



## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AND SCHOLAR SERVICES

OFFICE FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

### Memorandum

**TO:** Directors of Graduate Studies; Graduate Faculty Members; Graduate Program Advisors

**FROM:** Chelsea Wells, Director, International Student & Scholar Services

**DATE:** April 24, 2020

**Subject:** Encouraging Flexibility for International Students During COVID-19 Crisis

I am writing on behalf of ISSS and our international student population. First of all, thank you for your part in weathering the sudden transition to online classes and maintaining the University's influence and presence in the community during this unusual time. We certainly understand the immense amount of stress and challenges this has brought; especially with many needing to build newer infrastructure from the ground up. In these times, we want to highlight our international students and the unique prospective they are facing in light of COVID-19.

International students, like domestic students, face many challenges with the sudden conversion to online classes. Internet accessibility and a home/work environment are important elements for any student to successfully navigate online classes, and we understand that internet accessibility issues may be prevalent among the entire student population at this time.

Currently, we have approximately 2,700 active international students on campus, with over 100 countries represented. In light of this, we urge faculty and staff to consider offering additional flexibility for online class components for international students on a student visa.

The following are just a few suggestions we urge you to consider in order to combat the additional factors that may impact an international student's success in an online class:

- **Upload files rather than linking to sites that may be blocked in other countries due to Virtual Private Network (VPN) issues:** For some countries, particularly China, students will need access to a reliable VPN in order to access certain websites, including Canvas, Youtube, Facebook, and others. These websites are largely inaccessible to students in mainland China unless they are able to access a VPN. Obtaining a reliable VPN may be costly for students, and it still may not always work. More information about this issue, as well as information about how some instructors are combating this issue can be found [here](#).
- **Allow for additional time to complete assignments for students who may be quarantining in their home countries:** Many countries are imposing strict quarantine rules for any student returning from abroad. If an international student chooses to leave the US and return to their home country, it is possible that the student may be asked to go into a government quarantine facility upon arrival. These government quarantine facilities do not always have internet access. Even if internet access is available, it may be overburdened, or hours of use may be severely limited. It may not be possible for a student returning to their home country at this time to access the internet and complete class assignments for at least 14 days.
- **Allow material to be accessed at more flexible times:** For students who are electing to take synchronous classes, please be aware that these students may be living in drastically different time

zones. Regular class times may be in the middle of the night in their home country. It is difficult for a student to successfully attend each class and participate in class discussions if their sleep schedules are dramatically interrupted by attending classes in the middle of the night. It is advisable for international students to be enrolled in as many synchronous classes as possible in order to continue to maintain their visa status in the future. While flexibility is being offered by the US Federal Government to loosen the normal requirements of maintaining student visa status during the COVID-19 crisis, we are unsure how long this flexibility may last. Since synchronous classes are coded in the same way as “in-person” classes, a student’s enrollment may be less noticeable when assessed to review full-time course load requirements to maintain visa status.

You can find answers to many common questions about international students and maintaining visa status in light of the COVID-19 pandemic on the [ISSS FAQ page](#). Highlights include:

- **CR/NC option:** International students may participate in the CR/NC option and it will not impact their immigration status, due to the flexibility allowed for maintaining visa status at this time.
- **Dropping classes:** International students should NOT drop a class for the Spring 2020 semester. Students on a student visa must remain enrolled in a full-time course load (Undergraduate: 12 semester credits; Graduate: 9 semester credits, or 3 Thesis credits). If a student’s class has been cancelled, then please refer the student to ISSS. A cancelled class is treated differently than a dropped class.
- **Taking online classes and leaving the US:** Due to guidance issued in March 2020 by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), students on a student visa may maintain their visa status, even if all classes have been converted to an online format, and even if a student elects to leave the US and return to their home country. Provided that the student remains enrolled in full-time courses for the Spring 2020 semester, and returns for the Fall 2020 semester, then the student will be considered to be meeting visa requirements.
- **Awarding an EU grade:** Please be aware that EU grades should be issued only to international students who truly fall into this category, since an EU grade can impact a student’s visa status. If an E grade would be more appropriate than an EU for an international student, we encourage for faculty to award an E, as this grade does not impact a student’s visa status in the same way as an EU grade.

Immigration and maintaining student visa status is complex, and becomes increasingly complicated during this uncertain time. Please remember to refer international students to ISSS if they have any questions about maintaining their status, and what they will need to do with their classes. We want to ensure that students are being given correct information and that they are not negatively impacted if they are told to take actions that would not be advised by ISSS.

As always, thank you for your part in continuing to support students and the campus community during this uncertain and challenging time.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at [international@utah.edu](mailto:international@utah.edu). You are also welcome to contact me directly at [chelsea.wells@utah.edu](mailto:chelsea.wells@utah.edu).

Sincerely,  
Chelsea Wells  
Director, International Student & Scholar Services  
Email: [chelsea.wells@utah.edu](mailto:chelsea.wells@utah.edu) | Telephone: 801-585-5759