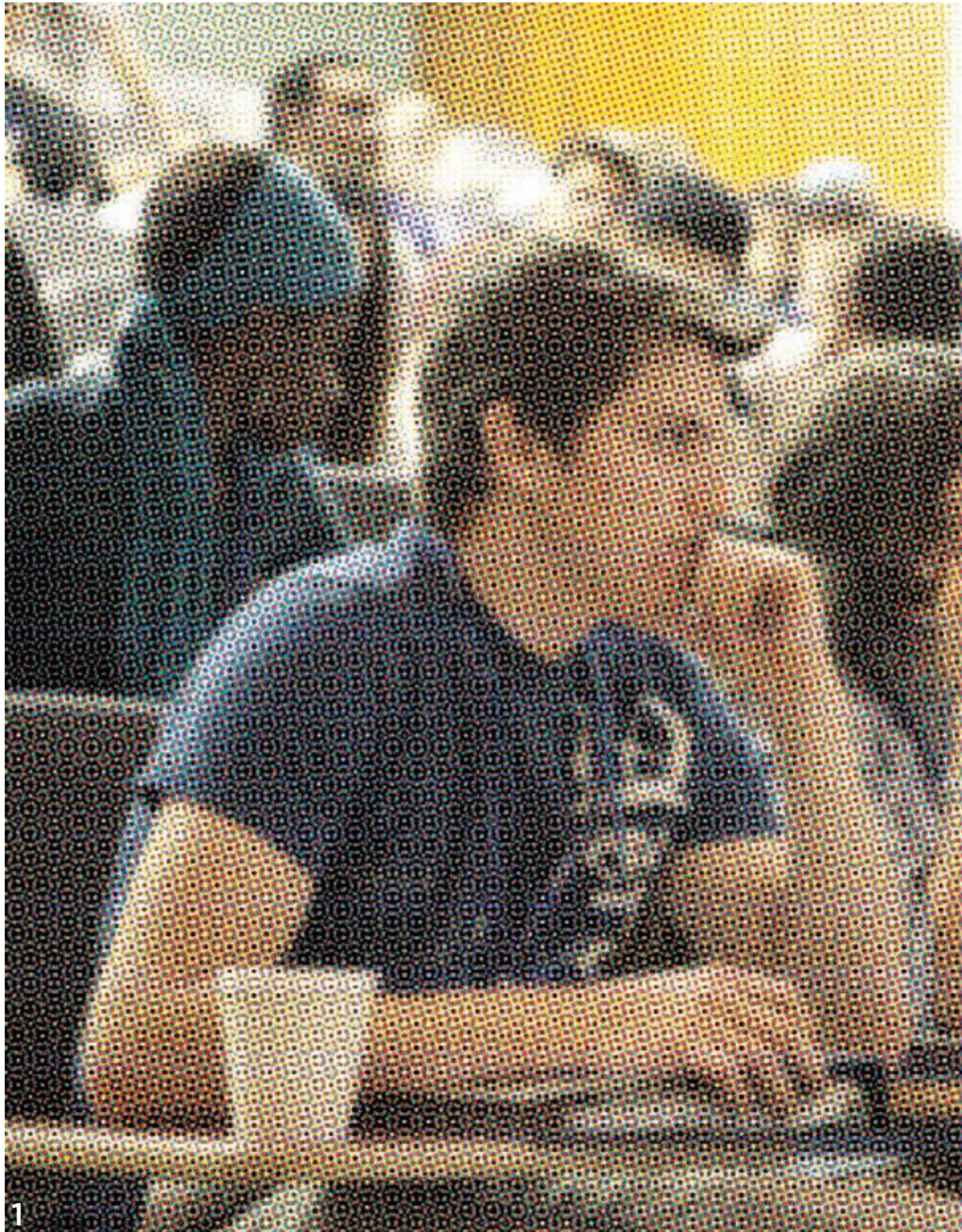


OPENING ONTARIO FOR WHOM?

