

University of Ottawa Undergraduate Students Textbook Affordability Survey Results and Findings (2023)

Tyler Stephens, Open Education Assistant

Mélanie Brunet, Open Education Librarian (Interim)

Thomas Rouleau, Senior Manager, Copyright Services

University of Ottawa Library

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En français

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Survey Data

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Executive Summary

This report, the outcome of a joint project between the University of Ottawa Library and the University of Ottawa Students' Union (UOSU), provides an overview of the results of a survey conducted at the University of Ottawa on textbook affordability in 2023. A summary of the key findings is provided in the following section. Any inferences or conclusions expressed in this report are generally based on the authors' own interpretation and do not represent the entire range of data collected, which may itself in certain cases be incomplete – readers are encouraged to consult the survey data for a full representation of responses received.

Supplementing prior activities conducted by the University of Ottawa Library on the same topic, the main purpose of this survey was to investigate student textbook purchasing behaviours, particularly in relation to textbook costs. In cases where respondents to the survey indicated that they had not purchased one or more required textbooks for their courses, the survey sought to identify any alternative solutions used by students, as well as the impact of such behaviour on student success.

A total of 1,687 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Ottawa responded to the survey, including students from each faculty. Overall, the survey results suggest that there is a strong link between textbook cost and student textbook purchasing behaviour, and that foregoing the acquisition of a textbook carries significant consequences for many students.

Key Findings

Finding 1: Students spent less on textbooks than expected, but not necessarily due to lower costs

Reported spending on textbooks was significantly lower than the estimated costs of required textbooks in 2022-2023. While students were expected to spend around \$430 (in French courses) and \$620 (in English courses) for course materials in the Winter 2023 term, over 50% of respondents reported spending less than \$250 that term.

Based on the survey questionnaire and responses received, the clearest and most easily identifiable factor behind this gap is simple: students do not purchase all the required materials. Approximately 71% of respondents indicated that they had not purchased a required textbook at some point during their academic career.

Finding 2: Students are concerned about the negative consequences of not purchasing textbooks

Almost 65% of respondents who did not purchase a textbook indicated that they were concerned about not having access to it. Identified concerns ranged from those linked to academic performance, to questions of equity, and to mental health impacts.

Finding 3: The impact of textbook costs on course selection and academic success is significant, and even more so for international students

Over 40% of respondents indicated that textbook costs influenced their choice of courses in Winter 2023, with this figure rising to over 60% for international students specifically. Approximately 22% of international students indicated that textbook cost was the main influence on their course selection, and almost 50% indicated that textbook costs were a factor in deciding how many courses they would take – these figures compare to approximately 11% and 26% for all survey respondents respectively.

Furthermore, while approximately a third of Canadian students reported struggling academically due to textbook costs, this figure rose to almost 50% for international students.

Finding 4: Students are calling on professors and the University to reduce spending on textbooks

When provided with the opportunity to make additional comments, respondents focused in large part on two common areas: 1) identifying textbook costs as a significant barrier; and 2) suggesting actions and measures to make course materials more accessible as well as highlighting the key role played by professors and the University in doing so.

Methodology

Introduction

The University of Ottawa Library conducted the “University of Ottawa Undergraduate Students Textbook Affordability Survey” to gather information on textbook expenses and their impact on students. Respondents answered questions about amounts spent, decisions around purchases, and alternatives to textbooks. The survey was administered exclusively to undergraduate students from February 1 to February 28, 2023, through the UOSU. It was inspired by a similar study at the University of Guelph (Versluis et al., 2017) and the *Student Textbook and Course Materials Surveys* by the Florida Virtual Campus (FLVC) (2016, 2019, 2022). It also complements data collected through the Library’s Textbook Broke (#textbookbroke) campaigns and analyses of required textbook costs.

Survey Setting: The University of Ottawa Context

Founded in 1848, the University of Ottawa is a public research university offering 550 undergraduate and graduate programs. It provides courses, resources and services in both of Canada’s official languages. At the time of the survey, there were approximately 48,000 students enrolled at the University, 40,000 of whom were undergraduates. Of these undergraduate students, 67% were registered as using English in their studies, compared to 33% using French (Institutional Research and Planning, 2023, pp. 1-2). The Library has been concerned with high textbook costs for several years, holding its first Textbook Broke campaign in January 2018 and collecting textbook cost data for required materials since Fall 2018 (Brunet, 2020).

Winter 2023 Textbook Broke Campaign Results

Shortly before the survey was conducted, the Library ran its Winter 2023 Textbook Broke campaign at the University from January 23-27. Posters were displayed at various locations in six buildings on campus, providing students with the opportunity to share how much they spent on textbooks that term. Over 300 students participated by adding a post-it note with amounts and comments. Participants reported spending an average amount of \$234.61. Among the comments left, one theme was predominant: students were deeply dissatisfied with exorbitant textbook prices, often skipping out on purchasing required course materials (University of Ottawa Library, 2023).

2022-2023 Required Textbook Costs

Also conducted in the Winter 2023 term was the 2022-2023 textbook cost data collection exercise, focusing on the first-year course sequence of the highest enrollment undergraduate program in each faculty at the University of Ottawa. Data was collected from the Campus Store (the University bookstore, managed by Follett Higher Education), local bookstores, the DocUcentre (the University’s print facility), and a local print shop, to establish the expected cost of required course materials (primarily textbooks) in each program, as well as the average expected cost of materials per course for all these programs combined.

