Senate Committees

**Report to the Teaching & Learning Policy Committee**

**Information Item**

**Topic: Environmental scan and research on lecture breaks**

**Date of Meeting: October 6, 2026**

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## 1. Purpose of the Report

- Providing relevant information on Canadian institutional policies, guidelines, and practices for in-class lecture breaks.

## 2. Background

- At the September 15 meeting of the Senate Teaching & Learning Policy Committee, a discussion item concerning mandatory breaks for classes over two hours culminated in a request for additional information, including an environmental scan to understand how this issue is currently being addressed by other Canadian post-secondary institutions.
- Staff in the Centre for Pedagogical Innovation (CPI) have since completed this research, a copy of which is attached to this memo.

## 3. Appendix

- Summary of research on institutional policies, guidelines, and practices for in-class lecture breaks

# Summary of research on institutional policies, guidelines, and practices for in-class lecture breaks

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## Executive Summary

This report was prepared in response to a request from the Senate Teaching and Learning Policy Committee (T&LPC) for information regarding institutional policies, guidelines, and practices for in-class lecture breaks.

An environmental scan was conducted to assess current institutional landscapes across Ontario and Canada. Alongside the environmental scan, a literature review was compiled to examine and understand the impact of lecture breaks on learning.

The environmental scan confirmed that there is generally an absence of formal mandates at an institutional level that govern in-lecture breaks across Ontario and Canadian universities. The literature review suggests that integrating movement and breaks in a lecture can have positive effects on cognition, physiology, and wellbeing. However, current research cannot establish a universal policy model as more research is needed to better understand other variables. Institutions can instead focus on developing flexible guidance that is informed by empirical evidence to support faculty understand the importance of breaks and boost students' cognitive and physical needs in their day-to-day learning.

# Environmental Scan

## Guiding Questions for the Scan

An environmental scan was conducted to assess and understand current institutional landscapes across Ontario and Canada. The scan was guided by the following questions:

1. How many institutions schedule lectures of three hours or more?
2. How many institutions maintain a formal policy mandating breaks within longer lectures (and if so, what are the specified frequencies and durations)?
3. What pedagogical, physiological, or evidence-based rationale do institutions cite for recommending shorter lecture segments or structured/unstructured breaks?

## General Findings

Here is a summary of the general findings and themes:

### *Ontario Universities and Colleges*

The Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) does not have any mandates that regulate lecture breaks. Similarly, the majority of institutions across both Ontario and Canadian universities lack any formal mandates or institutional policies mandating lecture breaks. Instead, institutions generally leave lecture break management to individual instructor discretion or address breaks through optional teaching and learning resources. The following are some examples of how in-lecture breaks are emphasized in some institutions in Ontario:

- **Western University** recommends that instructors provide at least 10 minutes of unstructured break time for each hour of lecture. These breaks are designed to be free/unstructured, and they are aimed at supporting the engagement and well-being of students.
- **The University of Waterloo** makes a recommendation to faculty to allow breaks during long classes to encourage students to move around, interact with one another or just quietly relax. They also justify breaks by mentioning that breaks allow students to catch up and digest the information that was discussed.
- **Toronto Metropolitan University** does not have a formal policy mandating exact breaks lengths or frequencies. However, institutional guidance from the Provost's Office explicitly encourages instructors to provide a reasonable break during any class lasting 2 hours or longer along with the standard transition between back to back classes which is 10 minutes.
- **Queens University** does not have a formal policy on lecture breaks but recommends the importance of learner well-being and the potential of lecture

breaks to reach learners' needs, most especially when lecturing over a longer period of time.

- **Carleton University** does not a specific policy regarding lecture breaks, except the recommendation to have 30 minute break between 11am-2pm for lunch. The suggestion is that no block of teaching is to exceed 3 hours.
- **Conestoga College** distinguishes free or unstructured breaks from short structured in-class breaks (e.g., stretch, mindfulness/gratitude) and cites Immordino-Yang, Christodoulou, and Singh (2012) on the brain's default-mode network as the rationale for rest.
- **Lakehead University** does not mention a general pedagogical policy regarding lecture breaks. However, the Student Accessibility Service Office explicitly emphasizes in-class breaks, standing, and movement as important functional accommodations for students with medical conditions or disabilities.
- **Trent University** has no formal policy on lecture breaks. However, their website suggests that this decision is left to the instructor's discretion: "Depending on the length of a lecture, instructors may include a break during class. Try your best to time snack and bathroom breaks during these times".

