

COVID-19 Pandemic and Academic Continuity

Principles to Guide Course Planning for Fall 2021

2 March 2021

The Senate Executive Committee continues to monitor the impact of the pandemic-related disruption under the auspices of the *Senate Policy on Academic Implications of Disruptions or Cessations of University Business Due to Labour Disputes or Other Causes* (the Disruptions Policy).

The course of the pandemic remains uncertain and it is anticipated that the University will not be able to resume full in-person/on-campus operations in Fall 2021. However, with the roll out of vaccines, there is optimism that with careful planning a gradual and partial return to campuses in September will be possible.

Accordingly, a set of ***Principles to Guide Course Planning*** has been established for the delivery of three-credit courses in Fall 2021 and six -credit courses for the FW 2021-2022. The ***Principles*** are appended to this communication.

Planning Assumptions and Implications

A set of assumptions about the public health restrictions that will be in place this fall has guided the planning. The University's *COVID-19 Planning and Response Group* outlined a likely fall scenario based on the best information currently available. It is as follows:

- Public health regulations will continue to require a 2m physical distance between individuals at all times, and a continued mask/face covering protocol (where 2m distance cannot be observed additional measures will be needed such as the use of plexiglass barriers, additional PPE, etc.).
- Public health authorities will continue to place responsibility on the University to maintain additional health and safety protocols (e.g., extra cleaning/disinfection, campus access management, mandatory self-screening for individuals before any trip to campus, handwashing facilities, directional signage, coordination of testing, attendance tracking, contract tracing/case management, and quarantine/isolation where necessary).
- Provincial and municipal authorities will continue to place responsibility on the University to pivot back to more restricted operations quickly should there be a tightening of public health regulations.
- Subject to the above protocols and ensuring that the number and flow of people on a campus will be managed to observe distancing requirements and limits on building capacity and campus density, attendance on campus will be permitted for a wider range of purposes (that is, coming to campus will not be limited only to “required” activities).
- At any one time, a number of students and other members of the University community will be unable to attend campuses due to ongoing travel restrictions and/or health concerns.

Based on this scenario, planning seeks to enable as much in-person activity as can be safely carried out on the campuses, knowing that the University can fall back if necessary, to more remote operations.

The planning scenario has several significant implications for what the return-to-campus will look like:

- **capacity limits:** It will be necessary to manage and monitor building capacity and overall campus density in observance of public health regulations. Recommended practice in pandemic management is not to exceed 15-18% capacity in instructional spaces or 30% overall building capacity at one time. This limited capacity will be allocated and centrally managed in a manner that balances access to teaching, research, service and other spaces.
- **cap on gatherings:** With distancing requirements, the great majority of our teaching spaces cannot accommodate more than 25 students plus one instructor at a time. Maintaining a 26 person cap on all in-person gatherings for teaching, research or other purposes will also assist in managing overall building and campus density, and will assist in managing and limiting any outbreaks. Note this does not refer to a cap on course enrolments, but rather on the maximum number of people who can come together at one time.
- **temporal gaps:** Class start times will need to be staggered, with at least one hour between each group to allow for safe entry/egress and cleaning.
- **study space:** For students living on or attending campus, it will be necessary to set aside internet-enabled study spaces and other places to go in between classes or other activities.
- **offices and research spaces:** Faculty and administrative offices, laboratories, studios, meeting and other spaces will be accessible, subject to distancing, building capacity and campus density limitations noted above.
- **shared facilities:** Library, gym, and other shared spaces will be able to reopen with limited capacity and rigorous safety requirements in place.

Principles Implementation Guide

An implementation guide to facilitate the operationalization and logistical requirements of the *Principles* will be distributed imminently by the Office of the Provost to Deans / Principal, who will in turn share it and any accompanying material with colleagues in academic units and programs. In addition, a communications strategy will unfold throughout 2021 to educate all members of the York community on the public health measures that will need to be observed on campus.

The Senate Executive Committee continues to apply to its decisions on accommodations in response to the impact of the pandemic the governing principles of *Academic Integrity, Fairness to Students*, and *Timely Information* as established in the Senate Disruptions policy. The Committee is also very cognizant of the strain that community members are experiencing after the past year, as well as growing concerns about mental health; these concerns are also informing decisions being made.

Alison Macpherson, Chair of Senate

Principles to Guide Fall 2021 Course Planning

The guiding principles for Fall 2021 and 2021-22 full year undergraduate and graduate course planning are:

Prioritizing Health and Safety: In order to maintain the assumed physical distancing requirements, any in-person/on campus learning activities will need to:

- Assume a cap of 25 students plus one instructor in one space at any time. (*Note: this is not a course enrolment cap but rather a cap on gathering sizes.)
- Be approved by your Dean's/Principal's office in advance and be carried out in accordance with approved health and safety plans.
- Include options for students to have alternative, remote access to all those learning activities that are possible to undertake remotely.
- Provide for remote assessment methods. (*Note: for health and safety reasons the University will not be permitting large-scale in-person tests or exams; accommodations will continue to be made where necessary for hands-on demonstrations, or for individual students who need to write a test or exam on campus. Additionally, see the decision on [Restricting Use of Online Proctoring of Examinations](#)).
- Include contingency plans to switch on-campus elements to remote/online learning if necessary for health and safety reasons, either temporarily, or for the remainder of the course as deemed necessary by public health.

