

ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE IN APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

**PERSPECTIVES OF PRESIDENTS
OF ONTARIO'S UNIVERSITIES ON THE FUTURE
OF ONLINE LEARNING**

**A SNAPSHOT OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PLANS
AND ASPIRATIONS**

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BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY:

In June 2017, the presidents of the 20 public universities in Ontario received a request to complete a questionnaire on the status of online learning in their respective universities, with particular attention to their roles as leaders. Responses were received from 13 presidents. These responses are presented below, using the language and emphases of the presidents, to provide a look at university online learning success stories; current, upcoming and aspirational developments linked to technological advances; the importance of collaboration; the roles of presidents in the integration of online learning; and an assessment of its future.

It is important to note that the term “online learning” is used as shorthand to include hybrid and blended learning, flipped classrooms, and technology-enhanced learning for distance and on-campus learners.

The following is an overview of the presidents’ responses written by the researcher. As promised in the initial contact letter, no individual institutions have been identified as the interest is in the overall status and direction of online learning in Ontario universities at this time.

1 (a) What is your university’s major success story to date in using technology for teaching or learning in the digital age?

Responses to this question were, understandably, the most varied, with significant differences in approach, often reflecting respective differences in each institution’s history of online education. While the question gave presidents the opportunity to boast, two respondents conceded that their institutions were only recently coming to grips with the challenges and opportunities posed by online learning. Responses here mainly fell into one or more of the following six categories;

a) *Establishing online learning as “regular business” no longer needing special attention*

Regardless of where an individual institution stood on a continuum of commitment to online courses and programs, there is an increasing perception that blended and online learning initiatives are becoming a regular part of the institution rather than initiatives that require special attention. A significant part of this transition involves slow but steady changes in faculty perceptions of online learning, moving from skepticism to increasing acceptance of its contributions to student access, flexibility and success.

b) *Changes to the organization and management of online learning that yielded positive results*

Four presidents focused on organizational changes that significantly enhanced the effectiveness of online courses and programs. Presidents of these institutions believed that online learning activities had reached a critical mass that required more centralized leadership than the earlier

strategies of encouraging pockets of expertise to develop. One president noted that “...in the past few years, there is a growing and wide-spread interest and all faculties are investing in online learning. This evolution has led us to consider how best to support online learning and distance learners from a university-wide perspective”. Part of this president’s strategy was to create here an assistant dean position in every faculty with responsibility to drive innovation in teaching and learning across the institution. Another cited the impact of bringing all related faculties and services under the provost, including an Online Learning Centre, Centre for Teaching and Learning and a faculty advisory board while a third was proud of the effectiveness of a newly created Institute of Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching. These initiatives intended to integrate online education into the academic mainstream of the institution were mirrored in other universities in earlier stages of such development.

c) *Specific program successes*

About half of the respondents identified specific online program initiatives that stood out as unique and successful. These varied from fully online professional programs, often offered collaboratively by two more universities and/or colleges, to a series of well-subscribed MOOCs and to the local development of a peer feedback technology. Other technological successes cited included virtual simulations, collaborative and highly technological classrooms shared between two or more institutions, and technologically enhanced approaches to specific academic programs, notably in such professional areas as Nursing, Medicine and Business.

d) *Opening doors to fruitful partnerships*

Notably spurred by external grants, the majority of respondents associated online initiatives with new opportunities for partnerships with both colleges and universities, initially within Ontario but increasingly internationally as well. Both internal and external funds are used to support online learning initiatives, with presidents highlighting eCampusOntario as well as other provincial funding programs as important to continued development.

e) *Demonstrated successful outcomes from online learning initiatives*

Four of the presidents noted the impact of offering regular campus-based courses in an online version during the summer, thus providing more flexibility to full-time students and those who had to repeat a course without losing time to degree completion, and also accessibility to students unable to attend classroom based courses. In one institution, significant

increases in student engagement in large enrolment courses were seen to result directly from adapting them into an online learning environment.

f) *Transforming the learning environment*

A couple of presidents emphasized the spin-off benefit of moving increasingly to hybrid and online learning, noting that the exercise often involved a total rethink of teaching and learning in various parts of the institution. For them, this outcome transcended the specific benefits accruing from online learning initiatives.

1 (b) What brought this about?

Many of the above successes were the initiatives of individual faculty members supported by deans and university funding. External funding from eCampusOntario was often cited as a catalyst for a particular initiative, notably those involving partnerships with other universities and/or colleges.

A few institutions were more systematic, with a number of successful initiatives emanating directly from strategic plans over the past 5-7 years. Two presidents referred to long histories of an integrated approach to distance education (moving from correspondence to online learning). One younger institution was grounded in educational technology from its outset. One unique and successful initiative was a direct product of research into learning processes, supported by internal funding from the institution, while another president cited the enthusiasm of students and open management policies in a specific educational area that led to successful technological applications.