Table 1. Expected cost of required course materials at the University of Ottawa for first-year students, by highest enrolment undergraduate program by faculty, in English and in French, 2022-2023

Program	English	French
Juris Doctor (Common Law)	\$1,751.17	\$512.99
Commerce (Management)	\$1,403.75	\$681.75
Electrical Engineering	\$1,198.00	\$757.50
Nursing (Health Sciences)	\$964.00	\$481.40
Psychology (Social Sciences)	\$824.55	\$594.20
Communication (Arts)	\$815.30	\$146.77
Biomedical Sciences (Science)	\$765.85	\$611.85
Education	\$97.50	\$142.95
Droit civil (L.LL.)	N/A	\$843.21

Source: 2022-2023 Required Textbooks uOttawa (Brunet, 2023a)

Table 2. Average expected cost of required course materials per first-year course at the University of Ottawa, based on highest enrolment undergraduate program by faculty, in English and in French, 2022-2023

Course language	Cost for course materials per course
English	\$123.32
French	\$86.03

Source: 2022-2023 Required Textbooks uOttawa (Brunet, 2023a) and uOttawa Textbook Price of Record – Reporting Student Savings (Brunet, 2023b)

While the data collected appears to show that English-language course materials are more expensive than French-language course materials, this is an oversimplification. The availability of French-language textbooks is much more limited, and new editions are not published as frequently. Therefore, professors who teach courses in French will frequently turn to other options such as course packs, the Library’s digital course reserve, or the learning management system to bring together various resources, as opposed to assigning a textbook that may not exist or be out of date. It is also known that a portion of these assigned resources, even if they do not involve an extra cost for students in French courses, are in English (Office of the Vice-President, International and Francophonie, 2021).

Survey Design and Participants

The survey was composed of 18 questions, twelve pertaining to textbook purchasing behaviours, impact of costs, and views on affordability, and six pertaining to demographics (see [Appendix A – Survey Questions](#)). Students could respond to the survey in either French or English, using Microsoft Forms, and were asked to think specifically about the Winter 2023 term.

Participation was limited to undergraduate students with a valid uOttawa email address who were contacted by the UOSU. For three open-ended questions (10, 11, and 15), qualitative answers were coded using one or more categories corresponding to their subject matter (see [Appendix B - Categories for coding students' open comments](#)).

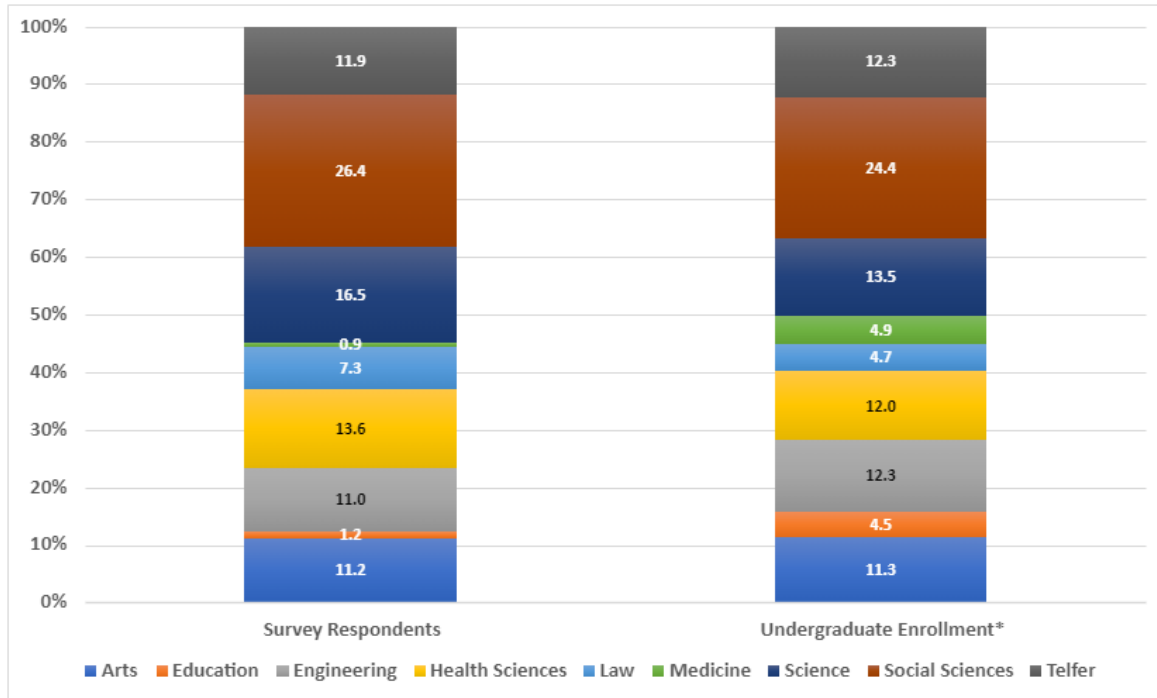
A total of 34,389 undergraduate students were contacted by email by the UOSU on two separate occasions and invited to respond to the survey. The initial email was sent on February 1, along with a reminder on February 27. As an incentive, participants could enter a draw to win one of twenty \$25 gift cards.

