

POLICY PAPER

***Academic Success***

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Draft

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# Introduction

As enrolment in higher education continues to grow rapidly, it is essential that in a commitment to promote student learning as well as to uphold McMaster's excellence as an educational institution, the University should make all efforts to ensure that every McMaster student is given equitable opportunity to access quality education in order to succeed academically to the fullest of their potential.

While McMaster University is well reputed as an institution both nationally and internationally, there are still further steps the university can take to work towards ensuring the academic success of all of its students. In this paper, academic success refers to the maximized potential for students to perform well academically.

Student concerns related to their courses begin with enrolling in such courses. The current system in place poses potential barriers to students and should be addressed with revisions to the system that offer pre-emptive conflict resolution.

Once enrolled in courses, undergraduate course management practices have a huge impact on the academic potential of students. Exam scheduling in particular is a concern for students where schedules are not released early enough to accommodate the needs of out-of-province students, or conflicts arise out of scheduling issues. Revisions to course management policies will also improve classroom accessibility, thereby translating into more equitable opportunities for students to perform well academically.

Most importantly, at the core of the university experience is the knowledge acquisition; thus, McMaster should strive to incorporate best practices for teaching and learning into its learning environments. This requires a fundamental understanding of the great diversity amongst the student population and the subsequent needs such as a variety of teaching and assessment methods.

The 2017 Academic Services Review conducted at McMaster University unveils other student concerns such as those of only average Teaching Assistant quality, lack of awareness of available academic resources, and lackluster participation in course evaluat ions. 1

Through addressing the various components of the university academic experience specifically and their individual areas for improvement, McMaster can move forward towards securing its position as one of the top schools in the world. The MSU would like to call on university policy makers and stakeholders to address these student concerns at a system level and make a positive contribution to the learning experiences of existing and future students of McMaster.

1 Hsu, Megan. *University Affairs Report: Academic Services Review.* (Hamilton: McMaster Students Union, 2017).

# Course Registration

## Variable Course Availability

Principle: All students should be able to access courses that contribute to their personal, academic, and career goals.

Concern: Students are unable to register in courses that are mandatory for degree or post-undergraduate admission requirements due to Mosaic's reserve capacity for lectures and labs.

Concern: Course waitlists are inaccessible because of long wait times to see academic advisors to be placed on the list.

Concern: Students who wish to pursue a minor/Combined Honours declare it later in their undergraduate careers and are not given priority to courses outside of their major, making it difficult to fulfill this intention.

Concern: Prerequisites often prevent students from taking courses that they are interested in and have the knowledge to do well in.

Concern: Students are unaware that they can enroll in courses they lack prerequisites in with instructor permission.

Concern: It is difficult to swap a tutorial for the same core through the Mosaic swap function.

Recommendation: Students should be given priority in course registration for required courses.

Recommendation: The Office of the Registrar should create a waitlist submission form.

Recommendation: Students should declare the intention for a minor/Combined Honours before course registration to be given access to the required courses from the minor course list for fulfillment.

Recommendation: Instructors should review the need for prerequisites in their courses.

Recommendation: The ability to gain permission from instructors for courses should be better advertised, and a more streamlined approach for instructor permission should be developed.

University and other post-secondary institutions are meant to be a period for students to develop the necessary abilities, skillset and knowledge to ensure their success post-undergraduate. In order for students to acquire this quality education, course registration becomes an active figure in facilitating this development. Course registration is a time for students to self-reflect on paths they would like to pursue. When this period of time is met with roadblocks, students find it difficult to focus on carving their paths to maximize the success of their undergraduate careers.

Currently, registration processes do not give students who require particular courses priority. The current registration process uses a lottery system stratified by academic

year where upper years receive priorit y.2 Though this is important for graduating students, it can create problems for other students who require courses respective to their program requirements in order to graduate in the near future, or meet post­ secondary program admission requirements. These courses are either full or reserved based on academic level.

For example, a Level II Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour student who has not taken the course "PSYCH 1X03" is required to register in the course in order to fulfill their program requirements. However, these students will be unable to enroll in the course when enrollment opens because there is a reserve capacity on available seats for each level. This means that there are limited amounts of Level II seats in a non­ level two course. These reserve capacities put restraints on students and do not prioritize those who may require the course for their degree requirements. As a result, students in Level II and above in this scenario would therefore find it difficult to fulfill the program requirement and need to seek aid from their respective faculty.

This problem is even more evident for students who wish to pursue a minor/Combined Honours. Mosaic currently does not allow students to declare their intentions to pursue these types of degrees. Subsequently, students are not given priority to courses required to fulfill their desired minor/Combined Honours.

Currently, Vancouver Island University in British Colombia follows a registration protocol where reserved seats are based on program requirements. Following registration according to program requirements, the remainder of seats are available to other st udent s.3 They also allow students to declare minors/Combined Honours; the course availabilities and registration priorities are reflective of these declared educational goals. Based on the success of these systems, we recommend that Mosaic adopt a similar model by incorporating registration priority according to program requirements. Within Mosaic, there is a program requirement section. When students are not on track to fulfill their program requirements, there will be a diamond icon indicating this. Students with a diamond icon, or unfulfilled requirements, on Mosaic should have a reserved seat for their mandatory courses.

This reservation of seats should also expand its purposes to include accommodating minors and Combined Honours course requirements. By allowing students to declare these educational goals and taking such academic tracks into consideration within the Mosaic system, students will have more access to required courses for their degree fulfillment.

In the specific case of degree minors, students who require a course for a declared minor should also be granted priority and a reserved seat for the course, similar to

2 "Enrolment Dates - 2017-18." Office of the Registrar. May 10, 2017. Accessed October 30,

2017. https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/enrol/enrol\_dates/.

3 "Reserved Seats." Vancouver Island University (VIU) f. Accessed October 30, 2017. https://www2.viu.ca/registration/guide/regfeat.asp.

the prioritization granted for program majors. Ultimately, this change would reduce wait times and loads on academic advisors, as well as other department staff and faculty. Wait times at academic offices can also be reduced by implementing a waitlist submission form. Currently, students have to visit their academic advisor to be added to a courses waitlist; these post long wait times. Inevitably, this will ensure that course registration is a simple and accommodative process; it must provide students with the access to prerequisite courses they need in order to fulfill their self­ development academically, personally and professionally.

## Visibility in Mosaic

Principle: Mosaic should be well equipped with the information necessary for course registration.

Concern: Mosaic's scheduling of full-year courses is inconsistent with the actual locations and timings across semesters; this creates scheduling complications for students.

Concern: Many students are unaware of Mosaic's Academic Requirements page that allows students to see required courses for degree fulfillment.

Concern: Students who may require accommodations are uninformed of the accessibility of their classroom.

Concern: Courses that are not mandatory but recommended are not listed on Mosaic. These courses tend to be prerequisites to many other upper year courses.

Concern: Mosaic makes schedule planning and building difficult, as there is no visual representation for tentative schedules.

Recommendation: Mosaic should have the correct times and locations for full-year courses across semesters to eliminate timetable conflicts.

Recommendation: Mosaic should increase visibility and awareness of the Academic Requirement page.

Recommendation: Mosaic should provide information on the accessibility features of a classroom in the course information section.

Recommendation: Recommended courses should be an added function to Mosaic to improve visibility to facilitate the fulfillment of program requirements.

Recommendation: Mosaic should link students to external resources that carry up-to­ date course schedules for schedule building and planning.

In order for course registration to be successful, students should be given all the necessary information when deciding to enroll in a course. Students have shared frustrations about the lack of transparency with course information on Mosaic. This

lack of transparency then results in students facing unfulfilled program expectations, accessibility concerns, complications in scheduling, and/or poor classroom experiences. Logistically, Mosaic provides minimal information for students to prepare for their courses. Firstly, Mosaic does little to provide students with a visual representation of their tentative schedules. Students do not know there is a conflict until registration when enrollment into a course fails. Inevitably, students seek external schedule builders that do not have the most recent schedule information.

Furthermore, scheduling can be even more difficult when attempting to register in full-year courses. Mosaic does not currently reflect accurate locations or timings of lectures across both semesters of a school year. Instead, Mosaic simply uses "filler" timeslots and locations for semester two which are unreflective of the actual time and location in that semester. This creates challenges for students as they determine their second-term class schedules, because other courses may be shown to conflict with these inaccurate, "filler" timeslots. Students are forced to use tools outside of those offered by McMaster in order to plan their schedules. Furthermore, students with accessibility needs require information on the accessibility of a classroom.

