Remote Learning for International Students - Autumn 2020 & Winter 2021
Frequently Asked Questions (Seattle campus only)
Updated October 29, 2020

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Autumn quarter - current enrollment

Q1: I am a continuing student who was enrolled at the UW spring quarter 2020. If I am taking classes remotely from outside the U.S., can I drop below full-time enrollment or withdraw from all of my autumn quarter classes?

Continuing students with an active SEVIS record, even if you are currently outside the U.S., must continue to follow all F regulations in order to maintain your status and preserve future F-1 benefit eligibility (annual vacation quarter, CPT, OPT, etc). If you plan to return to the U.S. with the same government immigration record (SEVIS ID number), you need to remain enrolled full-time (12 credits for undergraduates/10 credits for graduate students) or receive approval for an existing U.S. government exception to the full-time enrollment requirements.

To learn whether you qualify for an existing U.S. government reduced course load exception, complete the Course Drop Eligibility Assessment. If you do qualify for an exception, ISS will help you drop or withdraw your courses while maintaining your same SEVIS ID record for future study at the UW. If you do not qualify for an exception, you can still drop or withdraw from your courses but the ISS will be required to terminate your SEVIS immigration record for Authorized Early Withdrawal (AEW). This AEW will end your current SEVIS immigration record and you would be required to request a new I-20 before returning to the U.S. to continue your studies.

Returning to the U.S. with a new I-20 will reset your “three quarters of full-time study” for F-1 benefit eligibility (CPT, OPT, etc). For additional information and instructions to request a new I-20, review the Returning Students information web page.

Q2: This is my first quarter at the UW (or first quarter in a new degree program) and I received a transfer pending, or change of education level I-20. Can I drop my classes or take fewer credits if I am taking classes remotely from outside the U.S.?

If you want to continue your studies with the same government immigration record (SEVIS ID number) that you had at your previous school or degree level, you need to maintain full-time enrollment or qualify for an existing U.S. government exception to the full-time enrollment requirements. Full-time enrollment for undergraduates is 12 credits/10 credits for graduate students. Complete the Course Drop Eligibility Assessment to learn if you qualify for
Q1: How do I request an existing U.S. government Reduced Course load exception? If you are approved for a full-time enrollment exception, ISS will help you drop or withdraw from your courses while maintaining your same SEVIS ID record for future study at the UW.

If you do not qualify for a Reduced Course load exception, you can still choose to drop or withdraw from your courses. In this option, ISS will terminate your SEVIS immigration record for Authorized Early Withdrawal (AEW). This AEW will end your current SEVIS immigration record and cancel any pending SEVIS Transfer Pending or Change of Level. You would be required to request a new initial attendance I-20 and pay the $350 SEVIS fee again before returning to the U.S. to continue your studies. It is possible you could also be required to apply for a new F-1 visa as immigration regulations state students using an initial attendance I-20 must have a visa stamp that matches the name of the school on the I-20 form.

Returning to the U.S. on an initial attendance I-20 with a new SEVIS ID will also reset your “three quarters of full-time study” for F-1 benefit eligibility (CPT, OPT, etc). For additional information and instructions to request a new I-20, review the Returning Students information web page.

Q3: Autumn is my first quarter at the UW (or first quarter in a new degree program) and I received an initial attendance I-20. Can I withdraw from all of my classes or take fewer credits if I am taking classes remotely from outside the U.S.?

If you are taking remote classes from outside of the U.S. and you have not yet entered the U.S. with your I-20 issued by the UW, your SEVIS immigration record is not yet active. Because your SEVIS record cannot be made active until you physically arrive in the U.S., you are not required to maintain full-time enrollment for immigration purposes. To determine if you are eligible to drop or withdraw from classes, complete the Course Drop Eligibility Assessment. ISS advisors will review your status and will help you drop or withdraw from your courses if you are eligible.

Q4: Is there updated immigration guidance from the U.S. government for winter quarter 2021?

At this time, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has not issued guidance beyond fall 2020 and we do not know when they will release updated guidance for 2021. Many U.S. schools follow a semester system with 2 academic terms while the UW follows a quarter system with 3 terms over the 9-month academic year. It is possible that new or updated guidance for 2021 will be released in the coming months before spring semester but not specifically for winter quarter. We will continue to monitor the situation and will update this FAQ as soon as new information becomes available to us.

