

The “New Normal”



u0SATISFACTION



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Introduction

Mandate

In 2018, the uOSatisfACTION team was tasked with identifying irritants adversely affecting the academic experience and the relationship of trust between students and the institution.

Context and overview

In its first year of existence, the team broke new ground by soliciting feedback directly from students, who are regularly asked for their opinions on issues affecting their experience on campus. For example, between 2018 and 2022, more than 6,300 comments were received, handled and shared with the faculties and services concerned.

General data from 2021–2022

- This year, 6,276 people visited the [uOSatisfACTION webpage](#), for a total of nearly 7,200 views. In all, 4,546 people visited the English-language webpage (total of 5,215 views) compared to 1,730 in French (total of 1,984 views).
- The uOSatisfACTION webpage received some 1,129 comments between May 1, 2021 and April 30, 2022. Messages could contain comments on more than one topic.
- Most comments (75%) were complaints. Relatively few suggestions (15%) and remarks (9%) were received (Figure 1).

Types of comments



Figure 1: Types of comments

NB: This chart reflects only those comments that could be assigned to one of the categories shown.



- Most of the comments (90%) were in English (Figure 2).

Language of comments



Figure 2: Language of comments

- Signed messages received a personalized acknowledgement and response. They were forwarded to the faculties and services concerned.
- Messages expressing personal or urgent issues (academic or otherwise) were handled promptly and forwarded to the faculties and services concerned for immediate action.
- Half of the messages (50%) were signed, and almost all (95%) were submitted by students. Comments from staff and professors mainly had to do with the University's COVID-19 measures.
- A relatively equal proportion of students from each level of undergraduate (by year) and graduate studies (Figure 3) sent messages. Fewer first-year students signed their comments. These data do not include anonymous comments for which the level of study could not be determined.

Level of study of students who submitted a comment in 2021-2022

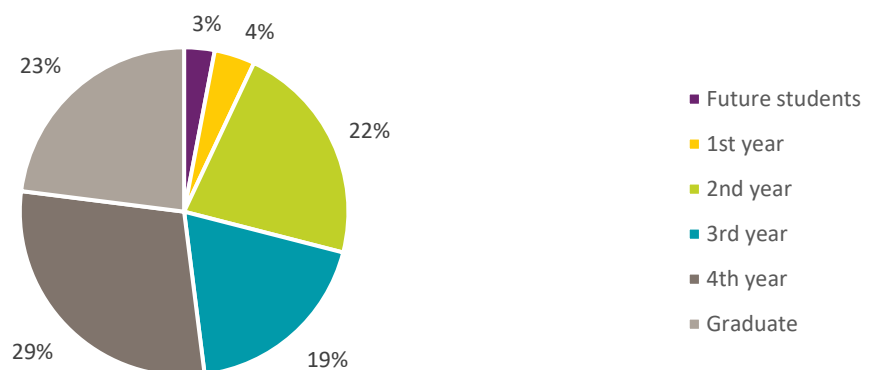


Figure 3: Level of study of students who submitted a comment in 2021–2022

NB: (anonymous comments excluded)



- The majority of complaints (80%) came from Canadian students (Figure 4).

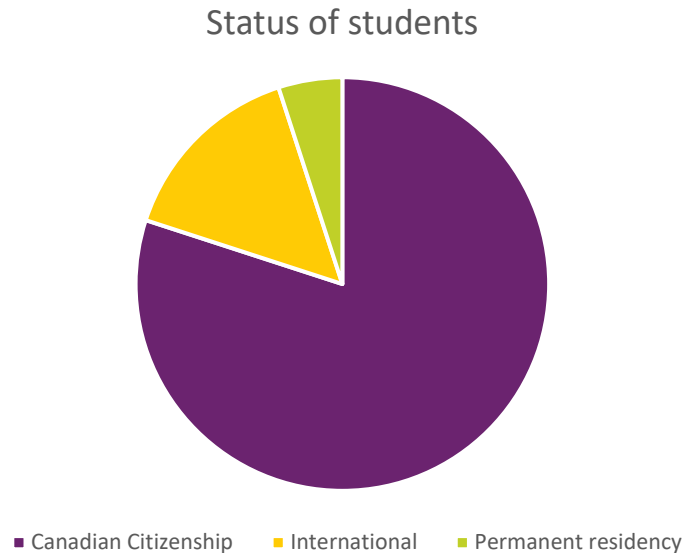


Figure 4: Status of students who submitted a comment

NB: (anonymous comments excluded)

