

# **Experiences in the ECAC: four terms, Fall'06 – Spring'08**

Compiled by F. Jones, May 2008.

(ECAC – the Earth Course Assistance Centre, a drop-in help centre for undergraduate students taking EOSC service courses, staffed by Teaching Assistants.)

## **I) PROJECT GOALS**

- Increase number of undergraduates interacting with teaching assistants (TAs).
- Improve the teaching experiences of TAs.
- Make management of service courses and corresponding TAs more efficient.

Two types of information are given in this report.

**First**, data about ECAC usage by undergraduates from the four terms in UBC academic years 2006W and 2007W are included; that is fall 2006 through Spring 2008. Results are summarized in Part II below.

**Second**, an online survey was deployed to ask TAs about their experiences working in ECAC in Spring 2008. Seventeen graduate students responded to this survey. Results are summarized in Part III below.

Actual recommendations are given on the last page (NOT in public version).

## **II) SUMMARY OF ECAC USAGE DATA (TALLY SHEETS)**

Data are summarized on the next page. Comments on this page are mostly given in terms of usage as a percentage of enrollment for each course. Total enrollment numbers are given following the data for completeness. FJ file *D:\currentprojects\eossei\projects\TAs\ecac\ECAC Summary 2002-2007.xls* contains the compiled data and analysis.

### **1) How has ECAC usage by course changed between 2006W and 2007W?**

- eos110 and 311 send 10%-15% of enrollment for visits.
- eos111 is by far the most significant user by percent of enrollment in the course. The number of student visits has also doubled between 02006W and 2007W.
- eos112 and eos114 see closer to 20% of enrollment making visits.
- eos116 has increased from 4.2% to 10.8% by enrollment from 06 to 07.

NOTE we do not know how many “unique” students use the ECAC – ie how many in these tables are individuals making multiple visits.

### **2) Walkin vs emails:**

- Walkin visits are 77% to 93% of TA - student contacts. There are a few time periods with no data, but the lack of online & phone use is pervasive.

### **3) Usage by week in the term:**

On average, most weeks see 7% to 12% of the total, with weeks 11 or 12 getting the most traffic at up to 18% of the total in any one year. However there is significant variability term to term. Causes include midterm and final exam dates, eos111 web lab due dates, and record keeping (or staffing) errors & omissions.

### **4) Time of day usage:**

Only one year has this data, but the favoured time slots are mid morning and early afternoon.

## THE NUMBERS (ECAC usage by students)

(Coloured cells simply help identify highs and lows in the tables.)

### Total numbers

#### Student visits to ECAC

Course No.	110	111	112	114	116	210	310	311	other	Total
fall 06	15	152	21	95		3		20	11	317
spr 07	37	166	42	78	10		4		23	360
fall 07	25	125	54	93		3		12	12	324
spr 08	7	405	36	119	27		4		4	602
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>848</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1,603</b>

### Courses that used ECAC in 2007W

Crs	Term	Instructors
110	1,2,s	Kennedy, Hearn, Grimm
111	1,2,s	Harris
112	1,2	Francois, Ver
114	1,2,s	Stull, Kennedy, Ver, Harris Sutherland, Eberhardt,
116	2	Grey, Mortensen, Francois
210	1	Mayer, Eberhardt
310	1	Harris
311	2	Scoates

#### Total enrollments

Course No.	110	111	112	114	116	210	310	311	other	Total
fall 06	168	98	129	529		174		158	?	1,256
spr 07	156	95	149	485	236		189		?	1,310
fall 07	170	102	172	628		190		146	?	1,408
spr 08	145	100	177	501	250		189		?	1,362
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>639</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>627</b>	<b>2,143</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>304</b>		<b>5,336</b>

### Visits as percentage of enrollment:

	Course No.	110	111	112	114	116	210	310	311
	2006W	16.0%	164.8%	22.7%	17.1%	4.2%	1.7%	2.1%	12.7%
	2007W	10.2%	262.4%	25.8%	18.8%	10.8%	1.6%	2.1%	8.2%
<b>change: 07W-06W</b>		<b>-5.9%</b>	<b>97.6%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>6.6%</b>	<b>-0.1%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>-4.4%</b>

### Walkins vs emails:

	Walk ins	emails	phone
fall 06	93%	7%	?
spr 07	81%	19%	?
fall 07	77%	19%	0%
spr 08	93%	6%	1%

### Usage by week

wk	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	totals
fall 06	0%	12%	15%	12%	7%	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%	16%	5%			1.00
spr 07			9%	4%	8%	12%	12%	7%	8%	10%	18%	6%	7%		1.00
fall 07			9%	10%	7%	15%	12%	10%	13%	9%	14%	no data	no data		1.00
spr 08			13%	11%	14%	6%	8%	2%	14%	1%	10%	13%	7%	1%	1.00
average		12%	12%	9%	9%	10%	10%	7%	10%	7%	14%	8%	7%	1%	

### Time of Day: spring 07 only

time slot	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-1	1-2	2-3	3-4
% total	4%	23%	12%	13%	22%	22%	8%

### III) Online survey of TAs

Results from ten multiple choice questions are given in the table and graphic below. Some conclusions are summarized on the subsequent page.

