Learning Experiences Transition Survey (LETS)

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Executive Summary

Since March 2020, SFU has been operating in a remote-learning context in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Instructors, staff, and administrators have worked tirelessly to adapt to this new situation. The Provincial Health Officer has communicated the expectation that in-person instruction can resume for the Fall 2021 term. As we move towards increased in-person activity on our campuses, SFU is committed to incorporating student feedback into our transition planning.

The LETS (Learning Experiences Transition Survey) was envisioned as a way to gather undergraduate student views about transitioning towards more in-person instruction. We also wanted to learn more about the student experience during remote instruction so any positive aspects of this experience could be retained. Student perceptions can provide unique insight and inform future practices.

The survey was deployed February 24th – March 10th (about midway through the Spring 2021 term). All undergraduate students enrolled at SFU during the Fall 2020 term, Spring 2021 term, or both were invited to participate (27,564 students), and our response rate was 22% (6,151 respondents). Although the main focus of the questions was the transition to in-person learning, we additionally included questions that appeared during the Summer 2020 SOLE survey (Student Online Learning Experiences). Repeating these questions gives us an idea of how student perceptions are shifting and was intended to provide insight on the aspects of remote instruction that are working well and could be integrated into future instruction.

Key findings:

➢ 45% of students would prefer classes to be mostly or entirely in-person in the future. 80% want to continue to do a portion of their learning online.

➢ Of those students currently living outside of Canada, 50% would prefer their courses to be entirely on-line in the future, but of those currently living in the Lower Mainland only 15% prefer this option.

- Labs (54%), Tutorials (45%), and Experiential learning (43%) are the top three learning activities students would prefer to be in-person.

- 90% of students think that it is important to have the flexibility to take classes from a remote location on occasion (e.g., when sick; live lectures are recorded to view later).

- The majority of students continue to prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities, and note that access to lecture recordings provides flexibility and greatly supports their learning.

- 77% of students understood how to participate in all course activities, an increase from the SOLE survey (68%). Generally, students understand how to access online student services for academic advising (87%) and mental health support (75%).

- Instructor video recordings, assignments, lecturing in real-time, and learning resources are regarded as the most helpful course components in a remote context.
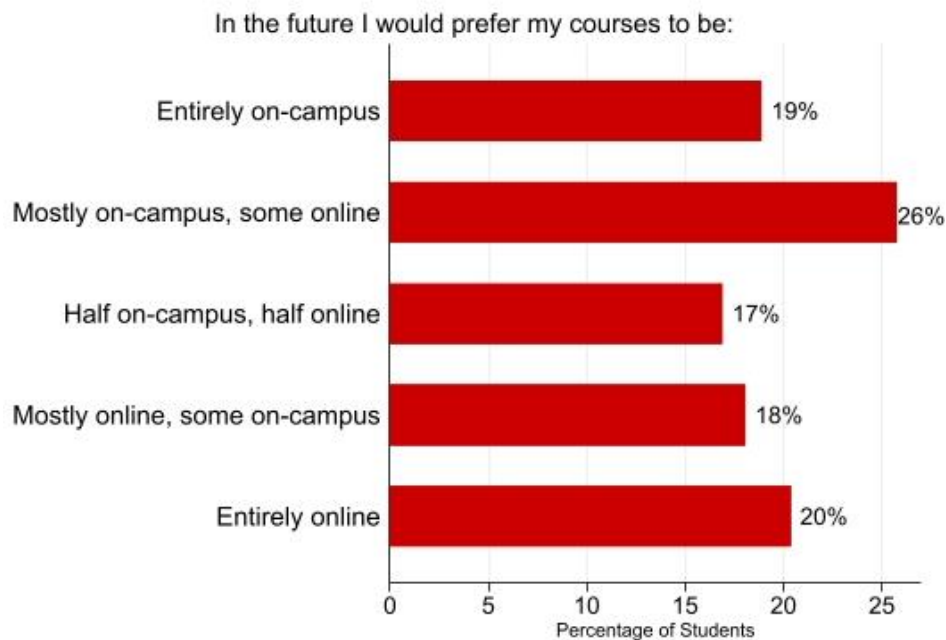
Who responded?