### *Canadian Universities outside of Ontario*

The following are examples of how some Canadian universities outside of Ontario highlight the importance of breaks during lectures. Similar to the majority of universities in Ontario, most institutions have not implemented a general mandate concerning in-lecture breaks:

#### Western Canada

- **University of Manitoba** does not have a formal policy but strongly recommends and supports in-class breaks through an institutional initiative called Motion Minutes, which was an initiative from faculty and clinical exercise physiologists. The university provides instructors with videos designed to be integrated directly into long lectures to reduce sedentary time, restore focus, and support student well-being. The videos focus on guided movement of 3 to 5 minutes and mindfulness.
- **University of Lethbridge** does not have a general policy but, through the Student and Wellness Office, it promotes taking active breaks as academic strategy. The office encourages students to take 5-to-60-minute purposeful breaks to boost productivity and asks instructors to model this in their lectures that are 3-hour long.
- **University of British Columbia** (Okanagan Campus, School of Health and Exercise Science) is a rare example of formal departmental policy of in-lecture breaks. The policy, called Take a Stand, was adopted in 2016 and it mandates that instructors facilitate at least one short standing or movement break for every 50 minutes of

lecture time as well as allow students to stand during class where appropriate. The policy links movement breaks to combatting prolonged sitting, improving cognitive function and attention, increasing vascular blood flow, and propitiating social connection. Faculty are also encouraged to include this policy in their syllabi and lecture halls.

- **Simon Fraser University** has no central policy on lecture breaks but, through the Provost and VP Academic Office, in-lecture breaks are recommended to be co-designed and decided between students and instructors. Faculty members mention that asking students about a break after 1 hour of lecture creates a flexible and responsive learning environment that helps to restore attention and balance the workload demands. The needs of students and the length of the breaks may vary depending on the moment of the term.

### Quebec

- **McGill University's** Department of Athletics and Recreation developed the One-Minute Stretch Breaks Initiative that provides instructors with videos to promote breaks and physical activity during lectures. The videos have been integrated into MyCourse (McGill's LMS). The purpose of this initiative is to reduce prolonged sitting and cognitive fatigue without losing significant instructional time.

### Atlantic Canada

- **Acadia University** mentions in-lecture breaks in a similar way than Lakehead University does. This means that in-lecture breaks are recommended as part of the Student Accommodation Office.
- **Dalhousie University's** general student scheduling guidance reinforces the 10-minute transition time between back-to-back classes. The policy notes that consecutive long lectures cause significant fatigue and campus geography makes the 10 minutes a short period of time that can cause anxiety for students to get from one class to another.
- **Memorial University's** policy at the Faculty of Medicine is to schedule classes that are 50 minutes long. "Lectures are limited to 50 minutes even if they are scheduled as a one-hour block. Students are entitled to a 10 minute break after each 50 minutes of lecture".

## Literature Review

This section summarizes relevant research that can explain a pedagogical rationale for integrating breaks into higher education instruction. The information is organized into three

categories: Cognitive Factors, Physiological Factors, and Student Wellbeing and Accessibility.

### *Cognitive Factors*

- According to Fenesi et al. (2018), incorporating exercise breaks into a university lecture improved on-task attention and memory for lecture material compared to non-exercise breaks or no breaks. Learners who received exercise breaks found the lecturer and lecture material easier to understand than did learners who received no breaks. Engaging minds through classroom learning and practice is a direct route to promoting academic performance, and physical exercise breaks may augment these processes.
- Dunlosky et al. (2013) present the concept of "interleaved practice" which can be defined as a learning strategy where students alternate between different concepts or materials during their study sessions, as opposed to a "block practice" where one concept is studied before moving to the next one. The results of their study demonstrate that blocked practice often feels easier and results in higher accuracy during their initial training. However, interleaved practice produces significantly better long-term retention and higher test performance. The results seem to suggest that this interleaved practice is more effective in mathematics, concept and categorization learning, and complex problem-solving activities.
- Hayes (2024) conducted experimental research at the Ohio State University. The findings suggest that the participants who took exercise breaks during a video lecture were more likely to be on task towards the end of the lecture and performed significantly better on a multiple-choice exam. Given the fact that students typically sit for the whole duration of a lecture, exercise breaks reduce sedentary behavior, which is associated with negative health outcomes and may negatively impact cognition and brain health. Moreover, these data indicate that implementation of exercise breaks throughout the semester is feasible.
- Sharpe et al. (2025) found that incorporating more frequent and shorter micro-breaks can offset learning fatigue and can maintain concentration better than traditional longer breaks. The results of this study explain how break structures can have an impact on student quiz performance during extended lectures. The authors suggest that for broader implementation, it is important to consider contextual factors, individual differences, and the integration of multiple evidence-based teaching strategies.
- Broad et al. (2023) demonstrated that Classroom Activity Breaks (CABs) can significantly improve on-task behaviors regardless of the time of the day. However, morning breaks seem to be more effective for reducing off-task motor and verbal

behaviors, while afternoon breaks tend to reduce off-task passive behaviors like zooning out. The results of this study demonstrate that just four minutes of physical activity within the classroom period has significant effects on classroom behavior and physical activity in primary school children.

