

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Academic Continuity

### Principles to Guide 2021-2022 Course Planning

6 May 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).

In March of this year a set of *Principles to Guide Course Planning* was established for the delivery of courses in the Fall 2021 term based on knowledge of the circumstances of the pandemic at that time. Emerging changes in public health conditions in Ontario and additional shifts in regulations forecast for early Fall 2021 now compel the University to develop scenarios for safe program delivery based on current public health information. Accordingly, updated and broadened guidelines have been established by Senate Executive as recommended by the Provost and Vice-President Academic. The revised *Principles to Guide 2021-2022 Course Planning* reflect updated evidence on the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that capacity limits may be increased for Fall 2021, and that a full return to York's campuses is very likely for the Winter 2022 term. The **Principles** are appended to this communication.

#### Planning Assumptions

Preserving the health and safety of the University community is being given primacy in all planning. Adjustments to program delivery plans defined for the Fall will be made if necessary, to ensure the safety and well-being of students, faculty and staff. The new set of *Principles* builds in flexibility to facilitate any such necessary changes.

Although the course of the pandemic remains uncertain, the latest projections for September 2021 are considerably more positive than they were in March 2021. Key updates include:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) has adjusted the distancing from 2 metres between people to 1 metre between people to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted>). This is aligned with guidance issued earlier in the year by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC). The key difference is that the CDC guidance is specific to K – 12 schools and replete with qualifiers and exceptions for adults in K – 12 school spaces. In significant contrast, the WHO guidance does not differentiate between children and adults and is not specific to one type of setting (educational or otherwise).
- Recent modelling of COVID-19 and an accelerated vaccination rollout together indicate that the situation in the GTA could improve significantly by September. This is supported by growing acknowledgement by the provincial government that, with continued stable vaccine supply, the time between the first and second doses for the two-dose vaccines (Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca) will be reduced from its current 16-week window. The supply of Pfizer has been extremely consistent to date and ramping up. Furthermore, the

*National Advisory Council on Immunization* (NACI) is currently exploring whether the mRNA vaccines can be used for the 2<sup>nd</sup> dose if someone had AstraZeneca for their first dose; preliminary findings suggest that this can be allowed safely. In short, the indicators are suggesting that more people will be fully vaccinated sooner in the summer.

- In addition, Pfizer has finally confirmed that it anticipates its vaccine will be available for children between the ages of 5-11 years by the end of summer. Just announced, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is expected to approve the Pfizer vaccine for children/youth between the ages of 12 and 15 years by the end of the week of May 10.
- The University has received news that the Keele campus will be utilized for mass immunization clinics for residents and workers in the area, and conversations are underway about prioritizing testing technologies (e.g., rapid testing, wastewater testing) and vaccines for those in the post-secondary sector.

Also of note is the B.C. government's publication on April 30 of a [Return to Campus Primer](#), endorsed by Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. This document projects that by August 2021 there will be no longer be a need for physical distancing on B.C. post-secondary campuses. It recommends planning for a full return including residences and classrooms being used to full pre-pandemic capacity, with continuation of other public health measures such as masks, directional signage, frequent hand washing, and health screening before coming to campus. There is no indication at this time that a full re-opening in Ontario for the Fall is as likely as in British Columbia.

To reiterate, the current situation remains extremely challenging. However, the signals for an improved Fall have gotten stronger, and the picture for Winter 2022 is even more positive.

### **Planning Implications for 2021-2022**

The University's approach throughout the pandemic has necessarily been based on scenario planning given the uncertainty even a few months out. That planning model facilitates adjustments as necessary to ensure the health and wellbeing of the York community. The Fall scenario planning undertaken by units in March produced helpful proposals. However, gaps surfaced including a relative lack of in-person programming for first- and second-year undergraduate students, two cohorts of students whose learning experience has been affected particularly hard by the pandemic. Furthermore, several of York's peer universities in Ontario and beyond are currently preparing and communicating ambitious *return-to-campus* plans. This increases enrolment and retention risks for York, especially with the release of more optimistic data and projections on the likely course of the pandemic.