Q5: Will winter quarter classes be online or in person? Can I take classes from outside the U.S.?

President Cauce sent an email to all students on October 14 announcing most winter quarter courses will be offered remotely. The winter quarter time schedule has been released with information about remote and in person course options. Remote courses will be noted as “offered via remote learning” and in person courses will have a classroom assigned. The time schedule continues to be updated as faculty finalize instruction plans for winter quarter, so be sure to review it before registering for classes. You can also use MyPlan to find both in-person
and remote course options. If you plan to remain outside of the U.S. for winter quarter, you can take all of your courses remotely.

Q6: Will there be a university-wide in-person class for winter quarter like there was for autumn?
At this time, the University is not planning to offer a general in-person course for all students. If you are already in the U.S. and you were enrolled full-time for autumn quarter, you are not required to take an in-person course for winter quarter. If you are currently outside the U.S. but you plan to travel to the U.S. before winter quarter begins and you will enter the U.S. with an initial attendance I-20, you will be required to register for an in-person course. Review the winter quarter time schedule or use MyPlan to find in-person course options available for winter quarter. We encourage you to discuss in-person course options available to you with your graduate program adviser, department adviser, or UAA academic adviser. The ISS will continue to monitor the situation and let students know about any updates from the U.S. government regarding in-person course requirements.

Q7: Will I be allowed to take all of my winter quarter classes online if I plan to stay in the U.S.?
At this time, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has not issued guidance beyond fall 2020 and we do not know when they will release updated guidance for 2021. It is possible new guidance could be announced before winter quarter classes begin. Based on the U.S. government’s previous guidance, continuing students who were previously enrolled at the UW will be allowed to remain in the U.S. or return to the U.S. to take all of their courses online. It will be possible for continuing students to take all of their courses remotely or take a combination of remote and in-person course options for winter quarter. Your SEVIS I-20 record will remain valid as long as you maintain your F status and enroll full-time.

If autumn or winter quarter is your first quarter at the UW (or in a new degree program) and you have an initial attendance I-20 with a 1/4/2021 program start date, you cannot take 100% of your courses online if you plan to physically travel to the U.S. Based on the U.S. government’s previous guidance, students applying for an F visa or traveling to the U.S. with a new SEVIS immigration record will be required to take at least one in-person course to maintain your F status. Please consult your graduate program adviser, department adviser, or UAA academic adviser for additional details and in-person options available. If you are a new, incoming freshman, transfer, or graduate student who was issued a transfer pending I-20, review question #9 below.

Q8: How can I request an I-20 or letter from the ISS confirming UW will offer both in person and remote course options for winter quarter?
According to the U.S. government’s previous guidance, schools are not required to update, re-issue, or reprint I-20 forms with information about the mode of instruction for any students. For undergraduate, graduate, and professional program students enrolled in degree programs on the Seattle campus, the ISS has created a winter quarter Travel Support Letter form. Complete this self-serve form by answering a few questions. Once submitted, you will receive an auto-generated email reply, including confirmation of UW’s mode of instruction for winter quarter.

Continuing students previously enrolled at the UW returning to the U.S. should use their current I-20 for travel. Make sure you have or request a valid travel signature before you travel. To determine whether you need an updated travel signature, review our Online Travel Signature information.
Students with an initial attendance, transfer pending, or change of education level I-20 with a 1/4/2021 start date should register for at least one in-person course if you plan to travel to the U.S. to begin classes in January. You may be asked to show proof of your course schedule when applying for a visa or entering the U.S. We recommend you register for classes prior to your visa appointment and take a print-out of your class schedule showing the in-person course as a precaution. It is also recommended you travel with this information in case you are asked to show it. You do not need a new I-20 with specific remarks about the mode of instruction for winter quarter.

