UTM Online Learning Planning Guide

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Introduction

The shift to remote teaching and learning in March 2020 required instructors and learners to adjust to new contexts and consider new perspectives on learning in higher education. During this period, instructors learned a great deal about pedagogy in terms of how interactive and engaged learning could look in virtual spaces. Online learning has since challenged students to develop autonomy over their learning – reinforcing one of UTM's undergraduate degree learning expectations (UDLEs).

In 2022, U of T developed the "Online by Design" (OBD) process to encourage pedagogical innovation and facilitate the exploration and implementation of new online courses, intentionally implementing the innovations that emerged from intense course redesign during the period of remote learning caused by the pandemic. The OBD process emphasized a deliberate and measured approach to the approval of new online courses, placing pedagogical rationale and the advantages of online delivery over in-person delivery first. Further shifts in the learning landscape have prompted increased demand by students for more flexible options for learning through existing courses, particularly during the summer terms. This has led to a conscious shift to "meet students where they are."

Many students travel, undertake experiential learning opportunities such as internships and field courses, and require the flexibility to integrate their studies with work, particularly in summer. UTM has established a "flexible" approach to course delivery that allows designated courses to be offered in-person, online, or hybrid in any given academic term. UTM aims to streamline the approval process and provide academic units with the autonomy to make course scheduling decisions that best suit their programs and their students. This approach to course planning highlights the need for a more holistic perspective and strategy that considers and identifies opportunities for students in the summer while also meeting the challenges and demands of developing the fall/winter slate of courses, mitigating waitlists, and providing a range of enriching learning experiences. Summer offerings for instance, should complement and enhance fall/winter offerings, whether in-person or online and, in some cases, reduce scheduling stress. Thinking holistically about course offerings does not mean that students will be expected to distribute their yearly course load across three terms; rather, it means that units consciously plan and make decisions for summer that complement the more robust fall and winter academic terms. A flexible approach to delivery options in key courses will allow academic units to strategically plan course offerings and adjust delivery modes to accommodate and respond to student need.

Developing an intentional plan

This Planning Guide is not meant to be prescriptive but instead outlines points to consider when planning yearly course offerings, and aims to give units the autonomy to identify which delivery modes best suit their courses in each session. UTM developed this guide in collaboration with administrative units and in consultation with faculty, program administrators, and students. Although much of the guidance focuses on flexible offerings for the summer sessions and assumes in-person delivery of courses during the fall and winter terms, the flexible delivery approach for existing courses enables units to explore, where appropriate, online course options for all academic terms – not just summer.

The UTM Online Learning Planning Guide strives to accomplish the following:

- facilitate course and program planning from the perspective of increasing opportunities and improving efficiencies in online delivery (usually for the summer months)
- leverage UTM experience in developing online pedagogies and techniques
- enhance the quality of student experience in UTM's academic programs
- strengthen pedagogy and create avenues for curriculum evolution and teaching innovation

In the spirit of UTM's Strategic Framework, this Planning Guide also aims to support each academic unit's holistic consideration of its suite of offerings in relation to the following key priorities:

- fostering student success
- developing sustainable programs
- staking our place within a forward-thinking higher education landscape

Sometimes this means "meeting students where they are" intellectually, personally, and creatively through technology; and sometimes this means engagement through face-to-face contact in the classroom and the lab.

Continuous and intentional planning will help UTM to develop a vibrant academic community both in person and online, by providing flexibility for students to integrate opportunities for travel, work, service, and research throughout the year, and particularly during the summer months.

Student motivation for online course enrolment and flexible delivery

Students seek to incorporate online courses into their studies for a range of reasons, including, but not limited to, the following:
- to fill a breadth requirement for their program
- to complete a required course outside their program of study (POSt)
- to complete required/core courses for their program

- to make up a dropped fall/winter course in the summer
- to pick up a course they missed in fall/winter due to waitlists
- to fit a full course load into a demanding part-time work or team schedule
- to gain flexibility regarding course schedule and location (e.g., because of issues with accessibility or parental and caregiving responsibilities)

Factors to consider

1. Pedagogy and student success

Not all courses will be appropriate for a flexible approach to course delivery that includes in-person and online options. What fits optional online delivery might differ from program to program within the same unit. Factors to consider include content integrity, program vibrancy, and learning outcome alignment:

a. How will the integrity of the content transfer from in-person to online, particularly if the delivery of that content depends on moderate or extensive student engagement?
b. How does the course relate to or support (pre-requisite/co-requisite) other courses in the program?
c. Is the course part of another program such as the Writing Development Initiatives (WDI) program?
d. Will the online section facilitate increasing the cap and providing more students the opportunity to take the course?
e. Can students successfully achieve the learning outcomes both in person and online?
f. How does the course map onto potential student motivations for online learning?

2. Equity and access

Equity considerations involve two primary stakeholder groups:

a. *Students* need equitable access to instructor contact and learning engagement, whether during synchronous classes, tutorials, office hours, or group meetings; access to resources for learning (including adequate tools such as computers and software); and assessments that measure their learning outcome achievement.

b. *Instructors* need support and strategies for transferring/converting in-person pedagogical approaches to online contexts and/or developing new strategies for an online environment in ways that respect intellectual property, academic freedom, academic integrity, and workload considerations.