➢ 82% were full-time (enrolled in at least 9 credits in their most recent term)

➢ 77% were domestic and 23% international students

➢ 12% were currently not in Canada

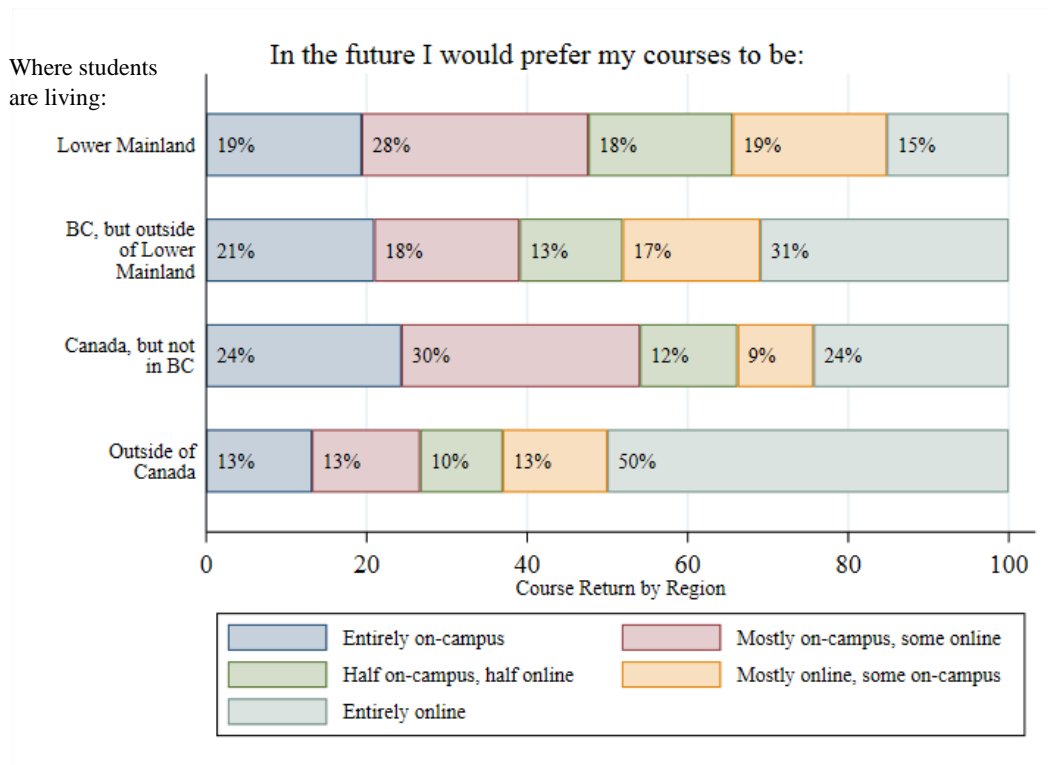➢ The response rate for each faculty was between 20-25%

Faculty	Faculty Response Rate	Number of Respondents	% of sample
Applied Science	20%	771	13%
Arts and Social Science	22%	2,318	38%
Beedie School of Business	24%	803	13%
Communication, Art, and Technology	22%	549	9%
Education	20%	194	3%
Environment	25%	248	4%
Health Sciences	25%	343	6%
Science	24%	925	15%
SFU	22%	6,151	**100%**

What do students want in the future?

Despite the difficulties students experienced during this past year and the desire of many (45%) to be mostly or entirely in-person in future, it is clear that there are aspects of remote learning that they appreciate and would like to continue. In the future, a majority (~80%) want at least some level of online learning.