Return to campus

Course formats

Changes had to be made to course formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students sent us numerous comments about their course format preferences (online, in person, hybrid). We received more than 152 comments in that regard and shared them with the central administration.

There were two opposing points of view among the students. One group wanted in-person teaching to resume, with students to be wholly back on campus (Figure 5).

- Those students felt that the online course experience, particularly in asynchronous mode, was subpar compared to the in-person experience. Many students said they found it **challenging to engage online**, whereas it was easier to participate in in-person courses.
- They missed the **social aspect and sense of community**. This was especially true for first- and second-year students, who had no pre-pandemic campus experience whatsoever.
- The University's health measures, such as compulsory vaccination, gave them a sense of security during the pandemic.



- Students from the faculties of Engineering, Science and Health Sciences said that in-person learning opportunities, such as labs and discussion groups, were critical for their learning in more complex courses.

SAMPLE COMMENT 1

In future, courses must be in person. Online courses make you feel isolated, are detrimental to mental and physical health, promote the growth of human-distorting artificial intelligence, completely take away the sense of belonging and the university experience, and result in connection-related problems.

SAMPLE COMMENT 2

As a student in Engineering, I'm getting very tired of exclusively doing online courses. I've been doing remote learning for about three years now, and I know for a fact that I'm not able to perform nearly as well as in person. At a minimum, for the fall term, please bring back in-person courses. I have no interest in, and am frankly tired of exclusively doing, remote learning.

In contrast, roughly the same number of students said they would like to continue taking their classes online, or at least have the option to do so (Figure 5).

- Most wanted online courses to become a **permanent option** after the pandemic, alongside on-campus courses. More than anything else, those students wanted to be able to choose their course formats.
- Many of them said that online teaching helps lower their anxiety and mitigate other mental-health issues caused by in-person instruction.
- They also said that online courses give them the freedom to strike a balance between their day-to-day academic, personal and work obligations, in addition to resolving certain housing-related issues.
- Bimodal or hybrid approaches were seen by those students as a good compromise that allows them to **choose the format that suits them best** (Figure 5).

For example: Record in-person courses so they can be taken remotely in asynchronous mode and/or be able to take in-person courses remotely, as they are happening.



Preferred approach indicated in the comments

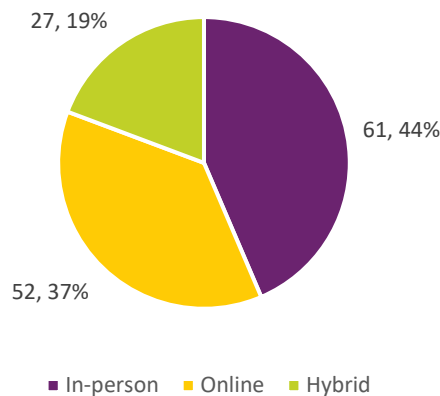


Figure 5: Preferred approach indicated in the comments

SAMPLE COMMENT 1

Please continue to offer courses in the new online format we have been using since COVID-19 started. Working from home has reduced my anxiety, reduced my stress, and allowed me to focus more. Thank you.

SAMPLE COMMENT 2

Since there are many of those who still prefer online learning, and as we see, the University is shifting back to in-person classes towards the Fall 2022 term, it would be great if the University could make it permanent, where both online and in-person classes are an option for classes, and where students who want to learn online can attend lecture sessions virtually. This would greatly improve the student experience, as it covers the demographic of both those who prefer in-person learning as well as virtual learning.

Academics

Online teaching

Most courses continued to be offered online in 2021–2022. As a result, online teaching was the topic that drew the most comments, with more than 220 students expressing their views on the matter. The issues raised mainly concerned the quality of teaching and supervision, excessive workload, use of online tools and tests.