McMaster's Accessibility Policy highlights a commitment to the universal design of learn ing. 4 The university can take a further step towards upholding this commitment through adding classroom accessibility information to Mosaic during the course registration process. Moreover, the provincial government is currently developing an Education Standard for Accessibility under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), which will require that McMaster is aware of the accessibility features of its classro om s.5

Mosaic can also increase visibility of some of the resources it already has, particularly, academic planning pages. These sections are available to assist students in checking program requirement completions. By increasing awareness and visibility, students can receive up to date information on fulfillment of requirements. Mosaic's lack of information also presents an issue with regards to recommended courses, which are courses that are not significant enough for enforcement, yet important to students who wish to pursue a particular academic, professional or personal path. These courses may also be prerequisites to many upper year courses. Currently, these courses are listed on outdated course calendars that are unreflective of the courses available to students in the coming academic year. Students unaware of identified recommended courses then miss out on opportunities they may otherwise have wished to pursue. By increasing the visibility of pre-identified recommended courses on Mosaic, we can ease the registration process as well as inform students of the

4 McMaster University Policy on Accessibility. Report. Senate, McMaster University. February 10, 2010. Accessed October 30, 2017. [https://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Accessibility.pdf](http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Accessibility.pdf)

5 "SNOW & Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)." Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) I SNOW. 2017. Accessed October 30, 2017. [https://www.snow.idrc.ocad.ca/node/195.](http://www.snow.idrc.ocad.ca/node/195)

options available to them. Similarly, providing information on course logistics, increases student awareness on the non-academic components of the classroom. Thus, Mosaic should give students the information they need to successfully register in courses they require and enjoy.

## Course Conflict Resolution

Principle: All students should be able to complete their required and elective courses without conflict.

Concern: Course conflicts cause unnecessary stress for students. Concern: The process of course conflict resolution is unclear.

Recommendation: The Office of the Registrar should develop a standardized conflict resolution form to streamline the process.

Recommendation: The conflict resolution form should be available on Mosaic to ensure accessibility.

Course conflicts are inevitable; however, course conflicts between required courses

and relevant elective courses cause unnecessary barriers for students to complete their degrees in a timely manner. To resolve this conflict, it is recommended that the Office of the Registrar develop a standardized conflict resolution form to streamline the process. This form should be easy to **fill** out and accessible to all students through their Mosaic accounts. It should be available as soon as the course timetable is released to ensure that the resolution occurs in a timely manner. Overall, this will improve the student experience during the course selection period and become easier for the Office of the Registrar to delegate resolution tasks and to ultimately fix the problems students may encounter.

**Undergraduate Course Management**

## Accommodations and Support

Principle: McMaster University should value and support the learning experience of all undergraduate students.

Principle: Students should have equitable access to courses regardless of differences in learning experience.

Concern: Some students and faculty may be unaware of available accommodations and supports, thus discouraging students from accessing such accommodations.

Concern: The current Student Accessibility Services (SAS) notetaking system creates undue individualized responsibility on notetaking students.

Recommendation: The SAS Notetaking Service should be accessible for short-term absences.

Recommendation: The SAS Notetaking Service should adopt a repository system of notes from contributing notetakers for each course.

Recommendation: Increase visibility and incentive for students to become notetakers for courses by highlighting these services in the course content, and by offering participation marks for contributing to the notetaking service.

Recommendation: Mandate the addition of Religious, Indigenous and Spiritual Observances (RISO) and SAS Form breakdowns on course syllabi.

Recommendation: Available accommodations and relevant services should be universally communicated within courses to all students in order to promote access.

Academic accommodations for students at McMaster University are currently required to be organized by the student through a second party (SAS) without disclosure of diagnosis, but with medical/official document at ion. 6 While uniform processes are necessary for efficiency and equal administration of courses, these processes are often difficult to navigate and can be ostracizing for students. The MSU thus recognizes that increased visibility of accommodation services and lessening the silo-ing of the current system is important to increasing the success of students using these services.

In order to best support students that are seeking accommodations, these accommodations need to be more readily accessible. The requirement to be registered with SAS can be a barrier for many students, thus again blocking students from using the available resources and succeeding academically. The SAS notetaking service is one such resource from which many students can benefit, and many do not know about the service unless they are already involved with SAS. With that being said, the SAS notetaking service requires change in order to best support students.

With the current system, when a student registers for the notetaking service, they are paired with a single notetaker for their course. This can then result in students not receiving notes in a timely manner or whatsoever, as there is currently no accountability measure for the not etakers. 7 By adopting a new system for notetaking wherein contributing notetakers deposit their notes to a note bank for the course,

6 McMaster University. "Academic Accommodations of Students with Disabilities." (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University, 2017).

7 McMaster University. "Student Accessibility Services: Notetaking Program." (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University, 2017). Accessed via: https://sas.mcmaster.ca/notetaking/.

students who need such support will be more easily able to find quality notes, and less stress will be placed on individual notetakers. Notes should also be available to students experiencing short-term absences, accessed through such avenues as McMaster Student Absence Forms (MSAFs), RISOs and instructor's permission. This is an important consideration, as it is often thought that needs for accommodations and other similar experiences go unrep ort ed.8 Featuring SAS services on the course syllabus would enable then to be more widely accessed, and the increased visibility would allow for more students to contribute to services like notetaking. It would also be beneficial if more educators provided this information through other means, such as informing students during a lecture, or posting on online forums such as Avenue to Learn. If more note takers are needed, incentivising students to be a part of this service by providing participation marks or through other available means could assist in this matter.

## Course Evaluations

Principle: Students should be involved in the evaluation process of courses and course educators.

Principle: Course evaluations provide a feedback mechanism that should be utilized to their fullest extent in the evaluation and management of courses.

Concern: Course evaluations are underutilized by students and educators despite the evaluations' value for advancing learning.

Concern: Some students are unaware or dissuaded from completing and submitting course evaluations because of a perceived lack of capacity for change through this mechanism.

Recommendation: The University should mandate that course evaluation dates and instructions or Course Evaluation website links are stated on course syllabi.

Recommendation: Educators should provide opportunity and/or incentive in each class for students to complete the pertinent course evaluation.

Recommendation: The University should mandate midterm course evaluations in order to provide educators the opportunity to make changes during the academic term.

Recommendation: Educators should be mandated to address course evaluations.

McMaster University recently underwent a review of their Course and Teacher Evaluation process,9 wherein the authoring committee put forth recommendations to

8 Vice President (Education). "MSU Accessibility Forum Report 2015-16: Breaking the Stigma." (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University, 2016).

9 MacPherson Institute Course and Teach Evaluation Committee, "Recommendations to Improve Course and Teacher Evaluations" (report, McMaster University). May 31, 2017.

improve upon the undergraduate course and teacher evaluations that are currently being conducted. These recommendations are in alignment with the MSU's perceptions of the value of course evaluations, and how these measures should be implemented. Furthermore, results from this review align with the MSU's 2016-2017 Academic Services Review.

Course and educator evaluations are thought by many to be paramount to the continuous growth of teaching for institutions and enhanced learning for st udent s.70 That being said, there is much research in the lack of communication to students, and subsequent student lack of awareness, of what these evaluations eff ect .11 According to the Academic Services Review, students felt that course evaluations went either unread or did not result in change.12 With the move to online course evaluations, educators saw a benefit of time and cost savings, but students experienced less of a focus on the evaluation pro cess.13 Overall, students have been dissuaded from completing evaluations because of the lack of a positive experience and perceived lack of importance placed on them. However, there is demonstrated impact of midterm course evaluations. For example, HTH SCI 4DM3, or Demystifying Medicine, is an undergraduate course that has been shaped by student feedback. In addition to midterm course evaluations, data is collected from the students throughout the semester assessing course learning outcomes. From years of collected data and input, the course syllabus has changed from year to year, reflecting student concerns.

Students are more likely to complete evaluations when prompted, given time, and provided incentive to do so.14 Likewise, communicating the process by which these evaluations (and others) are considered, will provide students the assurance that their feedback is meaningful and can result in change when necessary.

## Summative Assessment Ban

Principle: Students and instructors should uphold the policies outlined in the Undergraduate Course Management Policy, including the Assessment Ban.

10 Gravestock, P. & Gregor-Greenleaf, E. (2008). *Student Course Evaluations: Research, Models and Trends.* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

11 Kelly, Mary. *Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness: Considerations for Ontario universities.* Council of Ontario Universities, 2012.

12 Hsu, Megan. University Affairs Report: Academic Services Review. (Hamilton: McMaster Students Union, 2017.)

13 Bothell, T.W., and T. Henderson. (2003). Do online ratings of instruction make $ense? New Directions for Teaching and Learning 96: 69-80.

14 Norris, J., and C. Conn. (2005). Investigating strategies for increasing student response rates to online delivered course evaluations. The Quarterly Review of Distance Education 6: 13-29.

