Student Engagement and Experiences Survey (SEES) Qualitative Feedback Report

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**Introduction**

In March 2020, McMaster introduced changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes involved shifting to virtual and/or remote academic environments (“e-learning”), educational resources, and wellness support services through the 2019/2020 Winter Term. The Office of the Provost & Vice President Academic, the Equity and Inclusion Office and the MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching collaborated to develop the Student Engagement and Experiences Survey (SEES), which was sent out during the first month of the COVID-19 lockdown (April 2020).

This survey aimed to collect information about winter term student engagement and experiences in relation to: communication of changes and supports; accessibility, accommodations, inclusion and wellness supports; financial assistance; access to internet and virtual platforms; impact of shift to e-learning on continued enrolment, coursework and/or research. The following analysis of survey responses serves to help McMaster evaluate its response to the COVID-19 crisis, inform future decision-making and improve virtual and/or remote programs, practices and supports.

The survey response rate was 12.6%, representing 4,317 completed surveys among the 34,131 invitations sent to full-time and part-time students enrolled in the winter 2020 term.

This is report of findings from analysis of qualitative feedback obtained through open-ended questions included in the Survey. This Report should be considered in the context of the Institutional Research and Analysis (IRA) prepared reports providing a quantitative analysis of closed ended response to questions using Likert scales.

**Summary**

- The lack of awareness of student supports (financial, academic, wellness, accessibility), financial concerns, and academic concerns were dominant themes in the survey responses; particularly, stress from financial issues and dissatisfaction with academic changes were a predominant factor when discussing accessibility and inclusion
- Although a variety of distinct themes emerged, these themes commonly overlapped and related to each other. For example, financial and academic concerns were commonly mentioned as the cause of stress, which was cited as the dominant factor exacerbating pre-existing mental health struggles.
Fall Enrolment Decision Variations

Student responses concerning continuing their studies in the fall term if universities must continue e-learning (Q14) varied. Overall, 78.45% of students stated they would possibly, probably or definitely enrol in the fall term regardless of the shift to e-learning (2880/3,671). Indigenous and racialized students reported a slightly greater likelihood of fall enrolment (38/47 or 80.85% of indigenous students and 927/1,083 or 85.60% of racialized students), and students with disabilities reported a notably lesser likelihood of fall enrolment (329/414 or 79.47%). Potential reasons for these variations in enrolment likelihood, as well as general factors that may impact students’ enrolment decisions, are explored below.

Survey Response Themes

Academic

Most students across faculties expressed a preference or need for in-person classes. Common reasons given for this preference/need include:

- E-learning is not a viable option for given programs or courses. A common argument that is part of this reason is that e-learning cannot replace critical components of student learning, such as: access to labs and art studio equipment.
  - In-class labs (especially in the faculties of Science, Health Sciences and Engineering) and/or required lab work for thesis/final project work
  - Groupwork- or discussion-based courses
  - Fieldwork, placements and internships, especially nursing placements/clinical practise
  - Art studio and studio equipment (especially for those in the Studio Art program)
  - PBL (Project Based Learning) and practise-based courses and programs (i.e. music program, social work, medical programs)
  - Access to library, librarian assistance and physical archives (i.e. history and other Humanities students)
  - Access to Allen H. Gould Trading Floor (i.e. business students)
- Many students do not have a suitable working environment at home.
- E-learning is not engaging or interactive (cannot ask questions during class), especially as it feels impersonal
• Many students expressed being able to focus and stay motivated in an in-person learning environment; they also expressed feeling comparatively unfocused and demotivated to work in an e-learning environment.
  • Students find it harder to keep up work when not held accountable the same way
  • E-learning does not suit learning style (i.e. tactile, auditory, kinesthetically)
• Several students commented that heavy program workloads – specifically iSci and Engineering – are more difficult to manage in an e-learning environment
• Some instructors have not been supportive of or accommodating towards students during the transition to e-learning; many students have had difficulty adapting to e-learning
• Many students report that instructors are unfamiliar with software or tools that would enable better teaching online; several students mention having to self-teach via posted lecture slides, modules or textbooks
• Several students comment that it is difficult to reliably contact instructors and TAs, and that instructor responses to urgent student inquiries are often delayed and/or unhelpful.

