

# UBC Exam Prep Database: Sunsetting and Transition

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## Overview

The UBC Exam Prep Database began as an initiative to create a repository for past examinations. The main motivator for this project, which was spearheaded by the AMS in collaboration with many other groups on campus, was to take a few concrete steps toward reducing the levels of stress and anxiety students report experiencing around examinations. This stress and anxiety, and students' view that past exams would help remedy it, was shown strongly by the 2012 AMS Academic Experience Survey (see the "Academic Experience Report 2012," 48-52). While the AMS worked for several years on this project in order to address these issues, it was ultimately determined that the project was infeasible, and that it should be discontinued. This transition report lays out the project's origins and development, as well as how and why the decision to sunset the database was made.

## Background and Project Origins

The UBC Exam Prep Database was a collaboration between the AMS, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), the VP Students Office, the Library, and the Registrar's Office. The project first originated in 2011, when student senators raised it as a Topic of Broad Academic Interest at the UBC Vancouver Senate, where it was referred to Senate's Teaching and Learning Committee. This committee brought the idea back to Senate in 2013, when Senate endorsed the project based on several benefits:

- Supporting student learning and cultivating active lifelong learners, by supporting self-directed learning.
- Providing equal access to past exams, to remedy the fact that some students have unfair advantage through financial means or their social networks.
- Ensuring quality of exams, by encouraging faculty to develop new exams rather than recycling old ones.
- Supporting student wellbeing, by helping students understand assessment expectations in their courses.

The database was meant to mainly target 100 and 200 level courses, and was to be used by faculty on an opt-in basis, given that UBC policies prevent making the database mandatory or opt-out. The AMS and VP Students Office were awarded funding from the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) to create the database. The proposal sought funding for 3 years of the project, to cover several aspects, including: building the database; using the database as a hub around which to encourage innovation in assessment; and providing professional development for faculty designing assessments. Only the first year of funding was approved, which mainly covered hiring a project manager to oversee database development and initial content collection.

From Fall 2013 to Fall 2014, the project manager also spent extensive time consulting with over 300 faculty members who teach large first and second year courses, to try to solicit their participation and to identify the biggest concerns and barriers to their using the system. Based on these conversations and concerns expressed, various new features were incorporated into the database:

- Professors control who can access material: the system was integrated with the Student Information System so professors could make material available publicly, to anyone with a CWL, to students in their faculty, or to students currently enrolled in the course. Ownership of any materials uploaded to the database would remain with faculty who created them.
- Name change from "Exam Database" to "Exam Prep Database": the database was now meant to be a more holistic resource where professors could upload any course-specific exam prep resources, not just actual past exams; while the main focus was still on old exams, professors could upload sample exams, exam templates, or other study material.
- Linking to a range of more general study resources: the system was embedded with a range of resources for self-directed study so professors' material could be presented alongside these.
- Messaging to students: the database included messaging to students about how to properly use past exams to study, and how past exams should not be used. For example, that students should not just "study to the test," and should not expect new exams to be the same as past ones.

See appendix 1 for screenshots of the database website.

### **Faculty Outreach and Content Collection**

During the 2015-2016 AMS VP Academic and University Affairs term, the AMS's focus for this project was reaching out to faculty to encourage them to upload content to the database. Insights from the project manager's consultation was used to tailor messaging to faculty, including creating a comprehensive FAQ document to address concerns, and a short infographic with FAQ highlights and instructions for using the database (see appendix 2 and 3). The following list is a record of faculty outreach that was conducted during 2015-2016. In all cases, effort was made to follow up with faculty and to support them in the process of using the database; almost all discussions with individual faculty also resulted in these faculty bringing the database to their department to discuss potential wider use among colleagues, meaning outreach actually reached a greater number than is listed below.