A sectoral vision for integrating
online learning into the classroom

DECEMBER 2010





INTRODUCTION

Our four organisations represent hundreds of thousands of students, faculty and staff at Ontario's colleges and universities. For decades, we have called for a post-secondary education system to be built to be accessible to all qualified applicants regardless of location or circumstance. We are united in our support for superior quality in all aspects of that system regardless of where or how the education is delivered.

The McGuinty government announced the creation of a new Ontario Online Institute in Budget 2010 last March. Little detail has been provided to date. Until more is known about government intentions, a definitive response cannot be made. This document is a summary of some of the issues implicit in expanding online education, and an interim response of students, faculty and staff represented by the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario (CFS–Ontario), Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and Canadian Union of Public Employees–Ontario (CUPE–Ontario). *Opening Ontario for Whom?* provides preliminary recommendations to government on how it can leverage the successes already achieved in Ontario by making targeted investments to improve access to online post-secondary learning.

Distance learning in Ontario has grown substantially in the last three decades after the creation of the Contact North network almost 25 years ago.¹ This growth has occurred because of the understanding that students in northern and rural communities in Ontario often face additional challenges to accessing post-secondary education due to the costs associated with travelling great distances from a college or university, and the cost of relocation.² The success of

Contact North prompted the provincial government to expand this service to small and rural communities in eastern, central and western Ontario through the creation of the elearnnetwork.ca in 2007.³

With the technical advancements of the last decade, institutions have incorporated online features into teaching practices. Online teaching tools have allowed instructors to organise course material and communicate with students through online discussion forums or email. Some courses and programmes are now delivered through a combination of onsite and online instruction or may be taught entirely online.

While Ontario colleges and universities currently offer thousands of online courses and participate in distance learning networks, the creation of a new Ontario Online Institute may only serve to be a costly replacement for infrastructure that already exists in the province. Students, faculty and staff across the province share a common concern about the direction of a potential Online Institute and its impact on the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education in Ontario.

Post-secondary education stakeholders recommend that funding be targeted to improve existing infrastructure for distance learning instead of creating a new provincial entity.

¹ About Contact North. Contact North. 2010.

² P. Kariuki. *Ontario's Small, Northern and Rural Postsecondary Education Institutions*. Briefing note for Minister John Milloy. 22 September 2008.

³ About elearnnetwork.ca. elearnnetwork.ca. 2010.

THE ROLE OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Online delivery of courses and programmes is not a panacea. It is simply one tool in the access toolkit. For many students, particularly younger students and those who are already underrepresented in post-secondary education, online delivery is not a substitute for in-class, face-to-face education and should only be used in a way that enhances the learning experience and accommodates the unique needs of students. Without appropriate levels of funding, it is unlikely for online course offerings to have the same academic rigour as face-to-face classes. Many learners need an intense interaction with their instructors that is difficult to achieve with online delivery. The importance of the social and intellectual interaction between students and teachers that enhances academic quality is not served well by poorly-designed online courses or programmes or with a goal of cost-saving or revenue generation.

Students, faculty and staff believe that any new initiative may be at risk of diverting the emphasis away from improving the quality of post-secondary education in the province.

Any expansion to online education must address:

- **The skyrocketing cost of attending a post-secondary institution in Ontario.**
- **Ontario's student-faculty ratio and class sizes that are the largest in Canada.**
- **The lack of space at institutions to achieve the provincial government's projected 70 percent post-secondary attainment rate and the shortfall in deferred maintenance.**
- **The increasing reliance on private sector services and funding and the subsequent impact on academic freedom and quality of education.**

ACCESSIBILITY & QUALITY

The provincial government has aimed to have 70 percent of the workforce with post-secondary credentials in the province to support the knowledge-based economy. Students, faculty and staff recognise the need to make college and university education more accessible for this to happen. Proponents of a new Ontario Online Institute may argue that creating this entity would improve accessibility to college or university courses and programmes, especially by targeting under-represented groups like Aboriginal, rural, northern, first-generation and low-income students, and students with disabilities or dependents.

