

# STUDENTS & USAP

Results of the student survey on McGill's University Student Assessment Policy



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May 2020

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### Credits and Acknowledgements

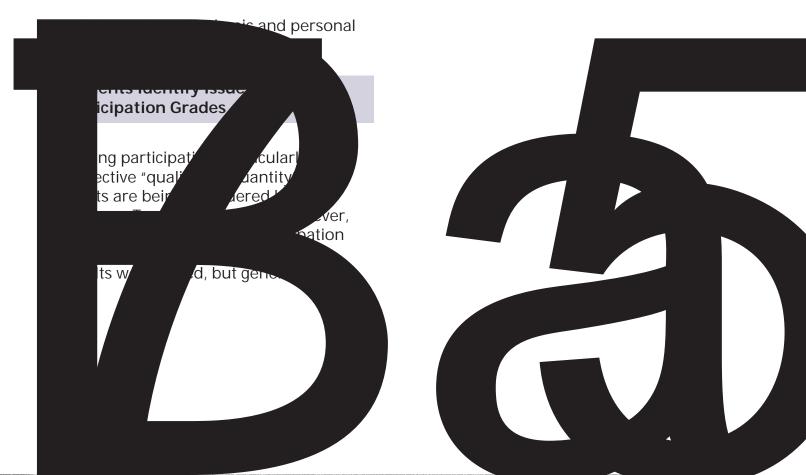
Survey design: Senator Henrique Mecabô, in collaboration with Senators Jeremy Garneau, Julia Kafato, Adrienne Tessier, and Madeline Wilson.

Special thanks to the SSMU translators, the SSMU Communications team, and to Angela Tessier for their support on this project.

Grades, marks, GPAs - they are ubiquitous parts of the student experience, especially at a competitive university like McGill. The

students chose 4. This suggests a clear preference by the majority of respondents in favour of more assignments over heavier exams.

In comments, students noted that exams can add to stress, discourage engagement with a course during the term, and encourage cramming. One wrote that "I really hate going into an exam knowing 12 weeks of learning depends upon my response to 1-3 questions and it just seems like such a poor way to test [a] student's mastery of the knowledge." Another wrote that assignments can disproportionately hinder students with families or other responsibilities outside of school. A proposed compromise of "assist-only" or optional assignments was proposed by another commenter



students enjoyed having a laptop ban and found that it improved their focus and learning in a course. They stated that they found that it removed distractions from the class and improved their focus. Others stated that it hindered their learning. This ranged from creating inconvenience (eg not understanding disorganized handwritten notes; needing to take the time to retype notes after the fact), to increasing cost from the need to print out readings, to increasing stress due to missing course or lecture material.

pact of laptop bans on students with disabilities. One student with arthritis had to ask friends for notes on certain days. Another ignored a laptop ban entirely because handwriting was not accessible to them. Two students stated that they made arrangements with the professor to have their laptops, but felt exposed and uncomfortable when using them.

### Methodology

This survey was designed by student Senators in collaboration with the SSMU VP-UA, in order to better inform the current USAP revision process. It was designed to answer the following questions:

- How informed are students of their rights under the USAP?
- What do students think of the current policy?
- What issues have students encountered related to curving and/or laptop bans?
- How would students resolve issues related to USAP?

The survey was open as a Google Form from March 30th until May 4th, 2020 in both English and French. No data was collected on the identities of participants (email address, student number, etc.). It was publicized via Faculty listservs hosted by student associations, the McGIII subreddit, SSMU social media outlets, and word of mouth. In total, it generated 196 responses, of which 5 were in French.

The survey was structured around certain rights guaranteed to students in the USAP. Each section began with an article from the policy. The following questions would relate directly to that article. For instance, section 9, "Reporting a USAP violation", began with the following article:

"The USAP (1.4) establishes that "Students may come forward in cases of perceived violation of the University Student Assessment Policy. The matter may, as appropriate, be conf dentially referred to the Professor, Department Chair, Director or Associate Dean to ensure the spirit of the University Student Assessment Policy is respected.""