In the future I would prefer my courses to be:

Preference	Percentage
Entirely on-campus	19%
Mostly on-campus, some online	26%
Half on-campus, half online	17%
Mostly online, some on-campus	18%
Entirely online	20%

Student interest in future, online options varied depending on where they are currently living. Roughly 83% of the survey respondents currently live in the Lower Mainland. The remaining 17% is comprised of 4% in BC but outside the Lower Mainland, 1% outside of BC but in Canada, and 12% outside of Canada. Of those students currently living outside of Canada, a full 50% prefer their courses to be entirely on-line. In comparison, just 15% of students who live in the Lower Mainland would prefer their courses to be entirely on-line. International students currently living in the Lower Mainland have preferences similar to domestic students in the Lower Mainland.

In the future I would prefer my courses to be:

Where students are living:

Region	Entirely on-campus	Mostly on-campus, some online	Half on-campus, half online	Mostly online, some on-campus	Entirely online
Lower Mainland	19%	28%	18%	19%	15%
BC, but outside of Lower Mainland	21%	18%	13%	17%	31%
Canada, but not in BC	24%	30%	12%	9%	24%
Outside of Canada	13%	13%	10%	13%	50%

Course Return by Region

Legend:
- Entirely on-campus
- Mostly on-campus, some online
- Half on-campus, half online
- Mostly online, some on-campus
- Entirely online

Furthermore, 55% of students agreed/strongly agreed that they are more likely to enrol in online courses in the future now that they have experienced remote classes.

Students were also asked to select the top 3 activities they would prefer to be in-person.

In-class activities preferred included:

➢ Labs - 54%
➢ Tutorials - 45%
➢ Experiential learning opportunities - 43%
➢ Lectures - 42%

For each faculty, the top activity (bolded below) was also one of the overall top three across all of SFU. Labs were selected by APSC, FENV, HSCI, and SCI students; Tutorials were selected by FASS, Beedie, and FCAT students; and Experiential learning was selected by EDUC students.

Top Three Activities by Faculty (% selected within faculty)			
Faculty	**Labs**	**Experiential learning**	**Tutorials**
Applied Science	**25%**	18%	13%
Arts and Social Science	16%	14%	**17%**
Beedie School of Business	12%	18%	**19%**
Communication, Art, and Technology	18%	17%	**18%**
Education	19%	**20%**	15%
Environment	**26%**	15%	15%
Health Sciences	**24%**	16%	14%
Science	**28%**	13%	15%

Note: Bolded percentage is the top choice for each faculty

Outside of the classroom, the in-person activities preferred included:

➤ Access to the library and study spaces - 65%

➤ Interacting with other students - 54%

➤ Access to recreational facilities - 30%

Students who selected "other" and provided an activity often chose convocation and student-society events.

Respondents were asked about which aspects of remote learning they valued and would like to see incorporated into future in-person instruction in some form. Overall, students reported that all aspects were important, with 76% of respondents selecting "Flexibility to take remote classes" as "Very Important".

Percentage of Students

Flexibility to take remote classes: 1, 5, 17, 76
Reduced scheduling conflicts: 12, 11, 24, 62
Live streaming of lectures: 3, 4, 12, 22, 58
Connecting with my instructor: 13, 14, 29, 53
Learn at my own pace: 4, 5, 13, 26, 52
Interactive learning tools: 2, 4, 22, 32, 40