#### **UBC-Wide**

- Presentation to UBC-V Senate, September 2015
- Faculty Service Centre notification: posted end of Winter 2014 Term 2, between Summer 2015 terms, and at beginning of Winter 2015 Term 1<sup>1</sup>
- Learning Technology Operations Committee, representatives from each Faculty

#### **Faculty of Science**

- Presentation to two Associate Deans + representatives from 7 departments
- Chemistry: Discussions with Department head, followed by outreach to professors coordinating large first and second year courses
- Math: Discussions with undergraduate chair and graduate students developing Math Wiki

#### **Faculty of Arts**

- Presentation to Associate Dean + representatives from 8 departments
- Sociology: Discussions with two professors
- Anthropology: Discussions with two professors
- Central, Eastern and Northern European Studies: Discussions with one professor
- Japanese Language Program: Discussions with program chair
- Chinese Language Program: Discussions with program chair
- History: Discussions with one professor

#### **Faculty of Land and Food Systems**

- Presentations at Land and Food Systems Community Meeting to Dean, Associate Dean, and around 20 faculty and Learning Centre staff
- Food, Nutrition and Health: Discussions with one professor
- Applied Biology: Discussions with one professor

As a result of the above outreach, 10 files were uploaded to the database, from 4 faculty:

- Alexander Wang, Chemistry: 6 files
- Richard Anstee, Math: 2 files

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<sup>1</sup> Text of Faculty Service Centre Notification: *The newly launched Exam Prep Database allows instructors to share course-specific material, including past exams, practice exams, and any other useful resources. Instructors control who can access these materials, which will be part of a bank of general resources for guiding successful self-directed study. Visit <http://exams.elearning.ubc.ca> to participate!*

- Neil Guppy, Sociology: 1 file
- Charles Menzies, Anthropology: 1 file

While many faculty agreed to raise discussions with their respective departments or programs, the uploads from Professor Wang were the only direct results of such outreach from faculty to colleagues. The rest of the faculty who uploaded were faculty the AMS spoke to directly, through presentations or one-on-one meetings.

### **Decision to Sunset the Database**

Despite casting a wide net, AMS outreach to faculty resulted in very little uptake of the database, with only four faculty members uploading files. From the start of the project, UBC policy and culture barriers have meant that uploading material to the database could not be made mandatory or on an opt-out basis, despite the fact that UBC Senate and administration support the project in principle. While most faculty concerns could be anticipated and addressed, the main barrier to participation was that using the database was completely optional, and most faculty were resistant to investing extra time into it on top of Connect or other course management systems. Despite positive response from many faculty to the way messaging was delivered, the most common response was that, while they appreciated the idea of the database in principle, they themselves did not have any use for it. This failure to build up momentum suggested that the project was not feasible to continue in its current form—much time had been put into speaking to faculty, yielding only minimal results, indicating the project could not be sustained going forward.

This conclusion was supported by experiences at other Canadian universities. McGill University and Simon Fraser University both have similarly designed exam databases, which were among the models used to support the original proposal at UBC. However, conversations with individuals from those institutions suggested that, after content was initially collected in the first year or two of the projects, the amount of time and effort needed to ensure faculty sent in content could not be sustained, so the databases quickly became outdated.

In light of all of these issues, the AMS proposed two options to the Exam Prep Database Steering Committee in March 2016, and the committee opted for Option 2.

- **Option 1: Keep the current system, but re-design it.** Because faculty did respond positively to messaging, it was suggested that there may be a way to re-design the current database to become a broader resource—either an “Assessment Prep Database” that includes even more resources beyond just exams, or shifting to a “Course Resource Database” that includes things like syllabi and course outlines. However, the ultimate barrier to participation would still have remained: using the database is completely optional, and most faculty are resistant to investing extra time into it.
- **Option 2: Sunset the database.** While the AMS still believed that the Exam Prep Database would be a valuable resource for students, continuing to put time and resources into the project in any form appeared unfeasible given the results of the past year’s outreach and the barriers that continued to exist. Included in the database were links out to study and exam prep resources from the Learning Commons and other sources, and faculty members responded positively to having these more visible to students; one recommendation noted for the incoming 2016-2017 VP Academic and University Affairs was to think about how the AMS can still be involved in better promoting such resources.

### **Continued Work on these Issues**

Although the project did not pan out as envisioned, the extensive discussion around the need for such a repository clearly raised awareness of student mental health and wellbeing, especially as it relates to setting proper course and assessment expectations for students. This ongoing discussion is now well embedded at UBC-V with several ongoing initiatives – including a new wellness service delivery model, a new Wellbeing at UBC

high level steering committee, and new FTE dedicated to counselling and mental health more broadly. With direct respect to faculty change, two initiatives in particular are worth noting. Firstly, one of the project's goals was to encourage faculty to create quality exams and assessments by encouraging them to think about the rationale behind their assessments; inspired by this goal, the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee created a working group to discuss UBC's approach to assessment practices, especially in relation to principles of flexible learning and how flexible learning has influenced curriculum design and classroom practices. Secondly, Senate's Teaching and Learning, Academic Policy, and Mental Health and Wellbeing Committees have been discussing the creation of UBC policies related to course syllabi. These committees are interested in ensuring that professors have detailed enough syllabi that are released to students early and that cannot change significantly throughout the term. Such policies would help to achieve the Exam Prep Database goal of setting proper expectations for students going into a course, with an eye to how this impacts student mental health and wellbeing.