### *Physiological Factors*

- The University of British Columbia Okanagan implemented a policy called Take a Stand. This policy highlights the fact that generally university students spend 50% to 70% of their daily time sitting in lectures. Take a Stand emphasizes that prolonged sitting during 3-hour lectures can contribute to physical discomfort, lethargy, and long-term health risks (University of British Columbia, School of Health and Exercise Sciences, 2016).
- Gilmore, Sullivan, and Hughes (2024) found that instructors who incorporated physical activity into their instruction reported that physical breaks can effectively energize students, increase their engagement and improve their level of enjoyment through social interaction. Participants in this empirical research appreciated and strongly accepted the value of physical activity for learning even though the research evidence is mixed and still limited.
- Moulin and Irwin (2017) found that students spent an average of 11.88 ± 3.46 hours a day engaged in sedentary behaviors, which is mostly caused by in-class lectures as the largest single contributor to this sedentarism. The authors identified three themes to engage in a less sedentary lifestyle: access to a gym, student jobs, and walking to and on campus. In addition, the authors emphasized that promoting the importance of taking breaks from sitting during study is critical. They explain that decreasing sitting time resulted in a 27.5% decrease in musculoskeletal discomfort.

### *Student Wellbeing and Accessibility Factors*

- Paulus et al. (2021) conducted a study in which they aimed to understand the practicality and impact of introducing a five-minute standing break for one semester in a five different 90-minute lectures. The results of surveys data from more than 500 students indicate that the standing breaks were highly accepted by the students. About three quarters of the students felt a relaxation of the muscles in the neck and shoulder as well as in the back and the legs. More than three quarters perceived an increase in concentration, receptiveness and retentiveness, motivation, and well-being. Results also indicate that a standing break as well as an active break are more effective than an open break to improve the self-perceived physical and psychological well-being of the university students. The increase in

cognitive skills is reported by all groups, including the group who were offered open breaks. Hence, standing breaks in university lectures receive a high level of acceptance and practicability and have the potential to increase students' physical, mental, and cognitive condition and contribute to students' physical activity and health.

- The Office of Student Accessibility Services at Lakehead University recommends integrating movement, standing options and mental breaks in order to normalize cognitive and physical pacing for students. The office suggests making faculty aware of this: "accommodation related to breaks during class are provided with the intent to inform instructors that there may be a student in the class that may need to leave class, stand up and move periodically or frequently due to disability and/or medical condition functional limitations" Lakehead University (n.d.).
- A study from the University of Sydney conducted by Ginns et al. (2023) demonstrates that a short five-minute unstructured cognitive break can help restore students' concentration capacity: "If you want your work or study to be more productive, you need to build in simple five-minute breaks of doing nothing". This break does not have to be a lengthy walk or a video but simply a five-minute break doing nothing. The article also mentions strategies like the Pomodoro Technique (Kurtuy, 2026) to be integrated and taught to students. This technique suggests working for 25 minutes and take a five-minute break in a four interval period.
- Both McGuill Athletics One-Minute Stretch Breaks Initiative and Motion Minutes at the University of Manitoba show that even a short one to five minute pause can effectively disrupt monotony, reduce stress and refresh students' mental focus.

## Considerations

The environmental scan and literature review yield the following considerations:

1. There is an absence of centralized, formal mandates across Ontario and Canadian universities for in-lecture breaks. In general, breaks are left to the discretion of the instructors. However, relying on the discretion of instructors for breaks can create an inconsistent experience for students, most especially, when lectures are longer than two hours.
2. Some Student Offices and Faculties at some universities are more intentional about considering breaks as tools to boost cognitive and physical student wellbeing rather than considering breaks as free time for students. It is recommended that institutions be more proactive in creating policies that underscore the benefits of in-lecture breaks (vs. a sacrifice of instructional time).

3. In-lecture breaks have been considered by some institutions as part of their accessibility, student wellbeing as well as Universal Design Learning Principles. This suggests that universities could help normalize breaks for all students and, therefore, reduce stigma, and administrative burden on Student Accessibility Services offices.
4. The literature review suggests that in-lecture breaks can have positive effects on students in three different levels: cognitive, physiological and student wellbeing and accessibility. It is important to note that the research has some limitations and could continue to be expanded into different contexts and ages.
5. At a cognitive level, research seems suggest that brief breaks throughout lectures (especially lectures that are longer than 2 hours) could improve students; attention, retention, comprehension, exam performance and mental fatigue (Fenesi et al., 2018; Hayes, 2024; Sharpe et al., 2025).
6. Combining active breaks with interleaved practice could potentially maximize long-term retention and complex problem-solving over blocked instruction (Dunlosky et al., 2013).
7. University students spend 50% to 70% of their day sitting in a lecture which is an average of 12 hours of daily sedentary behavior (Moulin & Irwin, 2017). This is why taking frequent movement breaks can reduce musculoskeletal discomfort by over 27% and reduce neck, shoulder, and back tensions (Paulus et al., 2021).
8. A takeaway from universities and institutions that have implemented programs and exercise modules (e.g., MCGuill stretch videos or Manitoba's Clinical Exercise Modules) demonstrates that faculty can more easily adopt in-lecture breaks when the institution eliminates the need for instructors to do extra work as they are already provided with alternatives for their integration.

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