

# **Protecting the health of students learning in different time zones: a letter to the UW administration**

Dear UW Administrators,

I am writing this letter to raise awareness of the challenges on the health of student learning in different time zones. In this letter, I present those challenges and potential solutions to mitigate those problems. I invite the UW administration to take actions to address those challenges to build a more inclusive global community.

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## **Executive Summary**

Amid the pandemic, many students have to learn in different time zones synchronously under current university policy, compromising their health. University policies on remote teaching need to be revised and enforced to protect the physical and mental health of students learning in different time zones. Established policies such as the elimination of attendance for grading need to be enforced. Policy changes should focus on making time schedules of assessments and discussion sessions more flexible.

## **Background**

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, students have to stay at home and learn remotely in different time zones inside and outside of the US. Most international students, especially, experience drastic time differences when trying to attend lectures and exams live from their home countries.

Attending classes live with hours of difference is not easy. For students studying in Hawaii, a 8:30 am PST class translates to attendance at 6:30 am local time. For students studying in East Asia, a 10:30 am PST class could mean staying up late 2:30 pm late night every weekday. Such time difference not only translates to disadvantages when learning materials and taking exams, it also disturbs the students' circadian clock, causing adverse effects on the student's physical and mental health.

The adverse effects are not theoretical, nor are they overstated. On February 8th, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute grieves the passing of Kaijie Zhang, "a first-semester freshman studying remotely from his family home in Wuxi, Jiangsu, China" [1]. Taking classes at night and its associated adverse effects are allegedly the main cause of this tragedy. To prevent such tragedies from happening at UW and for the health of all students learning in different time zones, university policies on remote teaching need to be revised and enforced. I am confident that these problems will be addressed because "the health and safety of our students, staff, faculty and academic personnel is our University's highest priority," writes our President Ana Mari Cauce in her message "The safety of our community is our highest priority" [2].

## **Problems and Recommendations**

### *Time Schedule Planning*

While synchronous classes with diverse time schedules and asynchronous classes could solve the problem, they are not realistic in large scale because of limited teaching resources and limited learning experience, respectively. However, I suggest the university to explicitly encourage the planning of lecture and quiz sections (if they have multiple sections) at very different times.

For instance, many courses currently offers section A at 9:30 am and section B at 10:30 am, providing students little time flexibility. Instead, the policy could encourage planning of section A at 9:30 am and section B at 4:30 pm, accommodating for students from different time zones.

I understand that such strategy may not work for all courses because of limitations such as their sizes, instructor availability, and time conflicts. Nevertheless, a small change in the schedule could benefit a large population of students. In addition, FERPA-compliant recordings of synchronous lecture should be required to be uploaded to the cloud for students all students for reference, giving all student the possibility of asynchronous learning.

### *Exam Policy*

Another issue that students learning from different time zones face is awkward exam schedule. If a course is offered synchronously, regardless whether its materials are posted for asynchronous learning, its exams are usually strictly synchronous, without exceptions (other than that required by university policy). For example, a student studying from East Asia may have to take an exam 3:30 am local time at night for an unnegotiable exam time of 11:30 am PST. Again, such late time is not only an disadvantage to academic performance, but it is also poisonous to the students' physical and mental health. This is easily understandable: if student do not expect instructors to teach late night to accommodate for students in different time zones, then instructors should not expect students in different time zones to take examinations late night.

As a concrete example, many exams in the Department of Chemistry must be taken synchronously, without exceptions for students learning in different time zones, because instructors "see less issues with academic ethics & integrity if all students take the exam concurrently." Even worse, it is quoted as a departmental policy. This would not be a problem if classes were in person, but remote instruction has to consider of time zone differences to be inclusive of students learning in different time zones.

Synchronous exam policies have to be changed. I recommend exams for remote learning to have a time window of 24 hours to start the exam, providing students from different time zones an equal opportunity to perform in their time zones. Indeed, such policy may raise concerns on academic integrity; however, policies should not punish students who did nothing wrong: the time zone students are in are not in their control. In contrast, the choice to adhere to the honor

code and take the exam with honesty is in the hands of every student. In addition, student who decide to cheat in asynchronous exams is likely to cheat in synchronous section regardless, having no correlation with whether students learning from different time zones should have a fair time to take the exam. Therefore, exam policies need to be changed so that every student has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their performance and a healthy schedule without late night classes.

### *Enforcement of Policies*

After appropriate revision to the university policies, those policies need to be strictly enforced so that the students can benefit from those policies to have a flexible learning experience. If no enforcement is placed and no feedback channel is available for students, students would not be benefitted from those policies. Thus, I recommend the university to establish ways for students to provide feedback and express concerns on remote teaching related to course policies to the administration level (independent to those mid-quarter survey that are for instructional feedback).

### *Attendance Policy*

Here, I present one example of the consequence of the lack of policy enforcement: the attendance policy is not practiced by instructors. The university policy on remote teaching has a clear guideline on grading synchronous attendance: “Attendance – Don’t factor in attendance as part of grading” [3]. However, many instructors still grade attendance directly or indirectly. Take an Organic Chemistry course as an example, its grading takes synchronous Poll Everywhere responses as 4% of the total grade, stating that “you will only be able to answer the questions during lecture, not while watching the lectures on Panopto later on,” forcing students to attend synchronously without considering students learning in different time zones. As a solution, I recommend quarterly inspection of course syllabus as a part of policy enforcement, in the hope that instructors will follow university policies, just like students should follow university policies, too.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, university policies need to be revised and enforced so that the physical and mental health of students learning in different time zones can be protected. The change to university policies can also provide more equitable examination opportunities. I invite the UW administration to respond by taking concrete actions to improve the policies, building a more inclusive community.

### **References**

- [1] Shirley Ann Jackson, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. “The Passing of Student Kaijie Zhang.” <https://president.rpi.edu/news/memo/02/08/2021/passing-student-kaijie-zhang>
- [2] Ana Mari Cauce, University of Washington. “The safety of our community is our highest priority.” <https://www.washington.edu/president/2021/02/04/safety-is-the-highest-priority/>

[3] University of Washington. “Teaching Remotely – UW Policies”  
<https://teachingremotely.washington.edu/uw-policies/>

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