# Appendix 1: Screenshots

## 1. Homepage

Exam Prep Database

Search

Upload New

Manage Existing

View Statistics

FAQ

Log Out

## Search the Exam Prep Database

Welcome to UBC's Exam Prep Database, a searchable database of current and past course exams and other assessment-related material. All files in this database have been uploaded by instructors for private study purposes. Please do not repurpose, redistribute, or publish anything from this site. University copyright applies to all content.

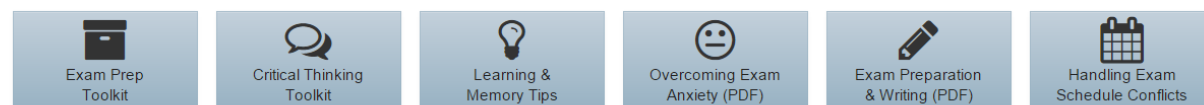
In addition to the uploaded files and additional resources below, please see the [FAQ](#) for tips on how you can get the most out of this database.

## Find Material by Course

Type a course code to see matching courses

Search

## Additional resources for exam preparation



## 2. Upload interface

Exam Prep Database

Search

Upload New

Manage Existing

View Statistics

FAQ

Log Out

## Upload New Material

Thank you for contributing to this valuable resource! To share your material, follow these four steps:

1. **Fill in the required fields** (marked with a \*) in the form below.
2. **Read the license and check off your consent** at the bottom.
3. **Click the "Browse" button** and choose the file you wish to upload.
4. **Click the "Save" button** to add the information and file to the database.

You can edit or delete any material you upload on the [Manage Existing](#) page.

### Course Information

Campus *	Subject *	Code *	Cross-listed as (subject code)
- Choose campus -	- Choose campus first -	e.g. 281	e.g. ASTU 202
Faculty *	Department *	Year *	Term *
		2015	- Choose term -

### Assessment Material Information

What is being uploaded *	Who may access the material *	Notes about the material	Content legally owned by *
- Choose type of material -	- Choose access level -		

### Legal Terms & Upload

Scroll in the box to read full legal terms

The University of British Columbia ("UBC")  
License For Works

WHEREAS:  
A. You have created the work (the "Work") described in the Schedule to this License;  
and  
B. UBC wishes to enable your consent to use your Work as set out below.

Date of consent (today) \*

03/13/2015

File uploaded by \*

Daniel Munro

Consent \*

☐ I agree to this License

File to upload \*

Choose File

No file chosen

### 3. Search results display

#### Find Material by Course

Type a course code to see matching courses

Search

6 found for CHEM 205

Term	File	Type ⓘ	Instructor	Notes
2013 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2013 Final Exam
2014 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2014 Final Exam
2013 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2013 Midterm Exam
2014 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2014 Midterm Exam
2012 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2012 Midterm Exam
2012 W2	<a href="#">Download</a>	Past Exam	Yan Alexander Wang	2012 Final Exam

Never assume that past or sample exams will be similar to exams used in a current section of a course—unless your instructor has explicitly indicated this. Note especially when material was uploaded either by a different instructor than the instructor teaching the current course or for a course that took place more than one or two years ago.

#### Study resources for exams in this department

You may also be interested in visiting the ChemHelp tutoring wiki at <http://wiki.ubc.ca/ChemHelp>. This page contains links to chemistry resources at UBC as well as detailed explanations for a range of challenging chemistry topics.

