

# Ontario is #1 in Online Learning in Canada: Top 10 Reasons

2012

## INTRODUCTION

Ontario has invested heavily in the development of a world-class post-secondary education and training system, building an impressive foundation of twenty public universities, twenty-four public colleges and a vibrant public training sector. The province sees post-secondary education and training as a strategic investment in its future.

It needs to. With the province's creative knowledge economy changing rapidly, and significant changes in demographics occurring, Ontario needs to increase the number of highly qualified people in its workforce to improve productivity and competitiveness, and develop its creative economy.

Ontario is helped by having one of the world's leading systems of compulsory education, ranked among the top education systems in the world. It also has a knowledge-based economy, with a strong focus on information technology and a technology-rich service sector, which is demanding more and more skilled employees, entrepreneurs and leaders. Ontario's health care system and broader public service are other significant areas of employment, which demand skilled knowledge workers.

It is for these reasons that the Government of Ontario has set the target of achieving a rate of post-secondary attainment in the workforce of 70% - moving from the current level of 59%<sup>1</sup>.

Key to achieving the target for attainment rates are issues of access, affordability, equity and quality. Ontario is working on all of these issues to increase access through expanding the post-secondary system, offering support for students to make their education affordable, working on specific strategies to promote equity (particularly in relation to access and outcomes for First Nations learners) and quality.

One component of the strategy for Ontario is the development and expansion of online learning as a means of securing increases in access, affordability, and equity without any loss of quality. It behooves all of us in Ontario's post-secondary sector to explore how well our province is doing with respect to online learning.

To launch this consideration and sector-wide dialogue, we explore the top ten reasons why Ontario should be proud of its current leadership position, but suggest that it needs to build on this foundation to take the next steps.

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1 Based on the review by the HEQC – see <http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/FINAL%20PSE%20Attainment%20Research%20Note%20ENG.pdf>, specifically at page 2.

## 1. STUDENT NUMBERS TELL THE STORY

- Ontario supported 495,716 online course registrations in 2008-2009<sup>2</sup> – over twice that of any other Canadian jurisdiction.
- The number of college online course registrations in 2008-2009 was 142,185 – 7% of all course registrations.
- The number of university (undergraduate and graduate) course registrations in 2008-2009 was 353,531 (13% of all undergraduate registrations and 7% of all graduate registrations).
- The overall number full-time equivalent, students studying online in Ontario, is 52,556.

These statistics are clear and decisive - Ontario is the Canadian leader in online learning. In terms of participation, no other Canadian jurisdiction currently competes with the success Ontario has achieved.

To give a sense of this scale, Alberta's Athabasca University currently has some 73,208 registrations across all of its programs from all sources – a full load equivalent of 7,923 students<sup>3</sup>. If this same full-load equivalent calculation is used in Ontario for its university online registrations, the province had 38,261 full-time equivalents – representing over four Athabasca Universities!

## 2. RANGE OF CHOICE IS CONSIDERABLE

Ontarians had access to 20,338 online courses and 762 online programs in 2008-2009 from Ontario's publicly-assisted colleges and universities, including:

- 602 college programs or 20% of available programs.
- 160 undergraduate programs or 6% of available programs.
- 25 graduate programs.

This availability of substantial course and program choice enables students to include some online learning in their "standard" college or university program. It can also accelerate completion or provide flexibility in learning modality.

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<sup>2</sup> The data available is for 2008-2009 – see Fact Sheet - Summary of Ontario e-Learning Surveys of Publicly Assisted Post-Secondary Education.

<sup>3</sup> See Athabasca University Annual Report for 2010-11 at page 9. The full load equivalent is calculated at 9.24. Not all students in Ontario are studying undergraduate degrees.

In the three years since this survey was completed, additional courses have become available. While some areas of study are not currently available online (for example, law related para-professionals), almost all areas of the post-secondary curriculum have some online courses available. In addition to college and university courses and programs, there are over two hundred and fifty public literacy and basic skills and training providers using online learning in support of training and development, including for adult literacy.

### 3. STUDENTS SHOW SUCCESSFUL COMPLETIONS

One concern often expressed about online learning is that, while many students may register, drop-out rates are thought to be high.

In Ontario, this is not the case. In the college sector, completion rates for online learning courses are between 70-79% (median of 76.1%) and between 85% and 95% (median of 89%) for universities.