Since the last report and the data were sent to the faculties, we received far fewer comments about on-line teaching (674 last year).



The figure below provides a breakdown of comments by faculty. Comments that could not be ascribed to any faculty were forwarded to the University's central administration (Figure 6).

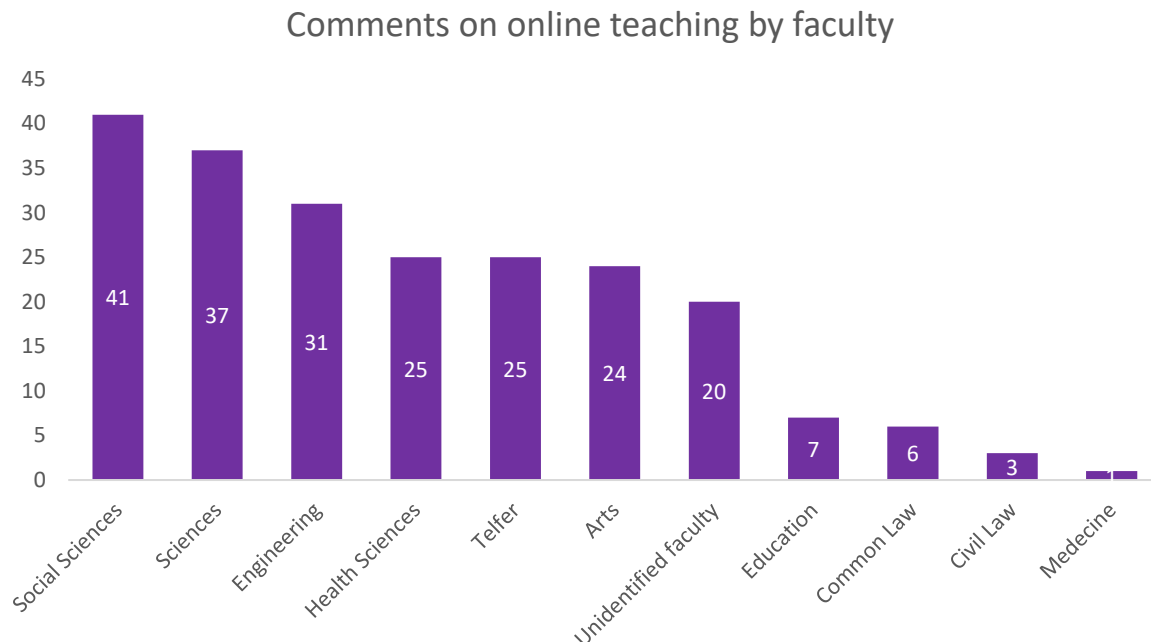


Figure 6: Comments about online teaching, by faculty

- To help in the adjustment to online courses, many students asked for Satisfactory/Not Satisfactory (S/NS) grading. For them, it was a way of reducing their anxiety during the pandemic, when most courses took place online.
- Pre-recorded asynchronous courses were said to be dispiriting. Students had no opportunity to interject or ask questions in order to enliven classes, which also ran longer than expected. Students' workload increased after they were asked to watch lectures prior to synchronous meetings.
- Many students taking hybrid courses online said they were not able to participate or ask as many questions as their peers who were attending in person.

Recommendation: Have professors check the chat tool regularly during class to ensure that everyone can take part.

- Online courses immediately followed by in-person instruction caused logistical problems.

Recommendation: Clearly indicate sequence of courses with different formats as students register.



- Some professors had difficulty getting used to the tools and the online format, which prompted numerous comments.
- Poor communications over course-related expectations and test procedures increased student stress.

SAMPLE COMMENT 1

To continue to use the qualitative grading system (S/NS) for this year, as we are still in a global pandemic, where students choose to stay at home for public and personal health reasons, and in-person classes are still not offered for maximum capacity classes.

