SOLE SURVEY

STUDENT ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Introduction to the Survey

In March of 2020, Simon Fraser University, like other postsecondary institutions around the world, suddenly pivoted from in-person to remote instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure successful completion of the Spring 2020 semester, courses were reimagined in just a few days. Also in March, SFU decided that the Summer 2020 semester would be conducted entirely remotely. Instructors took on the challenge of redesigning courses for this new way of teaching and learning, while simultaneously maintaining the teaching excellence for which SFU is known.

Although aware of how dedicated our instructors are to the student experience, we wondered if there were additional ways they could support and enhance student learning in our new environment. We thought the best people to ask about how to support students were students themselves. The SOLE survey (Student Online Learning Experiences survey) was envisioned as a way to learn more about the student experience during this first full semester of remote instruction, in a manner that might help inform instructors as they plan for another remote-learning semester in Fall 2020.

The survey was deployed June 22nd – July 6th (about midway through the summer term). All registered students were invited to participate (16,602 students), and our response rate was 29% (4,822 respondents). From the results, we have highlighted teaching practices most valued by our students, some areas where they are struggling, and things we've done well and others we could do better. Although some additional analysis remains to be completed (for instance, we are only just starting to evaluate the open-ended responses) releasing the report now provides instructors more time to consider if these results can inform their teaching plans for the fall.

Who responded?

- ➢ 58% were full time (taking at least 9 credits)

- ➢ 78% were domestic and 22% international students

- ➢ 5% were currently not in Canada

- ➢ 1% were within Canada, but outside B.C

Faculty	Respondents	%
Applied Science	732	15%
Arts and Social Science	1,492	31%
Beedie School of Business	652	14%
Communication, Art, and Technology	415	9%
Education	292	6%
Environment	169	4%
Health Sciences	302	6%
Science	768	16%
Total	**4,822**	**100%**

Do students prefer real-time (synchronous) or own-pace (asynchronous) learning?

Both kinds of teaching and learning delivery models have benefits. Synchronous delivery can promote discussions, interactivity, and the opportunity for students to receive immediate feedback. Real-time instruction can also help students regulate their efforts throughout the term and help build a community, two especially challenging issues in a remote learning setting. One student comment pointed out that having synchronous lecture or group meetings helps both students and instructors feel engaged.

Asynchronous delivery allows students the opportunity to learn at their own pace, which can be important for accessibility reasons. Students in remote communities may have insufficient internet capacity, others may have insufficient hardware or software, and some may be in different time zones, all of which can disrupt participation in synchronous activities.
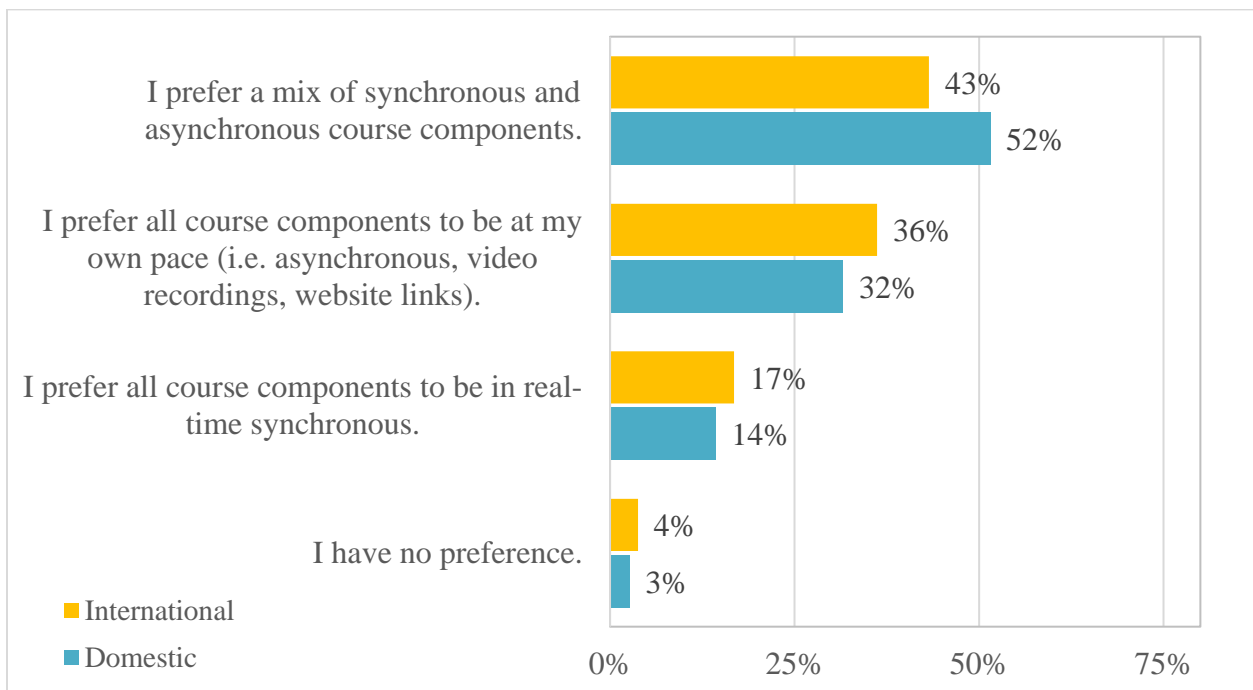
We learned that the majority of students (50%) prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components, although approximately one-third (33%) prefer learning at their own pace.
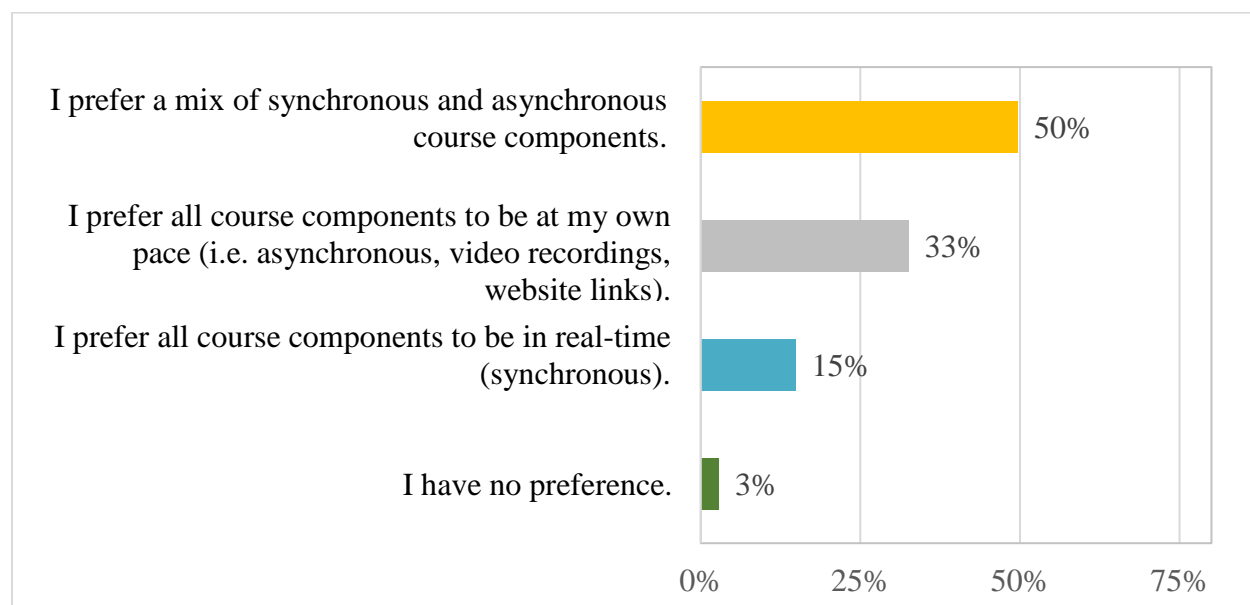
There was some variation among respondents from the different Faculties regarding the preference for a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components. The highest percentage was from Education and the lowest from Arts and Social Science.

I prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components.

Faculty	Percentage
APSC	49%
FASS	45%
BUS	50%
CAT	55%
EDUC	63%
ENV	47%
HSCI	51%
SCI	52%
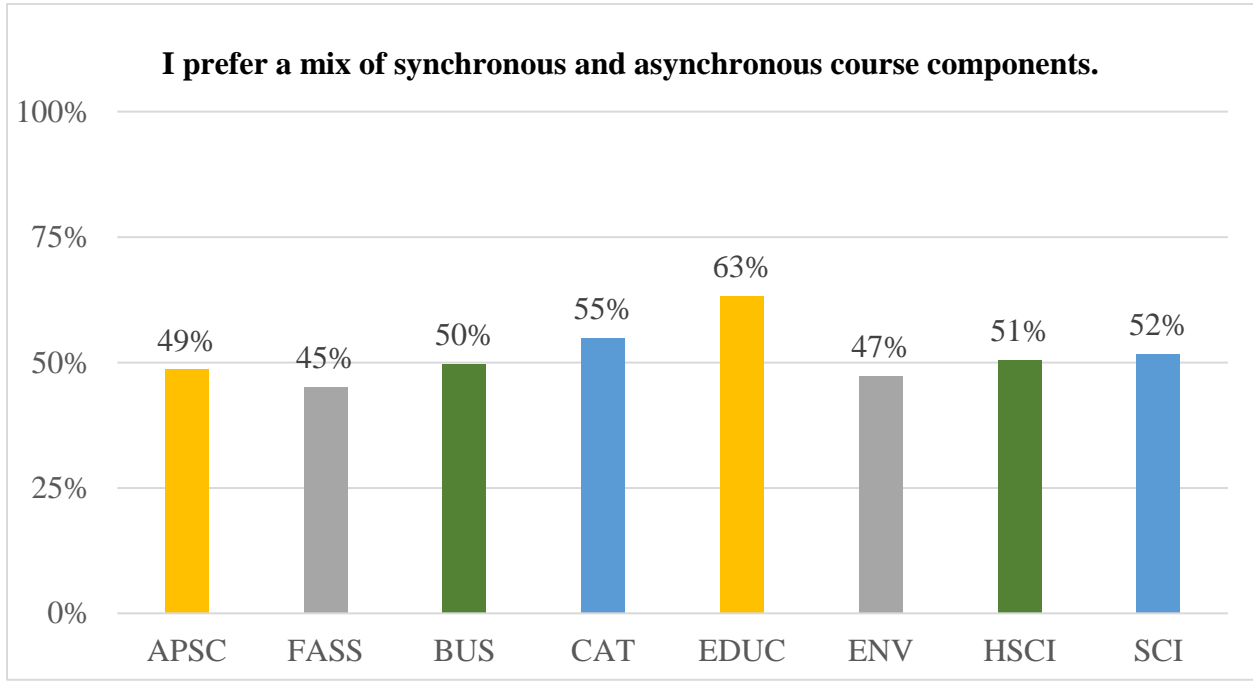
International students also prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components, though at a lower rate than Domestic students did.