The following questions were then based on this excerpt. `

The purpose of organizing the survey in this manner was two fold. Firstly, it was an easy way to organize questions about a wide-reaching and important policy that includes many rights and responsibilities. Secondly, it was strongly suspected that students would not be aware of the policy and its

educate the student community about the existence of the policy, and the rights it contains.

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The results of this survey represent an incredibly useful portrait of the student experience at McGill with regards to assessment. Throughout, students spoke of

Table 2 lists the participants by Faculty of School. The survey did not ask participants to identify which Faculty or School they declared their major in; rather, the survey asked at which Faculty or School participants had taken the majority of their classes. This was done for two main reasons. First, students (especially1nno U090 >> BDC BTSpan8 << /Lang (en-US)/MCID 497 73BDC BTSpan8 << /Lang (en-US)/

**General Questions on Assessment Experience at McGill** 

Students were asked whether they felt that it was possible to achieve an A in a course (i.e. on the standard grading scale, to receive over 85% in a course). The majority of students felt that it was not possible to receive an A in a course (143, 72.9%).

#### jectively:

"I have found all f nal exams at McGill to be well-organized with clear expectations. Assessment methods have always been very objective and do not depend on [a] relationship with prof whatsoever. I have gotten high grades having rarely interacted with a prof in that class. I have also found it doable to get above 85% in all the classes I have taken, particularly in math classes. However, my experiences are strictly limited to the faculty of science so perhaps this is not the case in other faculties such as arts where assessment is more subjective."

Others pointed to the fact that essays or papers are graded more subjectively than, for instance, multiple choice exams:

"I took a philosophy course in which the instructor's paper guidelines said that scoring >85% required "fawless or nearly fawless" work. Especially for philosophy, where arguments are always deeply nuanced and require examination of their faws, a feld in which you are supposed to push boundaries of thought and be welcomed to go out on a limb, this is ridiculous."

Lastly, two students expressed that they liked the current numerical scale, as having an A pegged to 85% made it more achievable than a 100%.

#### **Maximum Weight of Final Exams**

exam was worth more than 75%, 20 students strongly indicated that the maxi-

the maximum weight should be, a majority (56.1%) of participants indicated that it should be between 50-60%. Only 15.8% indicated that the maximum

should be worth less than 50% (See Figure 2).



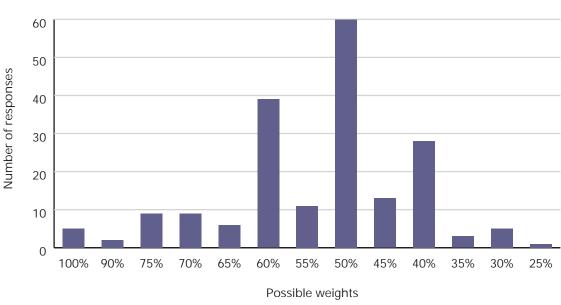


Figure 2: Maximum allowable weight for f nal exams

When asked to express a preference between more assignments (5) or more

dents chose 4. This suggests a clear preference by the majority of respondents in favour of more assignments over heavier exams.

In comments, students noted that exams can add to stress, discourage engagement with a course during the term, and encourage cramming. One wrote that "I really hate going into an exam knowing 12 weeks of learning depends upon my response to 1-3 questions and it just seems like such a poor way to test [a] student's mastery of the knowledge." Another wrote that assignments can disproportionately hinder students with families or other responsibilities outside of school. A proposed compromise of "assist-only" or optional assign-

needed to balance their academic and personal obligations.

### **Curving and Enforced Averages**

The next question was based on anecdotes reported to SSMU University Affairs over the course of the year. Students had reported that professors would tell graders in advance how many of each grade could be awarded, regardless of the work submitted. The majority (57.1%) of participants had never been in a course where they had strong reason to believe that only a certain number of grades would be distributed.

the work that students put into their coursework, and could have future implications for them. Others felt that curving down could be penalizing students for a professor who did not design a course well, or who did not communicate the information in an understandable way:

"Curving down shouldn't be permitted - it is not fair to penalize students if a professor somehow makes a course too easy, or if a class is unusually high-performing."