### 4. ALL ONTARIO POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN ONLINE LEARNING

All twenty-four colleges and twenty universities in Ontario offer some online learning, whether blended learning (including online components in classroom-based courses) or fully online courses. While some institutions are more strategically focused on online learning than others, many faculties have shown leadership and innovation in their use of online learning in their teaching.

Indeed, as of 2010, eighteen of the twenty-four colleges and fourteen of the twenty universities see online learning as strategically important to their future, while the remainder all see online learning as an emerging opportunity, particularly in terms of blended learning.

A study by the Sloan Consortium in 2011 suggests that online learning is the fastest growing segment of student enrolment – growing at over 20% in the United States compared with less than 2% growth for conventional classroom-based learning.

## 5. SUPPORTS FOR FACULTY

Ontario's colleges and universities have developed training programs to support faculty seeking to improve their skills in the design, development, deployment and delivery for online learning. At last count (as of September 2011), there were some seventy training programs available for faculty. In addition, several institutions have enhanced their capacity to support faculty in terms of both instructional design and technology.

## 6. ONTARIO SUPPORTS AND HAS EFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT ONLINE LEARNING

The backbone for online learning development in Ontario is its twenty-four colleges and twenty universities. It is the faculty, with the support of their administration and their professional colleagues (instructional designers and technology supports), which are enabling these developments. But these institutions have other supports which have accelerated and supported the development and delivery of online learning in Ontario, including:

- Independent Learning Centre (ILC) - mandated by the government of Ontario as the province's designated provider of distance education and GED Testing. The ILC offers Ontario credit courses in English and French for Grades 9 to 12, as well as the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) and the GED Testing Program. In addition, the ILC has English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and a variety of student services.
- Ontario Council for University Life Long Learning (OCULL) - a professional association for administrators and practitioners who develop and deliver degree and non-degree continuing education programs in Ontario universities. OCULL is an advocate for adult learners at Ontario universities, a collegial network, and a vehicle for professional development for its members.
- OntarioLearn - a consortium of twenty-two colleges who have partnered to develop and deliver online courses. Each partner college selects courses from the OntarioLearn course inventory that will complement its existing distance education offerings. This partnership approach has allowed member colleges to optimize resource use, avoid duplication and, more importantly, increase the availability of online learning opportunities for their students.
- The Ontario Research and Innovation Optical Network (ORION) - an ultra high-speed fibre optic network that connects Ontario's research and education institutions to one

another, and to partners and colleagues throughout Canada and around the world. A key component of ORION's work is to support innovative uses of technology for learning, both in the classroom and online.

- Contact North | Contact Nord – with 112 online learning centres in small, rural and remote communities across Ontario, Contact North | Contact Nord supports the province's colleges, universities, school boards, literacy and other training providers to increase and improve local access to online learning courses and programs.

These organizations have pioneered online learning and ensured that appropriate supports, for the deployment and delivery of online learning, are available in all areas of the province, supporting both access and equity of access.

## 7. FACULTY AS LEADERS OF ONLINE LEARNING

The bottom line is simple: students take courses developed by faculty taught by faculty. A considerable number of faculties are involved in the design, development and delivery of online learning. Some estimates suggest that in the college sector, approximately 20% of faculty is involved and at universities, approximately 10%. In terms of rates of adoption, this is impressive. While concerns remain, mainly focused on the quality of the learning experience and level of student engagement, faculty is finding new ways to improve the design, development and deployment of online learning. Many new programs and courses are being designed with online learning in mind.

This is a significant achievement by the faculty. For many, the supports for online learning (instructional design and technology supports, time and rewards) are modest, but they have persisted to create significant momentum for this work.

## 8. MANY POCKETS OF INNOVATION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Contact North | Contact North's educator website showcases thirty-four examples of innovative projects within colleges and universities across the province that demonstrate Ontario's innovative leadership in online learning.

Whether it is the development of online learning resources made available to the world through iTunes University (McMaster University, Queens University) or the use of inquiry-based learning (University of Guelph) or the creation of new tools for effective blended learning (Fleming College, Ryerson University, Ontario College of Art and Design University) or facilities for the production and delivery of enhanced online learning opportunities (Cambrian College) or the use of simulations in online learning (Fleming College, Sheridan

College) or effectively integrating technology into the learning experience (Nipissing University) or the effective use of mobile devices (University of Ottawa, University of Waterloo), Ontario faculty members and their colleagues actively engage in innovation.