Principle: Students should be able to prepare for exams without the stress of assignments.

Concern: There are no current avenues for students to report infractions of the Assessment Ban.

Concern: Professors and educators schedule assessments and due dates within the Assessment Ban period.

Recommendation: The University should educate and remind professors of the Assessment Ban on a per-term basis.

Recommendation: The University should create a form or medium for students to report Assessment Ban infractions.

Recommendation: The University should mandate the addition of the Assessment Ban period and include its criteria and rules in course syllabi.

Under the Assessment Ban, students have the right to a period of time before exams where assignments worth more than 10% of the final course grade cannot be assigned, with the exception of assessments held in normal class time slots and assigned at the beginning of the semester on the course outline. The Assessment Ban was intended to allow students to prepare for exams without the stress of other summative examinations. The current ban covers the last five days of classes plus the day(s) between the end of classes and the beginning of exams. Examinations covered by this ban include;

1. Assignments worth more than 10% of the final course grade
2. Tests and Exams
3. Take home exams worth more than 10% of the final course grade15

Despite this being an established policy by the university, professors still schedule due dates for examinations and assignments during this week. Currently, McMaster contains no formal reporting system for policy infractions. The OMBUDS office is currently responsible for dealing with these academic disputes, however, developing a formal reporting system would allow for more efficient processing of these issues. Even more so by increasing visibility of the Assessment Ban period, we can actively work to reduce the number of instructor infractions as these dates are now publicly aware to students as well as professors who may be ill-informed.

## Exam Scheduling

Principle: The exam period should be a an opportunity for testing and reflection with minimal stress due to other variables

Principle: Students should be given adequate time to prepare, study and schedule for exams.

15 *Undergraduate Course Management Policy.* Report. Senate, McMaster University. June 4, 2014. Accessed October 30, 2017. [http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students­](http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students) AcademicStudies/UGCourseMgmt.pdf.

Principle: Students should be informed of exam scheduling during the course registration process.

Principle: Information about exam schedules should be easily accessible to all students.

Concern: Some students struggle to accommodate, study, and plan around exam schedules due to the late release of the schedule in the semester.

Concern: Deferred exams are scheduled during the following semester which makes discourages students from using this resource.

Concern: Regulations for exam scheduling are inadequate and do not give students equitable opportunity to succeed.

Concern: Students who have exam scheduling conflicts are unaware of how to reschedule exams or report the need for rescheduling.

Concern: The process of exam conflict resolution is unclear.

Concern: Information about exam conflict resolution is not available with the exam timetable.

Recommendation: The 24 hour or calendar day period for multiple exam scheduling should be extended to 36 hours.

Recommendation: Deferred exams should be postponed to the end of the exam period so that students do not have to wait long periods to write.

Recommendation: The exam schedule should be released when course registration begins.

Recommendation: Instructions should be given to students on how to report exam scheduling conflicts in the same resource that notifies students of their exam schedule.

Recommendation: An alert should appear on exam timetables if there is a conflict within the schedule.

Recommendation: The Office of the Registrar should develop a standardized conflict resolution form to streamline the process.

Recommendation: This conflict resolution form should be available on the same page as the exam timetable to ensure accessibility.

Exams are a crucial time for students during their undergraduate careers. Although this can be a period where students can reflect on the information they have learned over the term, it can also be stressful as students focus on ensuring their academic success. However, logistical issues such as exam scheduling can hinder this academic focus. Currently, McMaster releases exam schedules less than two months before examinations begin. This is an inadequate time frame for students to coordinate study schedules while still having to balance course work. Even more so, this late release also poses an issue for students who have to coordinate travels for the Winter recess. More so, this period is inconsistent between terms and academic

years. Beyond scheduling, the current Undergraduate Examination Policy does not sufficiently regulate for multiple exams within a short period of time. The policy outlines that re-scheduling of exams can only be applied to students who have:

1. More than one examination scheduled at the same time
2. Three examinations in one calendar day (midnight to midnight)
3. Three consecutive examinations over two days
4. December only: two consecutive examinations if the first examination is three hours in durat ion. 16

The current "calendar day" only accommodates for midnight to midnight but does not include exams that were scheduled the evening before. For example, if a student has a PSYCH 1X03 exam at 7PM on the first day, another exam at 9 AM the next day and another at 4:30 PM on the same day, this would not be accounted for. Exam schedules as such are undeniably stressful, however, this issue can be resolved by changing the "calendar day" period to a 36-hour period rather than a 24-hour period. Even more so, logistical coordination of exam re-scheduling can be simplified for both faculty and students by providing students with instructions on how to report conflicts. This can be done through the same exam schedule medium on Mosaic.

Ultimately, these goals ensure that exams are fair, equitable and not excessively taxing on students.

Furthermore, exam conflicts cause stress for the students experiencing them, particularly when the student is unaware of how to resolve the conflict. Resolution can be a daunting and often unnecessarily difficult task for students to accomplish. This unnecessary stress could be alleviated through an obvious alert on the exam timetable when conflicts arise. The alert should be accompanied by a standardized exam conflict resolution form that appears on this page. This is an accessible option to ensure students can have these conflicts resolved in a timely and effective manner. Similarly, this allows for the Registrar to become aware of conflicts as soon as they arise, providing them ample time to effectively solve the conflict. This system would streamline the process of exam conflict resolution in a manner, which will benefit students immensely.

## Drop/Add Deadlines

Principle: Students should have the opportunity to make an informed decision about their course selections.

Principle: Students should receive communication about this Drop/Add policy and timeline, as it is relevant to their learning experience.

Concern: Many students are unaware of the Drop/Add Date and what it entails.

16 *Undergraduate Examination Policy.* Report. Senate, McMaster University. April 9, 2014. Accessed October 30, 2017. [https://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students­](http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students) AcademicStudies/UndergraduateExaminationsPolicy.pdf

Concern: The drop/add date is too early for students to make an informed decision about their course selection.

Recommendation: The drop/add date should be extended to allow students more time to coordinate or change classes.

Recommendation: All students should be sent an email that provides information on the Drop/Add date and relevant procedures.

The first week of class is a buffer period for students to experience some of the

courses that they have chosen to take. Not only do students use this period between the beginning of classes and the drop/add date to decide whether they like their classes, but they also use the time to switch into courses that they initially wanted but could not register in due to a lack of seat availability. Most classes begin during the first week of September; however, some classes begin the following week due to scheduling. This can pose more of a challenge, as this does not give students enough time to "test out" the classes they have selected when considering the drop/add deadline. Currently, McMaster's drop/add deadline gives students a week after the sessional start date of the term to make decisions about their courses. However, this does not give enough time for students to make informed choices about their selections. McGill University gives students a two-week period after the start of classes to drop or add courses.17 This gives students who may have not had a chance to experience their courses due to scheduling an opportunity to do so. Beyond the drop/add period, students are also unaware of what this deadline means, as well as the necessary dates. Many students do not know that the Drop/Add deadline is the last day to cancel a course without a "Withdrawal" mark on their transcripts. This is important as unawareness could negatively impact students when applying to graduate schools that question course withdrawals. Even more, much of the drop/add deadline information is shared through word-of-mouth. It would be beneficial if students could receive a University official email to inform students about this deadline. Current systems are inconsistent as it is up to the jurisdiction of professors to remind students. However, by creating a consistent platform, we can ensure that students are well aware of the drop/add period, which is crucial for course selection.

17 *Adding or Dropping Courses.* Report. McGill University. Accessed October 30, 2017. [http://www.mcgill.ca/students/courses/drop/adddrop.](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/courses/drop/adddrop)

# Accessibility

Ontario legislature requires McMaster University and its services to be accessible to all students and staff under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*

( AODA )18 and the University has stated its commitment to "fostering, creating, and maintaining a barrier-free environment for all ind ividuals."19 The following sections address various areas of concern relating to the accessibility of the McMaster campus within the context of impact on academic success.

## Podcasting Courses

Principle: Educators should communicate course material in accessible manners. Principle: Students who miss class should not be deprived of learning materials. Concern: Most educators do not use available podcast technology.

Concern: Students who miss lectures that are not podcasted have to rely on second­ hand information, such as notes, that may prevent them from receiving all of the course content.

Recommendation: Professors should be made explicitly aware whether or not they have the technology available to podcast their course.

Recommendation: Where the technology is available, educators should be required to audio record their lectures for online podcasts of the course.

Recommendation: Accessible information on how to use the available podcasting technology should be provided to educators.

Recommendation: Podcast availability should be clearly communicated to students in every course.