Some students indicated that they were neutral on, or in favour of, the shift to e-learning. Reasons included:

• Some students, particularly part-time students and students in computer-based programs (i.e. computer science), reported not being affected by the shift to e-learning because they were already familiar with or currently taking online courses before the lockdown
• Some students, particularly part-time students and students who did not live in Hamilton and commuted to class, prefer e-learning because they don’t have to travel to attend class; this reduces stress and gives students more time to dedicate to work
• Some students find it easier to focus at home
• Some students found it easier to hold a full-time job while also attending school after the switch to e-learning
• Some students found that online/video lectures make it easier to revisit course content for study purposes
• Many students stated that e-learning should be maintained for health and safety reasons
• Several students stated that as they had access to the required resources to securely participate in e-learning – stable internet, an adequate computer, and course texts/resources are easily available online – e-learning was not an issue for them.
Many students who were neutral or in favour of e-learning nonetheless stated that in-person, practical or hands-on learning is valuable.

**E-Learning and Disability**

Responses from students with disabilities regarding the accessibility of e-learning were mixed. Some students with disabilities expressed satisfaction with or a preference for e-learning. However, most students with disabilities expressed dissatisfaction with the accessibility of e-learning, citing the following reasons:

- Instructors not providing audio recordings of lectures/course content
- No/inadequate closed captioning on videos; this is noted as a particular problem with Zoom classes/video calls
- Uploaded lecture material/course readings, especially photocopied documents, are not compatible with alt text (for visuals) or text-to-speech programs (for text)
- Self-monitoring or keeping oneself on task in an e-learning environment is difficult, especially given the change in class structure
- Prior accommodations do not translate to an e-learning environment

Some students offered specific suggestions for making e-learning accessible:

- "Promot[ing] integrated accessible document creation and making the FlexForward training available on the Accessibility Hub mandatory for instructors" (Q22, Response 685).
- "We need a way to have screen-reader friendly text for math. The MathType software in Word is not user friendly and as far as I'm aware does not integrate with screen reader programs. I also think it might be beneficial to distribute a document to professors about how to create screen-reader friendly documents in general; I know some students really fall through the cracks because their documents are not accessible to them" (Q22, Response 802).

**International and/or Distance-Learning Students**

Several international and/or distance-learning students stated a need for supports for students who are outside Hamilton, outside the EST timezone, and outside of Canada. Inflexible class and assessment times disproportionately affect students in different time zones; a few students reported their sleep and consequently their health being negatively impacted by needing to attend class or write exams late at night, due to a large time difference between their location and Hamilton.
Financial

Overall, most students (2,479 / 70.73%) did not require emergency financial assistance in the new e-learning environment (Q18). This majority was slightly less for racialized students (782 / 68.30%) and students with disabilities (266 / 59.91%).

Of the students that required and requested financial assistance (Q18a), most responded that they were slightly, mostly or very dissatisfied with the financial assistance (99/173 or 57.22%); only a minority of students responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the financial assistance (64/173 or 36.99%) (Q18a). Concerns with financial assistance were echoed in the open responses (Q15, Q25):

- Several students expressed confusion and concerns about OSAP, including the 2019 cuts; some students mentioned being reliant on OSAP as income and to pay tuition
- Some students mentioned concerns about loans, scholarships, TA/RAships, doctoral awards and graduate/PhD funding

In addition to dissatisfaction with the financial assistance McMaster offered, a common factor that impacts students’ decisions to enrol in Fall 2020 (Q15), and their satisfaction with the shift to e-learning, is the cost of tuition. A significant majority of students stated that tuition should be reduced and/or (partially) reimbursed for several reasons:

- As students are no longer able to access campus facilities and resources – such as DBAC, libraries and campus wi-fi – they should be reimbursed for facility fees and other such parts of tuition
- E-learning does not compare to attending in-person classes
  - Many students noted that they paid for in-class learning, and do not feel that it is worth paying as much for e-learning
  - International students specifically mentioned their higher tuition fees, combined with not being able to stay in residence and/or in Canada, as reasons why McMaster should reduce or [partially] reimburse tuition.