The survey received 1,687 responses, representing a response rate of 4.9%. A breakdown of participant numbers by faculty, residency status and language of use, compared to undergraduate enrollment, is offered below.

By Faculty

All faculties were represented in the survey responses, and their proportions were comparable to undergraduate enrollment, except for Education and Medicine, which were underrepresented. Conclusions for these two faculties should be drawn with caution and have been left out of tables presenting data by faculty due to the small number of respondents.

Figure 1. Distribution of survey respondents compared to undergraduate enrollment by faculty



*Source: Students, Enrolment by program, Fact book (Institutional Research and Planning, n.d.)

By Residency Status

In terms of residency status, Canadian students were slightly overrepresented in the survey responses.

Table 3. Comparison of residency status between survey respondents and undergraduate student population

Residency Status	% of survey respondents	% of undergraduate student population
International	12.5% (n=211)	19.5%
Canadian	87.5% (n=1,476)	80.5%

Source: Students, Enrollment by program, Fact Book (Institutional Research and Planning, 2023)

By Language of Use

According to the University's enrollment data, 31.4% of undergraduate students listed French as their language of use when they registered for the 2022-2023 academic year (Institutional Research and Planning, 2023). In the survey, 15.2% of respondents said they were taking courses in French in Winter 2023 while another 24.4% declared taking courses in both English and French. Therefore, almost 40% of respondents were taking at least one course in French during the Winter 2023 term.

Findings and Results

Finding 1: Students spent less on textbooks than expected, but not necessarily due to lower textbook costs

Undergraduate textbook spending was considerably lower than the expected range of \$430.15 to \$616.60 for a full-time course load, figures based on the average cost of required course materials per first-year course (see Table 2) (Brunet, 2023a, 2023b). However, it is in line with the average amount spent reported by participants in the Winter 2023 Textbook Broke campaign: \$234.61 (University of Ottawa Library, 2023).

Several factors, including part-time status, may have contributed to this trend, beyond a decrease in the cost of textbooks as major education publishers make digital versions of their products available for less than printed versions, especially when purchased directly.

Students were asked how much they spent on textbooks for the Winter 2023 term, choosing between six ranges of value. Table 4 shows that a majority (51.5%) of respondents indicated spending \$250 or less. A further 36.3% reported spending between \$251 and \$500. Only 12.3% declared spending over \$500.

Table 4. Amount spent by undergraduate students on required textbooks for Winter 2023

Range of amount spent	# of respondents	% of respondents
\$0-\$250	867	51.4
\$251-\$500	612	36.3
\$501-\$750	159	9.4
\$751-\$1,000	34	2.0
\$1,001-\$1,500	10	0.6
More than \$1,500	5	0.3

n=1,687

By Faculty

While students in faculties associated with significantly higher textbook costs (such as Law and Management) report spending more than those in faculties with lower expected costs, the vast majority (87.7%) of respondents across faculties reported spending less than \$500 that term. In many cases, students may have a budget or expenditure limit, and will not go beyond this amount, even if the overall cost of required textbooks in their faculty is greater.

Table 5. Percentage of respondents spending \$500 or less, by faculty

Faculty	\$0-\$250	\$251-\$500	\$500 or less
Arts (n=192)	62.0%	30.2%	92.2%
Engineering (n=157)	64.3%	22.9%	87.3%
Health Sciences (n=229)	45.0%	38.9%	83.8%
Law (n=140)	35.7%	35.7%	71.4%
Science (n=275)	55.6%	34.9%	90.5%
Social Sciences (n=467)	57.4%	34.9%	92.3%
Telfer School of Management (n=191)	24.6%	59.7%	84.3%

n=1,651

By Residency Status

Generally, there was little difference in reported textbook spending between respondents from Ontario, other provinces in Canada, and international students, despite having to contend with different tuition fees.

Table 6. Survey respondents' reported spending by residency status

Residency Status	\$0-\$250	\$251-\$500	\$501-\$750	\$751-\$1000	\$1001-\$1500	More than \$1500
From Ontario (n=1,177)	52.3%	35.8%	8.9%	2.0%	0.7%	0.3%
From Canada, outside of Ontario (n=299)	51.5%	36.1%	9.7%	1.7%	0.7%	0.3%
International (n=211)	46.4%	39.3%	11.7%	2.6%	0%	0%

n=1,687

By Course Language

Respondents taking only English courses in the Winter 2023 term were more likely to not have purchased a required textbook due to cost (63.1%), while those who took only French courses were less likely to do so (49%). This is in line with the observation that the average cost of required course materials per course in French is lower, in part because appropriate textbooks in that language may not even exist.

While there is a visible trend towards a lower cost of textbooks in French courses, respondents who reported taking both French and English classes in the Winter 2023 term were somewhat

divided on whether there were differences between the two languages when it comes to textbook affordability and accessibility (see [Appendix B](#) – Question 15). A slight majority (54%) said there were some differences. When asked to elaborate, 39% observed that it was more difficult to access textbooks in French, while 34% reported that textbooks in French courses were less expensive or not even required.