Legend: Not at all Important | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Important
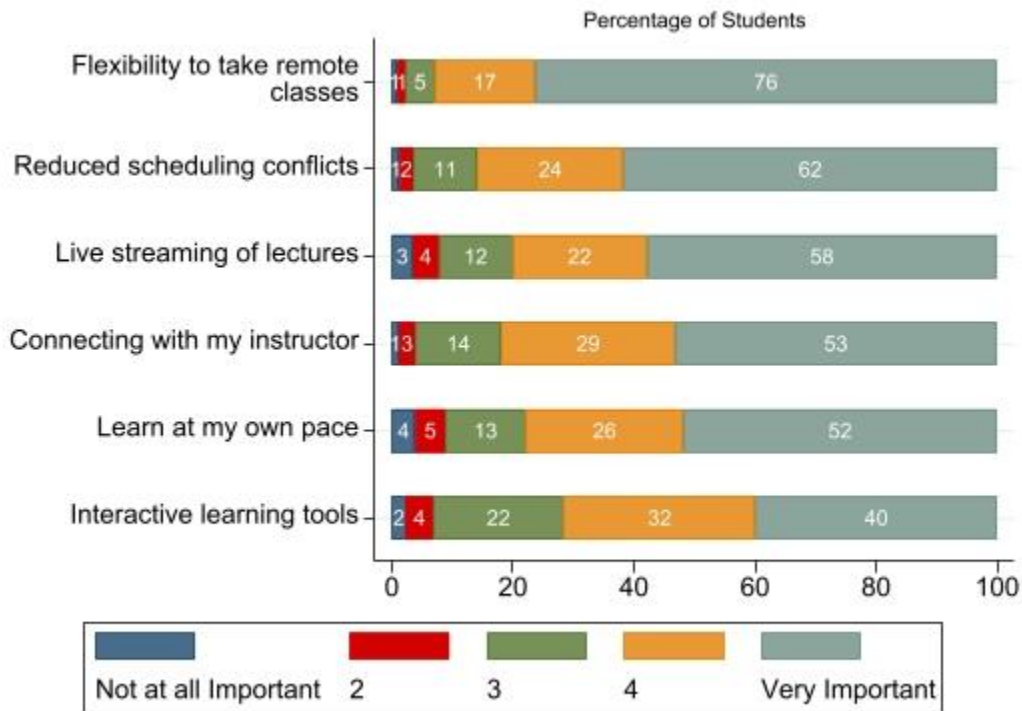
Students were asked in the open-comment question: *What elements, tools or innovations from your remote learning experience would you most like to see incorporated in the future?* This question elicited a variety of teaching tools used, with the following being the most common:

➢ **Recorded lectures**: students expressed that there was tremendous value in having access to recordings of the lecturers, no matter whether they were recorded live or asynchronously. Students noted that even when classes return, the ability to go back to recorded lectures to fill in gaps in their knowledge or to help them solidify their understanding would be helpful, and the ability to do so under remote-learning conditions was cited as transformative to their learning experience.

   "It is extremely valuable for lectures to be recorded and posted for student viewing. I would love to be able to attend a lecture in person and then re-watch

the lecture later to be able to pick up the pieces that I may have missed the first time.”

➢ **Increased enrollment/easier access to courses:** students were appreciative of the chance to take courses remotely that they may otherwise have been unable to take because of class size limits imposed by the size of our lecture halls. These students are eager to see measures put in place to allow higher enrollment in bottleneck courses.

➢ **Online office hours:** many students said that having an online option for office hours enabled them to attend them for the first time, with many citing the scheduling and logistical difficulties of attending in person. These students hoped that office hours online would continue to be offered as an option even when in-person classes have resumed.

“I think virtual office hours are a lot less intimidating than in-person office hours and it would be really helpful to have this option.”

What barriers do students anticipate when returning to the Lower Mainland?

Students who are currently living outside of the lower mainland/greater Vancouver region represent 17% of respondents. They were asked if they anticipate barriers to their return. Nearly 3/4 (72%) said yes and then were probed for information about which factors would impact their decision to move/return. At the time of this report, 12% of Canadians had received one dose of a vaccine and Canada has imposed strict border closures and quarantine measures for entry to the country.

The top three anticipated barriers are:

➢ Safety concerns (lack of rapid testing on campus, not yet vaccinated) – 83%
➢ Travel or border restrictions/flight availability – 69%
➢ Amount of in-person instruction available – 50%

Students who selected the "other" category expressed concerns about finding accommodation in the lower mainland, as well as about the cost of living. A few expressed concerns about SFU safety protocols, quarantine rules regarding travel to Canada, and challenges around their mental health.