Q9: If I have a Transfer Pending or Change of Level I-20, do I have to take an in-person course?  
Whether or not you will be required to take an in-person course depends on your physical location. Students with a transfer pending or change of education level I-20 and winter quarter start date, should review the options below:

a) Inside the U.S. – no plans to travel internationally before January 4
   ISS is interpreting the previously issued U.S. government guidance to say international students with a transfer pending or change of education level I-20 are allowed to take all courses online if they have stayed inside the U.S. AND maintained their F-1 status.

b) Outside the U.S. – planning to travel to the U.S. before winter quarter begins January 4
   The government SEVIS system separates I-20 forms into two categories – continuing and initial. Students who have been issued a transfer pending or change of education level I-20 are included in the initial category within SEVIS. To be safe, the ISS recommends you register for an in-person course if you plan to return to the U.S. with a transfer pending or change of education level I-20.

c) Outside the U.S. – no plans to travel to the U.S. before spring quarter (March 2021)
   The previous U.S. government guidance states, “U.S. institutions will not be able to keep transfer pending SEVIS records active for students who plan to stay outside of the U.S. for autumn quarter.” The guidance also states Designated School Officials (DSOs) can contact the SEVP help desk to request the I-20 start date be updated to the start of the quarter a student will physically travel back to the U.S.

ISS is interpreting the U.S. government guidance to say we cannot register SEVIS records for students outside the U.S. with a change of education level I-20 which is in the initial category.

The ISS will contact students with a transfer pending or change of education level program start date of 1/4/2021 by early December to confirm your plans about winter quarter. If you will continue taking classes remotely from outside the U.S., we will send additional instructions about how to request an updated I-20 with a later start date. There is nothing you need to do at this time. ISS staff continue to monitor the situation and will update this FAQ if additional SEVP guidance becomes available before winter quarter classes begin in January.

Q10: I am registered for a lecture that is offered as remote learning but a quiz section that is in-person. Does that qualify as an in-person course for U.S. immigration?  
The Code of Federal Regulations provides a definition of online courses for F-1 students. This definition describes an online class as a course that, “...does not require the student's physical attendance for classes, examination or other purposes integral to completion of the class.” 8 CFR 214.2(f)(6)(i)(G) By this definition, required in-person meetings of the quiz section would preclude a course from being considered fully online. It is our understanding that an in-person quiz section would meet the in-person requirement.
Q11: Are independent study/dissertation/thesis/research credits considered remote courses?
The Code of Federal Regulations provides a definition of online courses for F-1 students. This definition describes an online class as a course that, “...does not require the student's physical attendance for classes, examination or other purposes integral to completion of the class.” 8 CFR 214.2(f)(6)(i)(G) By this definition, required meetings with your faculty would preclude a course from being considered fully online. It is our interpretation that these courses will not be considered online and would meet the in-person requirement. These credits at the UW have always counted towards full-time enrollment for international students and we do not anticipate that changing.

Q12: Winter will be my final quarter and I will take only one class which will be offered remotely. I know immigration rules normally prohibit online-only study for the final quarter but can I take an online class as my only class in my final quarter?
Based on March SEVP guidance, you are allowed to take only one online class in your final quarter. You will need to apply a Final Quarter Reduced Course Load to maintain your F status. Also note, if you are planning to apply for OPT, applications must be submitted and mailed from within the U.S.

Travel to or from the U.S.

Q13: Can I travel to the U.S. for winter quarter classes? Am I required to take an in-person course?
Based on the U.S. government’s previous guidance, continuing students previously enrolled in spring 2020 will not be required to take an in-person course and can take all of classes remotely from inside the U.S. If you have been issued an initial attendance I-20 with a program start date of 9/30/2020 or 1/4/2021, we recommend you register for an in-person course if you plan to travel to the U.S. for winter quarter. Since there has been no update or new guidance from the U.S. government yet, the ISS is basing this recommendation on the previously issued guidance for autumn quarter. Students applying for an F-1 visa or traveling to the U.S. with an initial attendance I-20 for winter quarter should register for an in-person course to satisfy SEVP's previous guidance. If updated guidance becomes available before January, we will send an update to students. Consult academic advising or your department adviser for additional details and in-person options available. If you are a freshman, transfer, or graduate student who was issued a transfer pending I-20 or a change of level I-20 for autumn or winter quarters, review question #9 above.