SAMPLE COMMENT 2

The University puts way too much pressure on students to succeed in online learning when compared to in-person courses. The workload has doubled and just caused intense stress and mental health challenges among students.

Other student issues

Numerous other issues were raised. Those that attracted more than 40 comments are presented in this section. See Appendix B for a more comprehensive list.

COVID-19 concerns

The pandemic-related health measures generated 162 complaints from students.

A **first group** wanted the University to revert to **pre-pandemic conditions and lift the health restrictions** by making proof of vaccination and mask wearing optional. Some members of the University community either refused to get vaccinated or could not do so, and were therefore unable to provide proof of vaccination when it became mandatory. Some students were unable to complete their program because they could not attend compulsory courses that were offered in person only. Some staff were also forced to leave the University.

A **second group** felt **uncomfortable about returning to campus**. Some students wanted the health measures to be stepped up. They suggested, for example, checking vaccination status at the entrance to buildings on campus.

Service quality

More than 108 students wrote to uOSatisfACTION regarding the quality of services received. Poor communications were the focus of their comments. More specifically, the students took



issue with the slowness and vague nature of responses to emails sent to professors, services and faculties. Those situations cause students to feel further discouraged and unsupported.

Other sources of dissatisfaction and discontent:

- Poor experiences with professors, particularly with regards to tests and marking;
- Lack of support for academic and practical issues;
- Specific cases.

Web

Some 50 comments voiced dissatisfaction with the website interface. Among other things, students mentioned having difficulty navigating between pages and being able to access needed information, for example regarding registration for courses, payment of tuition fees and scholarships.

Some students also said they were dissatisfied with the new website design, which they described as confusing.

Tuition fees

Many students (49) were displeased that tuition fees had not been reduced, even though courses were being taught online and access to certain services was limited.

Mental health

Student mental health needs continued to grow again this year. This was due in part to a lack of familiarity with University resources already in place but whose existence was likely not communicated all that well. Many students did not know where to turn during a crisis or distressing situation. Furthermore, some students felt that the University is not doing enough to promote mental health and that available resources are inadequate.

- Inadequate support (lack of understanding, attention, empathy) **following** initial contacts with mental health and other services at the University (including the faculties) makes students feel more distressed and isolated after voicing their problems and concerns.
- A lack of activity on campus is closely connected with a gradual weakening of the sense of community, and reinforces social isolation.
- Students who started their education during the pandemic are having difficulty making contacts and friends at the University.



- Excessive workload and poor test management (unclear expectations, inadequate grading system, lack of communication) increase stress and other student wellness-related problems.

SAMPLE COMMENT 1

I have used the counsellors on campus and found them to be insensitive and unhelpful. The wait-times and the overall lack of mental health help on campus is appalling, and every death of a University of Ottawa student is on the University's hands.

SAMPLE COMMENT 2

I am isolated and depressed. I gained weight and hate myself for being not motivated. I see no life in living inside the virtual reality. School is not virtual, and I think that is all that matters at this point.

Recommendations

The following three recommendations derive from the students' comments and suggestions:

New challenges

Recommendation 1

In online and bimodal courses, have professors check the chat tool regularly to take note of everyone's input.

Recommendation 2

Improve the transition between online, in-person and bimodal courses by:

- Displaying a warning message as students register should two courses with different formats follow each other;
- Having different course codes for each format (online, bimodal, in person);
- Ensuring that professors finish teaching 10 minutes before the next time slot to allow students to get to their next class;
- Providing enough quiet study spaces so students who have to attend a class online before or after an in-person class can do so on campus.

Recommendation 3

Help students to feel that they belong in order to reduce isolation and improve their wellness on campus, in their faculty and in their classes. The faculties, services (e.g., sports, campus



life) and professors all have a significant role to play in that regard. The uOttawa Strategic Committee on Teaching and Learning Supports could examine this issue.

Follow-up to 2019–2021 recommendations

The recommendations from the 2019–2021 report were mainly concerned with online teaching—the focus of most of the comments received during the pandemic.

Recommendation 1

- All online courses should be recorded.