Socio-economic status (SES) is a major factor impacting student enrolment; most students responded that their annual gross family or household income was less than $25,000 (2,215 / 64.86%) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Q48). COVID-19 has had a negative financial impact on students and their families/households, as pandemic-related lay offs, work hour reductions and limited job availability have reduced incomes.
Other notable finance-related themes in the survey responses are:

- Several students reported being unable to afford textbooks and/or tuition, and as such cannot enrol in Fall 2020.
- McMaster should be providing or advocating for more financial supports, such as rent/mortgage freezes, tuition support, and subsidized internet services.
- Several students are considering e-learning options such as Youtube, Khan Academy, Coursera and Udemy instead of enrolling at McMaster in Fall 2020 because these options are less expensive or free.
- Some students took issue with Q15’s phrasing because did not feel that they had the choice to enrol or not to enrol in the fall – due to financial factors, they argued that their choice to enrol or not enrol was constrained or determined for them.
- Many students have already signed 12-month rental housing leases, and are contractually obliged to pay rent even if they are not moving to Hamilton due to COVID-19 and the shift to online learning at McMaster.

**Physical and Mental Health**

Several students expressed that health considerations impacted their Winter 2019/2020 semester experiences, and will impact their Fall 2020 enrolment decisions. Of note are the students’ mixed responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated safety measures. Many students would not enrol in in-person classes until it is safe (i.e. a COVID-19 vaccine has been widely administered) because they would not want to put themselves or their family at risk of illness.

The most predominant health concern students mentioned in relation to McMaster’s changes and COVID-19 social distancing measures is stress. Students identified several causes of stress:

- Finances, especially loss of income and employment
- Changes in their environment, lifestyle and/or social life due to social distancing/quarantine measures
- The pandemic itself as a traumatic event; students that are part of vulnerable groups (i.e. immunocompromised) report struggling to focus because of the dangers they face
- Burnout from working in healthcare
- The shift to e-learning, particularly due to the change in routine and loss of structure
Other impacts of the shift to e-learning on mental and physical health include:

- Migraines/headaches, depressed mood and exhaustion from increased screen time
- Lack of an ergonomic workstation at home makes online classes/work greatly uncomfortable; as one student states, "at home ergonomic assessment and equi[p]ments should be made available as this impacts the health and productivity [of students]" (Q15, Response 1423)
- Social isolation and loss of home/work/school distinction exacerbates pre-existing mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression

**Race, Disability and Recognizing Intersectionality in Supports/Services**

Some students commented on racism at McMaster University and the need for specific supports. One student commented that they did not reach out for inclusion support because they experienced "racism in the administration and structural university support" (Q27, Response 49). Another student spoke to the increase in anti-Asian racism as COVID-19 spread, and recommended the creation of online meetings/hangouts for Asian students "[to] help us understand how to stand together as a minority group during a trying time" (Q31, Response 630).

Students also mentioned the need to employ more skilled disability specialists and people with disabilities (visible and invisible) to work on disability-centred supports and resources (Q31, Responses 142 and 659).

Several students commented on the need for mental health services that take intersectionality into account. One student wrote: “[McMaster has] White, straight supports - therapists, counsellors, organizations. I need LGBTQ and racialized support. It cannot be a blanket organization like Good2Talk. That doesn’t suit my needs” (Q29, Response 500). In a similar vein, another student wrote that McMaster should offer therapy that takes into account intersectionality, especially with respect to students of colour, and staff that can relate to students’ experiences as POC (Q22, Response 655).

**Social**

A minor but notable theme concerning the shift to e-learning and social distancing/quarantine measures is the impact these changes have had on students’ mental health, physical wellbeing, and academic performance. Several students remarked on missing out on social aspects of on-campus student life, such as clubs/groups and other extracurriculars, in-person classes with
friends/peers, campus events and social spaces such as the student centre. Missing out on these aspects was cited as a reason for wanting [partial] tuition reimbursement.

**Accessibility, Accommodations and Barriers to Access**

**Accessibility, Inclusion and Wellness Support Services**

In response to the question of how important it is to know about and have access to McMaster accessibility, inclusion and wellness supports (Q16), a majority of students stated that it was important or very important (2,432/3,505 or 69.38%). This response was even more common amongst racialized students (821/1,145 or 71.70%) and students with disabilities (354/444 or 79.73%). However, a significant proportion of students stated that they did not reach out for McMaster’s mental health supports (Q29) because of dissatisfaction with McMaster’s Student Wellness Centre (SWC) and mental health services. Common reasons for this dissatisfaction pertained to the accessibility of services:

- Long wait times for appointments
- Infrequency of appointments – once per month
- Complexity/difficulty of process of requesting support
- Social barriers – shame, stigma, fear of judgement, etc. – making it hard for students to consider reaching out for help with mental health concerns
- Awareness of McMaster’s mental health/wellness services being overwhelmed/busy/understaffed relative to the population they serve; several students reported feeling that they should not take away resources from students ‘in greater need’