#### Additional resources for exam preparation

  
Exam Prep Toolkit

  
Critical Thinking Toolkit

  
Learning & Memory Tips

  
Overcoming Exam Anxiety (PDF)

  
Exam Preparation & Writing (PDF)

  
Handling Exam Schedule Conflicts

## Appendix 2: FAQs for Faculty

# UBC Exam Prep Database: Frequently Asked Questions for Faculty Users

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### ***Who is leading this project?***

The UBC Exam Prep Database is a project that was initiated by the Alma Mater Society and received support from the UBC Vancouver Senate in March 2013. Its creation and implementation are overseen in collaboration with various groups, including the AMS, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), the Library, the VP Students Office, and the Registrar's Office.

### ***What is the purpose of this database?***

The goal of the database is to support student learning and success through equal and centralized access to assessment preparation materials and resources, including practice exams.

Summative assessments make up a core part of student evaluation in most courses. Understandably, they also cause a significant amount of stress and anxiety for students, especially first and second year students. Access to assessment preparation materials provides students with a better sense of what to expect in terms of structure of examinations and provides additional tools for self-directed practice and study for students to assess their own learning and areas for improvement.

### ***Who owns the materials in the database?***

Individual faculty members and content creators own the learning materials they produce; as such they will retain the rights to all of their materials. Accordingly, they may add, remove, or modify materials at their own discretion.

### ***Who can upload content into the database?***

Content can be uploaded directly by faculty members, or can be provided to a staff member or colleague to upload on your behalf. Regardless of who uploads the content, they will be prompted to provide information on who owns the material.

### ***Who can see what I upload?***

Whoever uploads content can define level of access. For each document that a faculty member uploads into the database, they will be prompted to indicate the level of access they wish to provide. The options are:

- Everyone (available to the public)
- People with UBC CWLs
- Students with Courses in this Faculty
- Current Course Participants

Permissions may be modified at any time by the content uploader.

### ***What if I want to remove or modify materials?***



Content uploaders can remove or modify content at any time by logging into the database with their campus wide login (CWL).

***Why Does UBC need this database?***

Many faculty members already provide students with practice exams, however over time as new practice exams are provided to students, older versions are still in circulation and are only available to students who have the social capital to access them from older students or social network based archives. Many third party providers have taken advantage of this situation to sell practice exams to students or share them in exchange for other course materials.

The AMS identified that there is currently an issue with unequal access to past exams specifically, which leaves students with limited social capital and financial means at a disadvantage. To address this issue, this database was proposed as a place to provide consistent, equal access to students in a manner that is controlled by individual faculty members and embedded within a database that also provides students with access to academic support resources.

The focus of the database is 100 and 200 level courses to support the transition and orientation of new students; however faculty member may upload materials for any course they chose to.

The establishment of this database and the associated academic resources embedded within the database structure will help to better enable student success and facilitate a supportive academic environment for students.

***Won't this database encourage an over emphasis on studying from past exams for assessment preparation, rather than encouraging students to focus on the learning objective in my courses?***

Many students already utilize past exams to prepare for assessments, but they often do so without guidance about effective use and information about academic resources to support them if they are struggling. Past exams are available to student through multiple avenues including directly from faculty members, social networks, third party providers, and student clubs that sell past exams and solutions.

The Exam Prep Database is designed to be more than just a repository of exams. Embedded within the interface for students are a number of academic resources and tips on how to study effectively and access supports to be academically successful. These will be crafted specifically to include, among others, tips about using practice and past exams as effective learning and study tools, as well as reminders that exams available in the database may not resemble the exam that will be used in a current section of a course. Instructors will be encouraged to upload various exam preparation resources that are specific to their course or field.

The intention is to ensure that students feel well supported in preparing for assessments and utilize past exams and learning materials positively and effectively, and to ensure that moving forward, students will have equal access to past exams and learning resources.

***Exams in my course are likely to change annually, and I do not want my students to be studying from old exams or exams from other instructors; what kind of messaging is provided to students to inform them that past exams are not directly reflective of future exams?***

Recognizing that assessment materials evolve annually, the database [includes clear information for students](#) that materials are subject to change and that these exams are only meant as a guiding tool to support self-directed learning.

Faculty members may also at any time remove materials they have uploaded from the database that they no longer wish to share with students.

***Is the database only for past exams? Do you expect faculty members to upload all their past exams?***

Faculty members are encouraged to upload past exams annually, however it is understood that this is not feasible or desirable for all faculty members and disciplinary areas. As such, faculty members have full control over which materials they would like to upload.

