



## HURON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' COUNCIL

# REPORT ON ACCESS TO ONLINE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

---

On October 24, 2021, the HUCSC General Assembly (GA) voted to take immediate action on two different, but related issues of concern to the Huron student body. First, the GA voted in favour of expanding advocacy efforts to ensure access to online educational materials for all students. Second, the GA voted against the de-registration of unvaccinated students, and asked for online alternatives for students unable to attend classes as a result of the vaccination mandate, until the end of the academic term.

Given the HUCSC constitutional mission to “enhance the educational experience and quality of life for all students” and advocate “on behalf of students in all areas affecting the student experience”, we are accountable to Huron students and their elected representatives. Therefore, acting in accordance with the directives of the GA, this report provides an overview of students’ concerns around (1) restricted access to online materials and (2) the de-registration of unvaccinated students from their courses. Additionally, the report offers recommendations to address these concerns and urges the Huron faculty and administration to adopt institutional and classroom policies that prioritize and centre students’ needs.

### **Principle**

As outlined in the HUCSC Strategic Plan, the Covid-19 pandemic has refocused the needs of our students. The recommendations outlined in this report serve as a means to address and accommodate the evolving needs of our diverse and growing student body, and advocate for an equitable undergraduate experience.

## **I. Access to Online Educational Materials**

### **Rationale**

The return to campus has largely been a positive experience for students, and a majority of students are in favour of attending in-person classes. However, the transition to online learning has also highlighted many systemic barriers within regular in-person instruction and operation, especially for students with immediate health considerations, as well as chronic illnesses. Conversely, instructional approaches, technological tools, and accommodations policies adopted during the online year have provided opportunities for greater engagement for all students. Carrying these methods forward would be favourable for general student well-being, while also better accommodating those with health anxiety and safety concerns, international students facing travel restrictions, and those facing other mental health issues. Anonymous survey data collected from 200+ Huron students at the beginning of August 2021 indicated that around 50% of all respondents were in favour of the continued use of online materials, should the option be made available. As such, ignoring these methods in a rush to return to “normal” deepens the divide between students who are able to move back to older ways of learning, but overlooks and sets back students who do not enjoy the same privilege.



Institutional directives restricting student access to existing online educational materials, and prohibiting the use of online technologies for accommodations have bolstered inequities in the student learning experience. The impact of these directives is outlined below.

## Concerns

### **Students with Immediate Health Concerns (i.e. Covid-19 positivity, influenza, flu-like symptoms)**

- Lack of access to online materials is creating unsafe classroom environments. Students developing symptoms of Covid-19 are not completing screenings and not getting tested for Covid-19 before arriving on campus. The restriction has also discouraged Covid-positive students from disclosing their test results, who continue to attend class due to the fear of falling behind in their coursework. One student submitted the following feedback:

“The fact that we can’t get access to the online version of the course that international students do really tempt me to lie on the symptom questionnaires and just come to campus.”

- Restrictions around access to online materials have also forced students with symptoms of influenza and common cold to attend classes, contrary to staying home as per public health messaging. Students feel compelled to attend classes even when they are unwell. Additionally, attending class in the presence of visibly unwell students creates feelings of discomfort and lack of safety among other students. One student said the following: e to the fear of falling behind in their coursework. One student submitted the following feedback:

“Sometimes I hear my classmates coughing in class and I feel extremely uncomfortable. I wish classes could also have the option to be virtual to all the students, even if they are not in quarantine.”

### **Students with Chronic Health Conditions**

- We have learned the ways in which different formats of learning can support students with different needs. Institutional failure to meet its duty to accommodate and provide accessible education for students with disabilities is ableism. Being advised to defer and deregister from courses and/or being penalized for excused, health-related absences is not acceptable. Students’ inability to attend in-person classes as a result of medical conditions or disabilities ought not to create barriers to access, or discrepancies in the quality of education afforded to them.
- While some health conditions may require continuous access to online course materials until the student recovers (i.e. a student who broke their leg), in other cases a student with a chronic condition may experience flare ups (i.e. migraines, endometriosis), where they require intermittent access to online materials. The quality of education received from being present in classroom settings does not compare to receiving notes from peers. Participating in hybrid learning and/or having access to online material becomes integral to supporting student success in such scenarios.