Another major barrier to accessing mental health/wellness services at McMaster was a lack of privacy at home. This was of particular relevance in comments pertaining to accessing intimate partner violence and sexual violence response services, as many people were/are trapped with their abusers because of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Suggestions to address these issues that students offered include:

- Make the process of accessing services easier:
  - Provide explanations of how online services work (i.e. the triaging system, what virtual appointments will be like, estimated wait times for appointments)
  - Enable online appointment booking
• Have counselors reach out to their clients via A2L and/or the client’s preferred mode of contact

• Make services and supports [more] available:
  • Reduce wait times by hiring more academic support staff, psychologists, counsellors and other relevant staff
  • 24/7 online chat and active support phone line options

• Make services accessible via several options: email, phone or video call, etc.

• For issues of privacy, providing an instant messaging chat option between therapists and students, cached so the messages are deleted at end of each session (Q22, response 194) and/or texting-based mental health services for people in abusive homes (Q22, Responses 131 and 463)

Students also commented on Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and formal accommodations:

• McMaster should offer year-round accommodations for all staff and students (Q22, Response 450)

• SAS should communicate with students more, including reaching out to students directly

• SAS should assess the accommodations structure and tailor the offered supports to the e-learning environment (i.e. supporting students not used to having to type everything; giving SAS students more time to write tests because of unstable wi-fi access)

• SAS should provide note takers, as well as scribes for midterms and exams (as opposed to having to pay out of pocket) (Q22, Response 37)

• Meeting application requirements to get accommodations (i.e. doctor’s notes) may be impacted by students’ inability to get to their doctors due to social distancing measures

• Students who have not been registered with SAS may now need help because of the shift to e-learning. Furthermore, several students suggested expanding SAS eligibility to include: self-diagnosis, having full-time dependents or working in essential services. generally be more lenient wrt accommodations [and eligibility for them] (#71, 484).

Some students made comments about accessibility, accommodation and student wellness in a broader sense. Notable responses to the question “In such virtual and/or remote circumstances, what, if anything, do you think would improve McMaster’s accessibility, inclusion and/or wellness considerations and provisions?” (Q22) include:
• “[E-learning] is often seen as an accessible option but it is not for everybody. Faulty internet, old/slow computers, distracting/stressful home environments, professors only posting lecture slides and nothing else, isolation from community and a spike in mental health concerns are just a few examples of accessibility issues that arose during this change to virtual/remote learning” (Response 508).

• "McMaster's sudden ability to have heightened accessibility universal to its students (including those without pre-existing disabilities) is incredibly disappointing almost insulting to students who have long been facing these exact physical barriers and were given no support for it. Although it is an extenuating circumstance, this situation proves that it is possible to accommodate the needs of disabled individuals. It should not have taken a pandemic to realize this" (Response 479).

• "Responses that are based on principles of equity and the social determinants of health. Non-judgemental intake processes for those seeking emergency aid and accommodations which are not undermining or intrusive” (Response 715).

• "The benefits of having mental health support is useless when the source of the mental health problems come from the poor handling of the situation from McMaster University. It is better for McMaster to be proactive instead of reactive in times like these to remain on good terms with students" (Response 751).

• "The impacts of COVID-19 are unequally and thereby inequitably distributed across our student body based on the various social identities we hold and the oppressive barriers many of us live with. This crisis exacerbates existing issues and inequities in ways that were impossible to anticipate and prepare for in advance” (Response 761).

Internet Access and Resources

Another major barrier to participating in e-learning and accessing virtual services/supports students mentioned was access to the internet, suitable work spaces and other essential resources:

• Many students – especially but not limited to students living in rural areas or sharing internet service with multiple other students/people working from home – reported having slow, limited and/or unreliable internet access

• Many students also reported not having access to adequate technological equipment, such as computers, webcams and printers (the latter which was required for some courses to submit the final exam)
Several students reported issues with accessing library and/or research materials; one student mentioned that they needed access to physical books because they could not read e-books, especially after a full day of online classes.

Some students mentioned that McMaster should develop and/or offer a ‘decent’ VPN server to support e-learning for international students, and so the system is not overloaded by the online fall semester.