Follow-up: The University strongly recommends that professors record their courses. However, they are not obligated to do so. In addition, professors now have access to a new platform (Yuja), allowing them to easily record their in-person classes. [The Yuja user guide is available online.](#)

Recommendation 2

- Instructors need to remember that students take up to six courses per term. Piling on more tests to avoid having to manage formal exams generates considerable stress among students.

Follow-up: The Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS) has created a number of training modules including novel testing methods designed to replace formal exams and reduce stress among students and professors alike. These sessions are offered on demand on a cyclical basis each term. A [tool for estimating student workload](#) is also available.

Recommendation 3

- Professors should adhere to course schedules.

Follow-up: Faculties are reminding their professors that they need to allow 10 minutes between courses. In addition, the uoCampus schedule stipulates that classes end 10 minutes before the next time slot.

Recommendation 4

- The University should harmonize platform use.

Follow-up: The TLSS teams that support professors are promoting resources that are either free or for which the University has licences. However, the University has no control over the departments' or professors' choices.



Recommendation 5

- Professors should make sure that they know how to use the platforms in question, and that students are familiar with all of the technical parameters of online exams. It is recommended that professors administer a sample exam (with points for participating) prior to the first formal exam to reduce technology-related stress, and that they take any necessary corrective action beforehand.

Follow-up: Training modules and supporting documentation for all technologies officially approved by the University and the TLSS are available on the [TLSS website](#). The TLSS provides various kinds of technical support for professors (live, on the Web, 24/7, etc.).

Recommendation 6

- Open-book exams are difficult to prepare and challenging to manage online. Professors should be given training in how to create such exams, and they should especially show students how to do them properly. Sufficient time should be allotted for multiple-choice tests so students can read the questions carefully and reflect on the answers.

Follow-up: Those aspects are addressed in the TLSS training modules and consultations on online testing and open-book exams.

Recommendation 7

- Professors should explain in their syllabuses that they intend to use monitoring software for online exams, and clarify what it involves.

Follow-up: When students enter Respondus, they have to indicate that they agree to monitoring during their exam. [The guidelines for professors using Respondus](#) explain what to do in cases where students decline to be monitored.

Recommendation 8

- It is strongly recommended that students not be asked to pay additional fees.

Follow-up: This topic has been discussed by professors, the University and faculties, with their recommendation being that additional fees should be avoided.



Conclusion

Since 2018, the uOSatisfACTION team has enjoyed the trust of the University community and has become a tool for everyone to share their comments and concerns. It goes without saying that the last two years have presented tremendous challenges for the entire community. These exceptional circumstances have seen the team become an ally in addressing those challenges and solidify its reputation as a voice for the student body.

As we all know, 2021–2022 was a year of adjustment to the pandemic, following on the heels of 2020–2021. Feedback from students reflected those obstacles, hence the numerous comments about teaching, technology and health, among many other topics. Students clearly expressed a need for lighter workloads and more support, both academically and personally. Furthermore, mental health and wellness issues surged as we were navigating uncharted territory. The pandemic generated numerous concerns and difficult-to-manage emotions surrounding vaccination, face masks, social distancing and the return to campus. The uOSatisfACTION team forwarded those messages to senior management and to the units concerned so they could take corrective action.

Next year will bring further changes, namely the return to the “new normal.” Each one of us will have to define that normal, hence the importance of feedback from our University community. We trust that our recommendations will help the University cope with the new challenges that are already looming on the horizon. Some educational practices that became common during the pandemic will continue to be useful as we return to campus. We have to continue working together to enrich the experience for our students and the entire University community. Let’s take advantage of the return to campus to get things moving!