Distinct from modules, which are pre-recorded lectures, podcasts are audio and

video recordings of a lecture delivered live by the course instructor. Research has shown that lecture capture technology benefits student learning as well as provides an accessible format for students who are unable to attend classes.20 As the MSU believes that all students who are willing and driven to contribute should have the ability to do so; lecture capture technology, specifically podcasting technology, is of

18 Government of Ontario. (2005). "Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act." Retrieved from [https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05all](http://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05all)

19 McMaster University. (2010). "McMaster University Policy on Accessibility." (Hamilton, ON:

McMaster University). Retrieved via [https://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Accessibility.pdf.](http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Accessibility.pdf)

20 Watt, S., Vajoczki, S., Voros, G., Vine, M.M., Fenton, N. & Tarkowski, J. (2014). Lecture

Capture: An Effective Tool for Universal Instructional Design?. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 44(2),* 1-29. Retrieved October 20, 2017

from [https://www.learntechlib.org/p/157509/.](http://www.learntechlib.org/p/157509/)

paramount importance. This has been a focus of the MSU for many terms now, and students repeatedly call for it during elections and referenda process, as can be referenced by the 2017-2018 Student Representative Assembly members' various platforms and year plans. 21 Podcasts present the opportunity for students to review course content, catch up on missed lectures, and watch lectures at their own pace.

Podcast technology is a first step to Universal Instructional Design (UID) for McMaster University, where students are able to access education universally, rather than through various accom modat ions. 22 This can result in more students being involved in course material, better understanding of teaching styles and measures for peer evaluation between educators, and better, more proactive compliance to AODA legislation and values of accessibility. This approach to teaching and learning is valued at McMaster as per the current requirement for educators to participate in the "FLEX Forward" course on accessible pedagogies and universal instructional

desig n.23 While FLEX Forward is a new requirement for educators at McMaster, the program has the opportunity, and moreover, the responsibility, to making education universally accessible for our students.

Pedagogically, Universal Instructional Design are guided by the following principles summarized by Goff and Higbee:

(a) creating welcoming classrooms; (b) determining the essential components of a course; (c) communicating clear expectations; (d) providing constructive feedback;

(e) exploring the use of natural supports for learning, including technology, to enhance opportunities for all learners; (f) designing teaching methods that consider diverse learning styles, abilities, ways of knowing, and previous experience and background knowledge; (g) creating multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge; and (h) promoting interaction among and between faculty and students (17)\_24

These principles may seem common sense to excellent teaching, but they communicate a broad yet focused value, specifically through principle (f). Podcast technology is but one pedagogical tool in Universal Instructional Design frameworks,

21 McMaster Students Union. "SRA Caucuses." *McMaster Students Union.* Access date October 15, 2017. [https://www.msumcmaster.ca/governance/sra/sra-caucuses](http://www.msumcmaster.ca/governance/sra/sra-caucuses)

22 Watt, S., Vajoczki, S., Voros, G., Vine, M.M., Fenton, N. & Tarkowski, J. (2014). Lecture Capture: An Effective Tool for Universal Instructional Design?. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 44(2),* 1-29. Retrieved October 20, 2017

from [https://www.learntechlib.org/p/157509/.](http://www.learntechlib.org/p/157509/)

23 McMaster University. (2017). "Forward with Flexibility." (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University. Access date October 12, 2017. https://flexforward.pressbooks.com/

24 Jeanne L. Higbee, and Emily Goff. "Introduction," *Pedagogy and Student Services for*

*Institutional Transformation: Implementing Universal Design in Higher Education,* 2008. Accessed via <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503835.pdf>

but McMaster can communicate its value for all learning experiences by adopting the technology.

Specifically, the University should communicate information about podcast technology availability in specific classrooms to instructors, require educators to use such technology if available, and provide information about how to use the technology to instructors to eliminate further apprehensions about adopting podcasting technology. Furthermore, students should be included in the conversation surrounding podcast technology availability, and they should be informed, through means such as Avenue to Learn or course syllabi, whether their courses can be podcasted.

Through the Echo360 system already available at McMaster, podcasts can be automatically recorded in many classro oms.25 The Academic Services Review conducted in 2017 gaged student perceptions related to podcasted courses. The survey found that when podcasted courses were available, 40% of students chose not to watch podcasts while 40% watched them once. These results indicated that students were making effective use of podcasts to catch up on missed lecture material.

Previously, recommendations related to podcasted courses have been met with some resistance on the grounds that increasing podcast availability discourages in­ person class attendance in students. However, in contrast to this hypothesis, the Academic Services Review revealed that an overwhelming 74% of students indicated that they used both lectures and podcasts in courses that were podcasted; only 10% indicated that they watched podcasts only to learn the course material, and only 16% attended only lect ures.26 Therefore, there is solid evidence that the large majority of students do not use podcasts to replace lecture attendance, and implementing more widespread usage of podcasting technology only supplements learning and ensures accessibility needs are met.

## Physical Accessibility and Barriers

Principle: All students should be able to physically access their classroom.

Principle: Universal communication within the University should be prioritized rather than placing the responsibility on individual students.

Concern: Some classrooms are difficult to get to or are otherwise physically inaccessible.

Concern: McMaster campus is designed inaccessibly, putting students with physical disabilities at a disadvantage.

25 Hsu, *Academic Services Review,* 15.

26 Hsu, *Academic Services Review,* 17.

Recommendation: Accessibility of classrooms should be communicated on Mosaic during course registration, and on Avenue to Learn.

Recommendation: Classes should be relocated if an individual with a physical disability is unable to access it.

Recommendation: When new buildings are being planned, they should be designed with universal accessibility as a priority.

Recommendation: The buildings on campus should further their physical accessibility through incorporating wayfinding design.

The MSU's Accessibility Forum in 2015 determined that students feel that navigating

the McMaster campus is difficult with a d isab ilit y.27 With this in mind, it is imperative that we recognize that this clearly indicates a disconnect between the outlined aspirations of the McMaster University Accessibility Policy and student experiences of accessibility on campus. Students with physical disabilities, such as those who use a mobility device, may face physical accessibility barriers when traveling to a classroom (for example, due to the presence of staircases). In order to mitigate the current inaccessibility of many buildings and rooms on campus, the University can prioritize universal communication about accessibility. This will also contribute to alleviating the stigma surrounding conversations on disability on campus.

The accessibility of classrooms should be communicated clearly to students upon registering for courses, so that requests may be made for classes to be moved if so needed, and for general preparation of all students. This should also occur during exams. Universal communication about these matters is crucial, as accessibility being prioritized should mean that individuals with accessibility concerns are not solely responsible for holding the University accountable to that value. Moreover, if an individual has a physical disability that prevents them from accessing a classroom, the class should be relocated to an accessible classroom.

While newer buildings on campus meet physical accessibility requirements, there are still further steps that can be taken to ensure that the principle of accessibility is upheld. For example, the incorporation of wayfinding and signage design, where information is provided at strategic points within a building to guide people in the right directions, into campus can ensure the communication of the most accessible pathways within a building. In addition, more electrical outlets can be installed into buildings to reduce potential barriers for students who require devices to take class notes or complete course work. All these aforementioned considerations should be taken into account in the planning of new buildings in the future.

27 Vice President (Education). "MSU Accessibility Forum Report 2015-16: Breaking the Stigma." (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University, 2016).

It is clear that accessibility translates to academic success for all students, as the dismantling of barriers increases students' chances of learning, contributing, ad collaborating. Through taking pre-emptive measures to prevent barriers arising out of accessibility needs, the University can promote human dignity in addition to academic success.

## Financial Accessibility

Principle: Students should not be placed at a disadvantage if they are unable to afford textbooks or tutoring, particularly those resources that are available similarly through less expensive, more accessible means.

Concern: Individuals from lower-income quartiles are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and are further discouraged by additional costs of attending university.

Concern: Professors are unaware of or do not support Open Educational Resources (OER) such as fair-use articles and online textbook libraries.

Concern: Courseware are often published yearly with very minimal changes, disabling students from purchasing older versions.

Recommendation: Financial accessibility should be addressed and promoted by universities to encourage individuals, especially with greater financial needs, to pursue postsecondary education.

Recommendation: Educators should be encouraged and incentivized to create OERs wherever possible, as well as promote the use of other free resources available through McMaster.

Recommendation: Professors who require courseware should put new content on Avenue to Learn to enable students to purchase older versions of the courseware.

The average tuition cost for Canadian full-time undergraduate students for the

2016/2017 academic year was $6,373, a 2.8% increase from the previous academic year as reported by Statistics Canad a.28 In particular, Ontario universities had the highest average cost at $8,114, with the next closest province almost a thousand dollars less costly. Additionally, supplementary compulsory (or ancillary) fees for Canadian students also saw a 2.9% increase in the 2016/2017 year from the previous year, with an average cost of $873.