Online survey about TA experiences in ECAC							Spring 2008															
							Results															
Questions		Answer choices						Percent of total respondents (17 TAs responded).														
		1	2	3	4	5	6	0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%														
1	How many terms have you TA'd in the ECAC?	1yr	2yrs	3yrs	4yrs	5yrs	6yrs															
2	What is your primary field of study as a graduate student?	geology	geophysics	physical ogy	biol ogy	ATSC	other															
3	How much of the ECAC manual did you read?	0 - 20 %	21 - 40 %	41 - 60 %	61 - 80 %	81 - 100 %																
4	To what extent did the manual serve your needs?	Not at all	a little	some	a lot																	
5	To what extent did the pre-term training/tour serve your needs?	Not at all	a little	some	a lot																	
7	How much of your TA time was spent familiarizing yourself with the logistics, topics and assignments of ECAC courses?	0 - 20 %	21 - 40 %	41 - 60 %	61 - 80 %	81 - 100 %																
8	How often did you handle questions within your own general field of interest (drop-in, email, phone, etc.)?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often																	
9	How often did you feel like you were UNable to effectively support the students questions (drop-in, email, phone, etc.)?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often																	
10	On average, how often did students come specifically to use the video or textbook resources?	Never	Rarely	once or twice a week	several times week	Highly variable*																
11	IF we added monitoring an on-line discussion board to ECAC duties, how much time would you have to do this?	None, or I don't like this idea.	< 0.5hr / wk.	0.5-1.0hr / wk.	1.0-2.0 hrs / wk.	> 2:0hrs / wk.																
							**"Highly variable" means some weeks never, other weeks very often.															

Four of the online survey questions were open ended. All comments from the 17 TAs who responded are given in the appendix. Results for three of the four open ended questions were categorized as follows:

What aspect of working in ECAC do you LIKE the most?

Stu Contact	hours	topics	resources	T/L opportunity
11	1	2	1	1

What aspect of working in ECAC do you NOT like the most?

too few students	boring	hard topics	complex / disorganized
1	5	2	4

What aspect of working in ECAC would you like to improve most (either for TAs or students)?

# students	training	content	organizational
4	1	3	3

## General conclusions from TA survey (including open questions)

1. More student contact is desired by nearly all TAs.
2. Over half (9 of 17) commented that their ECAC experience was either boring or “complex / disorganized”.
3. The manual was considered good (albeit perhaps too long-winded), but training could be more practical / hands on.
4. Several suggestions for improving organization when managing grades or web-oriented information (labs in particular). This has implications if more web-oriented work is developed.
5. Photos of people (instructors and TAs) would help.
6. A huge amount of time seems to have been spent familiarizing with logistics / assignments etc. (Q.7)
7. Over half (9 of 17) “rarely” or “never” handled questions in their own discipline.
8. Based on Q10 students do not spontaneously come to view videos or text.
9. In spite of apparent shortage of visitors, there was not very strong support for adding web-based bulletin board support as one of the ECAC tasks.

## Comments about ECAC from interviewed undergraduate students

Needs data from interviews and focus groups with students.

## Comments about ECAC from Faculty

Needs data from service course instructor interviews.

## References

1. TA workload is summarized by TP Frappe in July 2007 (“*Workload of TAs in EOS-UBC.ppt*”).
2. TA training program – see B. Gilley for details.
3. TA allocation is shown in spreadsheet “*Working version TA Jan08.xls*”.

## Appendix: TA survey, open question responses:

### Q6. What can you suggest for improvements to the manual and/or training tour?

- 1 I was not in Vancouver for the tour. When I arrive to ECAC, sometimes students arrive asking for things (exams, labs, etc) from different courses and I do not know where they are. It would be good if each professor could drop in or email instructions for the ECAC TAs that would be placed in the ECAC manual for TAs to refer to whenever they are looking for something.
- 2 Better labelling of what goes where Need current syllabus for each class we are supposed to be helping such that we can know what they want and where we can look for it.
- 3 If someone could help us just one hour at the beginning make sure we know how to log in to the web-lab. I had a lot of trouble with these one and most of the time I would ask the student to log in.
- 4 Pictures to identify co-TAs and Profs. This would be especially useful for new grad students (who tend to work ECAC anyway).
- 5 None really - I think the manual is well put together, perhaps having things indexed more thoroughly for easy retrieval.
- 6 training should be more practical.
- 7 Extending the training tour or conducting more than one tour with fewer TA's per tour
- 8 -
- 9 I like the manual it never fails to answer most if not all the questions I have. I didn't make the training session so I cannot comment on it.
- 10 -
- 11 I am not so sure if you are talking about the manual in the green binder or not. I think whichever improvement it will be, make sure the manual remains concise. Also make sure there are enough useful contact info: instructors, manager, head TA.
- 12 I wasn't advised of the pre-term training, but I'm sure it would have been helpful!
- 13 -
- 14 Not really.
- 15 -
- 16 Perhaps a well-defined method for saving and filing midterm scores, tests, and answer sheets as they're emailed in by prof's, so there's no ambiguity when searching up results for students. Perhaps a page at the front divided up into the ECAC courses, with empty boxes to be filled in as midterms are either emailed in/dropped off.
- 17 Shorter and more concise would ensure people would read all of it. The text was also very cramped... this could be improved.