Focusing on Student Learning Outcomes: The expectations for courses rest with student learning outcomes (SLOs) and academic standards for achieving those SLOs as established by course directors. Colleagues are asked to work collaboratively within units/programs to determine the following:

- which courses or components thereof must be delivered on campus in order for students to achieve SLOs and progress (e.g., requirements for hands-on activities, to work with specialized equipment, to meet accreditation requirements).
- what additional courses or learning activities would be most valuable to offer on-campus, subject to instructor preferences and additional supports that may be needed to do so.
- what courses or components thereof should continue to be delivered remotely, to take advantage of what has been going well and what is less urgent to offer on campus in light of student and instructor needs.

Units/programs will submit plans and proposals to Deans'/Principal's Offices for approval based on health and safety requirements, scheduling and space limitations.

Thinking about the Future of Program Delivery: The efforts being undertaken in planning for the gradual increase in on-campus activities and how best to maximize those experiences for meeting SLOs and enhancing student learning experience have been raising questions among colleagues about the delivery of programs post-pandemic. Units will therefore be asked to share any thoughts they may have about their longer-term planning and any changes they are considering in how their program or specific courses will be delivered once our campuses are fully operational. Input on what supports would be needed to implement these forward-looking changes will also be welcomed. It is recognized that some individual Faculties/programs may be constrained in this regard by the requirement to meet external regulatory or accreditation processes. Depending on the extent and nature of changes being made to the mode of delivery of programs, there may be a need to engage with the York University Quality Assurance Procedures. More information on this will be provided from the Vice-Provost Academic as needed.

Prioritizing Access to Campus Spaces: It is anticipated that continued physical distancing requirements will make it necessary to ration space bookings for on-campus learning activities in fall 2021. Priority will be given to experiential activities that require access to labs, studios or other physical facilities, and that cannot be replaced or delivered via alternate means while still meeting student learning outcomes and protecting students' ability to progress in their programs. Assuming these requirements are met, Faculties will have flexibility to determine other priorities for requesting use of any remaining space based on safety considerations and the needs of different programs and cohorts of students, with the goal of maximizing the overall quality of student learning experiences.

Equity in Accommodating Student Circumstances: Course delivery should be planned with sufficient flexibility to provide equitable access for all enrolled students to achieve SLOs. Course directors should take into account the needs of undergraduate and graduate students in different geographic locations and time zones (for example by providing asynchronous access to course materials and activities where it is appropriate and reasonable to do so), as well as accommodation needs related to health, family status or disabilities as per existing University policies. It should be clear to students at the start of a course if it includes an in-person or synchronous learning component to meet the SLOs and what flexibility they will have for completing that component. In the case of either undergraduate or graduate courses with an in-person component, students should be provided with reasonable alternative access to the learning activities offered in that in-person component wherever it is possible to do so. In alignment with the principles of fairness and timely information to students, the delivery mode for a course should not be altered after the start of the course unless there is an exceptional health and safety circumstance. Students who start a course in one mode need assurance that they will be able to complete the entire course in that mode.

Scheduling Courses to Enable Progression: Programs, especially those with significant international student enrolments, will need to plan fall offerings with a view towards ensuring that students whose arrival to campus is delayed, or who have limited ability to participate in remote/online learning in the fall, will have viable pathways to start the program in winter 2022 and to progress in a timely and pedagogically responsible way.

Encouraging a Community of Care: As pandemic-weariness increases, instructors and students are encouraged to uphold compassion, kindness, empathy, and a sense of responsibility towards one another amid such uncertainty and strain. Instructors are reminded of the need to adhere to scheduled instructional times so as to ensure timely start and end points essential to student planning, and to observe the [Course Outline Guidelines](#) established by the Senate Committee on Academic Standards, Curriculum & Pedagogy, as well as [Senate regulations around grades and provision of feedback](#) to students. Instructors are encouraged to be sensitive to technology issues that impact students during synchronous instructional activities, including tests/exams, and to consider [alternative assessments](#) in those instances where stable, high-speed internet capacity cannot be guaranteed.

Students should be reminded of their duties and responsibilities to uphold professional and respectful interactions with their instructors and classmates, including, but not limited to: the University's zero tolerance for inappropriate conduct in virtual forums; the safeguarding of people's intellectual property; and our collective responsibility to protect academic honesty at all times but especially in those situations when we face difficulty and stress, or when there is opportunity or temptation to cheat. These points, and others, are addressed in the University's [Senate Policy on Academic Honesty](#) and [Code of Students Rights and Responsibilities](#).