Table 7. Categories of differences reported between French and English courses

Differences in availability of books	39%
Cost differences: French books less expensive or not required	34%
Cost differences: English books less expensive or not required	25%
Use of English textbooks in French courses	8%
Cost similarities between English and French textbooks	8%
Quality of French textbooks	4%
Use of online assignment platforms in English courses	2%

n=222*

* Responses could fit in more than one category

To buy or not to buy

One factor contributing to lower than expected spending on required course materials for the Winter 2023 term as of the time of the survey may be a delay in purchasing textbooks. Indeed, 93% of respondents declared waiting until after a course had started before buying textbooks. They offered various reasons for doing so:

- they were not sure what would be required (39%)
- they realized later that they would need the materials to succeed (19%)
- they did not have enough money at the time (17%)
- they were just not in a rush to buy the materials (7%)
- the materials were out of stock (6%)

A further 3% of respondents waited because they did not know if they would stay in the class, while 2% reported not having enough time to buy them before the class started.

More importantly, however, most participants indicated not purchasing a required textbook at all: 71% reported forgoing the acquisition of such course materials during their studies. That rate was relatively consistent across most faculties, with those outside of Law and Engineering ranging between 67.5% and 74.4%.

Table 8. Percentage of respondents declaring not purchasing a required textbook during their studies at the University of Ottawa

Faculty	% of respondents
Arts (n=133)	69.3%
Engineering (n=131)	83.4%
Health Sciences (n=162)	70.7%
Law (n=87)	62.1%
Science (n=197)	71.6%
Social Sciences (n=315)	67.5%
Telfer School of Management (n=142)	74.3%

n=1,167

In terms of residency status, international students were slightly more likely to say they had not purchased a required textbook (76.3%) compared to domestic students (69.9%).

When not purchasing a required textbook, respondents turned to a variety of alternatives. The most popular alternative to purchasing a textbook was downloading an online version (64%), whether accessed legitimately or otherwise. This figure was highest among Social Sciences respondents at 71%, while participants from the Telfer School of Management were the least likely to make use of this option (50%). Other alternatives respondents resorted to across faculties were using a friend’s copy (22%) and using a Library copy (16%).

Respondents from the Faculty of Law who reported not purchasing a textbook were the most likely to use a friend’s copy (33%) or a copy from the Library (32%). They were also the least likely to forgo using the textbook at all (48%).

Respondents from the Faculty of Engineering who reported not purchasing a textbook, meanwhile, were the most likely to forgo using the textbook at all (60%).

As far as reasons, 59.8% of all survey respondents said that it was specifically the cost that had caused them to not purchase textbooks at some point in their academic careers at the University, making it the most common reason not to buy required course materials.

Finding 2: Students are concerned about the negative consequences of not purchasing required textbooks

Most respondents who at some point did not purchase a required textbook expressed concern about not having access to it (64.5%). Faculty of Arts respondents expressed a high level of concern at 70.7% despite being one of the more “affordable” faculties in terms of textbook costs (see Table 1). Overall, 19.3% of respondents reported being “very concerned,” while 45.2% declared being “somewhat concerned.”

Table 9. Levels of concern when not having required textbooks by faculty

Faculty	% concerned*	% unconcerned*
Law	75.9%	15%
Telfer Management	69.7%	13.4%
Arts	70.7%	18.8%
Social Sciences	67.6%	22.5%
Health Sciences	63.6%	18.5%
Science	56.9%	30.5%
Engineering	50.4%	37.4%

n=1,167

* Concerned = “Very concerned” and “Somewhat concerned” and Unconcerned = “Somewhat unconcerned” and “Very unconcerned”

Respondents from the Faculty of Law were generally the most concerned (75.9%) and Engineering respondents the most unconcerned (37.4%). Overall, at least 50% of participants in every faculty said they were “concerned” on some level about not having a required textbook.

There were some differences between the levels of concern expressed by respondents based on their residency status. The levels of concern consistently went up from Ontario students (61.6%) to outside-of-Ontario domestic students (67.7%) to international students (75.8%).

Table 10. Levels of concern when not having a textbook by residency status

Residency Status	% concerned*	% unconcerned*
International	75.8%	12.4%
Canada, outside Ontario	67.7%	20.1%
Ontario	61.6%	25.6%

n=1,192

* Concerned = “Very concerned” and “Somewhat concerned” and Unconcerned = “Somewhat unconcerned” and “Very unconcerned”

Participants were also asked whether they saw any negative consequences to not being able or willing to purchase a required textbook. While 25% responded “no”, 75% mentioned some negative aspects, which were then coded into categories (see [Appendix B – Question 10](#)). The most referenced drawback was struggling to succeed academically (32%), which was closely followed by missing course and curriculum information (29%). Notably, the third most referenced topic at 26% was “faculty, the University, and/or the education system” with

comments that include: “profs rely too much on textbooks”, “we already pay too much in tuition”, and “feels like a barrier to education”.

Table 11. Types of negative aspects of not using a required textbook

Academic concerns: Lower grades/less success	32%
Academic concerns: Missing course and curriculum information	29%
Comment on faculty, the University, and/or the education system	26%
Academic concerns: Missing content essential to exams and evaluations	25%
Academic concerns: Reduced learning and/or reduced understanding of concepts	19%
Financial impacts	13%
Academic concerns: Disadvantage in relation to peers	11%
Academic concerns: falling behind	7%
Mental health impact	6%
Functional concerns: Alternatives are unsatisfactory	3%
Social impacts/relationship impacts	3%

n=1,190*

* Each respondent who indicated “yes” could select more than one negative aspect

Categories of negative aspects representing less than 3% of responses include inconvenience, unavailability of the textbook at the Library, and not being able to access a physical copy.