These barriers tend to tie in with financial concerns; as one student noted, “it seems if the university goes to online learning, they are ignoring the needs of poorer/less privileged students who don’t have access to the necessary materials [adequate technology/internet] that would allow online learning to be successful” (Q15, Response 798). To address these issues, students made the following suggestions:

- Many students stated that McMaster should provide students, particularly ‘disadvantaged students’, with adequate internet and/or computers, and several mentioned that the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB) provided students in need with the required IT resources
- McMaster should pay for student access to required software (i.e. online meeting products)
- McMaster should “provid[e] students with free access to textbooks/course materials, and offer[] free shipping from the campus store.” (Q22, Response 703)

**Students with Children and/or Dependents**

The need for childcare and the responsibility of caring for dependants impacted, or were said to potentially impact, several students’ ability to participate in e-learning. As elementary schools were closed and alternate childcare was unavailable due to COVID-19 closures, students’ daily parenting responsibilities have increased, and the time they can specifically dedicate to schoolwork has decreased. Similarly, several students mentioned that they would be unable to enrol in Fall 2020 if they had to care for sick relatives.

**Communication**

A predominant comment theme was that staff, instructors, programs and McMaster as an institution need to be transparent and consistent in their communications with students and each other. Students described needing to be kept continually updated as changes are being planned, not just after they are decided and implemented. Some examples students gave include:
• Needing faster and/or more frequent responses from their professors or services
• Wanting SAS and instructors to communicate so that instructors understand and respect accommodations
• For programs and instructors to have shared standards so students are kept informed and are on an equal footing across programs.

Advertising Inclusion and Wellness Services

In open responses, many students reported not knowing about virtual inclusion and wellness services (Q27, Q29), and overwhelmingly stated that inclusion and wellness supports need to be better advertised. Student suggestions for how to advertise include:

• Creating a permanent resource page listing available services/supports, hours of operation, and how to access them. This resource page could be posted to a dedicated section on Avenue to Learn (A2L) or a webpage that is emailed to all students with a clear subject line.
  • Such a resource, and the services/supports themselves, should be written and/or presented in plain language and multiple formats for readability
• E-newsletters, or emails from one email address dedicated to advertising supports and services; one student suggested “[emailing] details of what that service provides in a concise short set of bullet points and add in a link to access those resources at end of each bullet point” (Q22, Response 136)
• Frequent, consistent and personalized communications: individualized emails and discussions during classes/meetings
• Social media, especially video channels and dedicated student service accounts on Instagram and Twitter.

A particularly illuminating example of services not being adequately advertised is that the majority of respondents responded that they did not know that intimate partner violence and sexual violence response services, resources and support remain available virtually and/or remotely (Q21; 2,424/3,505 or 69.16%). Several open response comments mentioned not knowing such services existed at all – and as noted before, students also mentioned that sexual and/or domestic violence supports are of particular importance in these times because many people are now trapped at home with their abusers.

Lastly, many students stated that they wished they had more of a voice, or that McMaster had asked students what they needed before major changes were made. For example, several
students questioned why course evaluations for Winter 2020 had been cancelled. One student suggestion pertaining to giving students a voice is “[having] short mandatory weekly or biweekly surveys which ask 5-10 questions regarding mental health/inclusion, flag the responses that indicate a potential issue and then communicate with that student. Using statistical software, this should be fairly easy and inexpensive to do and the students will feel a lot more appreciated” (Q22, Response 239).

Survey and Report Limitations

- Out of a sample size of 34,131 people, 4,317 surveys were completed – in other words, the student response rate to the survey was 12.6%. Caution should be taken in viewing these responses as adequately reflecting the needs and opinions of the student body as a whole.
- As the surveys were advertised and filled out online, there is a necessary correlation between students who completed the survey and who: have access to adequate computers/mobile devices to complete the survey; have access to internet service to complete the survey (especially relevant as the survey was conducted after McMaster and City of Hamilton buildings, libraries and other public places with internet access closed); have received and read COVID-19 related University updates.

Conclusion

Based on the dominant themes of the student responses, some steps McMaster could take to support students not only in these times, but throughout their university experiences, include:

- Developing and/or improving advertising of (a) clearly-written, accessible and centralized resource page(s)/hub(s);
- Addressing issues of financial inequity, racism, inaccessibility and ableism/sanism in the design and implementation of McMaster’s e-learning environments and student services/supports;
- Improving communication with students as responses to emergencies/unforeseen circumstances and plans for the future are being developed, and engaging student to provide feedback to inform plans; and
- Continuing to assess impact over time and enhance strategies to increase the response rate.