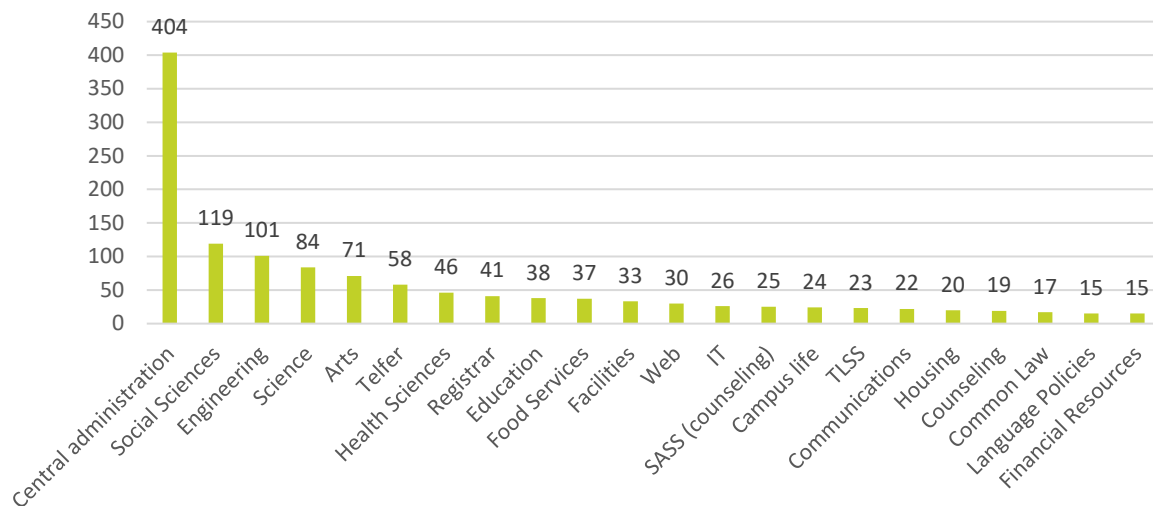


Appendix A

As was the case last year, the central administration was the subject of the most complaints this year. More than 404 comments were forwarded to it in 2021–2022. COVID-19 concerns, course offerings, teaching and tuition fees were cited most often. Any anonymous comments that could not be ascribed to a faculty were also sent to the central administration.

It should be noted that many University units have their own feedback mechanisms for their services. They are excluded from the following data.

Number of comments by sectors for 2021-2022



Number of comments, by sector in 2021–2022

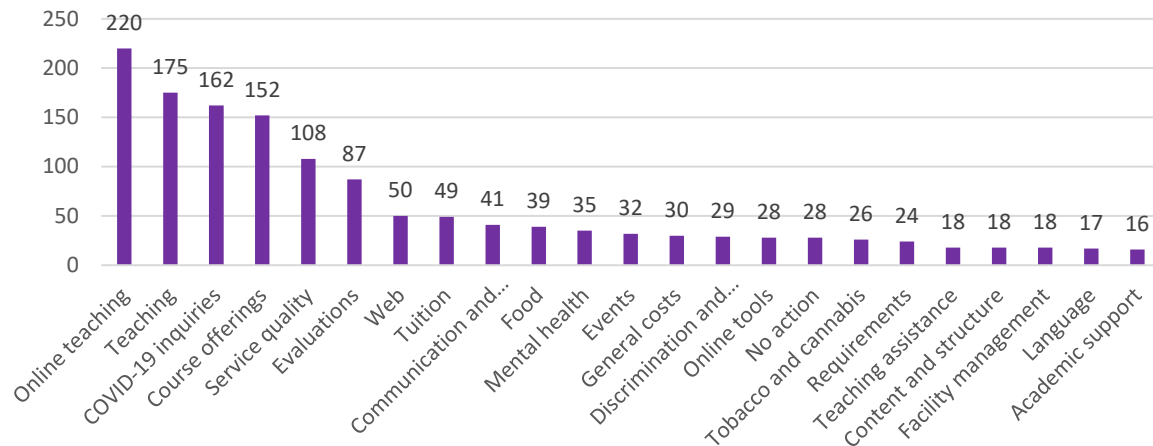
Services having received fewer than 15 comments are not included in this chart.

NB: Comments for which no faculty could be identified were classified under “central administration.”



Appendix B

Number of comments by category in 2021-2022



Number of comments, by category in 2021-2022

Services having received fewer than 15 comments are not included in this chart.

NB: Most comments in the “teaching” category were about teaching methods, and more than 36% were about certain professors specifically.