To a follow up question asking if respondents had anything else they would like to add about textbook costs, 52% of respondents who made comments associated professors or the University with the financial burden created by textbooks. Some representative comments include:

“For low-income students, we have to balance rent, groceries, utilities etc., and it feels as though the university forgets that not everyone has parental support or access to financial aid.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Social Sciences

“I think the university should provide these materials and not make students pay for it.” – First-year student, Telfer School of Management

“Often professors require newer versions of textbook despite minimal changes, making it difficult to buy old books and save money.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Law

“Profs make it impossible to follow the class without the textbook” – Second year student, Telfer School of Management

“Professors force students to buy textbooks with access codes which has all quiz/assignments included.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Engineering

The word “force” was also present in multiple other responses, hinting at how much students feel that they have limited choice or agency in this matter:

“It may force you to resort to other means such as downloading textbooks, perhaps illegally.” – Third-year student, Faculty of Social Sciences

“Some courses (mostly in economics) require a textbook code to access the quizzes, which forces me to buy a new book, and most of the time the textbook is useless and couldn't be resold. If you don't buy the book, you lose 20-30% of the grade because those quizzes are mandatory.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Social Sciences

“There are some subjects that require a textbook but only use a few pages for one assignment that costs \$100. Because of that, other than it being too expensive, I feel like I'm being "forced" to buy a book that doesn't benefit me.” – Second-year student, Telfer School of Management

“Many profs force students to purchase online textbooks (that they wrote) that include online assessments through the textbook application.” – Fourth-year student, Telfer School of Management

“I do not have the luxury of dropping courses because I register them based on my work schedule. I rarely find out what books we need until classes start. By then it's too late, and I'm forced to either spend the money or go without the books.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Arts

“It sparks the feeling of academic insecurity without the required textbook. It decreases the comprehension of concepts needed to understand a class and also lead to decreased participation in classroom discussions. They are costly and overpriced textbooks force students to cut down on other expenses that may be important for our health, wellbeing, and general living expenses.” – Third-year student, Faculty of Science

Finding 3: The impact of textbook costs on course selection and academic success is significant, and even more so for international students

Course selection

While more than half of respondents said textbook costs had no impact on which courses they selected for the Winter 2023 term, a significant number (41.2%) reported that it did play a role, including 11.4% who said it was the main influence on which courses they selected. Textbook costs were even more determinant among international students: 61.2% reported that it had an impact, including 22% of them who said it was the main influence on their course selection. Therefore, international students were almost twice as likely to say that textbook costs were the main factor determining the courses they took in Winter 2023.

As for the number of courses taken in Winter 2023, most respondents said textbook costs had no impact. However, 26.4% of participants reported that textbook costs had an impact on how many courses they selected, including 5.9% who said it was the main influence on the number they took. Again, the percentages were significantly higher among international students, 48.8% of whom said textbook costs had an impact on how many courses they selected, and 15.3% reporting it as the main influence. International students were almost three times as likely to say that textbook costs were the main reason behind how many courses they took than Canadian students.

Struggling academically without textbooks

Overall, 37% of respondents said they felt like they were struggling academically at some point due to not being able to afford textbooks. Affecting their academic performance, the cost of textbooks also directly led 14.6% of respondents to drop a course, 9.3% to avoid registering for a specific course, and 5.3% to withdraw from a course later in the term.

Table 12. Percentage of respondents feeling they struggled academically due to textbook costs by faculty

Faculty	% of respondents
Arts	30.2%
Engineering	36.3%
Health Sciences	31.9%
Law	24.3%
Science	34.9%
Social Sciences	40.5%
Telfer School of Management	43.5%

n=1,651

Respondents in the Telfer School of Management were the most likely to report feelings of academic struggles due to textbook costs (43.5%), followed closely by respondents in the Faculty of Social Sciences (40.5%). At 24.3%, respondents from the Faculty of Law were by far the least likely to express having felt academic struggles due to textbook costs. This is likely due to Law students' tendency to purchase textbooks despite the cost, as well as the availability of alternatives: the resources they need are often accessible at the Library (either in databases or on reserve) or are free resources such as case law and jurisprudence.

Table 13. Percentage of respondents feeling they struggled academically due to textbook costs by residency status

Residency Status	% of respondents
From Ontario	35.9%
From Canada, outside Ontario	32.1%
International	49.8%

n=1,687

Based on residency status, international students were by far the group most likely to say that textbook costs made them feel like they were struggling academically, due to an inability to make certain purchases. This is despite being the group that reported being the least likely to not purchase required textbooks due to textbook costs, pointing to the possibility that international students feel compelled to acquire textbooks they may not be able to afford, simply because they consider them necessary for their academic success.

In line with other trends in courses taught in French, respondents who were taking only French courses in Winter 2023 were less likely to report feelings of academic struggle due to textbook cost (26.9%), presumably because they were not as often put in situations in which they could not access the course materials. Respondents taking only English courses, however, were more likely to feel that they were struggling academically (39.4%) because they did not acquire a textbook.

Table 14. Percentage of respondents feeling they struggled academically due to textbook costs, by language of courses taken

Course language	% of respondents
Only in French	26.9%
Only in English	39.4%
Both in English and in French	37.4%

n=1,687

Finding 4: Students are calling on professors and the University to reduce spending on textbooks

For the last question on textbook affordability (see [Appendix B](#) – Question 11), survey participants were asked if there was anything else that they wished to share on the subject. Responses focused in large part on two common areas: 1) identifying textbook costs as a significant barrier; and 2) suggesting actions and measures to make course materials more

accessible as well as highlighting the key role played by professors and the University in doing so.

