time. Some students requested access to unlimited internet bandwidth as a desirable outcome.

*"I have a very poor internet connection, there are days where I am unable to connect at all, therefore having flexible due dates and access to all lectures will take off a lot of stress."*

*"With the low speed Internet I have available for use at home, accessing certain online content can be difficult. At my house, this past week, our Internet has cut-out (no connection) on three or four different occasions for five to forty-five minutes at a time. As a result, I worry about having to complete timed tests, attend video lectures, and watch long videos for courses this fall. I also have a sister who will also be a post-secondary student this fall and required to complete online schooling as well. We fear our*

*internet quality is not strong enough to support the two of us completing online course work. Unfortunately, the community we reside in only has one available internet provider so switching is not an option. Others in my community have the same connection and speed issues and are already worried and stressed for the Fall."*

## Scheduling / Time Zone Issues

Students asked that add/drop deadlines and refund dates be adjusted given the pandemic. Adjust the time available for assessments given that they have changed and are more technical. If there are to be synchronous sessions, they should be held at consistent and pre-scheduled times, and recorded for those who cannot attend. Time zones and student locations make it difficult for students to participate in live sessions or online assessments. Students seek flexibility when participating from other time zone.

*"I am in bc now because of covid and a bunch of other issues so it is 4.5 hours earlier here. I prefer it when exams are available all day. The last exam I wrote I had to start at 3 or 4 am which was not fun. This is a large reason why synchronous learning doesn't work for me."*

## OTHER THEMES

Other topics discussed included lowering tuition and/or fees given the change in the learning environment for students. Financial assistance for scholarships and other assistance. Providing meaningful opportunities for students to provide feedback on their educational experience, and concerns around course offering availability. Some students are concerned a full slate of courses will not be offered, and this will impact their ability to complete their program.

## NEXT ACTIONS

This report will be circulated to instructors through the CITL Advisory Council and the CITL website to aid instructors in the design and delivery of their learning experience for the fall semester. CITL will also work with administrative support units on designing and promoting interventions that will help students be successful in the fall semester.

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