Currently, the Government of Ontario is working towards improving student financial assistance to increase the accessibility and affordability of postsecondary education

28 "The Daily - Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2016/2017," *Statistics Canada,* September 7, 2017, [https://www.statcan.qc.ca/daily-quotidien/160907/ dq160 90 7a-enq.ht m](https://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/160907/dq160907a-eng.htm).

through the recent changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).29 Beginning this 2017/2018 school year, it introduced the Ontario Student Grant (OSG), which aims to reduce the tuition costs of students with the greatest financial need (family income of $50,000 or less) by 100%. A recent article by the National Post reported that since the implementation of the new OSG, over 185,000 post-secondary students in Ontario have been awarded free tuition, equivalent to over 33% of all full­ time college/university students in the pro vince.30

While the recent governmental funding changes provide a promising option to those students whose families are ill-equipped to afford a full-time post-secondary degree, McMaster must explore other avenues to further reduce the increasing costs for all students, many of whom face additional costs in order to obtain a degree, such as transportation, housing, and food.

One such option is the use of open educational resources (OER), a free resource that utilizes a variety of online platforms, ranging from free textbooks to Youtube and TedTalks, to increase accessibility of learning tools for all students regardless of socioeconomic st at us.31 One of the greatest advantages of OER is the provision of a Creative Commons license to educators, which enables them to "adapt, adopt and remix materials" so that they can customize textbooks and other resources to the needs of their courses and their st ud ent s.32 In this way, not only does the use of OER allow for students to save money on the purchase of entire textbooks when they may only need a few chapters, it also enables instructors to easily structure their courses to maximize learning for students.

Since 2003, British Columbia has been actively promoting OER through its Open Education team at BCcampus, which manages the BC Open Textbook Project funded by the Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills & Training and the Hewlett Found at io n.33 One of the primary goals listed for the open textbook development project is to decrease student costs and subsequently increase accessibility to education and learning. Between 2012-2017, it reported student savings of over $3 million, with 221 books in the collection, 38 B.C. institutions currently adopting the use of OER, and almost 50,000 students utilizing these resources. 34

29 "2016 Ontario Budget I Improving Access to Postsecondary Education," *Ontario Ministry of Finance,* July 20, 2016, [https://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2016/bkl.html.](http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2016/bkl.html) 30 "So Far 185,000 Post-Secondary Students in Ontario Have Received Free Tuition," *National Post,* September 11, 2017, <http://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/so-far-> 185000-post-secondary-students-in-ontario-have-received-free-tuition.

31 "Open Educational Resources I eCampus Ontario," *eCampus Ontario,* 2017,

[https://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/.](http://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/)

32 Ibid.

33 "Open Education I BCcampus," *BCcampus,* 2017, <https://bccampus.ca/open-education/>. 34 "Open Textbook Stats I BCcampus Opened Resources," *BCcampus,* 2017, https://open.bccampus.ca/open-textbook-stats/.

Despite the value of switching to OER for the purpose of increased educational accessibility, there are barriers to instructor uptake of these resources. A report by BCcampus explored the use of OER, including their motivations and perceptions, by post-secondary faculty in BC.35 Their key findings suggest that "faculty at all types of institutions face institutional barriers such as lack of administrative, staff, or department support for their use of OER." Many experts also believe that a lack of awareness may be one of the barriers towards the implementation of OER by educators, such as lack of understanding regarding the variety of licenses available through Creative Commons or the possibility for government and private grants to support the switch from traditional text b ooks. 36 ·37

In Ontario, eCampus Ontario greatly supports Open Education and boasts a multitude of educational resources that are open to students and educators for all post­ secondary institutions in Ont ario. 38 Their Open Textbook Library provides students with access to free, downloadable textbooks and other academic materials, thereby decreasing the costs associated with buying hard copies of traditional textbooks for students. eCampus Ontario also has several funding initiatives in place to support Ontario educators towards improving technology-enabled teaching and learning, including the New Program Development Fund, the Research and Innovation Fund, and the Open Initiatives Fund. 39 For instance, the New Program Development Fund has enabled educators to design online programs tailored to the needs of their students. This has not only allowed them to work towards improving the quality of education being provided to students, but has also further enabled students to access free or low-cost OER.

Improving financial accessibility is also not just limited to OER. It also applies to other resources, such as mandatory software or journal articles that students may need for certain courses. Some required programs, especially for engineering courses, can be costly for students to purchase. As such, cheaper options should be pursued instead in order to reduce the costs for students. This can even be facilitated by OER, which

35 Rajiv S. Jhangiani et al. "Exploring faculty use of open educational resources at British Columbia post-secondary institutions," *BCcampus,* January 18, 2016, https://bccampus.ca/files/2016/01/BCFacultyUseOfOER\_final.pdf

36 Suzanne Bowness. "The Open Educational Resources Movement is Redefining the Concept

of Online Textbooks," *University Affairs,* April 4, 2017, [http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/open-educational-resources­](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/open-educational-resources) movement-redefining-concept-online-textbooks/.

37 Tony Bates. "Teaching in a digital age," 2015,

https://teachonIine.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/teaching-in-a-digital-age\_2016.pdf 38 "Open Educational Resources I eCampus Ontario," *eCampus Ontario,* 2017, [https://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/.](http://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/)

39 "Educator Resources I eCampus Ontario," *eCampus Ontario,* 2017, [https://www.ecampusontario.ca/educators/](http://www.ecampusontario.ca/educators/)

often do include free software as well. Similarly, although journal articles can often be expensive for students to buy, open access allows for free use of such resources in many courses. Library resources, such as Lib Access, also enable students to access these journal articles free of cost off-campus. Such options should be promoted so that more students are aware of their existence and avoid these additional costs in accessing resources vital to their education.

Many institutions across Canada, like those in B.C., have begun to transition towards the use of OER. The University of Toronto began its Zero-to Low Cost Course Project in the Spring 2015 term and reports savings above $400,000 for students thus far.40

(13) With progress seen across Canada, it is time that McMaster explore partnership opportunities with organizations like eCampus Ontario and work towards better awareness of open education and integration of OER into all courses moving forward. The benefits for both faculty and students have been shown. To overcome the barrier of limited faculty uptake, McMaster should work with professors to increase their understanding of the benefits of OER for their students and themselves, and further support them in developing online textbooks and resources best tailored to their courses. Furthermore, McMaster should work with the provincial and/or federal governments towards potentially introducing funding opportunities for professors as a way to incentivize the uptake and creation of OER. If instructors were given adequate knowledge and support in the transition to OER, it might go a long way in pushing them towards better teaching and learning. By decreasing costs of attending post­ secondary education through the implementation of OER, McMaster will further open its doors to the brightest minds across Canada and internationally.

Another aspect of financial accessibility includes courseware, which are updated annually but with small changes. These changes prevent students from being able to purchase older, and therefore cheaper, versions of the courseware. This is an unnecessary added cost to students and to prevent another financial barrier to students, we recommend that professors who require courseware add the new content onto their Avenue to Learn page. This will keep the older versions in print and allow students to purchase secondhand courseware, saving a significant cost for students. **Academic Resources**

Principle: Students should have easy access to all of the academic resources necessary to succeed including, but not limited to: academic advisement, academic services, and trained undergraduate teaching assistants.

Concern: Students find it difficult to seek academic advisement due to limited drop-in hours during the academic year.

Concern: Some students are unaware of the academic services available to them.

Concern: Students rate their Teaching Assistants as only average, citing variations in teaching quality from TA to TA as the reason for this rating.

Recommendation: Academic advisement offices should extend their office hours during peak periods of the academic year.

Recommendation: The University should create a widget on Mosaic or Avenue to Learn to advertise Academic Services in one centralized location to students.

Recommendation: The University should create a general Training Facilitation Guide and implement supplementary training for all Undergraduate Teaching Assistants, possibly in collaboration with the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership.

Some students are unaware of the academic services provided by the university.

Respondents of the 2017 Academic Services Poll indicated their use of some academic services: Academic Workshops (9%), Tutoring Service (8%), and Writing Workshop (1%) .41 The Report suggests a lack of effective promotion as a potential cause for this lack of awareness. A centralized location to advertise Academic Services would be beneficial, such as Mosaic or Avenue to Learn, as most students visit these sites frequently.