Table 15. Categories of responses to open question on textbook affordability

Suggested actions and measures	32%
Commentary on costs being too high and other cost-related issues	32%
Comments on professors/faculty	26%
Limited use of textbooks	15%
Alternatives to buying required textbooks	13%
Comment on University tuition	13%
Comment on University Campus Store	10%
Comment on online assignment platforms	9%
Include textbooks in tuition prices	5%
Issues with accessing textbooks other than cost	4%
Comment on University Library	4%

n=589*

* Responses could fit in more than one category

Other themes mentioned by less than 3% of respondents included textbook publishers as well as mental health. Of note, respondents were almost nine times as likely to mention professors as having an impact on textbook affordability than they were to mention textbook publishers, although the latter play a direct role in setting prices, releasing new editions, and bundling textbooks with homework platforms.

While almost of third (32%) of respondents to this question commented that textbooks were too expensive, approximately the same number offered suggestions to improve the situation:

“we already pay a whole lot of tuition, and some professors do post relevant readings (all the love to them and only them), so why can’t all of them just do that?” – First-year student, Faculty of Arts

“The university has to stock up the library with more textbooks so that a majority of students taking any given class can borrow them. There is often only one or two textbooks available.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Engineering

“It would be helpful to state the textbook cost for a course in the course description prior to enrolling to the course so that you know before you enroll and do not have to drop the course later.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Arts

“Needs to be subsidized by the school. Professors should not be allowed to further profit from students with the use of their own published book.” – First-year student, Faculty of Law

Among respondents who mentioned professors, some were under the impression that they did not care, were not aware of students’ financial situation, assigned textbooks that were barely used, or were keen on assigning their own book:

“Hate when professors make you buy a book they wrote and it’s over 100\$... they are making a further profit off of their students and then they (intentionally or unintentionally) shame people for not having the book, saying things like it is essential to the course, if you don’t have it you will fail.” – Third-year student, Faculty of Arts

“Sometimes professors ask us to buy textbooks only to use them a few times during the semester and their cost can be pretty high. An example of that is when one prof asked us to buy an 80\$ textbook only for examples we had to cite during the midterm. Those examples could have been provided in another way, but instead we had to buy it for the midterm.” – Third-year student, Faculty of Engineering

“My biggest concern about textbook costs is when professors say that a textbook is absolutely required, yet the course can be done without it. There have been many times that I have purchased textbooks at ridiculous prices only to not touch them the entire semester.” – Third-year student, Faculty of Health Sciences

“It’s not just textbooks, why do professors insist on using platforms that cost a lot of money that are required for our courses, instead of just using the FREE resources available. And every professor uses a different platform so it’s even more money out of pocket.” – First-year student, Faculty of Science

However, respondents also pointed to instances where they felt professors were sensitive to the high cost of textbooks and provided alternatives:

“My profs have been very understanding about the cost of textbooks and either uploaded their own material and gave access to a free textbook.” – First-year student, Faculty of Arts

“My professors have always been sympathetic to our situation, so the only books we've been told are really mandatory are books we need for several courses.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Health Sciences

“In my 3rd and 4th years, textbooks became mere suggestion as my profs put much more effort into using scientific papers and open access material to go along with their lectures.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Science

“I like when professors post links to library readings rather than make a required textbook for the course as this is a good way of making course material accessible for students in a variety of financial situations.” – First-year student, Faculty of Social Sciences

Observations and Conclusions

Given the extent of the data collected in the survey, this report offers only a glimpse into the realities, preoccupations and hopes of undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa regarding textbook affordability.

Respondents actively tried to reduce their spending on textbooks, resulting in a considerable gap between expected costs and actual amounts spent. While potential decreases in the cost of course materials may have played a role, this appears unlikely to be a significant factor behind the identified gap based on the survey results. Students sought alternatives but they were not always wholly satisfied with what they found. A good number of them opted to not use a required textbook at all, an approach they were aware came with its own costs, including concern over their academic success:

“Sometimes it can affect your grade and your understanding of the class. I feel that if textbooks were less expensive, many more students could study at UOttawa and succeed better.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Law

“A lot of testing material is based on lecture and textbook material. Therefore, if you cannot afford a textbook you are immediately at a disadvantage compared to everyone else, which isn't fair. Students should all be offered the same opportunity to learn and achieve the grades they deserve.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Health Sciences

“Some textbooks were with a bundle for an online platform containing the class assignments. Since I couldn't afford to purchase the online pass, I could not take the class assignments and so I didn't receive a grade for that component.” – Second-year student, Faculty of Engineering

International students seemed to be particularly vulnerable to high textbook costs. Already paying the highest amount of tuition based on their residency status, respondents from this group were the least likely to go without a required textbook and reported spending just as much on course materials as domestic students. For some, it meant working more hours while for others, it meant choosing between textbooks and groceries:

“Because of my financial situation, some required textbooks that cost 150-250 CAD per textbook, especially in engineering, meant an extra month's work or forcing me to take extra hours to reach the sum.” – Fourth-year student, Faculty of Engineering

“For international students who pay their tuition, it's not possible to pay for books as well. \$645 is the cost of my books, but it's also double my 1st student salary, so we either eat or buy books.” – Third-year student, Telfer School of Management

In general, respondents were clearly frustrated with textbook costs that they felt added to an already precarious financial situation brought on by high tuition, fees and living expenses, and that this could be better addressed by professors and the University. Indeed, while some

participants were aware of the role played by textbook publishers, most pointed to other actors as contributors to the problem, mainly professors who assigned expensive textbooks (sometimes their own), did not share their notes and readings in the learning management system, or required the purchase of access codes to submit assignments through commercial platforms.