"it should be noted that a class that happens to have a neat bell curve doesn't necessarily mean that it was a well designed course."

One student pointed directly to the practice in the Faculty of Management to curve down grades:<sup>21</sup>

"As a student with a management minor, I am very against the DesauteIs curve. It breeds so much toxic competition in the faculty and often results in

#### **Receiving Accommodations**

The next section of the survey dealt with the issue of accommodations. These questions were meant to capture accommodations provided through the Of-

well as more informal accommodations that students may seek directly from

#### The Right to Receive Feedback on Your Grades

77% of students had never requested a re-assessment of an assignment, mid-

ment but ultimately decided against it.23

The next question asked participants whether a professor had ever declined to give them feedback on an assignment or exam. 68.3% responded that no, a professor had never declined to give them feedback. 25% stated that a professor had declined to give them feedback, while 3 students noted that they had never asked for feedback. As well, 5 students noted that professors had not answered emails requesting feedback on assignments. One student stated that they had requested feedback, but the professor was not amenable to making their schedules work. Others noted that the quality of feedback that they received was inadequate, as it was vague or too late:

"[S]ometimes feedback was dismissive and combative and not in the spirit of learning."

"I have received very inadequate and vague feedback. I have also received feedback that does not ref ect the grade I received: that is, 'your paper was excellent, one of the best in the class' with a grade of B+ on the paper. B+ was the highest grade given for the paper (which was a midterm)."

"[P]rofessors have simply not returned assignments / papers / exams, before or after the course marks were submitted, so there's no way I could have gotten feedback anyway."

"[A] professor last semester never made the exams accessible to students until after the date to contest the f nal mark had passed. Another professor does not have an of ce near campus and insisted that students come to his workplace to receive feedback."

Students noted the administrative barriers that are sometimes present when requesting feedback, or when they want to review their exam papers. In the Faculty of Law, students are required to contact the SAO, who will forward them the graded assessment on behalf of the professor. However, if the professor does not send the graded papers to the SAO, then students cannot receive feedback. One student stated that several of their courses did not allow them to review their exam papers at all, meaning that they had to take their marks at face value on their transcript. The student suspected that this was to allow professors to re-use questions in subsequent years. In requesting a reread of an exam, students are charged a \$42.35 fee - though this may be refunded in some circumstances.

### Presence of Instructors During Examinations

Table 4 lists the responses to question 25.

#### **Maximum Weight of Participation**

subjective "quality not quantity" elements are being considered by a professor or Teaching Assistant. However, when asked what weight participation should be given of a total grade, the results were mixed, but generally in favour of lowering the potential weight of participation grades - or eliminating them entirely. The most popular answer was capping participation grades at 10% (28.6%). However, the next most popular option (17.3%) was not allowing them at all. When courses weighted participation at more than 10% and a rubric was provided, as per USAP guidelines, a majority of students who had taken such a course (54.5%) felt that the rubrics were unclear.

Students noted in comments that participation grades are often not accessible to those who have anxiety, or simply are not comfortable participating in

engagement (discussions on MyCourses; emailing the professor or TA after the

in a large lecture, but were more acceptable in a smaller seminar format. A Francophone student noted that speaking in their second language in front of a large lecture hall was intimidating, thereby hindering their ability to take advantage of participation marks.

Potential actors for dispute resolution

#### Reporting a USAP violation

students to resolve issues concerning USAP, or violations of their rights under USAP. Figure 4 lists a number of possible routes to resolution of violations of USAP.

To whom would you feel comfortable reporting a violation of USAP?

Figure 4: Reporting USAP violations<sup>26</sup>

0 20 40 60

Number of responses

The results suggest a strong preference by students to addressing violations through their peers. One student noted that their answer would depend on the context of the violation.