Teaching Assistants (TA's) are a core component of the classroom exp erience. 42 As such, the overall effectiveness of TA's may impact student academic performance. As per the 2017 Academic Services Review, most students rate their satisfaction with TA's between 2-4, with the most responses for 3, indicating that most students felt their TA's were around average effect iveness.43 The implementation of a mandatory general Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Training Program would provide all TA's with the necessary teaching, communication and facilitation skills required to succeed in such a role. Respondents of the 2017 Academic Services Poll believe TA's could improve their teaching style (66%), communication with students (59%), and classroom facilitation (56%).4 4 Other universities, such as the University of Western Ontario, have benefitted from the implementation of such a program, citing their seminar-workshop based program for their success with effective TA s.45 This supplementary training will ensure that all TAs are better equipped to conduct tutorials of the same calibre. Despite this, it is important to note that different courses require different skills from TAs. Thus, course specific training may be advisable as it would address the course specific needs of different courses. For example, PYSCH 1X03 has a mandatory course for teaching assistants that educates TAs on the skills required for the specific role. This ensures that all teaching

41 Hsu, Megan. *University Affairs Report: Academic Services Review.* 5-6. (Hamilton: McMaster Students Union, 2017.)

42 Hsu, *Academic Services Review,* 10.

43 Hsu, *Academic Services Review,* 10-11.

44 Hsu. *Academic Services Review,* 11.

45 University of Western Ontario. *TATP* - *Teaching Assistant Training Program.*

[https://www.uwo.ca/tsc/graduate\_student\_programs/tatp.html.](http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/graduate_student_programs/tatp.html)

assistants are best equipped to conduct tutorials and ensure that the style of teaching is standard across all of the TAs for a certain course.

Academic advisement enables students to realize their maximum educational pot ent ial.4 6 Consultations with academic advisors may provide students with

assistance in course selection/registration, preparation for post-degree endeavors, accessibility accommodation, et c.4 7 With the current Academic Advisement Office drop-in hours, students are finding it difficult to meet with their respective academic advisors. Taking into account the enrollment numbers and drop-in hours of three of the largest faculties on campus, the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Social Science, had drop-in time to student ratios of 0.10 hours/student,

0.06 hours/student, and 0.07 hours/student, respectively. This equates to 6 or less minutes per student per academic year (Fall and Winter sessions). By increasing the drop-in hours of the respective faculties, academic advisement can better accommodate the needs of all students.

# Classroom Learning

Academic concerns make up a huge portion of the student body at McMaster University. It is essential that the McMaster Students Union dedicate efforts towards not only pointing out major concerns that students have regarding their academics but also recommending solutions that have worked in the past with other universities.

## Experiential Education

Principle: Integrating experiential learning opportunities into course content promotes student-centred learning and enriches academic understanding.

Concern: There is a lack of experiential learning components in new and existing courses.

Concern: There is a lack of community engagement courses offered across faculties.

Concern: Faculty members do not receive training on the benefits and proper execution of experiential learning courses.

Recommendation: The University should create an institutional vision and mission to promote experiential learning.

Recommendation: The University should incorporate experiential education into new courses and course outlines of existing courses.

46 University of British Columbia. *What is Academic Advising?.*

[http://students.ok.ubc.ca/advising/what\_is\_advising.html.](http://students.ok.ubc.ca/advising/what_is_advising.html) 47 McMaster University. *Student Affairs* - *Academic Advising.* [http://studentaffairs.mcmaster.ca/academic-advising/.](http://studentaffairs.mcmaster.ca/academic-advising/)

Recommendation: The University should hold an experiential learning workshop in partnership with the McPherson Institute concentrating on providing faculty with essential skills that an instructor might need.

Often misunderstood, "experiential learning" is defined as students engaged in

learning content in which they have a personal interest, need, or want. 48 Research has shown that most college faculty members teach by lecturing because few have learned other ways to teach.49 Although traditional lecturing styles are important in the delivery of education, teaching approaches that focus on student discussions, group work, and hands-on participation within and outside the classroom should be explored. These teaching approaches can be vaguely categorized under experiential education, which prioritizes the learning process rather than the outcome. The MSU is concerned with the lack of experiential education components in new and existing courses at McMaster University. The implementation of experiential education in higher education can be achieved through the creation of learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learn ers.50 These learning spaces include apprenticeships, clinical placements, cooperative education, fellowships, fieldwork experiences, internships, practicum experiences, student teaching experiences, service learning, and volunteer opportunities. Service learning and volunteer opportunities can be easily integrated into existing courses, creating a mutually beneficial relationship for the student and the community. This would allow students to engage with the city of Hamilton, learn about their surroundings, and develop good cit izenship.51 Educators are encouraged to read the list of experiential learning principles outlined by the Association for Experiential Education. A holistic approach that includes all faculties and is enforced by University educational mandate is

proven to be the most effective way to incorporate experiential learning curriculum. 52 The MSU recommends the development of an institutional vision and mission to promote experiential learning that provides guidelines for educators and applies practices to new and existing courses from all faculties. The information regarding best practices of experiential education and teaching can be disseminated to educators through workshops in partnership with McPherson Institute.

48 Wurdinger, Scott D., and Julie Carlson. *Teaching for experiential learning: five approaches that work.* New Delhi: Overleaf, 2011.

49 Ibid.

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5 Kolb, Alice Y., and David A. Kolb. "Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education." *Academy of Management Learning* & *Education* 4, no. 2 (2005): 193-212.

51 Bringle, Robert G., and Julie A. Hatcher. "Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education* 67, no. 2 (1996): 221-39.

52 Kolb, Alice Y., and David A. Kolb.

**Assessments**

Principle: Course testing should concentrate on student learning rather than just evaluation.

Principle; Students should have access to a variety of different assessment formats in each of their courses that recognize the variety of student learning style and needs.

Principle: Students should be made aware of their performance throughout the duration of a course.

Concern: When grades are at the centre of the academic experience, student learning becomes a lesser priority.

Concern: Students are tested on high-risk summative assignments and lack access to feedback from instructors.

Concern: Summative assignments, such as midterms, term papers, and exams, with very heavy grade weightings create undue stress for students.

Concern: Many courses rely too heavily on a narrow selection of assessments formats such as multiple-choice, essays, and basic knowledge tests.

Concern: Students often are not aware of their academic performance in a course throughout a semester due to untimely returning of assessments and receiving of grades.

Recommendation: More courses should consider the implementation of a pass-fail assessment format in order to move the focus of the course away from grading and towards learning.

Recommendation: Instructors should incorporate more formative testing assignments.

Recommendation: Courses should not have summative assessments that are very high risk, with grade weightings that are as high as 60%.

Recommendation: Instructors should utilize a greater variety of assessment methods, drawing from best practices derived identified by academic research.

Recommendation: Students should receive at least 10% of course grades back by the undergraduate course withdrawal deadline, and accountability measures should be in place to ensure this.

Currently, McMaster focuses on using tests as a means of evaluating how a student is doing in the course. 53 However, evaluation does not necessarily need to have a numerical grade in order to promote learning outcomes. Many undergraduate programs make use of pass-fail systems to great success: at McMaster, the undergraduate Health Sciences program is an example of how the pass-fail system can be effectively used with positive results. Furthermore, some universities grant students with the power of implementing a pass-fail system. For example, at Brown University, students can choose to take courses for a grade or, instead, for a

53 Wai, Jai et al, "Teaching and Assessment," *Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance,* last modified 2015.

satisfactory/no credit. However, Brown's University does not compute GPAs for students. In an example of how the opt-in pass-fail system can be implemented without creating complications for McMaster's GPA calculations, Queen's University's arts and science faculty is in the works of creating a pass-fail credit system where the professor still grades students' performances and retains records of this for graduate school applications, if necessary.54 Thus, encouraging more pass-fail assessment formats in undergraduate courses at McMaster has benefits of removing risk as a barrier to learning.

Alternatively, assessments can be used to facilitate learning itself. By incorporating more formative tests instead of summative tests, instructors can provide students with constant feedback on their learning. Formative assessments occur early in the semester and throughout the course to not only generate grades, but to also provide students with feedback on their work. Their primary goal is to monitor students' learning through lower stakes (lower point grade) assignments. Alternatively, summative assessments aim to evaluate a student against a benchmark or a standard. This is done by giving higher stakes tests at the end of a unit (e.g. midterms, papers, and exams). A study done at Queen's University aimed to look into the benefits of such testing in a post-secondary environment. This online formative assessment allowed students to receive feedback throughout the course rather than just after a largely weighted midterm/exam. Students reported improved learning and better support from facult y.55 McMaster University should aim to follow this model and introduce formative assessments into courses. These smaller scale assignments will provide students with more learning opportunities and allow them to understand the expectations of the instructor.