While the perception among students that professors' choices are a key factor in making course materials inaccessible is not unjustified, the results of this survey also highlight the role that the Library and the UOSU can play in continuing to raise awareness across the University community – not only of the burden of textbook costs, but also of the affordable and legal alternatives already at its disposal.

Appendix A – Survey questions

1. In total, how much have you spent on textbooks this term (Winter 2023) for all your classes?
 - \$0-\$250
 - \$251-\$500
 - \$501-\$750
 - \$751-\$1,000
 - \$1,001-\$1,500
 - More than \$1,500
2. Have you ever waited until after a class has started to purchase the course materials?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Which of the following reasons best describes why you waited to purchase course materials until after the class started? (Select one that fits best) *
 - I was not originally sure which materials would be required
 - I did not have enough money to purchase the materials at the time
 - I realized I would need the materials to succeed in the class
 - I did not have time to buy them before the class started
 - I did not know if I would stay in the class
 - I was supposed to borrow the materials initially, but had to return them
 - I had to wait because material was out of stock
 - I knew I would buy the material, but I was not in a rush to do so
 - Other
4. Have you ever NOT purchased a required textbook for a course?
 - Yes
 - No
5. If you did not purchase a required textbook for a course, what did you do instead? (check all that apply) **
 - Used a copy available from the library
 - Used a copy that belonged to a friend
 - Downloaded a copy of the textbook online
 - I did not use the textbook
 - Other
6. How concerned were you about not having bought the textbook? **
 - Very concerned
 - Somewhat concerned
 - Neither concerned nor unconcerned
 - Somewhat unconcerned

- Very unconcerned
7. How much did the cost of textbooks influence WHICH courses you are taking this term (Winter 2023)?
- Textbook costs were the main influence
 - Textbook costs had some influence
 - Textbook costs had no influence
8. How much did the cost of textbooks influence HOW MANY courses you are taking this term (Winter 2023)?
- Textbook costs were the main influence
 - Textbook costs had some influence
 - Textbook costs had no influence
9. In your academic career at uOttawa, has the cost of required textbooks caused you to: (check all that apply)
- Not register for a specific course
 - Drop a course either before or at the beginning of a term
 - Withdraw from a course later in the semester
 - Not purchase required textbooks
 - Feel like you were struggling academically because you could not afford required textbooks
 - Change your major
 - Change your minor
 - None of these
 - Other
10. Do you see any negative aspects about not being willing or able to purchase a required textbook? If NO, simply write "No." If YES, please explain. (Make sure to not include any personal identifying information)
11. If there is anything else you would like to tell us about textbook costs, you may do so here: (Make sure to not include any personal identifying information)
12. What is your current year of study in your program at the university?
- 1st year
 - 2nd year
 - 3rd year
 - 4th year
 - 5th year
 - Non-degree
13. How many classes are you taking this term?
14. Are you taking courses in both English and French this term?
- Yes

- No: I am only taking English courses
 - No: I am only taking French courses
15. Since you answered YES, do you notice any differences in textbook affordability and accessibility between the two languages of instruction? ***
16. What is your faculty of study at the university?
- Faculty of Arts
 - Faculty of Education
 - Faculty of Engineering
 - Faculty of Health Sciences
 - Faculty of Law
 - Faculty of Medicine
 - Faculty of Science
 - Faculty of Social Sciences
 - Telfer School of Management
17. On average, how many hours per week are you working for income this term (at uOttawa or elsewhere)?
- I am not working for income this term
 - 1-5 hours
 - 6-10 hours
 - 11-15 hours
 - 16-20 hours
 - 21-25 hours
 - 26-30 hours
 - 31-35 hours
 - Over 35 hours
18. You are...
- a Canadian student from Ontario
 - a Canadian student from outside of Ontario
 - an International student

**Respondents were only prompted to answer this question provided they answered “yes” to Question 2*

***Respondents were only prompted to answer this question provided they answered “yes” to Question 4*

****Respondents were only prompted to answer this question provided they answered “yes” to Question 14*

Appendix B – Categories for coding students’ open comments

Question 10: Do you see any negative aspects about not being willing or able to purchase a required textbook? If NO, simply write "No." If YES, please explain. (Make sure to not include any personal identifying information)

Code	Category	Sample Comment
Note	<i>Assign up to 4 codes (Negative1, Negative2, Negative3, Negative4)</i>	
00	None	Blank "No"
01	Academic concerns: reduced learning / understanding	"harder to grasp concepts" "textbooks explain better than profs"
02	Academic concerns: missing important information regarding course curriculum (curriculum refers to non-graded components of coursework, such as readings or lecture materials)	"not having access to required or supplementary readings" "not having enough information for the course" "Not being able to meet curriculum expectations"
03	Academic concerns: missing content essential to exams and other assessment (assessment includes exams, quizzes, essays, and other formally graded portions of coursework)	"missing content needed for exams" "all the practice questions come from the textbook"
04	Academic concerns: falling behind	"Not being able to catch up in the course" "Not being able to follow along in class"
05	Academic concerns: lower grades	"you will fail the course" "hard to get a good mark in tests and exams" "hard to succeed in the course"
06	Academic concerns: disadvantage compared to peers	"people who can't afford textbook are at a disadvantage" "Not being able to do as well in classes as students who have higher economic status"