Individual faculty members may choose the type of materials that they would like to upload onto the database, including a single sample exam or other exam preparation materials that they feel would be beneficial to students in preparing for course assessment. We encourage faculty members to share advice and tips for preparing for course assessments or other learning tools that may be helpful to students.

***What types of materials can be uploaded onto the database?***

The following materials can be uploaded onto the database in PDF format:

- Past Exams (without solutions)
- Sample Exam(s)
- Study materials and resources specific to your course or discipline for assessment preparation
- Tips for exam preparation for your course or discipline

Additionally, faculty members can post messages alongside PDF materials they upload. These messages may include additional links and tips, caveats regarding the posted materials, or words of encouragement or advice for students.

***I already provide copies of past exams to students in my course, why should I also put them in the database?***

The benefits of using the database are two-fold. First, it allows students to access assessment materials in an interface with academic support resources directly embedded. This will ensure that students use learning materials, like practice exams, in the ways that are most effective for enhancing learning.

Second, while faculty members may provide past exams or study materials from their own courses, older exams from past sections or instructors are often kept by previous students and passed on through informal social networks or third party platforms. In a search of 4 such third party platforms, the AMS found over 500 practice exams from as far back as 10 years. Putting materials on the central Exam Prep Database ensures that all students moving forward have equal access to materials that have already been made available to students in the past, and that they are not using past exams to study without a broader frame of guidance for how to do so effectively.

***There are a limited number of questions that I can ask for my course(s), therefore making past exams available would not be appropriate. How can I use the database in other ways to help my students feel better prepared for assessments?***

In such cases, we encourage the use of the Sample Exam option to provide students with a sense of the structure and general approach of the exam to help ease concerns about what to expect in the exam. A Sample Exam can be comprised of a set of questions taken out of the pool of potential exam questions displayed in the format and structure of a typical exam.

Instructors can also share tips or advice for preparing for assessments in their discipline or course through the database, and can upload other relevant study materials.

***If I decide not to opt in to using this database for reasons specific to my own course or teaching style, my students may unfairly assume that I don't want to support their assessment preparation. If I do not want to put any content into this database, how can I let students know that I am aware of the database and have made a decision not to participate?***

Participation in the database is opt-in and completely voluntary for faculty members, and we recognize that instructors already choose to support assessment preparation through a variety of means that are specific to their own course needs.

Because many students report experiencing unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety related to examinations, it may be useful to provide transparency on reasons for sharing or not sharing material like practice exams to help students better understand and navigate their academic environment.

***Who do I contact if I have questions?***

Questions can be directed to the AMS VP Academic at [vpacademic@ams.ubc.ca](mailto:vpacademic@ams.ubc.ca). These may be re-directed to another appropriate party for response.

## Appendix 3: Infographic for Faculty

### Exam Prep Database

exams.elearning.ubc.ca

#### Key features

- **Instructors choose what type of content to upload according to their course and teaching needs.**
  - Actual past exams
  - Sample exams
  - Exam templates
  - Any other course-specific study material
- **Instructors retain ownership and control over all material. Content can be removed or modified at will, and is uploaded under one of the following levels of access:**
  - Everyone (available to the public)
  - People with UBC Campus-Wide Logins (CWLs)
  - Students with Courses in this Faculty
  - Current Course Participants
- **Uploaded material is provided alongside further resources and tools for self-directed study, including messaging to students about how to use the database effectively**

#### Project Leadership

Endorsed by UBC Vancouver Senate in 2013

Database overseen by the AMS and the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, in partnership with the Library, Enrolment Services, and the VP Students' Office

**Note:** faculty must log in with a UBC CWL to upload and manage material.

#### Key Benefits to Students

**Equal Access:** provides equal access to course-specific exam preparation material, much of which students currently access through illicit online services or their social network.

**Student Wellbeing:** reduces exam-related stress and anxiety by providing resources on effective studying, and by helping students understand professors' exam expectations.

**Supports Active, Life-Long Learning:** provides opportunities for students to practice independent, self-directed study

### Steps for Uploading Material

1

Fill in the required fields (marked with an asterix).

2

Read the license & check off your consent.

3

Click the "Browse" button & choose the file you wish to upload.

4

Click the "Save" button to add the information & file to the database.

 You can **edit** or **delete** any material you upload on the **Manage Existing** page. If you run into technical issues, please contact the site's administrator for help at [examdb.support@ubc.ca](mailto:examdb.support@ubc.ca)