	International	Domestic
I prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous course components.	43%	52%
I prefer all course components to be at my own pace (i.e. asynchronous, video recordings, website links).	36%	32%
I prefer all course components to be in real-time synchronous.	17%	14%
I have no preference.	4%	3%

What do students value?

We wanted to understand what was important to students in a remote learning environment. Respondents highly valued feedback from their instructor and the ability to provide feedback *to* their instructor, but place less value on interactivity during synchronous course components with their instructor or peers.

Most important:

- Instructors responding to emails within a few days.

- Receiving regular feedback about out how well I'm learning the course material.

- Having opportunities to provide feedback about the course during the semester.

Less important:

- Having opportunities to interact with other students.

- Interactive course components.

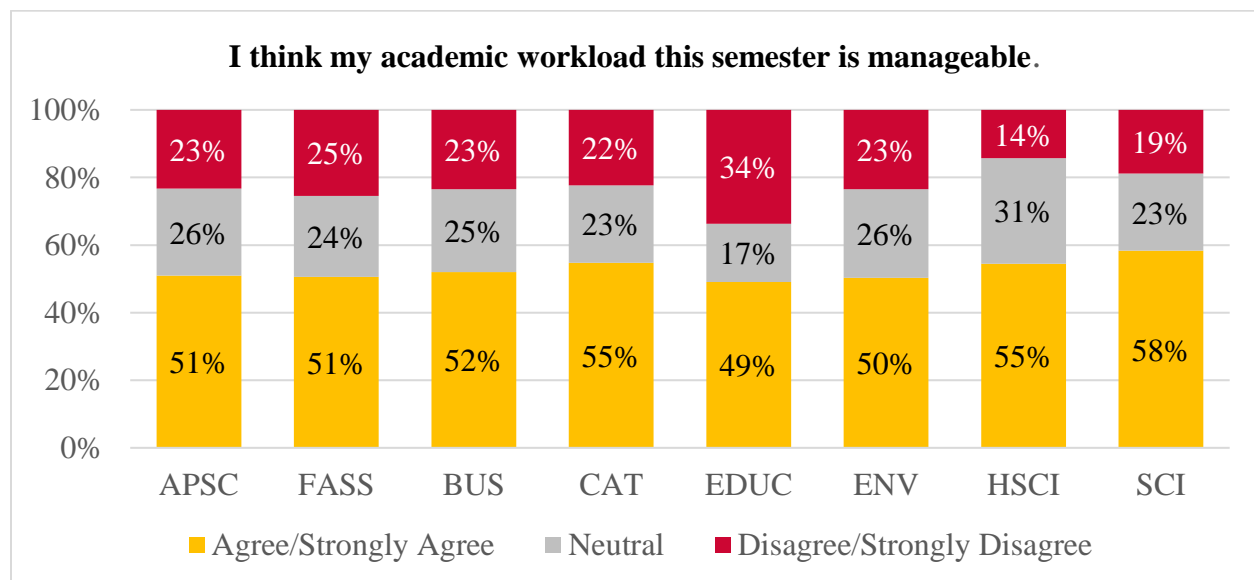- Instructors responding to questions using a discussion board.

Students are clearly grateful to the instructors who are working hard to support students. Some example comments:

"I very much appreciate how my professor explicitly said to tell him if you were having difficulties…he has been very understanding and I am extremely grateful"

"I am deeply grateful for the professor's understanding and accommodations. Also, having lecture shortened from 4 hours to 1 hour was a great help. Thank you."

Are students managing their workload?

Managing an academic workload in a remote learning setting can be more difficult for some students. However, the majority of our participants reported that their workload was manageable, with 23% reporting that it was not. The percentage of respondents who found it unmanageable varied by Faculty (though not with domestic/international status).

I think my academic workload this semester is manageable.

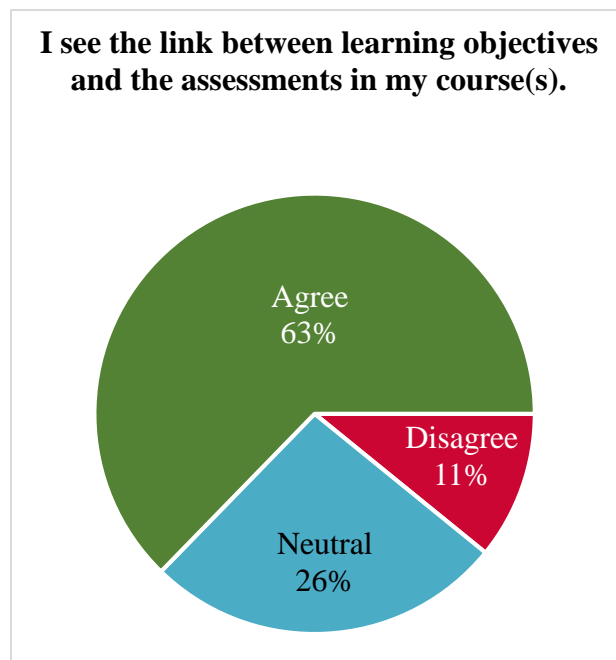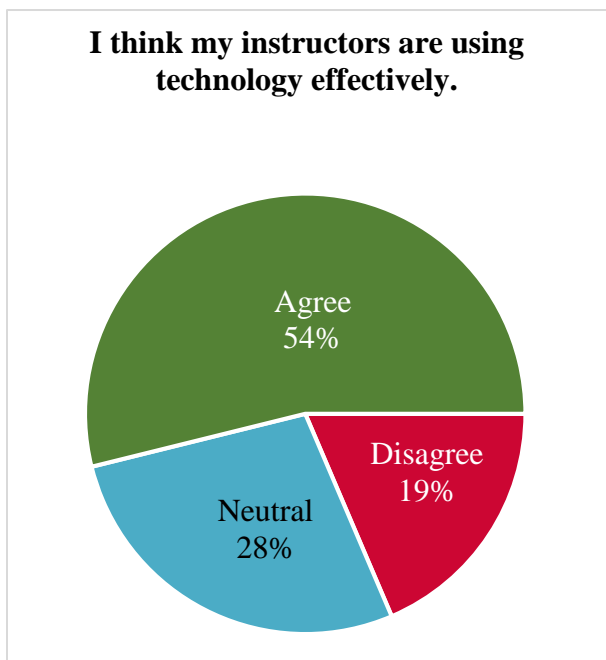|	APSC	FASS	BUS	CAT	EDUC	ENV	HSCI	SCI
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	23%	25%	23%	22%	34%	23%	14%	19%
Neutral	26%	24%	25%	23%	17%	26%	31%	23%
Agree/Strongly Agree	51%	51%	52%	55%	49%	50%	55%	58%