Another concern of highly-weight summative assignments is the resulting undue stress students experience. In particular, some final exams can be weighted as much as 60% of a student's final grade. As well, in courses where the final grade is comprised of only a few heavily-weighted summative assessments, a student that must miss one of the assessments and uses the MSAF form now potentially faces a final exam that combines the weightings of both the exam and the missed assessment. In order to promote student wellbeing, fostering a healthy environment in which students can thrive academically, it is imperative that extremely stressful situations such as these are minimized and addressed pre-emptively. Therefore, quality assurance bodies should ensure that a summative assessment does not hold a majority weighting (i.e. greater than 50%). An exception can be made for instructors who offer a variety of assessment weightings so that whichever weighting offers a student the greatest final grade is adopted. For example, a final exam may either be

54 Ibid.

55 Miller, Tess. "Formative computer‐based assessment in higher education: The effectiveness of feedback in supporting student learning." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 34, no. 2 (2009): 181-192.

worth 40% of a student's final grade or 100%, depending on whichever weighting gives students highest individual grades.

Another area in which undergraduate course assessments can improve is assessment variety. Currently, many courses rely on a narrow selection of assessment formats, namely multiple-choice, essays, and basic knowledge tests. There exists, however, a variety of other assessment formats such as presentations, peer review, and group projects. Traditional assessment methods are not necessarily the most effective in terms of promoting learning outcomes. Looking at multiple-choice and basic knowledge tests specifically, only surface-learning understanding through rote memorization is achieved rather than deep learning and critical engagement with course content. Furthermore, assessments should strive to engage students in reflective thinking, as research has shown the importance of reflection in learn ing. 56 Therefore, instructors should draw from a wide variety of effective assessment methods, using academic research and the MacPherson Institute as available resources.

Finally, assessment distribution is an important part of the conversation of promoting academic success. Assessment distribution is how grades and assessments are returned to students throughout the duration of a course. Due to the untimely return of assessments, students are often unaware of how they are performing academically in a course, which prevents them from making any necessary changes to their current learning approach for the course. This negatively impacts their potential to succeed to the fullest of their potential academically. Therefore, students should receive at least 10% of their course grades by the undergraduate course withdrawal deadline. Moreover, accountability measures need to be set in place in order to ensure that instructors are abiding by this requirement. For example, students should be made aware of how they should report an incident of not receiving grades by the withdrawal date, and to whom. This may be accomplished through the development of a standardized conflict resolution form, and the increased visibility of such a form.

Through approaching the topic of assessments with student learning as the top priority, changes can be made to the current landscape of course assessments in order to move forwards towards an academic environment that truly fosters deep learning.

## Innovative Course Design

Principle: Courses offered at McMaster University should be pedagogically innovative.

56 Coralie Haller, Rod Gapp, and Ron Fisher, "Reflection as a Means of Understanding: Ways in Which Confucian Heritage Students Learn and Understand Organisational Behaviour," Multicultural Education & Technology Journal 1 (2007): 6-24. Cherie Tsingos, Lorraine Smith, and Sinthia Bosnic-Anticevich, "Learning Styles and Approaches: Can Reflective Strategies Encourage Deep Learning?," Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning 7 (2015): 492-504.

Principle: Pedagogical research should be consulted when designing and delivering course content.

Concern: Courses incorporating blended learning are not uniform in design across faculties. Concern: Blended learning can add additional hours of class onto a student's schedule.

Recommendation: Design an advisory committee for instructors switching over to blended learning or inquiry based courses that is in partnership with MacPherson Institute.

Innovation in education is essential in order to improve the quality of education given

to students. Currently, McMaster incorporates many new tools and techniques in order to teach students. These strategies such as inquiry-based learning and blended learning. Blended learning involves the integration of online web modules with traditional face-to-face lect ures57 whereas inquiry involves posing a question to students and allowing them to search for an answer by looking at primary research and dat a58 . Although both these methods are well researched and beneficial for students, the improper implementation of such designs can result in course difficulties.

For this very reason, The McMaster Student's Union conducted a university-wide academic services reviewis\_ 9 The review found that the majority of concerns that students had surrounded the style of education: specifically blended learning and inquiry. Undergraduate students at McMaster University found that the quality of blended learning and inquiry-based learning varies from course to course and faculty to faculty. This is a surprising finding as there is an institution dedicated to improving education at McMaster.

In order to reduce the variability across and within faculties, McMaster University can create a committee that works specifically on innovation in courses. Currently, the University of British Columbia has a task force that is responsible for blended

learn ing. 60 It provides a comprehensive definition of what blended learning is and also provides guidance and feedback for instructors planning to switch over to such teaching practices. In addition to helping with the transition, the task force checks the progress of the course and evaluates the switch to blended learning. Additionally, the university also hosts sessions for instructors switching to blended learning. The sessions are a 4-week long blended learning course where instructors experience blended learning first-hand whilst learning the process of switching over and what it entails.

57 Garrison, D. Randy, and Heather Kanuka. "Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education." *The internet and higher education* 7, no. 2 (2004): 95-105.

58 Haq, lnam. "Inquiry‐ based Learning." *ABC of Learning and Teaching in Medicine* (2017): 11.

59 Hsu, Megan. *University Affairs Report: Academic Services Review.* (Hamilton: McMaster Students Union, 2017).

60 "Teaching in a Blended Learning Environment (T-BLE)," *Centre for Teaching Learning and*

*Technology,* accessed October 27, 2017,https://ctlt.ubc.ca/programs/all-our-programs/tble/.

McMaster University currently has a body of researchers dedicated to research on classroom innovation known as the MacPherson Institute. The institute in collaboration with students and faculty can combine to create a committee much like the one that exists at the University of British Columbia. Having this advisory committee will help control variability in blended learning and inquiry across

different faculties. The committee can also regulate the length of the module, ensuring that they do not introduce more hours into a typical students' workload. In addition, the committee can work towards creating information sessions for instructors who want to convert their courses to blended learning or inquiry based.

## Content Delivery

Principle: Students should be engaged with their course content through interactive lectures. Concern: Large class sizes often result in non-interactive lectures.

Concern: Non-interactive lectures can hinder students' learning.

Recommendation: Instructors should be provided with resources to incorporate active learning in classrooms.

Recommendation: Instructors should incorporate small tutorials for courses with large class sizes.

Recommendation: Pedagogical best practices should be employed in classrooms, informed by available resources from and consultations with the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence.

The way a lecture is delivered can have a major impact on student engagement and,

in some cases, even retention. This is especially apparent in large first year courses where class sizes exceed 500 students. Most students are entering post-secondary institutions from a small class size of 20 to 30 individuals. Having them attend lectures that are large in size and non-interactive can negatively affect their transition into universit y.61 As a result, McMaster should aim to make large lecture classes more interactive through the incorporation of various techniques that promote collaborative learning and by offering smaller scale study groups within the large lecture hall.

One such technique involves *active learning* where instructors incorporate activities into the course that allow students to think about what they are learning. This can be done on several scales and has proven to be successful in some courses at McMaster. On a very small scale, active learning can involve professors asking students to think, pair and share with the individual beside them. This strategy involves posing a question in the classroom, and pausing to allow students to absorb and think about the given information. This also provides students with the opportunity to share their

61 Kuh, George D., Ty M. Cruce, Rick Shoup, Jillian Kinzie, and Robert M. Gonyea. "Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence." *The journal of higher education* 79, no. 5 (2008): 540-563.

ideas with the individuals sitting beside t hem62. This small activity can occur in the middle of lecture for a couple of minutes without disrupting the "traditional" way professors usually t each.63 This has been done at McMaster University in Introductory Psychology lectures with the use of iclickers. The lectures require individuals to stop and answer a question mid-lecture. At first, the students answer it alone and then are provided with the opportunity to speak to their peers. The university can achieve this by providing new faculty with the resources on how to conduct active learning in a classroom. This can be done through a proper training program or through a mandatory session facilitated by MacPherson Institute.

In addition to these smaller scale changes in classrooms, instructors can also add more opportunities for learning by engaging with the content in innovative ways: this can be done by incorporating teaching innovations such as *problem-based learning* (PBL). PBL is a technique that involves students learning course content by actively exploring a problem or challenge they are presented wit h.6 4 The use of PBL in classrooms has shown to be effective especially in the field of nursing in Canada.

Studies have shown that PBL allows students to gain a deeper level understanding of content than regular styles of t eaching. 65 Currently, McMaster has incorporated forms of problem-based learning in its Health Sciences department to help teach future doctors, therapists and nurses how to actively learn concepts while solving problems presented to them in small-scale groups. Other instructors at McMaster can also follow this paradigm and shift towards creating courses that allow students to engage actively with the content.

Finally, all faculty need to be engaged in a conversation surrounding existing best practices in teaching and learning. In collaboration with the resources at the MacPherson Institute, best practices in content delivery should be shared and implemented in all applicable classrooms.

# Policy Statement

**Whereas:** All students should be able to access courses that contribute to their personal, academic, and career goals.

