University of Toronto Provostial Guidelines on the Use of Digital Learning Materials

Revised: Summer 2020 (in response to COVID-19 pandemic planning)

The University of Toronto recognizes that the creation of new learning materials and methodologies is an important part of pedagogical practice and can contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning. The use of Digital Learning Materials has increased in recent years as an alternative to physical textbooks and Digital Learning Materials have evolved to include assessment tools – both for self- assessment and to contribute to a course mark. While the benefits of Digital Learning Materials are known, the University also recognizes that these resources may come with additional costs that may be onerous for some students.

Background

Prior to 2013, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) had prohibited the charging of compulsory ancillary fees for digital learning materials. In December 2013, MTCU revised the *Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines for Publicly-Assisted Universities, 2013-14 to 2016-17*.

Section 6.B.3: *Exemptions from Protocols*[1] was amended to permit non-tuition-related ancillary fees for clickers and to address fees for digital learning materials.

> ***Fees for learning materials and clothing retained by the student, or materials used in the production of items that become the property of the student*** *– these fees include materials such as dental kits, <u>clickers</u>, art supplies, lab coats and manuals.*

> ***Fees for digital learning materials that are the property of the student and which can include test/assessment tools.***

> - *The Ministry considers the payment of tuition as supporting the cost of instruction and assessment. Where a course or program relies substantially on assessments that are included with a learning resource, such as an online textbook, the Ministry expects universities to have a policy with respect to their students' interests in these situations. Such a policy could include a rebate to students of a portion of their textbook fees where bundled assessments represent a substantial portion of a student's mark for a course.*
> - *The Ministry acknowledges the contribution that these resources can make to the quality of teaching and learning, including support for adaptive learning and formative assessment. Universities should be proactive in monitoring conditions attached to the use of learning resources by faculty and students, to ensure that these are consistent with institutional academic policies and values.*

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[1] At the University of Toronto the "Protocol" refers to the <u>Memorandum of Agreement</u> between The University of Toronto and student governments regarding the increase or introduction of compulsory non-tuition related fees.

While the Ministry asked that universities set a threshold at what they consider a "substantial portion of a student's mark", the University of Toronto recognized that for some students, even a very small percentage may be seen as a significant portion of the total grade. Additionally, the use of digital learning resources for assessment purposes may vary significantly from course to course.

Guidelines

As required, the University responded in a timely manner to the new Ministry framework with the initial set of guidelines that became effective in 2014-15. The guidelines have since been updated. These guidelines are reviewed each year by the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students, the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs and Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education, and the Planning and Budget Office. **These guidelines are for the 2020-2021 academic year only.**

Digital Learning Resources

The principles outlined below take into consideration the financial implications of learning materials, the importance to many students of every component of assessment towards a final grade, and the variety of usage of such resources across the University. The principles also take into account the extraordinary circumstances of online instruction as a result of COVID-19. Instructors can require students to purchase digital learning resources for assessment purposes *provided that the following conditions are fulfilled*:

1. If students are required to purchase physical textbooks bundled with software, codes to access on-line resources, or other digital components for assessment purposes, **students must have the option to purchase the digital components separately.**

2. If the total cost of the digital learning resource(s) by which assessments are derived **exceeds $65 per half-credit** (0.5 full-course equivalent (FCE))[2], an alternative method of assessment must be offered as an option.

3. Wherever possible, students must be made aware of the use of digital learning materials for assessment **upon registration for a course**. If the cost to students for such materials exceeds $65 per half-credit, then the **alternative methods of assessment must be set out in the first week of class through the syllabus, or on Quercus or other communication tools used in the particular course. Note that instructors shall notify students of these costs within the first two weeks of class through the syllabus, or on Quercus or other communication tools used in a particular course.**

In addition to fulfilling the conditions described above, instructors are highly encouraged to reach out to the University of Toronto Libraries to discuss alternatives to commercial on-line resources, including open source on-line resources, or resources acquired through consortial purchasing.

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[2] Having reviewed the relevant costs, the cost limit for 2020-2021 is $65 per half credit and may be pro-rated. This threshold will be reviewed yearly.

A list of e-book platforms is available at: https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/ebooks

Please contact your appropriate Liaison Librarian resource.library.utoronto.ca/liaison/all.html for more information and assistance.

Clickers or Classroom Response System Devices

A number of classroom response systems are in use at the University of Toronto. It is now permissible to require students to purchase clickers or other classroom response system devices for assessment purposes. The purchase of clickers/classroom response systems is not included in the $65 threshold.

Instructors are encouraged to seek cost-effective measures, such as selecting bundled course packages that include clickers at a reduced price or using the iClicker[3] currently supported at the University.

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[3] iClicker (commonly called "clickers") is the proprietary name for the classroom response system (CRS) supported at UofT

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q1:   What is the University doing to provide cost-effective solutions for digital learning resources?

A1:   The University will continue to investigate the use of open-source assessment tools and engage in discussions with publishers to obtain the best options for our students. Additionally, the University will investigate the suitability of reduced cost options for textbooks, such as open source and/or commercially available e-textbooks. For more information please refer to: http://act.utoronto.ca/act-projects/, https://q.utoronto.ca/courses/46670/pages/edtech-catalogue and https://ocw.utoronto.ca/projects-at-uoft/.

Q2:   What types of alternative methods of assessment may be provided?

A2:   Alternative methods of assessment may include an option for the students to access the learning resource in the classroom/lab, or providing accessible physical copies of similar assessment tools.

Q3:   How did the University arrive at the figure of $65?

A3:   The figure was determined after reviewing the range of costs per course for digital learning materials currently available.

Q4:   Does the same threshold apply to both half and full courses?

A4:   The threshold is $65 per half-credit. Full credit (1.0) courses would therefore be permitted a total threshold of $130. Other credit values are pro-rated, for example a 0.25 credit, would be permitted a total threshold of $32.

Q5:   If more than one digital learning resource is required per course, does the threshold change?

A5:   No. The $65 threshold is currently a total cost for digital learning materials used in assessment per half-credit.

Q6:   The Ministry Guidelines suggest a threshold for assessment – i.e. a substantial portion of the grade – when using digital learning materials. Why is the University of Toronto using a dollar figure?

A6:   The University is aware that even a small percentage of a mark is of importance to our students. Requiring students to purchase potentially expensive digital learning materials for any assessment value may prove financially onerous.

Q7: Clickers, or classroom response system devices, are used in numerous courses and students may require various models of clickers based on the course. What is being done to minimize this cost to students?

A7: The University is investigating a campus-wide solution - be it a physical clicker, a downloadable app, or a combination thereof.

Q8: How often will these guidelines be revised?

A8: The guidelines will be reviewed annually.