Open-ended comments suggested students felt the expectations of their instructors should be reduced, given the unfamiliar way of learning and the stress many are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. They also commented on the difficulty of working from home, where there can be little privacy as other people may be sharing their space.

Are we communicating expectations to students well?

Although students were generally positive about their experiences and felt they understood expectations, there is room for improvement in this regard. For example, 19% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "I think my instructors are using technology effectively." Open-ended comments suggested there was anxiety about internet instability and whether lectures could be recorded in case of difficulties, and there were some pointed comments about difficulties instructors were having with using videoconferencing tools like Zoom.

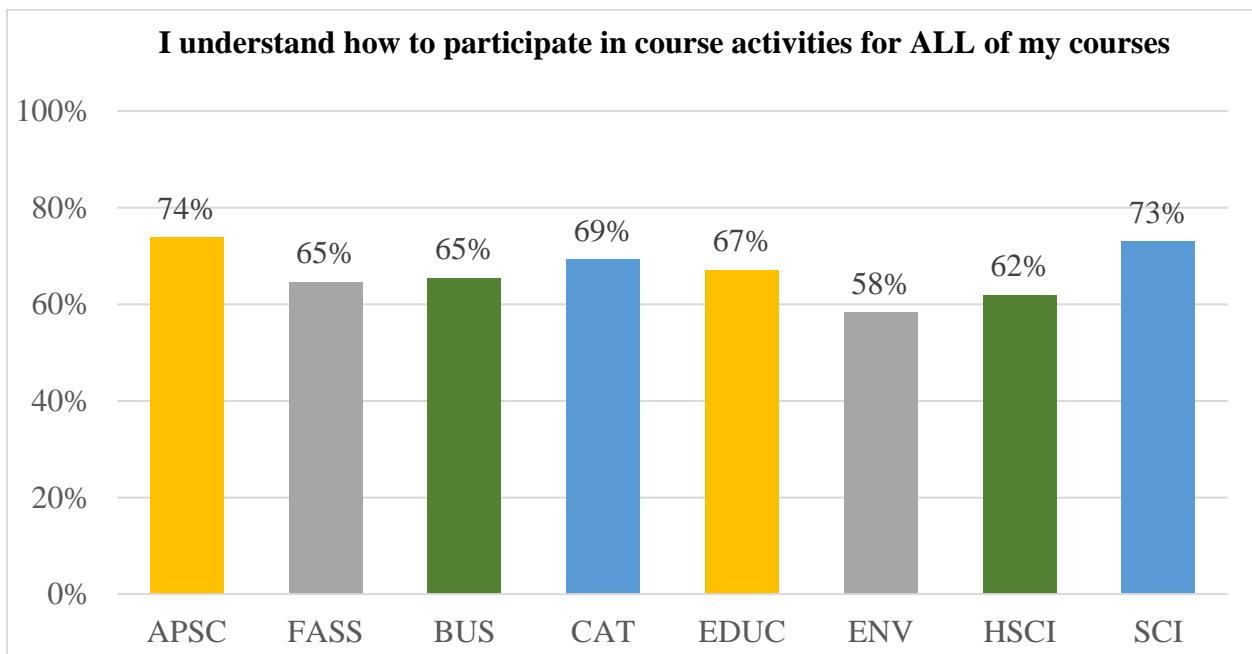On the other hand, only 11% of respondents did not see the link between course learning objectives and assessments.

I think my instructors are using technology effectively.

Agree 54%

Disagree 19%

Neutral 28%

I see the link between learning objectives and the assessments in my course(s).

Agree 63%

Disagree 11%

Neutral 26%

A common issue students experience in remote learning environments is feeling confused about how to participate in course activities. Open-ended comments on our survey suggested it wasn't always clear how to access information, how assignments or participation would be graded, or what was coming next in the course.

I understand how to participate in course activities.

- All of my courses 68%
- Some of my courses 32%
- None of my courses 1%
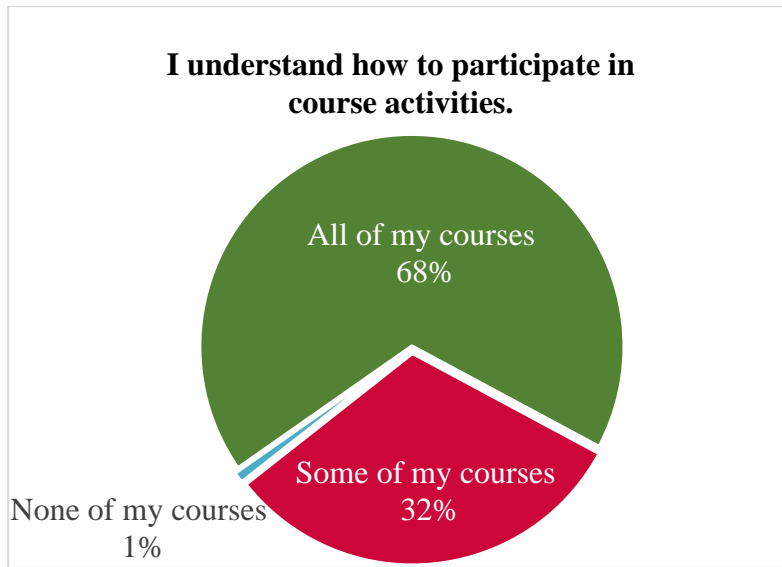
There also appeared to be variation among Faculties, since a greater percentage of students in Applied Science and Science reported understanding how to participate in all of their course activities.

I understand how to participate in course activities for ALL of my courses

APSC	FASS	BUS	CAT	EDUC	ENV	HSCI	SCI
74%	65%	65%	69%	67%	58%	62%	73%

Course components that students felt helped them learn

To help inform future course design, we asked students about which course components they experienced, and of those, which they felt helped them learn.

Which course components have you experienced this semester? Check all that apply.	Respondents	%
Assignments	4,451	92%
Instructor lecturing online in real-time (synchronous lecture)	4,002	83%
Learning resources (such as texts, readings, videos, applications, website links)	3,871	80%
Quizzes	3,804	79%
Video recording of instructor lecturing (asynchronous lecture)	3,757	78%
Online discussion board (e.g. Canvas forum)	3,604	75%
Presentations sent/posted for students (such as PowerPoint presentation)	3,398	70%
Discussion or activity in small groups or break-out rooms	3,240	67%
Workshops or tutorials (real-time or synchronous sessions)	2,773	58%
Group work/projects	2,769	57%
Audio recording of the instructor lecturing (audio files)	1,960	41%
Other	240	5%
Respondents	**4,822**	**100%**

Of the course components student experienced, the ones students found to be most helpful:

➢ Assignments

➢ Video recording of instructor lecturing

➢ Learning resources (such as texts, readings, videos, applications, website links)
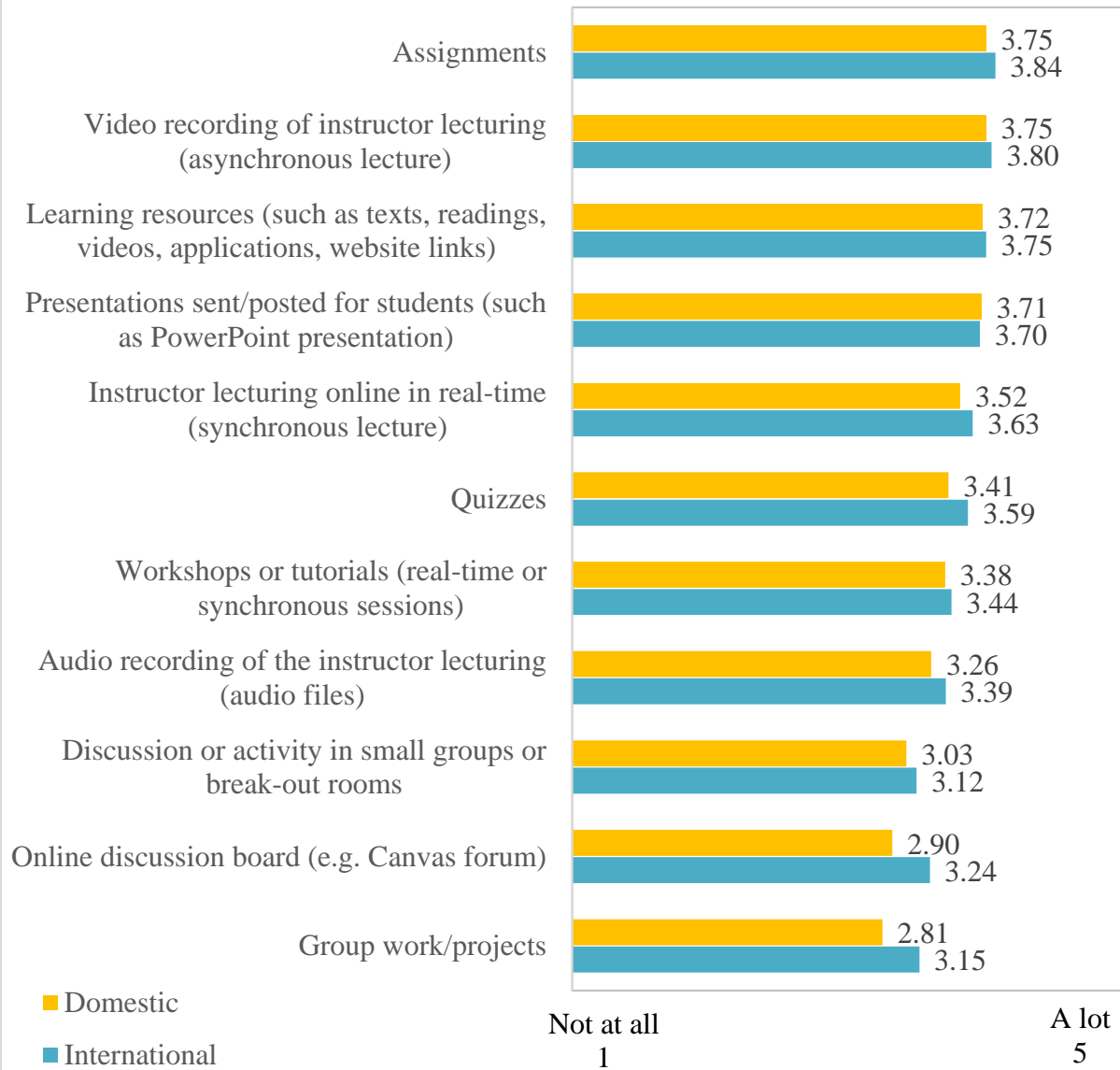
And those that were less helpful:

➢ Group work/projects

➢ Online discussion boards

➢ Discussion or activity in small groups or break-out rooms

These student preferences may reflect modes of teaching and learning that they (and their instructors) are more familiar with (such as assignments and texts being more familiar than online discussion boards). In addition, some students commented that they thought participation in discussion boards was more work with little added benefit.

International students generally ranked all course components as more supportive of their learning than domestic students. However, the order from most to least useful course component was almost identical between the two groups. One possibility is that international students give higher scores due to cultural differences, but find the same course components relatively more or less helpful when compared with domestic students (see next page).

How much is the course component helping you learn?

Course component	Domestic	International
Assignments	3.75	3.84
Video recording of instructor lecturing (asynchronous lecture)	3.75	3.80
Learning resources (such as texts, readings, videos, applications, website links)	3.72	3.75
Presentations sent/posted for students (such as PowerPoint presentation)	3.71	3.70
Instructor lecturing online in real-time (synchronous lecture)	3.52	3.63
Quizzes	3.41	3.59
Workshops or tutorials (real-time or synchronous sessions)	3.38	3.44
Audio recording of the instructor lecturing (audio files)	3.26	3.39
Discussion or activity in small groups or break-out rooms	3.03	3.12
Online discussion board (e.g. Canvas forum)	2.90	3.24
Group work/projects	2.81	3.15

Not at all = 1, A lot = 5

■ Domestic
■ International

Spring 2020 Pivot

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, in-person teaching activities were halted quite suddenly. On March 12, 2020 the Province limited any teaching in classes with enrollments over 250, and by March 17 SFU had cancelled all in-person classes and exams. Instructors reinvented courses on the fly to ensure students could complete the term. Both instructors and students needed to adapt and learn new ways of interacting (i.e. videoconferencing rather than in-person lectures), relying heavily on Canvas, our learning management system, to complete courses.

We asked students how they felt about the university response during this time.

➢ Only 17% of respondents disagreed with the statement "I felt informed about the changes that were made to my courses." This percentage drops to just 11% for International students.
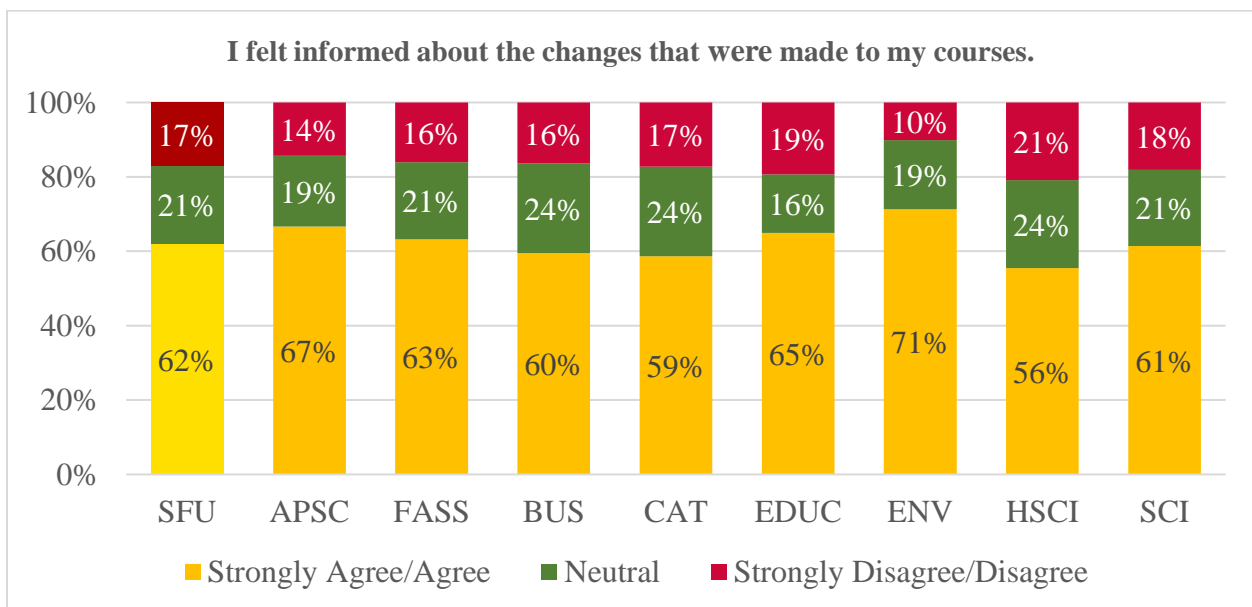

Comments on this issue were quite divergent and require further analysis. They range from "I don't believe SFU as an institution has done enough to support students and staff to adapt to these times" to "I don't understand an email I received from the student union criticizing spring 2020. Felt like given the circumstances SFU did a great job transitioning to remote learning on very short notice."
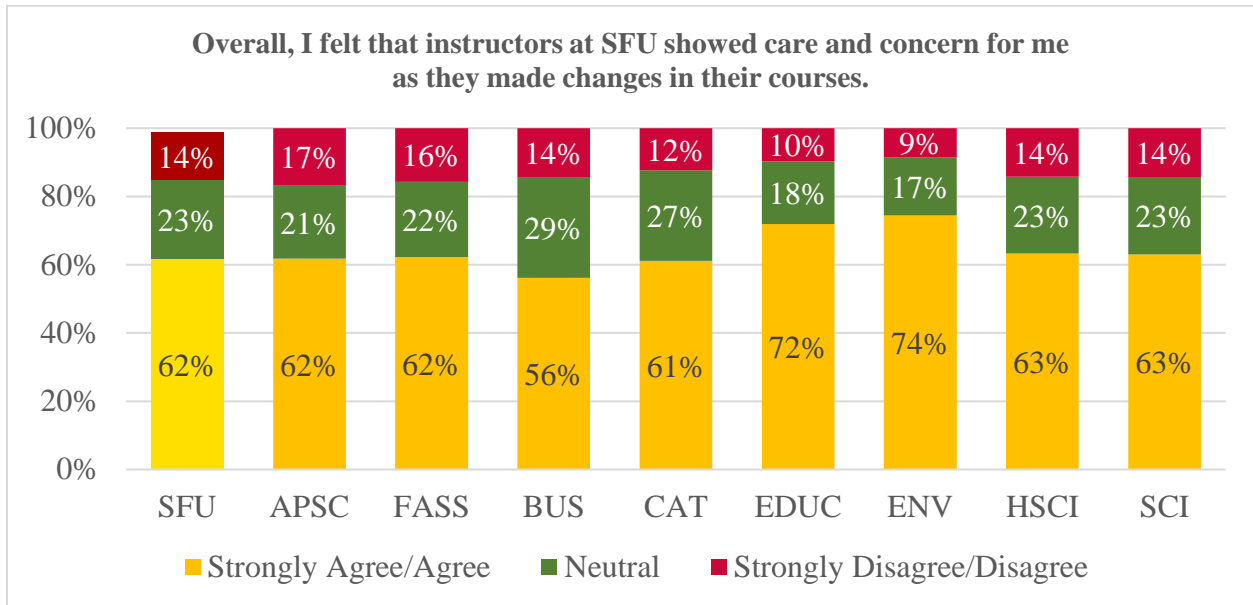
➤ Most students found that new online tools and the ways they needed to submit assessments worked reasonably well.

Online tools or methods of submitting assessments were reliable.
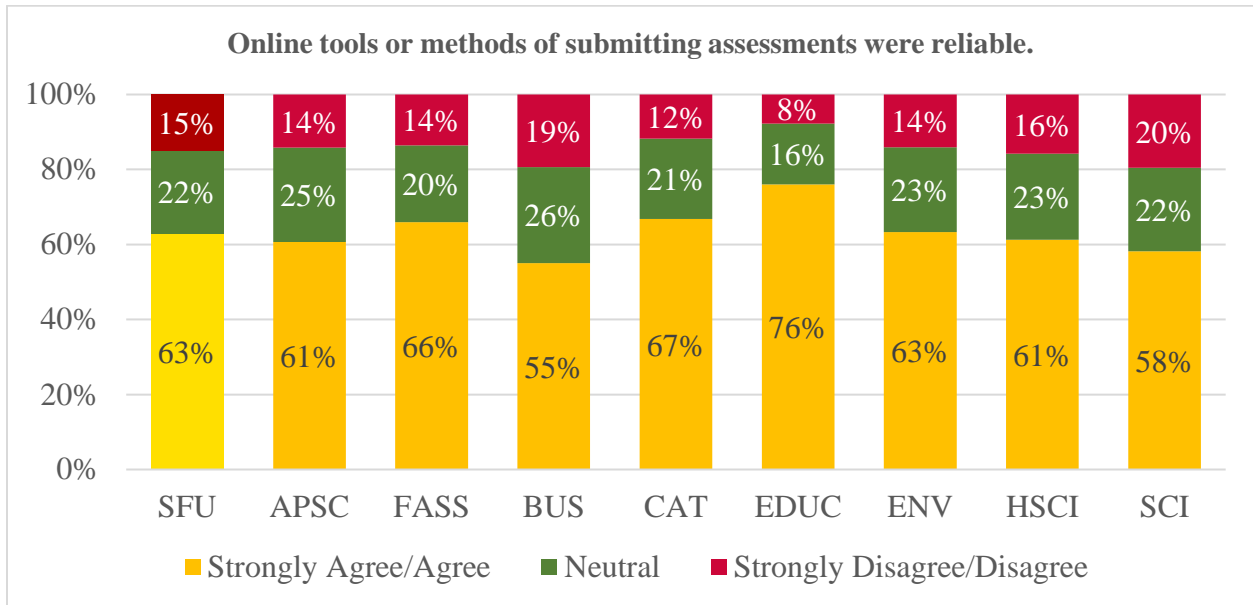
➤ Although students generally understood new ways of using online tools, 20% felt instructor expectations were not reasonable given the challenges of the transition. This percentage varied among Faculties.

My instructor(s) had reasonable expectations of my performance given the transition
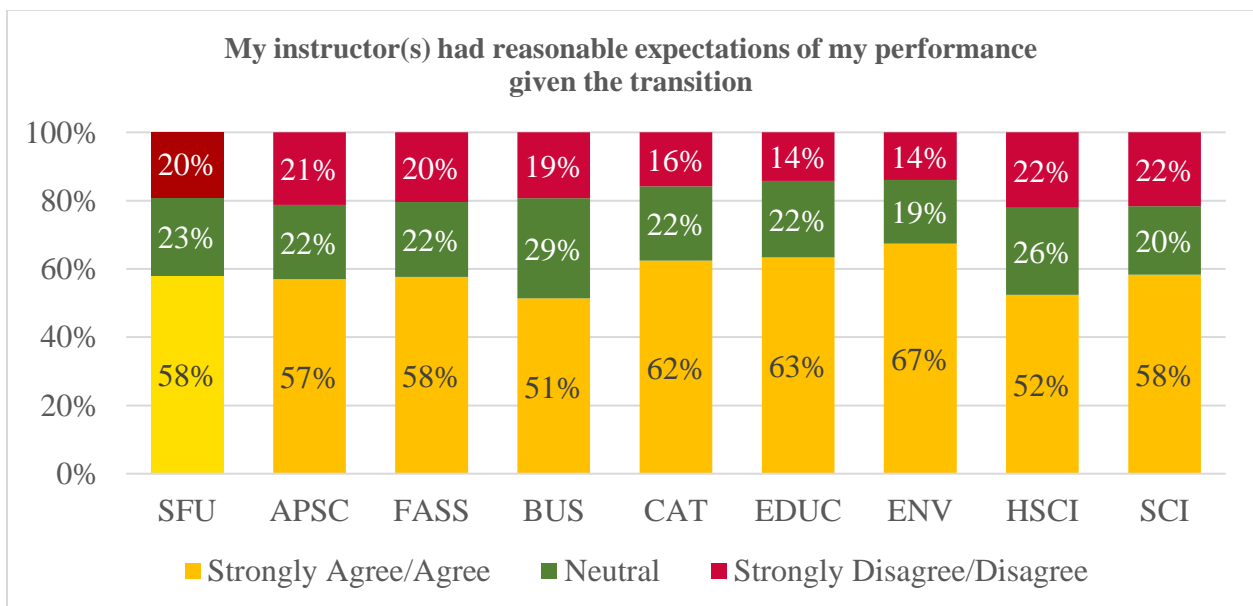
➢ The majority of respondents felt that SFU instructors showed care and concern during the pivot.

Overall, I felt that instructors at SFU showed care and concern for me as they made changes in their courses.

	SFU	APSC	FASS	BUS	CAT	EDUC	ENV	HSCI	SCI
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	14%	17%	16%	14%	12%	10%	9%	14%	14%
Neutral	23%	21%	22%	29%	27%	18%	17%	23%	23%
Strongly Agree/Agree	62%	62%	62%	56%	61%	72%	74%	63%	63%

A few sample comments about instructors and the pivot:

"As I mentioned SFU made me proud with the online learning experience. It is as if they have been doing this for decades. To pull this off so quickly is admirable."

"I realize my instructors are also making a big adjustment and I appreciate that all of them have done their best to make learning accessible to their students."

Summary and next steps

Teaching and learning remotely has been challenging for both instructors and students. We have heard many stories reflecting the dedication, commitment and innovation of our faculty in meeting these challenges. The results from this survey provide some insight from the student perspective which may help shape pedagogical practices as we continue with remote instruction into the fall of 2020.

The diverse array of tools and methods being utilized by instructors in their efforts to support students in their remote learning demonstrates remarkable adaptability. Students have expressed some concerns that instructors may not be using technology effectively, however. Instructors who are interested in learning more about how technology can support pedagogical goals may wish to consider some of the workshops offered by the Centre for Educational Excellence (CEE).

We learned that students tended to prefer course components that they (and perhaps their instructors) were likely more familiar with, such as assignments and texts, rather than discussion boards and breakout room discussions. These course components, in addition to possibly being less familiar to students, were also perceived as being more work. A second important finding is that students tended to appreciate a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities. Just as for in-person teaching, our findings suggest that the use of a diversity of pedagogies will support a greater diversity of students. Of course student preferences are just one consideration in instructional design, and some preferences predate the move to remote instruction, such as some students being uncomfortable with group work. Helping students to understand the goals of learning activities such as discussion boards and group work, and the transferable skills that underlie them, can be useful. Instructors who would appreciate more support around course design in the remote teaching environment could consider reaching out to the educational developers at CEE.

The survey results also suggest that it would be useful to reflect on ways to improve how we communicate our expectations to students. Students expressed confusion about how to participate in course activities and where to find course information. From other recent surveys, we are aware that postsecondary students are feeling high levels of anxiety and stress in these

challenging times. Consequently, we recommend that instructors consider investing some course time to ensure students understand expectations under these new ways of teaching and learning, and perhaps also consider checking-in with students throughout the term regarding whether course activities are appropriately supporting their learning.

We have yet to perform a more thorough analysis of respondent comments on the survey, which, once completed, will be released as a revised version of this report. We will do our best to have this analysis and revised report released by early September.

Acknowledgements