In addition, when invited to provide open-ended comments, International students:

➢ Were concerned about costs for returning to Canada, including a mandatory hotel stay;
➢ Expressed a greater deal of uncertainty about returning to in-person teaching;
➢ Held a generally positive view about asynchronous learning and materials provided and expressed a desire to continue with them in the future;
➢ Expressed difficulty with synchronous learning, particularly the challenges of navigating time zones

What can we learn from the current remote learning environment?

Do students want course components to be synchronous or asynchronous?

Students expressed almost identical preferences about how they would like to experience course components in a remote-learning context when compared to students who responded to the SOLE survey in summer 2020. We learned that the majority of students (49%) prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components, although approximately one-third (32%) prefer learning at their own pace (asynchronously).

Domestic students have slightly higher preferences for synchronous-only instruction, and international students have much higher preferences for course components to be at their own pace. This might be because many international students have to navigate time zone differences, as we heard in the SOLE survey. Likewise, it might be easier to review course materials and perhaps reduce any language or cultural barriers with more asynchronous materials.

I prefer my remote-learning course components to be:
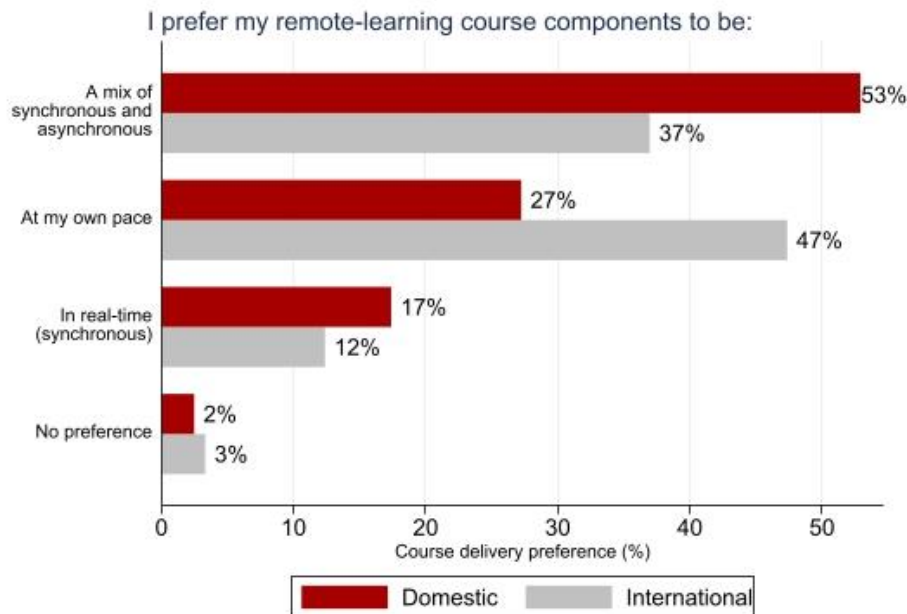
What else do students value in a remote learning context?

Students were also asked to what extent particular course components helped them learn and which supports are important to them in a remote-learning context:

Most helpful supports

➢ Instructors responding to emails within a few days
➢ Receiving regular feedback
➢ Receiving support from TAs

Least helpful supports

➢ Having opportunities to interact with other students
➢ Instructors responding to questions using a discussion board
➢ Interactive course components

Most helpful course components

➢ Assignments
➢ Video recordings of instructors
➢ Learning resources

Least helpful course components

➢ Group work/projects
➢ Discussion or activity in breakout rooms
➢ Online discussion boards

Students were also asked to provide additional information with an open-comment question. Student comments illustrated the following:

➢ Consistent with the key findings from the SOLE survey, communication and connection with the teaching team remains a top priority for students. Synchronous components (lectures or tutorials) provided important opportunities to ask questions and clarify expectations. Being unable to interact directly with the teaching team was seen as a drawback of entirely asynchronous lectures or courses.

➢ Lectures, a frequently cited course component, were seen to be most effective when recorded with a visual element (a video of the instructor delivering the lecture, or a powerpoint presentation) as opposed to an audio-only file which students found hard to follow.