## 9. AN ACTIVE RESEARCH AGENDA FOCUSED ON ONLINE LEARNING & A FOCUS ON QUALITY

Ontario has at least one hundred and sixty researchers engaged in the study and analysis of online learning from a variety of perspectives. While some researchers are focused on the efficacy and effectiveness of online learning, others are engaged in case studies, ethnographic work and analysis of the performance of learning under a variety of different conditions, including the study of the potential of online learning as a resource for First Nations learners.

There is also a strong focus on quality. For private post-secondary organizations and for colleges seeking to offer degrees involving online learning, the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) has developed rubrics for assessing online learning and blended learning, building on the work of many others around the world. This is in addition to the work each institution does with respect to quality assurance and the collaborative focus on quality by both the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance<sup>4</sup> and the Ontario Colleges Quality Assurance Service<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, in 2005, the government of Ontario established the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Its primary focus is the use of evidence-based research to support the continued improvement of the post-secondary education system in Ontario. It offers policy advice, detailed analysis of trends and developments all based on systematic evidence undertaken at arms length from government – another example of Ontario’s leadership in learning.

## 10. A VIBRANT PRIVATE SECTOR WITH A COMMITMENT TO THE TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Ontario is home to one of the leading online learning technology companies – Desire2Learn, based in Kitchener. Its software and online learning resources are now used by over eight million learners world-wide.

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4 See the Quality Assurance Framework at <http://www.cou.on.ca/related-sites/the-ontario-universities-council-on-quality-assura/pdfs-%281%29/quality-assurance-framework--guide-oct-2011.aspx>

5 For a summary of the methodology used, see <http://www.ocqas.org/methodology.html>

With the growth of mobile learning – using hand held devices or tablet computers to learn – Research in Motion and its Blackberry (especially the PlayBook) are also important building blocks in Ontario’s online learning infrastructure.

But there are others – Dual Code (Ottawa), UM Solutions (Toronto), Alcea Technologies (Toronto) are just three companies from over one hundred and fifty based in Ontario currently expanding their capacities to provide support for online learning developments in Ontario and around the world. Ontario’s high-technology hub – Silicon Valley North – is part of the assets colleges, universities and training organizations can draw upon to accelerate the development of online learning.

## CONCLUSION

These are ten strong reasons to suggest that Ontario is, yes, THE Canadian leader in online learning at the post-secondary level. But we should not be complacent. Ontario needs to continue to grow its online learning offering to meet demand and the expectation that the province can achieve a post-secondary attainment rate of 70%.

As we move to build on Ontario’s leadership position in order to take online learning to the next level, the province needs to focus on five priorities:

### 1. New Online Programs and Courses

We need to enable and support faculty at colleges and universities to develop new online programs and courses in high demand areas that currently do not exist in an online form. As part of this priority, we must focus on supporting faculty to improve the design of courses and leverage all of the tools now available to connect students to one another, to varied sources of ideas and knowledge and to improve student:faculty interaction. It’s time to focus on quality, not just the volume of courses and programs, to provide students with a much richer, more engaging learning experience.

Coupled with new programs, Ontario needs to move to open admission for undergraduate programs and make our programs and courses available on demand, not constrained by term dates and semesters.

### 2. Program Completion

We need to explore new patterns of program completion at the college and university



levels, and leverage transfer credit and work-based learning so that students can have more learning recognized for credit in a shorter period of time. The province also needs to examine the use of e-portfolios to support students to accumulate credit and record that credit in a simple way.

### 3. Support Faculty Development

We must recognize that it is the faculty at colleges and universities that make learning happen and create rich, engaging learning experience for students. We need to build on current training programs and invest in their development and support their innovation.

### 4. Systematic Data Collection

Ontario's post-secondary sector must engage in systematic collection of data on all aspects of the availability and utilization of online learning so that system decisions and investments can be evidence-based. It is critical in establishing a baseline and guiding our investments and decisions on accurate and up-to-date data and also on gauging the impact of strategies and actions through the change in the statistics.

### 5. Private Sector Partnerships

The province is uniquely positioned to leverage potential partnerships between our public institutions and those in the private sector (Research in Motion, Desire2Learn and many more) to develop new, innovative learning technologies that our students use.