Q14: I am currently in the U.S. but would like to travel internationally during winter break. Will I be allowed to return to the U.S. in January for winter quarter?
The pandemic continues around the world and we do not know whether new travel restrictions will be ordered or whether current COVID-19 travel restrictions will continue or be extended. It may be risky to leave the U.S. for winter break because it is not guaranteed you will be able to return in January. The situation remains very unpredictable. You may want to reconsider your travel plans if you are concerned you may not be able to return to the U.S. If you decide to travel internationally, we strongly recommend you carefully research your plans, be prepared, understand the risks, and be advised you might not be able to travel back to the U.S. before the quarter starts on January 4. Consider the following before making your decision.
Things to consider:

- **Essential travel:** Is your travel essential, for example mental health & wellness, medical, or family reasons?
- **Risks:** Are you comfortable with the travel risks, both health risks and re-entry to the U.S.?
- **Visas:** Do you require a new F-1 visa? If yes, consider the limited U.S. consulate services and visa delays.
- **Travel restrictions:** Are you traveling to a country with current travel restrictions? Be prepared for quarantines and limited flights or additional restrictions that may impact your return to the U.S.
- **U.S. immigration rules:** Exceptions were made to the online enrollment rules to keep SEVIS records valid through autumn quarter. We do not know when or if updated restrictions will be announced before January.
- **Graduating students planning for OPT:** Currently, government guidance states you must submit your OPT application to USCIS from within the U.S. Additional information available under [Graduating Students](#) on the ISS COVID-19 page.

Continue to check the [Coronavirus information for F1 & J1 students](#) for updates as they become available. You can also monitor the U.S. Government's [Study in the States: COVID-19 Resources](#) for updates.

**Q15: Will I be required to self-quarantine when I arrive in the U.S. or on-campus?**

We recommend you review the [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recommendations for people after air travel](#). It is generally recommended that you monitor your health for 14 days from the time you return from domestic or international travel. International flights arrive at specific airports in the U.S. which could have additional screening and requirements. It is recommended you prepare to socially distance and monitor your health for 14 days after returning to the U.S. There are currently no mandatory quarantines for international travelers. UW Housing & Food Services has provided additional [Coronavirus information for residents living on-campus](#). There is currently no requirement to self-isolate after moving into on-campus housing.

**Q16: Are there restrictions on returning to the U.S. from Canada or Mexico?**

We recommend reviewing the [Fact Sheet: DHS Measures on the Border to Limit the Further Spread of Coronavirus](#). “Non-essential” travel includes travel that is considered tourism or recreational in nature. These measures were implemented in April 2020 and have been extended every 30 days since then. On October 19, the border closure was extended again through November 21, 2020. Before traveling from Canada or Mexico, we recommend checking for the most up-to-date information and you should be prepared to explain why your travel to the U.S. is “essential.”

**Q17: What documents are required for continuing students in F-1 status to re-enter the U.S.?**

- Valid I-20 with a [valid travel signature](#) on page 2
- Valid passport that must be valid for 6 months beyond your expected return to the U.S.
- Valid F-1 visa stamp in passport (Canadian citizens exempt)
- Proof of funding or financial evidence (recommended)
- Current class schedule for autumn 2020 and your winter 2021 class schedule (recommended)
- SEVIS I-901 fee receipt (recommended)

We recognize it is a highly stressful and unpredictable time, with travel options and restrictions changing daily. Re-entry to the U.S. is always at the discretion of U.S. Customs & Border Protection officers. More information on re-entry requirements and how to prepare for possible questions is available on the our [Travel & Visas page](#).
Taking a Leave of Absence (Gap quarter or year)

Q18: Can I take winter quarter off or study part-time instead?

Every student’s situation is different. If you want to take winter quarter off (0 credits or part-time) and maintain an active F-1 SEVIS record and valid I-20, you must meet one of these enrollment exceptions. If you do not qualify for the exceptions, you must request an immigration Leave of Absence.

If you take an immigration Leave of Absence in winter 2021, you will be required to depart the U.S. If you are registered for winter quarter, your departure must be within 15 days of the date you drop/withdraw those classes. If you are not registered for winter quarter, or not planning to register for winter quarter, you must depart the U.S. within 15 days from the last day of autumn quarter (Dec 18). If you return to UW for full-time studies for spring 2021, ISS can request reactivation of your current SEVIS record / I-20 (Pathway A).