2. What technological innovations are you exploring that you believe will have the most impact on your university's future by improving learning outcomes or the quality of service to students?

While presidents cited many specific technological innovations in their replies, the emphasis of the great majority was on a gradual transition to flipped classrooms and blended learning for most courses and programs to give students more flexibility and personal support. Each institution had its own approach, governed in part by its status and history but also by the personal orientations of its academic leaders. At one institution, it had been a presidential priority since 2013 to reimagine undergraduate education with educational technology playing a central role in the transformation. At least one president felt that many of the “shiny new tools” were unproven in their impact on learning outcomes, a criterion that the respondent believed to be the key consideration for changes in teaching and learning.

Among the technological innovations cited in two or more universities were developing prototype platforms for Open Educational Resources (OER), Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR, AR), simulation projects (e.g. through AmatroS), laboratory applications in STEM disciplines (e.g. through Mobius), experiential learning (e.g. through Riipen, Labster), virtual classrooms, new tools for performance assessment (e.g. Akindi, Crowdmark), MOOCs, and e-portfolios. Those referenced by a single institution included digital badging, e-textbooks, Clockwork (online applications for disabled students), Google's G-Suite, and case studies through gaming simulations. One institution was implementing a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solution to enhance the student experience, improve diagnostic and analytical capacity, and help to support innovative programming

3. How does the growth of online learning create new opportunities for the operations of your university? How has it contributed to new opportunities for collaboration with other universities and colleges in Canada and around the world?

There was consensus among the respondents that the growth of online learning was creating new opportunities for Ontario universities, not only in attracting non-traditional students and offering more flexibility and support to on-campus students but also in developing partnerships at the regional, national and international level. Increasing student timetable flexibility through online courses, notably in the summer, was one direct result and the greater availability of online courses and programs was helping to grow enrolments at a time when less centrally located institutions were otherwise facing enrolment decline.

Partnerships were central to these new opportunities, notably in the collaborative development of shared curricula through OER and various open content and open source-ware packages such as Sakai, a product of Apereo, an international consortium of universities for online learning of which two Ontario universities are current members. Other collaborative ventures cited by two or more respondents included digital toolbox planning, open textbook development, media production methods, MOOCs, and a Canada-wide consortium of universities sharing best practices and professional development programs for online learning. Again, many of these partnerships were spurred by funding opportunities from eCampusOntario, but crucially depended upon the orientations and personal support of presidents, vice-presidents, deans and individual faculty members for their success. Areas of partnership cited by one respondent included Coursera's marketing support for incorporating the United Nations' sustainable development goals, an online tutorial program (Lynda.com), the use of online materials by an HR department for professional and policy development, and connecting theory and practice through work

integrated learning.

Three presidents noted that the growth of online learning was easing some of the pressures on campus facilities and study space. A couple noted the importance of ensuring high quality online offerings, ensuring that they met universal design principles, even to the extent that they were at least as expensive as traditional face-to-face courses and programs.

4. What is the most important thing you can do as President to advance the cause of online learning at your institution?

Presidents saw their leadership in this area as emphasizing quality, flexibility and accessibility for students. A common thread throughout the responses was envisioning the president as a champion of a culture that promoted innovation, the primary motivation being to prepare students with the requisite skills for a digital age. This involved speaking publicly on a regular basis about the importance of online learning, embedding it in strategic planning and governance documents, and ensuring the appropriate support (not only financial but strategic and moral as well). One respondent suggested that the president had to be sufficiently knowledgeable about digital technologies to debunk mythologies that impeded faculty progress in teaching and learning.

There was considerable recognition of the critical role of faculty attitudes and the president's responsibility to champion institutional leaders who were leveraging online learning tools and strategies to improve and transform student learning. One president emphasized hiring the right people to help develop this area and then ensuring they had the appropriate institutional support.

A couple also emphasized the importance of the quality of online learning endeavours, noting that this is not easily attained and requires concerted investment and support if online courses are to at least match face-to-face classroom based offerings in quality and student engagement. A president needed to celebrate cutting edge research to ensure that future teaching innovations were evidence-based.

A couple of respondents envisioned a strongly proactive role, mandating a digital strategy for the institution and requiring all faculty to use a specified learning platform. One offered a comprehensive series of steps that the president could take to ensure institutional change, starting by setting targets for the skills that students needed to develop for the 21st century. Other steps included advocating for the explicit recognition of the development and delivery of online and technologically-enabled courses in review, tenure and promotion processes, setting targets for student exposure to online learning opportunities and consulting

with faculty engaged in innovative teaching to inform institutional strategic planning.