➢ Many students praised how the asynchronous materials, specifically video recordings of lectures, allowed them to review the course material in order to better retain the information. They found they could both learn on their own schedule, such as the time of day or place they learn; as well as learn at their own pace, such as ability to pause, reflect

and digest the information. Combined, this enabled them to take the time needed to optimize their learning experience.
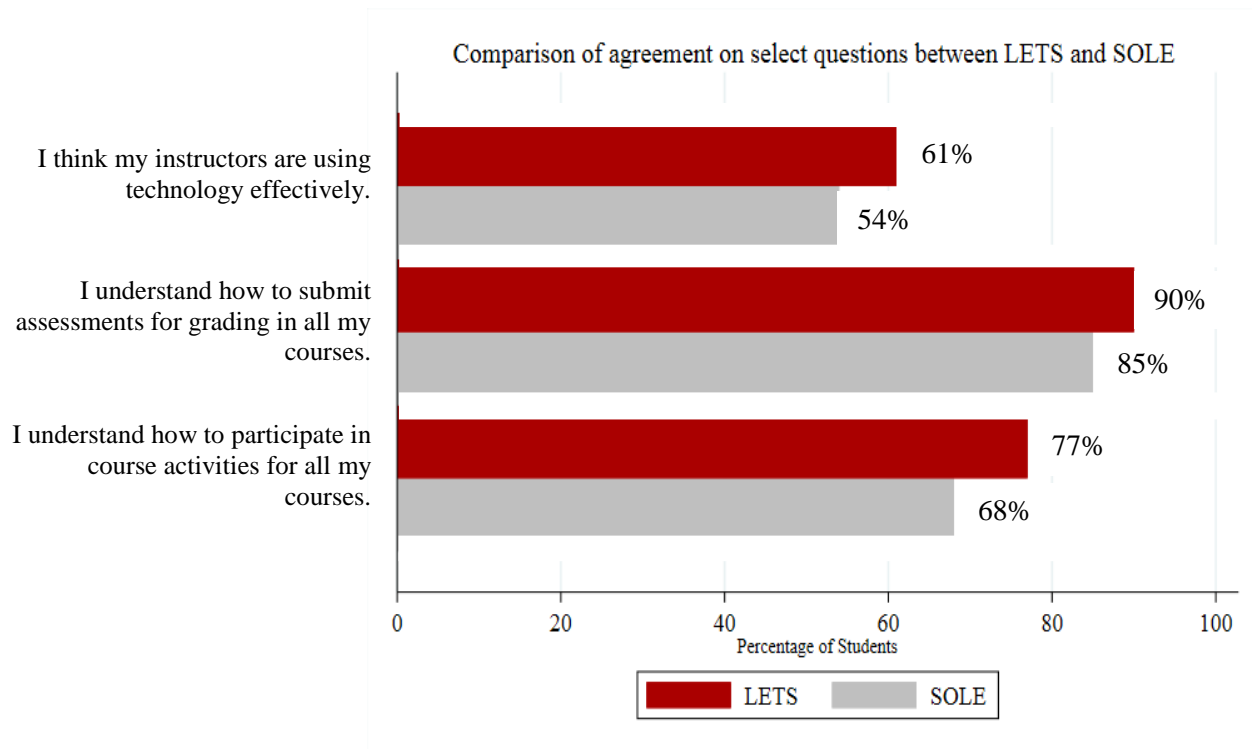
"Having the opportunity to pause the lecture, think about what was said and take notes in my own words allowed me to retain the information much more."

➢ The amount and frequency of certain components such as assignments and quizzes were highlighted, with several students indicating that they had seen an increase in their workload since the start of remote learning to a degree that became increasingly challenging to manage (see next section).

➢ Issues surrounding technical quality of audio recordings continued to appear, as they did in the SOLE, particularly highlighting the challenges in synchronous learning activities where the instructor was experiencing technical glitches or delays. This seemed to be an additional challenge for assessments (quizzes, assignments).