In response to the above, additional planning will be undertaken at the level of the Deans' and Principal's Offices, in consultation with units/programs, to create the flexibility for more in-person instruction in the Fall if it is ultimately safe to do so given actual public health conditions. The most recent projections suggest that the existing planning scenario at York be adjusted to assume that by September 1:

- Physical distancing requirements will be reduced to no more than 1 metre; and
- Groups as large as 50 (plus one instructor) will be able to gather on campus, with a limited ability to make exceptions to accommodate larger groups

These updates afford greater latitude in the availability of classrooms, and in the maximum density that can be accommodated on our campuses and within buildings. The updated planning scenario allows additional in-person instruction to ensure that:

- Every unit is ready to offer in-person instruction of some kind in 40-50% of their courses, at a minimum; and
- The in-person offerings in every unit include options for first- and second-year students, whose transition to university has been so heavily impacted by the pandemic.

These parameters keep the University aligned with the post-secondary sector while also being responsive to the needs of York's students seeking in-person instruction, as well as those who may still require access to remote learning.

It bears repeating that this planning is being undertaken only to create flexibility for a more robust return to the campuses, if that is indeed possible in September. If the circumstances warrant, in-person offerings will be scaled-back to comply with health regulations. In addition, accommodations will be provided under existing policies to any individual instructors who ultimately cannot teach in-person for medical or other relevant reasons.

### **Principles Implementation Guide**

An updated implementation guide to facilitate the operationalization and logistical requirements of the *Principles* has been distributed by the Office of the Provost to Deans / Principal.

Communications to educate all members of the York community on the public health measures that will need to be observed on the campuses will continue to be regularly disseminated.

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.

Alison Macpherson, Chair of Senate

## Principles to Guide 2021-22 Course Planning

The guiding principles for Fall 2021, Winter 2022 and 2021-22 full-year undergraduate and graduate course planning are:

### Fall 2021 – Partial Return to Campuses

**Prioritizing Health and Safety:** To maintain the assumed physical distancing requirements, any in-person/on campus learning activities delivered during Fall 2021 will need to:

- Assume a cap of 50 students plus one instructor in one space at any time. Limited exceptions can be made for larger groups on request by Deans' / Principal's Offices (\*Note: 50 students is not a course enrolment cap but rather a cap on gathering sizes.)
- Occur within defined building capacity and overall campus density in observance of public health regulations. As general rule of thumb, this means planning assumptions will aim to not exceed 30-40% capacity in instructional spaces or 60% 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.
- Be approved by the respective Dean's/Principal's office in advance and be carried out in accordance with approved health and safety plans.
- Include options where possible for students to have alternative, remote access to learning activities.
- Provide for remote assessment methods where possible. (\*Note: 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.

Deans'/ Principal's Offices will continue to work with units / programs to determine which courses have highest priority to be scheduled for whole or partial in-person instruction in Fall 2021.

### Winter 2022 – Expected Full Return to Campuses

A full return to campuses is expected to be possible for Winter 2022, such that all courses (including full-year 2021-2022 courses) should be planned on the assumption they will revert to their pre-pandemic mode of delivery by default, subject to agreement with the Dean's/ Principal's Office for a course to be delivered in a different manner such as remotely or in a blended format, during the Winter 2022 term. Dean's and Principal's Offices will work with units / programs to determine an appropriate balance of delivery modes in Winter 2022, given that this will still be a transitional term in which some students may be delayed in travelling to Toronto.

**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 and with their Dean's / Principal's Office 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.

**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 are invited to continue sharing 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 with the following exceptions:

- a. where the change is required due to an exceptional health and safety circumstances, or
- b. for 2021-22 full-year courses, where the course has been coded as BLEN from the outset with different delivery modes indicated for Fall and for Winter.

**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 remote 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 Fall 2021, and a likely continuation of some remote learning where it is valuable to do so in Winter 2022. Thus, the coming academic year 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 coded REMT, 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, and the appropriate timing to declare an end to the disruption. 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.

6 May 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

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