When asked whether they would feel uncomfortable bringing up a violation of

(52%) said yes. 24.4% said maybe, and 21.4% said no. Students were then asked how clear they found the procedures for reporting violations as currently outlined in USAP, where 1 meant "unclear" and 5 meant "clear". Figure 5 sets out their responses.

Figure 5: Clarity of reporting procedure for a violation of USAP Given these f ndings, what can we say about student's experiences with assessments here at McGill? Four themes that emerged were concerns with the Faculty of Law's enforced average, the importance of student autonomy, the need for f exibility, and the necessity of conf dential and ef ective access to accommodations.

Concerns with the Faculty of Law's Enforced Average

## Importance of Student Autonomy and Flexibility in Assessment

Students indicated a strong preference



### Appendix A: Survey Questions

#### Part 1: Demographic Information

- 1. Are you a McGill student?
- 2. If you are not a current McGill student, what is your status with respect to McGill University (eg. alum, instructor)? If you are a current McGill student, please respond "N/A".
- 3. What is your year?
- 4. In what Faculty/School do you take most of your classes?

#### Part 2: General Questions on Assessment Experience at McGill

- 5. Before taking this survey, had you heard of the McGill University Student Assessment Policy?
- 6. It is important that students enter university knowing what to expect of the years ahead. With that in mind, we want to know: how close to what you expected before you joined McGill have your exam experiences (and assessment experiences more generally) been? Note that this does not relate to the grades you obtained, but to the process of obtaining them.
  - a.
  - b. My experiences have been reasonably within the expectations I had before joining McGill
  - c. My experiences have been better / smoother than expected
  - d. Other
- 7. From 0 to 5, how often do you feel the grading process in your courses can become arbitrary or biased (eg. getting along with the grader or professor might lead to more generous grading)? (With 0 meaning "I have never been in such a course" and 5 meaning "I feel like that's every course in my department").

- 16. Alternatively, SSMU has heard anecdotes of professors who will, instead of curving, tell graders in advance the number of each letter grade that students in a class can be awarded for assignments and exams. This could distort the distribution of grades in a class. Have you ever been in a course where you knew or had strong reason to believe that only a certain number of some letter grades was allowed to be distributed, regardless of how many students might have been handing in excellent work?
- 17. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

#### Part 5: Receiving Accommodations

- 18. Have you faced problems trying to secure accommodations or alternative arrangements for an assessment, even if providing the required documentation?
- 19. In requesting an in-term academic accommodation for personal health reasons, were you forced to present your instructor with a medical note?
- 20. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding any of the above questions.

#### Part 6: The Right to Receive Feedback on Your Grades

- 21. Have you ever requested a re-assessment of an assignment, midterm or
- 22. Have you ever considered requesting a re-assessment of an assignment,
- 23. Has a professor ever declined to give you requested feedback on an assignment or exam?
- 24. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding any of the above questions.

#### Part 7: Presence of Instructors During Examinations

25. er or a designate (such as the TA) was not present, hindering your chance of asking clarifying questions?

26. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above question.

#### Part 8: Maximum Weight of Participation

- 27. In your opinion, what should be the maximum weight allocated to participation?
- 28. If you have taken a course where participation was valued higher than
  - a. The USAP (3.1.6) establishes that "[n]ormally, participation will not attendance) is to exceed 10%, instructors must include a clear rubric in the course outline."
- 29. Regardless of how you feel about the maximum participation and rubric means "clear"). Version francaise: Comment box.
- 30. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above question.

#### Part 9: Reporting a USAP violation

- 31. Who would you feel comfortable reporting a perceived violation of the USAP to? (select all that apply)
  - a. The Professor
  - b. The Chair of the Department
  - c. The Director of your program
  - d. The Associate Dean
  - e.
  - f. Student Association Representative
  - g. Legal Information Clinic at McGill
  - h. None of the above
  - i. Other

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- 33. Regardless of how you feel about the procedures surrounding the report-