➢ While many expressed that interacting with peers was valuable to their learning experience, the lack of student participation in breakout rooms and group projects was a frequently highlighted concern.

"Group work/projects are impossible to work on when it is difficult to reach your peers online – you are left to do the group work on your own. It causes more stress… and is truly disappointing."
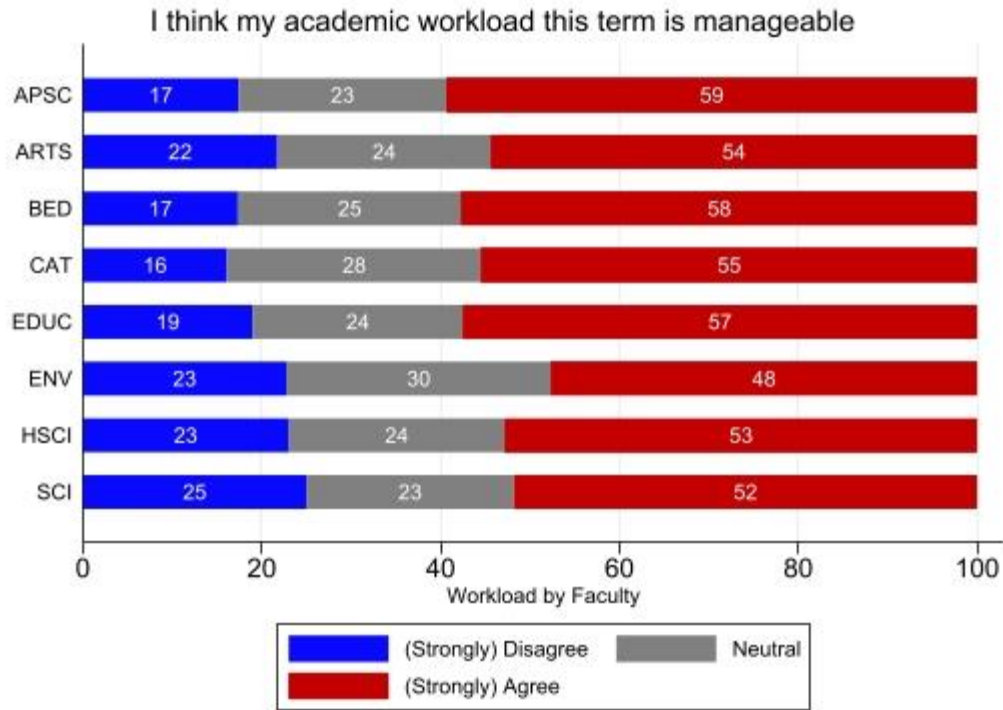
Have things changed between Summer 2020 and Spring 2021?

There were marked increases in the number of students who reported that their instructors were using technology effectively, and that student understood expectations of their instructors, between the SOLE survey of Summer 2020 and LETS in Spring 2021. Although students generally found that instructors were using technology more effectively with time, in open-ended comments they noted that their experiences of remote learning varied greatly among instructors because different instructors were using different online platforms.

Comparison of agreement on select questions between LETS and SOLE

Question	LETS	SOLE
I think my instructors are using technology effectively.	61%	54%
I understand how to submit assessments for grading in all my courses.	90%	85%
I understand how to participate in course activities for all my courses.	77%	68%

Managing an academic workload in a remote learning setting can be more difficult for some students. The majority of respondents on the SOLE survey reported that their workload was manageable and 23% reported that it was not manageable. Although these results are similar to the overall percentage from the LETS (21% reporting that their workload was not manageable), there were changes within faculties.

➢ The percentage of HSCI students who reported an unmanageable workload increased (14% SOLE, 23% LETS).

➢ The percentage of EDUC students who reported an unmanageable workload decreased (34% SOLE, 19% LETS).