## **International Students**

- Some international students are experiencing travel bans or flight suspensions in their home countries and/or waiting for study permit approvals as a result of restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rushing these students to return to campus has created undue stress and anxiety for many.
- Frequent changes in travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, access to vaccines, and flight limitations and cancellations have added logistical and financial burdens to students trying to fly to Canada.

## **II. On De-Registration of Unvaccinated Students**

### **Rationale**

On August 15th, 2021, the GA voted to adopt a stance in favour of the on-campus vaccination mandate for the 2021-2022 academic year, expressing its support to the administrators of Huron and Western. The GA made its decision following feedback received from a series of focus groups and an anonymous survey to the student body, which indicated that 75.24% of respondents were in favour of a vaccination mandate on Huron's campus. We stand by our vote on August 15th 2021, and maintain our stance in favour of the vaccination mandate on campus. However, we also believe that unvaccinated students should be given the chance to complete their courses or their degrees remotely for the remainder of the academic term, instead of being deregistered from their courses, given that Huron has the technological capacity to do so. By choosing not to accommodate students through online materials and remote learning, Huron is limiting undergraduate students' access to education.

### **Concerns**

#### **Incomplete Education**

- Deregistering unvaccinated students in the middle of the academic term removes their opportunity to complete their credits, and in some cases, complete their degrees on time. While it is true that there are online options at other institutions that students may choose to pursue, the transfer process takes time. Additionally, not all credits may be able to be transferred to other institutions. Allowing students to continue ongoing credits and complete the academic year through alternate means gives them the opportunity to make appropriate plans for subsequent years. One student submitted the following feedback:

“I've already spent so much on moving costs and a lease. I've completed half of my courses, can I at least get the credits so I can just graduate? I feel so neglected and betrayed.”



## **Financial Strain**

- Students have already purchased course materials, paid moving costs, and signed leases, and accrued additional expenses over and above their tuition that may not be recovered. This will have a more severe impact on students who are already marginalized and/or have other financial considerations, dependents, etc. By participating in ongoing courses online, unvaccinated students may have the opportunity to conserve some of those resources and have sufficient time to make other plans for next year.

## **Recommendations**

Given the concerns outlined above, the HUCSC asks that:

1. Restrictions on the distribution and circulation of online content are lifted, and available online materials are made accessible to all students at the discretion of the course instructor.
2. Students are accommodated using online tools, such as zoom broadcasting, online participation, etc. as needed, given the new technological capabilities of each classroom.
3. Penalties associated with short-term absences related to experiencing flu-like symptoms, colds, etc. are removed, and a clear and consistent policy for dealing with such absences is developed and communicated to students.
4. Online materials, including pre-recorded lectures, virtual participation methods, etc. in addition to in-person instruction, are utilized when needed, at the discretion of the course instructor.
5. International students residing overseas continue to be accommodated through online options until the end of the academic year.
6. Unvaccinated students are not deregistered from their courses and are accommodated online until the end of the academic year.

We believe that students' concerns can be addressed by providing them access to online materials and methods of teaching and learning. This is made more feasible by the fact that Huron has invested in technology to provide accessible hybrid-learning education this year, which may not have been available in past years. **Students are excited to be back on campus and eager to return to 'normal', but learning spaces and approaches built on systemic ableism and inequity are not the ideal we should aspire to.**



Moreover, our recommendations further Huron’s goal to identify and remove “systemic obstacles to the ongoing success of equity-seeking groups” and join in the aim “to be inclusive and equitable” as identified in the FASS academic plan. Providing students the support and care they need falls aligns with Huron’s vision for “creating the best learning and living experience possible for all our students” and “providing them with the support they need to thrive, all the while ensuring our campus is safe, compassionate, and welcoming.”

We invite the Huron community to join us in building a safer, more accessible and equitable learning environment and space for its students.

On behalf of the HUCSC General Assembly,

Matthew Chasmar, HUCSC President

Matthew Chasmar

Urvi Maheswari, Vice-President Student Affairs

Urvi Maheswari

Kendra Hancock, Vice-President Communications

Kendra Hancock

Andrew McCann, Vice-President Finance & Administration

Andrew McCann

Dakshina Kannan, Vice-President Student Events

Dakshina Kannan