5. There are different institutional responses to the opportunities and challenges posed by online learning. Some executive heads have made this a major strategic planning issue while others prefer to encourage pockets of innovation as they emerge. How would you characterize your own approach to this and why do you think your approach is best for your university?

The most common response was that the institution was combining the two approaches. At least until quite recently, the majority of respondents saw themselves more on the side of encouraging pockets of innovation rather than taking an institution-wide approach to the development of online learning. However, most of these reported a changing environment as online learning reached a critical mass that tipped the balance towards more centralized institutional planning. As a result, most presidents saw themselves taking both a leadership and support role at the same time.

One president expressed it this way: *“We have made it a strategic institutional priority to support and encourage teachers to engage fully with technology without imposing a particular level of technological facility. As a result, the teachers who are engaged in this process are fully supported and, often, pockets of progress based in a department, program or team-taught course will develop. This is the best approach for us for now because we have both top-down and organic development of our technology based teaching. We will continue to evaluate the success of that approach and, in fact, we may be close to reaching the kind of critical mass that will tip the balance of strategy toward a more profoundly institution-driven plan”.*

Several universities, especially those with a longer history of outreach through distance education, more explicitly included online learning as a central issue in their strategic planning. For example, one institution’s academic plan requires the institution to “develop a university-wide blended e-learning strategy, which incorporates the principles of inclusive design and accessibility, in order to expand technology-enhanced and high-quality online offerings.” There had been a significant increase in the numbers of online courses recently which was leading to a need to encourage more fully online certificate and degree programs and sequenced professional training modules.

2013 seemed a pivotal year for three of the institutions, leading to the creation of e-learning task forces, offices of open learning and other top-down efforts to encourage a more concerted approach to teaching and learning issues in the university. Such initiatives have spurred a more systematic approach. For example, at least one institution has created an award for online teaching and

established a Senate task force to consider the curricular needs for 2020. Other responses have been to set up online course design institutes for faculty and funding for faculty research into learning outcomes.

6. Where do you see online learning at your institution in five or ten years? Is this issue prominent in your recent Strategic Management Agreement (SMA*) submission?

Most respondents saw a continuation of recent trends to more online courses and programs, driven by student preferences for more flexibility in timetables and modes of delivery, time-to-degree completion and experiential learning. Blended learning and flipped courses would be the norm on most campuses at the undergraduate level with many institutions envisioning more fully online courses and programs at the professional graduate level.

The emphasis was on accessibility, flexibility and skill development, with online learning envisioned where it was best suited to positive learning outcomes. This underlined the importance of ongoing research into the most effective innovations in teaching and learning. One president envisioned the continuing development of online courses and programs over the next 10 years to provide remote access, bridging opportunities for international students and innovative programming that is personal, purposeful and collaborative in a customized learning format and timeline.

Online learning initiatives were more prominent for some institutions. In one, it was a presidential priority to provide more flexibility (to accommodate student needs and enhance their skill development), innovation (through instructor engagement) and community outreach (through virtual classrooms, MOOCs, experiential or work-integrated learning). Another envisioned his/her university as a leader in digital technology with an emphasis less on online learning than on such technological institutional tools as simulations, virtual and augmented reality. All course content would be learned online with the campus used more for query and practice.

Online learning was central to the SMA2* submissions of five universities and not prominent in most of the others. Some felt the format of the process was responsible for this while others admitted that they had higher immediate priorities at this time.

OVERVIEW FROM THE RESEARCHER:

The survey provided a rare opportunity to get the perspectives of Ontario university presidents on the status of online learning in their institutions. The overall impression derived from the sum of presidential responses is that the Ontario university system is on the cusp of significant change in approaches to teaching and learning, although most such initiatives are relatively recent and will require at least five more years before they are firmly embedded in the DNA of the respective institutions.

Most presidents saw their institutions as on a continuum of increasing attention to and investment in online learning. Probably the majority are at earlier stages of development where the primary strategy is to promote and support the innovators with online learning not yet a dominant issue in strategic academic planning. However, this has been changing rapidly over the past five years so that online and technology-enhanced learning are increasingly central to an institution's overall approach to teaching and learning. Ontario university presidents are significantly engaged in this process and are increasingly apt to take leadership roles as online learning reaches a critical mass stage in their respective institutions.

A fair projection from this analysis would be that online learning will play a significantly more prominent role in SMA3* submissions in three years' time.

Respectfully submitted,



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* SMA refers to the Strategic Management Agreements that each university signs with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development to outline the institution's priorities and accountabilities for a three-year period. The first such agreements were initiated in 2014 and, at the time of this report, universities and colleges were actively engaged in discussions with the Ministry about the next round (SMA2). SMA3 refers to what is assume to be the third such process to follow in 2020.