07	Functional - time management / inconvenience	“Not being able to study whenever I want to” “inconvenient to always borrow from a friend”
08	Functional - library resources availability	“not enough copies on reserve” “can only use library copy for two hours”
09	Functional - alternatives are unsatisfactory	“downloaded versions don’t always work” “sharing with friends is not ideal”
10	Functional - not having a print copy	“not able to highlight or mark up the book” “we are unable to bring in pdf copies to open book exams”
11	Functional - accessibility (issues pertaining to design of course materials for students who experience disabilities, not general availability of materials)	“have to purchase textbook in order to get accessible copy”
12	Financial impacts	“I need the money for food” “sometimes it’s not worth it as the prof doesn’t use it”
13	Social / Relationship impacts	“strain on friendships from borrowing textbook” “judgements from peers”
14	Mental health impact	“causes me stress” “feel inferior” “I feel isolated”
15	Comment on Faculty / University / Education System	“profs rely too much on textbooks” “we already pay too much in tuition” “feels like a barrier to education”
16	Yes, but no explanation	

Question 10 categories are based on Appendix B – Categories for Coding Student Comments from the University of Guelph survey (2016) (Versluis et al., 2017, pp. 40–41).

Question 11: If there is anything else you would like to tell us about textbook costs, you may do so here: (Make sure to not include any personal identifying information)

Code	Category	Sample Comment
<i>Note</i>	<i>Assign up to 2 codes (Other1, Other2)</i>	
00	None	Blank "No" N/A
01	Suggested actions - Make less expensive, optional	"Make them cheaper, even renting them is expensive"
02	Include textbooks in tuition	"They should be provided with tuition" "Textbook costs should be covered by university fee since they are required textbooks"
03	Expensive/other cost issues	"too expensive" "hard to budget for this unanticipated cost" "\$200 for just one textbook"
04	Issues beyond cost (availability, delays)	"often they are not available at the uOttawa bookstore and need to be ordered online, which takes time and can be difficult"
05	Limited use	"Surtout qu'on les utilise juste pour une période" "Sometimes we dont end up using them much" "les livres sont demandées mais l'enseignant utilise ces livres que quelques fois au courant de la session"
06	Comment on University (tuition)	"we already pay too much in tuition"
07	Comment on faculty / instructors	"Professors should NOT require students to purchase their own books every year" "Some of my teachers provide all of the course materials online"
08	Comment on textbook publishers	"textbook companies are profiting at the expense of the students"

		"I understand textbook companies need to make profits but these costs are not affordable at all"
09	Comment on CampusStore	"Bookstore-only texts are a nightmare to get a hold of" "Buying textbooks at the bookstore is so expensive it is not worth it"
10	Comment on Library	"If only the library had enough copies or even online copies"
11	Assignment platforms/website/software	"I dislike when you are supposed to pay to access your homework" "the non renewable codes for online access to quizzes was a money grab"
12	Suggested alternatives (renting, downloading)	"Now I prefer to rent online books for 4 months because physical books can get 4 times expensive than the online one" "I use Libgen"
13	Making compromises (format)	"Je préfère les avoir version papier, mais souvent s'ils sont disponibles en ligne et moins cher, je le prendrai en version électronique"
14	Financial impacts (sources of funding)	"This forces students to work even more hours at their job (part or full time job)"
15	Mental health impact	"causes me stress"
16	Other	"honestly, I don't think the student union needs to get involved in this"

Question 15: Since you answered YES [to question 14], do you notice any differences in textbook affordability and accessibility between the two languages of instruction?

Code	Category	Sample Comment
<i>Note</i>	<i>Assign up to 2 codes (Language1, Language2)</i>	

00	No	"No" "No difference" "Not sure" "No I haven't bought any" "Same"
01	Yes - no explanation	
02	Disponibilité des livres en français (y compris formats, seconde main)	"French textbooks are harder to access" "I often have to wait weeks and pay lots of shipping for books that come from Europe" "Plus accessible en anglais"
03	Utilisation de livres en anglais dans les cours en français	"Not really since my French classes use English books" "cours en français mais manuel en anglais"
04	Différence de prix (français plus cher ou pas de manuel en anglais)	"La grande majorité des versions anglaises des livres sont largement moins cher que la version française"
05	Différence de prix (français moins cher ou pas de manuel)	"French classes usually do not have a book or if they do it is a cheap book" "French courses typically don't require physical textbooks in my program"
06	Qualité du matériel en français	"the material is google translated awfully and inaccurately"
07	Assessment tool/platform in English courses	"English courses are most likely to ask you to purchase a textbook and some sort of online assessment tool such as Pearson Connect or McGraw Hill Connect"
08	Taux d'utilisation du manuel en français	"I also find that I use my French textbooks much less than my English textbooks"
09	Prix similaires	"I've noticed that they are similar in price" "both expensive"

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