For students with an initial attendance I-20 currently taking classes remotely from outside the U.S., your SEVIS record is not yet active. Because your SEVIS record cannot be made active until you physically arrive in the U.S., you will not be required to maintain full-time enrollment for immigration purposes. Before January 10, you can drop or withdraw from any of your classes through your MyUW portal without ISS approval. After January 10, complete the Course Drop Eligibility Assessment to determine if you are eligible to drop winter quarter courses. ISS advisors will review your status and will help you drop or withdraw from your classes if you are eligible.

Q19: Can I take the rest of the academic year off and resume my studies in Autumn 2021?

Currently enrolled UW students with active SEVIS records who choose not to enroll for 2 or more quarters, must request an immigration Leave of Absence and then depart the U.S. If you are registered for winter quarter, your departure must be within 15 days of the date you drop/withdraw those classes. If you are not registered for winter quarter, or not planning to register for winter quarter, you must depart the U.S. within 15 days from the last day of autumn quarter (Dec 18). If you return to UW for full-time studies summer 2021 or later, you must complete the Return to UW process to request a new I-20 (Pathway B).

If you are taking remote classes from outside of the U.S. and have not yet entered the U.S. with your UW issued initial attendance I-20, your SEVIS immigration record is not yet active. Because your SEVIS record cannot be made active until you physically arrive in the U.S., you are not required to maintain full-time enrollment or qualify for a full-time enrollment exception for immigration purposes. Before the quarter you wish to re-enroll at the UW, review the Returning Students information and instructions.

Q20: Is there a deadline to submit an immigration Leave of Absence for winter quarter 2021?

We recommend you review winter quarter course offerings before deciding to request an immigration leave of absence. The winter quarter time schedule is available now and is being updated as faculty finalize course options. Both in-person and remote course options will be available for winter quarter, so consider all of your options before requesting a leave of absence.

Once you decide to submit the Leave of Absence Request, you must drop all your winter quarter classes. Be aware you are required to depart the U.S. within 15 days from the date you drop/withdraw from your classes. ISS advises you to submit the Leave of Absence Request and drop your winter quarter classes by January 10 (last day to withdraw) to avoid owing tuition or additional registration fees.

The information contained in this FAQ is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for expert legal advice. ISS Advisors are not attorneys and cannot provide legal advice. Please consult an immigration attorney if you need legal advice based on your situation.
F-1 benefit eligibility (vacation quarter, CPT, OPT, etc)

Q21: If I took autumn quarter classes remotely from outside the U.S. and then I return to the U.S. for winter and spring quarters, will I be eligible for an annual vacation quarter in summer 2021?

You will be eligible for a vacation quarter in summer 2021 if you were registered full-time for autumn, winter, and spring quarters, even if autumn quarter was taken remotely from outside the U.S. You will not be eligible for a summer vacation quarter if spring or summer 2021 will be your final quarter, you worked on campus more than 20 hours a week, or you do not intend to register full-time for autumn 2021 classes.

Q22: What will happen to my F-1 benefits if I take my classes remotely from outside the U.S.?

Students who wish to remain outside of the U.S. can register and take all of your courses remotely for winter quarter. As long as the courses you want to take are available through remote learning, you can remain outside of the U.S. for winter quarter.

Continuing students who were previously enrolled at the UW in spring 2020 and have maintained your F status, can continue to take remote courses from outside the U.S. Based on the U.S. government's previous guidance, the UW can keep your SEVIS I-20 record active as long as you register full-time for winter quarter and continue to follow all F regulations. As long as your SEVIS record remains active and you maintain your F status, you will be eligible for future benefits such as CPT and OPT. Note: If Winter 2021 is your final quarter, your F-1 status and SEVIS record will only be active through the last day of your final quarter. Please review our Graduation: Final Year Checklist and COVID-19 FAQs Graduating Students section for important considerations about F-1 travel and applying for OPT.

If autumn or winter quarter is your first quarter at the UW (or in a new degree program) and you have an initial attendance I-20, you can continue to take classes online from outside of the U.S. but your SEVIS I-20 record and F visa will not be made active until you physically arrive in the U.S. Eligibility for benefits like CPT and OPT generally require one academic year (3 quarters) of study from inside the U.S. Because the university cannot make your SEVIS record active until you enter the U.S., your F-1 benefits could be impacted if you remain outside of the U.S.

