

May 5, 2020

To: Spring and Fall Term Instructors

From: David DeVidi, Associate Vice President, Academic
Jeff Casello, Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs
Catherine Newell Kelly, Registrar

Subject: Asynchronous vs Synchronous Remote Instruction

Colleagues,

We write in hope of clarifying matters with respect to synchronous vs. asynchronous instruction for remote learning.

During terms where remote instruction is required, our students will be in many time zones, in unpredictable living circumstances, and often with unreliable access to the internet. This is obviously problematic, for instance, for a student studying from home in China, with a 12 hour time zone difference and where it often takes four hours to download a one hour video. These challenges are not limited to international students; reliable internet is also a problem in rural areas in Canada.

What is required, in the name of fairness to our students, is that students must be able to achieve the learning outcomes from a class asynchronously. This is the reason that the Registrar's Office did not schedule synchronous course elements during Spring 2020.

However, this does not mean that the University has "forbidden" the use of some synchronous elements in courses. **What is required is that any synchronously delivered material be made available to students unable to participate in the synchronous event. You will find advice about mechanisms for doing this effectively, and advice about privacy and other considerations relevant to recording events, on the Keep Learning site.**

Some examples:

1. A tutorial reviewing solutions to problems where students can get immediate feedback to suggestions can be useful to students. For students unable to participate, the synchronous event should be recorded and made available to all students; but if the recorded event is supplemented by an asynchronous opportunity for students to pose follow up questions, all students might benefit.
2. If, after connecting with their class at the start of term, an instructor knows that all students are able to engage synchronously, for example in a graduate seminar with small enrollment, then an agreed synchronous meeting time is certainly permissible and might be desirable.

Based on the rationale provided above, it is not practical, nor reasonable given the limited role of synchronous course elements, to centrally schedule these components. Our expectation is that in cases like (2) instructors will have sufficient flexibility to find a conflict free time for their students, and that in cases like (1) students will not be unduly disadvantaged should a scheduling conflict mean they must choose between synchronous events.

Finally, with the move to remote teaching, the University's advice has been that instructors choose alternatives to timed final exams whenever they are appropriate. We have also advised that, if there are no feasible alternatives to a timed final exam, students be provided with a minimum 48 hour window for

completion so that students can complete the exam at a time that is feasible for them. Since there are no centrally scheduled final exams the usual *process* by which students request relief from consecutive final exams is not operating (the rules have not been suspended but may be less relevant), but it is possible that some students will have several exams in the same 48 hour period. In such circumstances students will be approaching instructors directly. We ask that you be accommodating to reasonable requests for adjustments to the exam schedule.