Enhancing the Remote Learning Experience

The experiences of the past year have shed light on both the possibilities and challenges of remote learning and teaching. The pandemic necessitates the continuation of a high degree of remote delivery in 2021-22 and affords further opportunity to enhance the remote learning experience. Instructors are also asked to review the Provost's communication of February 10, 2021 regarding the practices that students find helpful to their remote learning experience [Attached as Appendix A].

For courses that are normally delivered in person/on-campus, students should have access to some form of contact time with their course director via recorded or synchronous audio or video lectures, discussion fora, or other pedagogical activities. Posting of notes, slides, readings, third party videos, or other materials can supplement, but does not replace, contact with the course director.

In addition, instructors should clearly articulate to students at the beginning of the term:

- The format of the course (e.g., synchronous, asynchronous, etc.)
- How to navigate through online course content (e.g., the course's eClass site)
- When and how the instructor will be available to connect with students (e.g., office hours).
- When and how the instructor will be available to interact online, whether through synchronous activity, explicit moderation of forums, feedback on progress, etc.
- When and how students can be in touch and interact with one another about course content, and expectations for the use of collaborative online sites or spaces.
- How students should contact the instructor in a timely manner when experiencing technical difficulties during synchronous activities.

Resources are available through Faculties/units and the [Teaching Commons](#) to support instructors in adapting to remote teaching including [BOLD](#) and other web-based resources, organized peer groups, and the availability of [one-on-one](#) consultations with an educational developer.

The Senate Executive Committee will continue to meet as needed to assess the academic implications of the disruption in conjunction with the Provost and Vice-President Academic. Further adjustments to regulations, schedules and deadlines may also be made in response to evolving circumstances and any further decisions deemed necessary by the University to ensure the safety of all community members. Members of the community are urged to familiarize themselves with the Senate Disruptions Policy, and to watch the University and Senate websites for updates.

2 March 2021

York University



Fall 2020 Student Survey – Summary for Instructors

York University surveyed our students in November about their experiences of Fall 2020 in terms of overall educational experience, experiences of virtual learning, and their engagement with student services. We appreciate the time that over 6,500 graduate and undergraduate students took to give us feedback.

Thanks are due to all faculty and instructors who have been navigating remote teaching during the pandemic. Students reported some very positive experiences especially in terms of creative course delivery, access to student services, and the effectiveness of course delivery platforms. Indeed, some students have embraced virtual learning for its ability to accommodate their life circumstances. Positive and helpful practices that were noted included:

- Instructors providing clear, frequent communication;
- Providing structure to their courses; and
- Embedding well-facilitated discussions or engaging/interactive elements within their courses.

The survey results also provided insights about how the University can continue to improve student experiences of virtual learning. Areas that emerged as posing particular challenges for students touched on:

- Engagement with instructors;
- Access to course materials;
- Scheduling, workload;
- Evaluation; and
- Dependable technologies.

To address some of the concerns and struggles that were discovered through the survey data, instructors can integrate features students value by:

- **Offering some synchronous engagement at scheduled class times:** students find it tremendously valuable to engage in real time with instructors and to receive timely feedback on assignments. Other highly valued features include access to office hours, question and answer sessions, or other modes of synchronous interaction.
- **Considering recording and posting lectures:** 83% of students surveyed agree that posting recorded lectures is very helpful and will especially assist students who cannot attend synchronous sessions for a host of reasons such as their time zone, caregiving responsibilities, or unsteady internet access. Even for those able to attend synchronously, recorded lectures are seen as an excellent additional resource to enhance learning.
- **Providing timely electronic access to course materials:** students reported that inconsistent or late posting of materials hinders strong engagement with course materials.
- **Staying on time and sticking to the syllabus:** ensure courses are offered as scheduled and that adjustments to the syllabus follow York University Senate policy which requires students to agree to changes to the evaluation scheme after the beginning of term.
- **Considering student workload:** learning from home does not necessarily result in more study time

for students. Work, family and other obligations continue to be balanced with educational activities and students will benefit from thoughtful consideration of competing demands. Additional assignments or longer lectures in multiple courses can unintentionally add up to too much.

- **Offering a supportive approach to technology:** strict constraints on the use of technology, the requirement for multiple devices, or tight time constraints for some course components, can cause students considerable stress. Some do not have reliable internet at home and are struggling to meet all course and assessment requirements. Students are asking for trust, patience, and flexibility where possible.

We understand that our instructors need support too and are conducting a similar survey of instructors to learn about their experiences of Fall 2020. The results, together with our findings from the student survey, will help us ensure we enhance technical and pedagogical supports where needed.

The shift to remote learning has been a significant undertaking for many of us. The University is very grateful to all of our instructors for the effort that they have put into providing an excellent educational experience for our students. The survey results confirmed these efforts have had a meaningful positive impact on our students. We will continue to work together to promote the best learning possible both during the pandemic and as we recover and gradually return to our campuses.

Sincerely,

Lisa Philipps
Provost & Vice-President Academic