If you have a transfer pending or change of education level I-20 and you decide to continue taking classes remotely from outside the U.S., there are additional concerns that could impact future F-1 benefit eligibility. Both transfer pending and change of education level are defined as ‘Initial’ in the SEVIS database despite the fact you have been maintaining a continuous SEVIS record. Schools cannot activate transfer pending or change of education level I-20 records for students outside the U.S., but the UW ISS is interpreting that we may count one or more quarters of full-time enrollment from outside the U.S. towards future F-1 benefit eligibility (such as CPT and OPT). Our interpretation does not change the fact that students must be physically present in the U.S. with an active SEVIS record to apply for these benefits, however. ISS advisors can authorize eligibility for some F-1 benefits, but we are not U.S. government employees and there is some risk that USCIS officials would disagree with our interpretation. This could negatively impact future benefits such as a work visa, U.S. residency application, etc. if USCIS determines CPT or OPT should not have been allowed.

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Graduate Students (Master’s degree, PhD, or professional programs)

Q23: I am an admitted graduate student for winter quarter. Can I defer my admission to a later quarter or year?
Graduate Enrollment Management Services (GEMS) handles admission to the UW and questions about deferring admission to a later term. Review the Graduate School's COVID-19 Admission FAQs for more information and discuss possible options with your graduate program advisor or faculty advisor in your academic department.

Q24: I am a graduate student with an RA/TA position but I am currently outside the U.S. The Graduate School recommends “students should arrive in/return to the U.S. as reasonably possible...” Does this mean I might not be able to continue working remotely for winter quarter?
This is not a question that can be answered by International Student Services. It is an employment matter and should be discussed with your academic department or hiring manager. There are significant tax and labor ramifications around how foreign nationals are paid in their home country by a U.S. employer, which makes this situation very complex. The Graduate School has additional information on their web page about Employing/Paying International Students Working Abroad. This is a temporary policy due to the current pandemic and travel restrictions. If you have concerns about continued employment from outside the U.S. for winter or spring quarter, please discuss this with your academic advisor or hiring manager.

Remote Learning Resources & Options

Q25: What options are available for students taking online courses from outside the U.S. when time differences make it difficult to attend at the time the course is offered? Will courses be recorded?
We understand there are challenges for students taking online courses from outside the U.S. UW faculty have been encouraged to consider these concerns including accessibility, connectivity, and time differences when developing remote courses. Some courses or lectures may be recorded and made available to students at any time, but it is not a requirement. We encourage you to discuss concerns with an academic adviser, department adviser, or the instructor of your course to see what options may be available to you. If you are unable to participate in online or other alternative instruction requirements due to the lack of available technology resources, complete the ‘Have a Question’ form on the ISS website - advisors may be able to keep your SEVIS record active as long as you intend to resume your course of study when in-person classes resume.

Q26: What academic support programs are available to me?
There are several UW academic support programs available to enrolled students, including CLUE Tutoring, Online Learning resources, and Success Coaching. The Odegaard Writing and Research Center (OWRC) also offers appointments for help with writing assignments or help from a research librarian. The Math Study Center is available online for students needing help with math homework. The Engineering Academic Center is open to all Engineering students to help hone your skills in fundamental Math, Physics, Chemistry or Engineering courses. For additional campus resources by department or subject, review Other UW Resources. For additional information technology resources and help, visit UW's IT Connect or Teaching and Learning Tools.
Q27: Where can I get more information about coronavirus resources for students?
The UW maintains various web pages with coronavirus information and resources for students. Go to the Resources for Students to learn more about Husky Coronavirus Testing, Husky Pack Pledge, Husky Health and Well-Being, on and off campus housing resources, and messages & updates sent to campus. Your health and well-being are very important to us and we encourage you to reach out if you need help. CIRCLE offers drop-in office hours and FIUTS is hosting a variety of virtual events. Both offices can help connect you to the other students and the international student community at the UW.

Q28: Does UW have any “Go Local” partnerships with universities outside the U.S.? Can I take courses at an institution in my country that will count towards my UW degree?
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and significant challenges faced by our international student community, UW Study Abroad is looking into academic opportunities for international undergraduate students who are outside the U.S. More details will be posted to Options for International Students once they become available. Email studyabroad@uw.edu if you have questions.