I think my academic workload this term is manageable

Faculty	(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
APSC	17	23	59
ARTS	22	24	54
BED	17	25	58
CAT	16	28	55
EDUC	19	24	57
ENV	23	30	48
HSCI	23	24	53
SCI	25	23	52

Workload by Faculty

Instructor use of some course components increased between the Summer 2020 and Spring 2021:

➤ Audio recordings (+30%) - Despite their increase in use, student comments suggested that audio alone was not extremely helpful unless accompanied with visuals.

➤ Discussion or activities in breakout rooms (18%) – This component was reportedly used more frequently, yet it was rated as one of the least helpful components. Student comments suggest breakout rooms need intentional structuring to be effective.

➤ Workshops and tutorials (+18%) – Students expressed a desire for scaffolded engagement in tutorials, such as the mandated use of cameras and synchronous lessons.

➤ Video recordings by instructors (+15%) – Student ratings suggest that video recordings are well liked by students to learn at their own pace.

Supporting our students remotely and as we return to campus

Do students know how to access online support services?

The majority of students understood how to access online academic advising and mental health supports. International students expressed higher rates of understanding when compared to domestic students.

➢ 87% of respondents understood how to access online academic advising (92% for international status and 86% for domestic).

➢ 75% of respondents understood how to access online mental health support (82% for international status and 72% for domestic).

Mental health was frequently discussed by students when they were invited to share general comments. Students generally expressed that they were starting to hit their limits with regards to the impact that remote-learning and more broadly the pandemic was having on their mental health. Students suggested that should remote learning continue, two things would be helpful:

➢ Have instructors be aware of and sensitive to the mental health challenges of their students;

➢ Facilitate more opportunities for students to interact both with their peers and with their instructors.

> *"I have been fortunate to have some really understanding professors with regards to my anxiety disorder, but I know a lot of my friends have not been as lucky. I think professors need to be briefed on mental health and what is available to students so that they gain a bit more empathy for our situation and are able to redirect students to health counseling when they need it."*

A number of students disclosed in their responses that they live with a disability. These students made positive comments about remote learning (as it reduced their barriers to access learning),

while others expressed that these remote course components actively improved their educational experience.

> "*Remote learning has changed my life. As a person with a visual impairment, remote learning has given me more opportunities for learning than I could ever benefit from in person!*"

Additional comments from students fell into three broad groups:

➢ One group expressed they were uncomfortable returning to campus in any form because they did not want to put those they live with at risk and they were concerned about crowds and public transportation.

➢ A second group were excited to return, expressing they would like a return to some forms of in-person learning as soon as possible. These students outlined the ways in which remote learning had negatively impacted both their learning experience and their mental health.

➢ The third group of comments expressed that along with any return to in-person, they thought retaining the option to participate remotely would be vital. These students were appreciative of the level of flexibility that remote-learning brought to their educational experience, and wanted to retain that moving forward.

> *"As in person classes come back I hope that remote learning for every class becomes an option that each student can choose for themselves – it allows students to be flexible with their time, manage their time more efficiently and gives us the opportunity to take classes that may have otherwise had scheduling conflicts."*

What's next?

Students emphasized that tools were created during remote learning that enhanced their learning experience and allowed them to learn in new and helpful ways. This positive sentiment was particularly true of the use of recorded lectures, as well as being reflected in students expressing gratitude in being able to take courses they would not have otherwise been able to.

> *"I have thoroughly enjoyed remote courses, and I think in the future there should be more courses that are offered online in this format. Remote courses have made learning more accessible, and wiping away all of the innovations that have come from remote learning would be extremely unfortunate."*

As we continue to plan for the Fall 2021 term, SFU will consider how we can use innovative teaching approaches to support student learning. There is also an opportunity to use survey results to learn more about how we can support students as people, navigating the mental health and other challenges that come both from learning remotely and concerns about returning to in-person activities. We are grateful to our students for helping us as we navigate our return to on-campus life.

Acknowledgements

The Executive Leadership of the Provost office is grateful to the Learning Experiences Assessment and Planning Division (LEAP) of the Centre for Educational Excellence (CEE) for helping to operationalize our ideas about what we needed to learn from our students.