3. Assessment

One of the key priorities for online learning is maintaining the integrity of the curricular content to allow for the successful achievement of learning outcomes through content delivery and assessment. The integrity of the learning experience requires equivalence across

assessments (for both in-person and online versions of the same course) in relation to measuring student achievement of course learning outcomes. To facilitate assessment designs that are equitable and uphold academic integrity, UTM needs to provide opportunities for instructor professional development in online teaching and continuous Educational Developer support. To protect Academic Integrity concerns, UTM should carefully examine the transferability of in-person assessment schemes to an online environment, and consider whether to alter or exchange assignments that work for an in-person environment with assignments that have been shown to work for an online environment. In some instances, a hybrid distribution of online learning and some in-person assessment may be more pedagogically appropriate and will support the goal of maintaining academic integrity (e.g., online courses with in-person tests). Units wishing to offer online courses with in-person final exams during the summer should, of course and as always, consult with the Office of the Registrar to determine the most appropriate scheduling options to avoid attrition.

4. Health and wellbeing
*For **students,*** a diverse array of summer courses and larger proportions of online learning options provide the opportunity for more evenly distributed learning throughout a program. Flexible approaches to course delivery also gives units enhanced opportunities to accommodate students with different learning preferences.

The flexibility of summer online teaching for ***faculty*** may provide more opportunity for balancing year-long workload, scheduling research travel, facilitating family-care obligations, etc.

5. Infrastructure
Even a small reduction in the number of in-person classes during the fall-winter terms will ameliorate current and pressing space challenges. And although fewer classroom resource needs arise in Summer sessions than in the Fall/Winter, the growing number of non-academic activities occurring at UTM will continue to place pressure on space availability. Increasing the proportion of online learning opportunities will ease classroom space pressures year-long, allowing units to use spaces on campus for other academic-related programming. A flexible approach to course delivery will still require governance approval to add online and/or hybrid modes to courses that are currently in-person. Once the additional delivery modes for a course are approved, units may then schedule the course as online, in-person, or hybrid in any given term without further approvals needed. **However**, this Guide does not intend to suggest that all courses be approved for both in-person and online delivery. Decisions about specific course delivery modes should be part of the unit's overall curriculum renewal and reflect an intentional shift in program design and delivery.

Online teaching and unit workload policies

Unit heads will need to consider how teaching loads are distributed and to work with faculty to maintain an acceptable and equitable balance of online and in-person teaching loads. The expectation is that UTM is an in-person institution with some online learning opportunities. Faculty teaching online are still required to be available for in-person service work during the fall, winter, and summer terms.

Targets

Targets per academic unit may vary depending on student demand, disciplinary demands, and pedagogical appropriateness. It is expected that reviewing the online landscape across all programs within a unit is part of the regular curriculum review. A robust offering of online courses will generally fall between 2–10% for fall/winter and between 20-25% in summer of the total course seat capacity. To achieve these targets, units may request an exception to offer an existing course online if it has not yet been approved through the governance process.

Summer enrolment and online learning

UTM intends to strengthen summer enrolment by increasing the number of courses and spaces in synchronous and asynchronous online course offerings. This will provide all students with enrolment options that better suit their respective summer obligations and to meet students where they are.

Data-informed approach

A data-informed approach for summer course offerings will include consultation between the Office of the Vice Principal, Academic & Dean and academic units, using the following metrics:

- historical summer enrolment data, including proportion of capacity offered in-person vs. online
- student waitlist data for previous Fall & Winter sessions, and courses that experienced higher waitlist pressures
- enrolment data for UTM students taking courses in other divisions
- enrolment data for transfer credits for online courses that UTM students completed elsewhere

Keeping student motivation in mind, units are asked to consider and target the following kinds of online offerings during their summer planning:

- special topics courses with minimal pre-requisites
- breadth requirement courses

- courses with waitlists that did not resolve in the preceding Fall and Winter terms
- a selection of core courses in deregulated fee programs
- equivalent courses in other divisions that were over-enrolled with UTM students
- a selection of first-year courses
- courses commonly used as distribution credits in the HUM, SSC, and SCI

Supporting an effective mix of summer offerings

Increasing summer online learning at UTM has an impact beyond course selection, governance processes, and enrolment. The following supports and opportunities can establish a vibrant learning community both in person and online.

Supports for teaching online summer courses

- dedicated online support for faculty from an educational developer at RGASC and educational technology expert from the library
- professional development opportunities for sessional instructors (for which they are paid) in the form of workshops

Supports for enriching student experience in the summer

- opportunities to complete learning enhancement programs such as the PART (Program for Accessing Research Training) offered through RGASC
- in-person and online and appointments through RGASC to support student learning
- online and in-person advising appointments (both with department/institute advisors and registrar advisors)
- online co-curricular opportunities where appropriate

Communication

Communication with students is key for ensuring a robust online learning community that complements and enriches the entire student experience.

Summary

As previously stated, this plan is not prescriptive but rather a set of considerations for developing a robust and enriching student experience. This document is fluid and will change over time.