**And whereas:** Mosaic should be well equipped with the information necessary for course registration.

62 Kaddoura, Mahmoud. "Think pair share: A teaching learning strategy to enhance students' critical thinking." *Educational Research Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 3.

63 Ibid.

64 Choi, HeeJung. "The effects of PBL (Problem-Based Learning) on the metacognition, critical thinking, and problem solving process of nursing students." *Journal of Korean Academy of Nursing* 34, no. 5 (2004): 712-721

65 Ibid.

**And whereas:** All students should be able to complete their required and elective courses without conflict.

**And whereas:** McMaster University should value and support the learning experience of all undergraduate students.

**And whereas:** Students should have equitable access to courses regardless of differences in learning experience.

**And whereas:** Students should be involved in the evaluation process of courses and course educators.

**And whereas:** Course evaluations provide a feedback mechanism that should be utilized to their fullest extent in the evaluation and management of courses.

**And whereas:** Students and instructors should uphold the policies outlined in the Undergraduate Course Management Policy, including the Assessment Ban.

**And whereas:** Students should be able to prepare for exams without the stress of assignments.

**And whereas:** The exam period should be an opportunity for testing and reflection with minimal stress due to other variables.

**And whereas:** Students should be given adequate time to prepare, study and schedule for exams.

**And whereas:** Students should be informed of exam scheduling during the course registration process.

**And whereas:** Information about exam schedules should be easily accessible to all students.

**And whereas:** Students should have the opportunity to make an informed decision about their course selections.

**And whereas:** Students should receive communication about this Drop/Add policy and timeline, as it is relevant to their learning experience.

**And whereas:** Educators should communicate course material in accessible manners. **And whereas:** Students who miss class should not be deprived of learning materials. **And whereas:** All students should be able to physically access their classroom.

**And whereas:** Universal communication within the University should be prioritized rather than placing the responsibility on individual students.

**And whereas:** Students should not be placed at a disadvantage if they are unable to afford textbooks or tutoring, particularly those resources that are available similarly through less expensive, more accessible means.

**And whereas:** Students should have easy access to all of the academic resources necessary

to succeed including, but not limited to: academic advisement, academic services, and trained undergraduate teaching assistants.

**And whereas:** Integrating experiential learning opportunities into course content promotes student-centred learning and enriches academic understanding.

**And whereas:** Courses offered at McMaster University should be pedagogically innovative.

**And whereas:** Pedagogical research should be consulted when designing and delivering course content.

**And whereas:** Course testing should concentrate on student learning rather than just evaluation.

**And whereas:** Students should have access to a variety of different assessment formats in each of their courses that recognize the variety of student learning style and needs.

**And whereas:** Students should be made aware of their performance throughout the duration of a course.

**And whereas:** Students should be engaged with their course content through interactive lectures.

**Be It Resolved That:** Students should be given priority in course registration for required courses.

**Be It Further Resolved That:** The Office of the Registrar should create a waitlist submission form.

**BIFRT:** Students should declare the intention for a minor/Combined Honours before course registration to be given access to the required courses from the minor course list for fulfillment.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should review the need for prerequisites in their courses.

**BIFRT:** The ability to gain permission from instructors for courses should be better advertised, and a more streamlined approach for instructor permission should be developed.

**BIFRT:** Mosaic should have the correct times and locations for full-year courses across semesters to eliminate timetable conflicts.

**BIFRT:** Mosaic should increase visibility and awareness of the Academic Requirement page.

**BIFRT:** Mosaic should provide information on the accessibility features of a classroom in the course information section.

**BIFRT:** Recommended courses should be an added function to Mosaic to improve visibility to facilitate the fulfillment of program requirements.

**BIFRT:** Mosaic should link students to external resources that carry up-to-date course schedules for schedule building and planning.

**BIFRT:** The Office of the Registrar should develop a standardized conflict resolution form to streamline the process.

**BIFRT:** The conflict resolution form should be available on Mosaic to ensure accessibility.

**BIFRT:** The SAS Notetaking Service should be accessible for short-term absences.

**BIFRT:** The SAS Notetaking Service should adopt a repository system of notes from contributing notetakers for each course.

**BIFRT:** Increase visibility and incentive for students to become notetakers for courses by highlighting these services in the course content, and by offering participation marks for contributing to the notetaking service.

**BIFRT:** Mandate the addition of Religious, Indigenous and Spiritual Observances (RISO) and SAS Form breakdowns on course syllabi.

**BIFRT:** Available accommodations and relevant services should be universally communicated within courses to all students in order to promote access.

**BIFRT:** The University should mandate that course evaluation dates and instructions or Course Evaluation website links are stated on course syllabi.

**BIFRT:** Educators should provide opportunity and/or incentive in each class for students to complete the pertinent course evaluation.

**BIFRT:** The University should mandate midterm course evaluations in order to provide educators the opportunity to make changes during the academic term.

**BIFRT:** Educators should be mandated to address course evaluations.

**BIFRT:** The University should educate and remind professors of the Assessment Ban on a per­ term basis.

**BIFRT:** The University should create a form or medium for students to report Assessment Ban infractions.

**BIFRT:** The University should mandate the addition of the Assessment Ban period and include its criteria and rules in course syllabi.

**BIFRT:** The 24 hour or calendar day period for multiple exam scheduling should be extended to 36 hours.

**BIFRT:** Deferred exams should be postponed to the end of the exam period so that students do not have to wait long periods to write.

**BIFRT:** The exam schedule should be released when course registration begins.

**BIFRT:** Instructions should be given to students on how to report exam scheduling conflicts in the same resource that notifies students of their exam schedule.

**BIFRT:** An alert should appear on exam timetables if there is a conflict within the schedule.

**BIFRT:** The Office of the Registrar should develop a standardized conflict resolution form to streamline the process.

**BIFRT:** This conflict resolution form should be available on the same page as the exam timetable to ensure accessibility.

**BIFRT:** The drop/add date should be extended to allow students more time to coordinate or change classes.

**BIFRT:** All students should be sent an email that provides information on the Drop/Add date and relevant procedures.

**BIFRT:** Professors should be made explicitly aware whether or not they have the technology available to podcast their course.

**BIFRT:** Where the technology is available, educators should be required to audio record their lectures for online podcasts of the course.

**BIFRT:** Accessible information on how to use the available podcasting technology should be provided to educators.

**BIFRT:** Podcast availability should be clearly communicated to students in every course.

**BIFRT:** Accessibility of classrooms should be communicated on Mosaic during course registration, and on Avenue to Learn.

**BIFRT:** Classes should be relocated if an individual with a physical disability is unable to access it.

**BIFRT:** When new buildings are being planned, they should be designed with universal accessibility as a priority.

**BIFRT:** The buildings on campus should further their physical accessibility through incorporating wayfinding design.

**BIFRT:** Financial accessibility should be addressed and promoted by universities to encourage individuals, especially with greater financial needs, to pursue postsecondary education.

**BIFRT:** Educators should be encouraged and incentivized to create OERs wherever possible, as well as promote the use of other free resources available through McMaster.

**BIFRT:** Professors who require courseware should put new content on Avenue to Learn to enable students to purchase older versions of the courseware.

**BIFRT:** Academic advisement offices should extend their office hours during peak periods of the academic year.

**BIFRT:** The University should create a widget on Mosaic or Avenue to Learn to advertise Academic Services in one centralized location to students.

**BIFRT:** The University should create a general Training Facilitation Guide and implement supplementary training for all Undergraduate Teaching Assistants, possibly in collaboration with the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership.

**BIFRT:** The University should create an institutional vision and mission to promote experiential learning.

**BIFRT:** The University should incorporate experiential education into new courses and course outlines of existing courses.

**BIFRT:** The University should hold an experiential learning workshop in partnership with the McPherson Institute concentrating on providing faculty with essential skills that an instructor might need.

**BIFRT:** Design an advisory committee for instructors switching over to blended learning or inquiry based courses that is in partnership with MacPherson Institute.

**BIFRT:** More courses should consider the implementation of a pass-fail assessment format in order to move the focus of the course away from grading and towards learning.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should incorporate more formative testing assignments.

**BIFRT:** Courses should not have summative assessments that are very high risk, with grade weightings that are as high as 60%.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should utilize a greater variety of assessment methods, drawing from best practices derived identified by academic research.

**BIFRT:** Students should receive at least 10% of course grades back by the undergraduate course withdrawal deadline, and accountability measures should be in place to ensure this.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should be provided with resources to incorporate active learning in classrooms.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should incorporate small tutorials for courses with large class sizes.

**BIFRT:** Pedagogical best practices should be employed in classrooms, informed by available resources from and consultations with the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence.