

**SYNDICAT
ÉTUDIANT**
de l'Université d'Ottawa



University of Ottawa
**STUDENTS'
UNION**

UOSU's COVID-19 Survey:

Our Results

May 2020

The UOSU recognizes that it performs its work on the unceded, unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people.



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students' lives in more ways than one. In addition to the sudden transition towards online learning, the current public health crisis and economic recession has also dramatically altered the student experience.

In order to better understand the student population's concerns at this unprecedented time, the University of Ottawa Students' Union asked students to share what impact COVID-19 is having on them by completing a survey broken down into three sections: Academic Impact, Financial Impact & Mental and Physical Health Impact.

The survey found that the pandemic is taking a toll on students' ability to cover basic expenses, having a significant negative impact on their mental health, and the prospects of a full semester of online learning will leave many students falling through the cracks or paying more just to stay in school. This reality is exacerbated among international students and marginalized groups.

More specifically:

- **Students are worried about how they will cover basic expenses, such as rent and tuition, in the fall semester.** This concern is greater among racialized and international students. 76% have had a change in their employment status. **As a result, students have given the UOSU a clear mandate to advocate for reduced tuition in the Fall Semester**, with 80.3% of students agreeing that a fully online semester should come with a lower price-tag.
- **Though online learning may be accessible to a majority of students, it has nonetheless left far too many falling through the cracks.** Students with learning disabilities, such as ADHD, are among the most negatively affected by the transition. Others are struggling to keep motivated to learn at the same rhythm. The University should provide professors with the tools they need to deliver classes in both a synchronous and asynchronous manner, and **maintain flexible academic regulations**. Moreover, students in precarious financial situations may not own the technology required to pursue a full semester of online courses. The provincial & federal government should provide additional financial assistance. No student should have to pay more to stay in school.
- **Students' mental health has taken a significant hit.** We found in this survey that 39% of students are exhibiting high symptoms of psychological distress and that 63% of students have self-reported that their mental health has worsened. uOttawa was already in a



mental health crisis before the pandemic; the urgent mental health needs of the student population are far greater than ever now.

The findings of this report demonstrate that levels of government and the University of Ottawa must do more to help students during this time. The needs are great and they are urgent. The UOSU has heard students and will fight on their behalf.

A full list of recommendations is available on page 11 of this report.

Methodology

The survey was open from May 5th to May 28th and was hosted on Google Forms. The sample size was not collected through any probability-based sampling method, and as such, the data in this report cannot be applied to the overall uOttawa student population. Nonetheless, it can provide a valuable insight into the impact this pandemic is having on undergraduate students.

Summary of Results

Data démographique // Demographic Data

264 students have completed the survey. The following is a comparison between the demographic breakdown of the sample size and of the uOttawa population as a whole.

	Sample Size	Actual (2019 Fall Semester) ¹		Sample Size	Actual (2019 Fall Semester) ²
Arts	10.6%	12.1%			
Education	1.9%	4.0%			
Engineering	15.5%	12.7%	Full-Time	93.9%	85.8%
Health Sciences	13.6%	10.7%	Part-Time	5.4%	14.0%
Law (Common & Civil)	0.8%	5.5%			
Management (Telfer)	6.1%	12.2%	Canadian & Permanent Residents	75.8%	80.7%
Medicine	1.1%	5.3%	Foreign & Exchange	24.2%	19.3%
Science	15.2%	13.0%			

¹ <https://www.uottawa.ca/institutional-research-planning/resources/facts-figures/fact-book/enrolment>

² Idem.



Social Sciences	35.2%	24.7%
-----------------	-------	-------

The data shows that the sample size is generally consistent with the demographic breakdown of the uOttawa population, with several small, but notable exceptions. Students in Law, Management, Education and Medicine are underrepresented in the survey, and students in Social Science are overrepresented in the survey. Similarly, Full-Time students and, to a small extent, Foreign & Exchange students, are over-represented in the survey, at the expense of Part-Time students, and, to a small extent, Canadian & Permanent Resident students.

Lastly, 70% of students self-identified as a woman, 28% identified as racialized, 18% identified as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community and 5% reported that they had a disability. *This disclosure was voluntary, which has an impact on the accuracy of the data.* uOttawa does not publish demographic data of this nature, so a comparison is not possible.

Cours et impacts académiques // Classes and Academic Impact

Students were asked the following questions in this section:

- How were your online classes carried out?
- Do you have the appropriate technology to access online class materials?³
- How satisfied were you with the quality of online courses?
- Does this change in your classes affect the completion of your program?
- Were you satisfied with how your professors conducted your final exams? Is there anything we should know?
- Are you enrolled in courses for the 2020 Spring/Summer term? If no, why?
- Would you be willing to take a full course-load of online classes in the Fall term? If no, why?
- Were you ordered to move out of residence before the end of the Winter 2020 semester? If so, could you please explain your experience? Were you granted a special exemption to stay in residence during the end of the Winter 2020 semester? If so, are your needs being met?

The following is a summary of the most relevant findings from these questions.

Online courses at the end of the Winter 2020 semester mostly all used the Brightspace portal. 50% of students noted that they were in at least one class that was completed through live video conference lectures. 50% of students also noted that they were in at least one class that was completed through pre-recorded lectures.

³ Note: While the results show that most respondents have access to the proper technology to access online course materials, it should be noted that the survey was conducted solely online due to the constraints imposed by the current situation, and could be skewed as a result.



31.4% of students noted that the change to online classes will affect the completion of their program. This included over half of all Engineering students who responded to the survey.

In response to a question asking students to rate how satisfied they were with the quality of their online courses, 29.4% of respondents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Moreover, when it came to final exams, there was a fairly positive response, **and many expressed relief that their faculty had given them the satisfactory/non-satisfactory (pass/fail) option.** Nonetheless, a significant number of students brought up the fact that some professors tended to increase the difficulty of the final exams to make up for them being open-book. Many students noted increased stress because of this.

Some students suggested that more flexible options would have been welcome:

“The university needs to be considerate of the fact that due to the circumstances, students may not be able to sit down for 1-2h to write an exam (not to mention time differences if the student went home). At UofT and McGill, their students had 1 week to do their exams. **Perhaps this means that you can write the exam when you decide (rather than making it mandatory that on a certain date and time, you must sit down and write it) or changing the format to an essay would be more favourable to students.**”

Others pointed out the inconsistency between their different classes and professors:

“Some professors were very accommodating while others were not. Some professors only gave the three hours [for exams] (even less when you have to count in printing, scanning, and uploading documents to Brightspace). Others gave 24 hours or multiple days. **Many of my peers who excel in their courses experienced significant drops in their marks due to the final exams because they were not able to finish.**”

40.5% of students stated that they would not be willing to take a full course-load of online classes in the Fall semester.

Impact financier // Financial impact

Students were asked the following questions in this section:

- Were you laid off from your job in March 2020 due to COVID-19 AND earned at least \$5000 in the past 12 months?
- If you were laid off from your job in March 2020, when was your work contract expected to end?
- Approximately how much income have you earned in the previous 12 months?
- How concerned are you about the potential impact COVID-19 will have on your various financial obligations?
- If you are an international student or exchange student, are you receiving any help from your home country? If yes, what type of aid are you receiving?



- What is the status of your summer employment?
- Which financial supports do you have access to at this time?
- In the event that all of your courses in the Fall 2020 semester will be held online, do you believe that the cost of tuition should be... (raised/kept the same/reduced/waived)?
- In the event that all of your courses in the Fall 2020 semester will be a mix of online learning and in-person lectures with physical distancing measures, do you believe that the cost of tuition should be... (raised/kept the same/reduced/waived)?

Students were asked if they had been laid off from their job in March 2020 due to COVID-19 and earned at least \$5000 in the past 12 months. At the time of publishing, these were the general admissibility criteria for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. In this section, only 13.6% of students responded yes, with 9% of students preferring not to say and 77.5% of students responding no.

Domestic and international students were asked what financial support they had access to at this time. Close to half of respondents indicated that they were receiving financial support from their families. About a quarter of respondents also indicated that they were receiving the CESB, scholarships, or were still employed. Around a fifth of respondents stated that they were receiving OSAP or equivalent financial aid, or the CERB. 15% of students said they were receiving no financial aid.

International students specifically were polled on whether or not they were receiving financial assistance from their home countries. 13% responded that they were, and 87% indicated that they were not. Of those who indicated that they were, half reported that the financial aid they were receiving was from their family.

In addition to asking them what financial resources they currently had, we polled students on their concerns for financial obligations in the future. Students were least concerned about paying summer tuition, medical bills and their credit card. 44% were either very concerned or extremely concerned about paying rent and utilities. **About 60% were either very concerned or extremely concerned about paying tuition fees in the fall.**

Lastly, students were polled on whether or not they believed the current rate of tuition should be maintained, provided classes do not resume on an in-person basis in the Fall. In the event that all Fall 2020 semester courses were to be held online, 14.7% of students believed tuition should be waived, **80.3% of students believed tuition should be reduced**, and only 5% believed tuition should be kept the same. In the event that the Fall 2020 semester would be “a mix of online learning and in-person lectures with physical distancing measures”, 3% of students



believed tuition should be waived, **73.7% of students believed tuition should be reduced**, and around 20% of students believed tuition should be kept the same.

Impacts sur la santé mentale/physique // Mental/Physical Health Impacts

Students were asked the following questions in this section:

- The following questions concern how you've been feeling. During the past 30 days, on the scale of 1 to 5, about how often did you feel...
 - nervous?
 - hopeless?
 - restless and/or fidgety?
 - so depressed nothing could cheer you up?
 - that everything was an effort?
 - worthless?(Kessler et al., 2002)⁴
- In your opinion, how has your mental health changed since the introduction of social distancing measures in Canada?
- How did online school affect your mental health? (Was your productivity affected? Did it increase your level of stress? Feel free to provide as much detail as you're comfortable sharing.)
- Tell us about how you've been feeling lately. What are a few things that you've been doing to cope with the latest events resulting from COVID-19?
- Do you have any learning disabilities that have made/would make online courses more challenging?
- Anything that you're worried about that wasn't mentioned in this survey? Anything you need? Let us know.

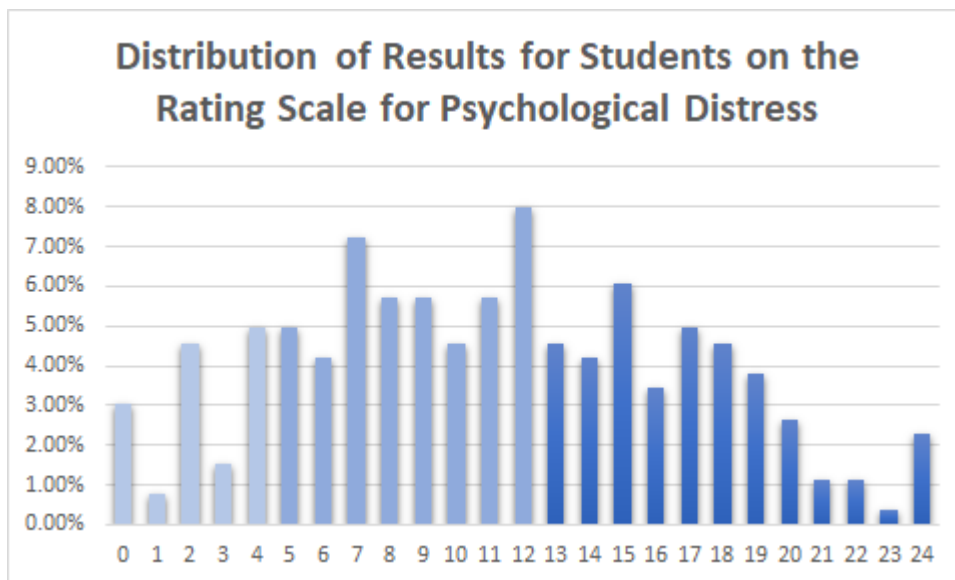
Students were asked to complete a shortened version of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6). This is a measure regularly used to evaluate likelihood of depression or psychological distress in population-wide studies, including by the *Union étudiante du Québec*⁵, the *Institut de Statistiques du Québec*⁶, Statistics Canada⁷ and others. By comparing the results of the sample with typical results within a population and within a student population, one can seek to quantitatively assess if COVID-19 has had a significant mental health impact on the well-being of students.

⁴ Kessler, Ronald C., Gavin Andrews, Lisa J. Colpe, Eva Hiripi, Daniel K. Mroczek, Sharon-Lise, T. Normand, Ellen E. Walters, and Alan M. Zaslavsky. 2002. "Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress." *Psychological Medicine*. 32(6): 959-976. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291702006074>

⁵ Union étudiante du Québec. 2018. What's Behind The Mask? https://unionetudiante.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Rapport_UEQ_SP-VF-EN-1.01.pdf

⁶ Institut national de santé publique du Québec. 2018. Rapport québécois sur la violence et la santé. Québec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec. <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/rapport-quebecois-sur-la-violence-et-la-sante>.

⁷ Statistics Canada. 2012. Perceived need for mental health care in Canada: Results from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey-Mental Health.



The rating scale was adjusted from 1-5 to 0-4 for the purpose of this survey - the lower the number, the less the respondent felt the specific emotion (nervous, hopeless, restless/fidgety, depressed, that everything was an effort, worthless). The following table contrasts the results of this survey with the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey - Mental Health⁸:

(Categories determined by the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey)	uOttawa Students According to COVID-19 Survey	2012 Canadian Community Health Survey - Mental Health
Low (score 0-4)	15%	77%
Moderate (score 5-12)	46%	21%
High (score 13+)	39%	2%

Even in light of this survey's limitations, these results are worrisome and confirm that students' mental health has worsened due to COVID-19.

Students were also asked to self-evaluate if their mental health has changed since the introduction of social distancing measures in Canada. **49%** stated that it had worsened and **14%** had stated that it had significantly worsened. In total, **63%** of respondents have confirmed that

⁸ Idem.



COVID-19 has taken a negative toll on their mental health. Coincidentally, these questions resemble those posed in a Statistics Canada crowdsourcing survey entitled “Impacts of COVID-19 Canadians - Your mental health”, in which 46,000 Canadians participated:

Our survey question/StatsCan question	uOttawa Students According to COVID-19 Survey	Statistics Canada - Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians ⁹
Significantly improved/much better now	1%	2%
Improved/somewhat better now	9%	8%
Stayed the same/about the same	27%	38%
Worsened/somewhat worse now	49%	44%
Significantly worsened/much worse now	14%	8%

In the open-ended answer questions, many students affirmed that their productivity has significantly decreased. Among the explanations for this include the lack of a schedule or routine, a lack of motivation, an inability to focus or to learn online and increased stress about the global pandemic. When asked how they were trying to cope, many students cited exercise, cooking or embracing the opportunity to take more rest. Nonetheless, students were generally hopeless, frustrated, anxious and concerned about the challenges ahead in the next few months:

Now that I'm done with exams, I'm coming up with little baking and art projects for myself or having days where I do nothing productive. **I feel like I'm grieving.**

I've been feeling stressed but in a different capacity. Rarely leaving the house has been difficult. I miss some of my family members and friends. I miss going to church. I usually experience an episode of depression in the summer, but having work helps mitigate that a little. **I'm worried I may not be able to get a job this summer, which would also negatively affect my mental health.**

I am very concerned by the financial situation. My mother sends me money from Mexico, but with the more expensive exchange rates things are more difficult. I am looking for a job but I can't find one. I feel anxious, apathetic and alone. **There are days when I have nothing to do.**

⁹ Statistics Canada. 2020. Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians – Your mental health. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.



I am extremely stressed about the lack of answers I am receiving from my faculty. I was supposed to complete a placement abroad, but it was cancelled. I have a total of 2 deferred grades, with no idea of when I will make up the hours. I am constantly nervous, anxious and suffer from depression. **I have no motivation for doing anything because it doesn't seem like the situation is getting any better.**

Disparités parmi les étudiants étrangers et les groupes d'équité en français // Disparities among International students & equity-seeking groups¹⁰

	Int'l students	Women	LGBTQ+ (small sample size)	Person with disability (small sample size)	Racialized	All domestic students ¹¹
Satisfaction with online courses (/5)	2.95	3.01	2.77	2.53	2.81	3.00
Concern about paying Fall Tuition (/5)	3.83	3.63	3.30	3.13	3.98	3.54
Concern about paying rent (/5)	3.38	2.95	3.10	2.80	3.45	2.94
Average K6 (psychological distress) score (0=best, 24=worst)	12.32	10.78	12.29	13.50	12.28	10.51

This section clearly demonstrates that COVID-19 is having a disparate disproportionate negative impact on uOttawa's marginalized communities. Although domestic students alone face serious challenges caused by COVID-19, it is clear that marginalized communities are even more affected.

¹⁰ Note: The sample sizes for LGBTQ+ students and students with disabilities were quite low, while women were likely over-represented in this survey. There is noise in the data as a result.

¹¹ Note: This section includes all domestic students, including those who are members of equity-seeking groups.



- People with disabilities and racialized students were far less satisfied with online classes than domestic students.
- International students and racialized students are significantly more concerned about how they will pay rent or Fall Tuition than domestic students.
- Students with disabilities, international students, LGBTQ+ students, racialized students and women, in order of most likely to exhibit depressive symptoms to least likely, all have a higher K6 score than domestic students.



Overarching themes/observations

1. Online learning is a challenge for all. We need flexibility, compassion and creativity.

This pandemic has changed our lives in unexpected and unprecedented ways, including the way that we will learn in the foreseeable future. All students have been called on to adapt. Professors and teaching assistants, too, have had to make drastic, unexpected changes. Technological problems and challenges abound from course to course, faculty to faculty. For online delivery to work in all programs this fall, the University must step up and provide professors and teaching assistants with high-quality, expansive training to help them in the transition to online learning.

- *Recommendation: The University must offer a more expansive training program to professors, TAs and RAs, in order to help them with online delivery of courses.*

Our survey found that uploaded slides or other documents on Brightspace are a staple of online learning. Where the picture is a little less clear, however, is on the question of asynchronous or synchronous (live) delivery of lectures. To determine students' preference, we turned to the survey from the Science Students' Association (N=216), which found that 12% preferred a live-only option, 34% preferred a pre-recorded only option, and 44% preferred a combination of the two.¹²

- *Recommendation: The University should work with professors to provide them with the technological tools necessary for an optional form of asynchronous delivery. This will allow students who live in different time zones, who have learning disabilities or who require more flexible methods of learning during this challenging time to be able to follow along.*

For example, professors could deliver their lecture live, during the regularly scheduled class-time, through Adobe Connect or another platform, while using the recording function. This will please both students who prefer having a daily "schedule" and those who need more flexibility in pursuing their academic endeavours. Exams could favour a take-home format, or allow students a window of time (a few days or a week) during which they can take a live exam.

Moreover, not all students are the same. We cannot ignore the class, racial, and rural-urban disparities within the undergraduate student population, which have a direct impact on the ability of some to access the tools required to learn online. Examples of these tools include

¹² Personal communication, Science Students' Association



laptops, microphones, webcams, a stable wi-fi connection and a quiet place to study and learn at home.

- *Recommendation: The University should introduce a grant for students to buy online learning materials. The federal government should heed the call by the Board of Governors representatives of the University of Ottawa, Carleton University and Queen's University, and explore the idea of a federal tax credit for online learning materials.*

2. Students are facing the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression. Though they are benefitting from the various financial aid measures, they are worried about making it to the fall. International students in particular are suffering. Everyone needs to step up.

For education to be a right, not a privilege, it needs to be accessible to all, irrespective of financial background. Tuition fees have long been an impediment to this principle. Ontario has the highest tuition fees on average in Canada, and the provincial government's share of funding to post-secondary institutions has steadily decreased in the past three decades, placing the burden on students. In addition, we are now in a pandemic. Employment opportunities are scarce. Students are scared about how they will pay for rent and tuition in the fall. They don't know where the money will come from.

Our survey has found that students need the University and the province to step up. A crowdsourcing survey conducted by Statistics Canada, which surveyed over 100,000 students in April 2020, found that 76% of students had a change in their employment status, including 34% who were laid off and 21% who lost jobs.¹³ An opinion poll by Abacus Data and the Canadian Federation of Students found that 72% of students found that COVID-19 had a "really big impact" or "somewhat of an impact" on their financial situation.¹⁴

- *Recommendation: The University should acknowledge this reality and act. Tuition fees should be reduced by the Board of Governors, acknowledging a) the reduced quality of education due to online learning, b) the fact that students will not be using the physical facilities on campus, c) the dire economic situation which is placing students under significant financial duress. At the very least, tuition should not go up, as it has at some Canadian universities.*

¹³ Statistics Canada. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

¹⁴ Canadian Federation of Students. <https://cfs-fcee.ca/survey-post-secondary-students-reconsidering-fall-semester-plans-in-wake-of-covid-19/>



Nonetheless, we recognize that waiving or reducing tuition fees is not a decision that the University of Ottawa can make alone. We also recognize that forcing the government to reduce tuition fees is, simply put, an impossible ask. It has been the University's position that it has one of the most generous scholarship & grant programs in Canada. This may be true, but it nonetheless, the moment we are living in requires more assistance, particularly for the most marginalized among us.

- *Recommendation: The University should advocate, through the Council of Universities, for more funding from the provincial government. That additional funding should go directly to students through an expansion of grants and scholarships, such as the COVID-19 Relief Fund.*

Lastly, international students are clearly in a state of dire need. They do not qualify for the CESB, which has been a significant help to domestic students. Many find themselves stranded in Canada with little help from their "home" country. Employment opportunities are scarce. Other universities, such as McMaster University, have committed to provide all first-year international students with a guaranteed bursary of \$2,500.¹⁵

- *Recommendation: Depending on financial need, the University should go beyond freezing international fees -- they should explore lowering it or introducing a grant to specifically help international students in need. It should be noted that international students provide a significant portion of the University's revenue. The federal government, on the other hand, should relax even further restrictions on international students being able to seek employment, given the current circumstances.*

3. Students' mental health is suffering. We need help, now.

The University of Ottawa already had a self-described "mental health crisis" prior to COVID-19. The results of the survey, both quantitative and qualitative, demonstrate that this crisis has worsened during the pandemic.

- *Recommendation: The University should continue the ongoing process of listening to students in a virtual town-hall. This new testimony could also inform the work of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health.*

Mental health on campus cannot merely be tackled by adding more counsellors, or communicating services better - as important as both of these things are. It must also be tackled at its root. Stringent academic regulations are one of the main sources of stress for students. The

¹⁵ Personal communication, McMaster Students' Union



S/NS option applied by many faculties at the end of the Winter semester was a huge success - it provided thousands of students across campus with the peace of mind that a bad grade in the middle of a pandemic will not ruin your academic record. It should remain in place.

- *Recommendation: The University Senate should **require** faculties to adopt a S/NS option for the Fall 2020 semester. Faculties who did not provide this option to students for the Winter 2020 semester should now do so. At a minimum, this option should be made available to first-year students, who are now facing the double whammy of having to adjust to university-level academic standards and virtual learning in the midst of a global health and economic crisis.*

4. Internal Recommendations for UOSU

UOSU shouldn't just talk the talk, but walk the walk. Here are some things we can do to help students and lead by example.

- *Recommendation: The UOSU needs to treat the COVID-19 relief fund plan as a top priority. We promised it to students three weeks ago, but many questions remain unanswered. We should consider administering the aid based on financial need, with special priority to international students, and also consider using a portion of the money to help students who need to pay for new learning tools, such as new software, microphone/webcam equipment and others. As an alternative, we could donate money to a pre-existing fund for this effect.*
- *Recommendation: The UOSU should keep applying a COVID-19 lens to all decisions. This includes through the delivery of our services. Now more than ever, students need the full support of a student union - especially marginalized and low-income students.*
- *Recommendation: The UOSU should also engage other student unions and campus unions constructively to share ideas & good practices. The UOSU's lack of institutional memory is a significant organizational impediment to delivering results for students. We should consult, learn and act in an informed manner. We should also hold the University accountable all while engaging them constructively in dialogue as a gesture of good faith.*



Conclusions

Contrary to the oft-cited expression, the COVID-19 pandemic does indeed discriminate - and so does online learning. It is discriminating against students broadly, as students are generally, by definition, low-income and incurring debt. But it is also shining a light on the divisions and disparities that different segments of our community are facing - those of us who do not have a stable internet connection, those of us who face even more financial hardships & those of us who cannot learn or study online or at home.

What is needed in this moment from the University and government actors is compassion, empathy and flexibility. And these principles must also manifest themselves into action. The UOSU should emphasize this at every possible opportunity, through every existing channel. But it should also fulfill its obligation to students by stepping up, building solidarity and maintaining public pressure.

Submitted faithfully in service,
Tim Gulliver

Advocacy Commissioner of the University of Ottawa Students' Union