While it is critical to eliminate barriers to post-secondary education, expanding online education would not necessarily serve this purpose on its own. A new online entity should not be created as the solution for people who currently cannot access post-secondary education. Online delivery does not address the underlying barriers to access, which can include cost, distance, family and work responsibilities, and lack of accommodation for disabilities.

Expanding online education with the underlying intention of “improving access” has the potential instead to create a two-tiered system of education. For example, students who complete their degrees largely or entirely online could be learning without the same student-teacher/student-student interaction, support services, quality assurance and academic standards throughout their degree if adequate resources are not available to support these programmes. These students – who are often most in need of accessing a high quality post-secondary education – would likely be offered a different education that would seem sub-standard compared to those who aren’t completing their degrees online if it is a cheaper and convenient alternative to attending a college or university in person.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, the Canadian Union of Public Employees-Ontario, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union and the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario recommend that the government make targeted investments to improve access to online postsecondary learning and improve Ontario's capacity to deliver postsecondary education online, rather than spending money on the creation of an entirely new Online Institute.

INVESTMENT IN EXISTING E-LEARNING INITIATIVES

- **Inject funding into Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca and provide targeted funding for institutions to strengthen existing e-learning infrastructure and expand capacity.**

Lakehead University, Laurentian University and the University of Waterloo are three universities that have taken care to create good quality online courses and programmes. The University of Waterloo, for example, has a Centre for Extended Learning whose staff have accumulated considerable expertise in e-learning, including high quality content, effective delivery, and robust student support. However, maintaining this quality comes with a cost that competes with other university priorities. Lakehead's delivery infrastructure, as one example, is ten years old and desperately needs updating. Providing funding to strengthen these programmes would build on the institutional expertise of faculty and staff in order to benefit students.

Contact North has established a strong distance education and training network of access centres that have been serving students in northern communities for 25 years. While the government has made some recent investments in Contact North's infrastructure and capacity, building on decades of expertise in distance delivery could improve an already excellent service. Contact North could of course use more funding support. Since there has been clear demand for similar service in small and rural communities in eastern, central and western Ontario, investments in elearnnetwork.ca would strengthen the province's capacity to provide quality distance learning opportunities for students.

EXPANDING BROADBAND ACCESS

- **Invest in bringing greater broadband access to underserved areas in the province, including rural, small, northern and on-reserve communities.**

When expanding online education, one of the most important investments that has to be made is to bring broadband access to the many rural, small-town Ontario, northern, and on-reserve households who do not have it, or who need access to a more robust infrastructure. Despite the recent \$225 million Industry Canada programme, a 2004 federal satellite broadband initiative, and a \$87.75 million Ontario Building Broadband programme for underserved areas in the province, thousands of households across Ontario still do not have access to broadband Internet.

As we know, broadband access is a critical component to the successful delivery of distance education. Costs associated with the most recent federal programme suggest that a modest investment of about \$2,000 per household will buy broadband access.¹ Investing in broadband would bolster the eventual success of the government's initiatives, including all Open Ontario initiatives as well as new online initiatives in other sectors.

4 www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ic1.nsf/eng/o6o45.html

AFFORDABILITY FOR STUDENTS

- **Reduce Tuition Fees for Online Courses and Programmes**
- **Expand OSAP eligibility to Part-Time Students**

Strengthening Ontario's capacity to deliver quality online education will benefit students if targeted investments are made to existing learning infrastructure and underserved communities are supported. Along with improving the quality of e-learning opportunities for students, the provincial government should recognise the additional barriers that students face to accessing post-secondary education.

The best way to improve access to online courses and programmes is to address the financial obstacles that students continue to encounter in the post-secondary education system. Tuition fees continue to rise in the province, including those that students pay for online courses. Reducing tuition fees for online courses is one way to address the high cost of attending college or university. It is also important to recognise that a significant number of part-time students enroll in online courses, often because they are balancing family life, employment or disability needs. Providing financial support, e.g. expanding Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) eligibility for part-time students, would reduce the financial constraints that these students face.