### Q12. What aspect of working in ECAC do you LIKE the most?

- 1 Its nice to interact with the students.
- 2 Answering students' questions
- 3 That there is no extra hours, when you are not there, you don't think about it.
- 4 Face-to-face interaction with students and the opportunity to broaden my background knowledge of E+O sciences beyond seismology.
- 5 I like when I can help students with their questions. It makes me feel better about what I know and also makes me feel like my knowledge is useful.
- 6 getting more familiar with courses, contacting with students,
- 7 -
- 8 -
- 9 lots of the resources you need are right there so it makes everything fairly simple.
- 10 -
- 11 Interaction with the non-science students, test of different styles of teaching/tutoring
- 12 Helping students answer course content questions
- 13 Helping out students who care enough to come in and ask a question.
- 14 Helping kids with questions
- 15 -
- 16 Building a rapport with regular students who came in specifically during my times.
- 17 Interaction with students - I don't always get that since I'm primarily used as a marker.

### Q13. What aspect of working in ECAC do you NOT like the most?

- 1 In general, I feel like my time is not used efficiently. Typically, I see a maximum of 2 or 3 students per 2-hour time slot. If we could make it so more students come within a narrow time range, it would use the TA's time more wisely. (I know that is why we have marks to enter, etc etc, but sometimes there are no labs to enter marks).
- 2 sitting around when nobody comes in
- 3 At the beginning it is stressful to understand the system, it takes a long time to get comfortable and if you don't have many hours in the term you feel all your time pass to understand how it works.

- 4 Entering marks ;)
- 5 When students come in with questions about something I know NOTHING about (i.e. structural geology) - it sucks for my ego and it makes them feel like they aren't going to get the help they need at ecac.
- 6 -
- 7 -
- 8 -
- 9 There are some course-specific questions that TAs are not able to answer, so having so many courses serviced by ECAC makes answering these types of questions difficult.
- 10 -
- 11 data entry
- 12 Helping students answer logistical questions (e.g., exam and homework procedures, where to find the course notes, how to pay for field trips, when grades will be posted, etc) because the answers are usually not readily available. I don't understand what would be involved in an "on-line discussion board" but it would be great if was some kind of bulliten board/discussion board for individual classes so that when a logistics question comes up, the ECAC-er can look directly to the discussion board for answers (or to ask them) instead of leafing through the notebook hoping to stumble upon those answers.
- 13 -
- 14 Sometimes it is too slow and I have nothing to do
- 15 -
- 16 Searching through the computer for midterm marks, etc, when they're not filed and saved in a systematic manner.
- 17 I dislike the more mundane tasks like entering marks or alphabetizing.

**Q14. What aspect of working in ECAC would you like to improve most (either for TAs or students)?**

- 1 Increase the drop-in/hour ratio.
- 2 free beer. It's not bad, but still underused as a tutoring centre.
- 3 A little more training at the beginning of the term when it is you first semester at ECAC would help us being more efficient.
- 4 It's occasionally difficult to answer questions unrelated to a certain field of expertise; a system for questions to be answered by TAs, for TAs might help. A meta-discussion board perhaps.
- 5 If ECAC TA's could have access to specific assignment answer keys to help us guide students to the right answer (specifically if we don't know the field), or if we could be given a heads up about topics for the week that are covered in 1st&2nd year courses, that might help both students and TAs.
- 6 -
- 7 -
- 8 -
- 9 -
- 10 -
- 11 the green binder should contain more guidelines/updates. In this case any TA, even if she/he is not familiar with the material or the course (not her/his field or not assigned for this term), she/he would be able to help a minimum a student. Usually that's enough to help the student fix an administration or course issue without having to send the student to the course instructor or the manager.
- 12 see above.
- 13 -
- 14 The book that we write in should be electronic and important points that everyone should be aware of should be highlighted in some manner.
- 15 -
- 16 Working with the students face-to-face.
- 17 I'd like to see the number of student visits to ECAC increase, and perhaps have students study there for more time during their visits. In my opinion, the room is much too small to facilitate this, and ECAC should be moved to the second floor where the beautiful new undergrad study area is. This would encourage students to hang around longer, and thus to make better use of ECAC simply because of its proximity to their own personal, more quiet, less crowded study area.