

A photograph of a blue wooden desk and chair placed in a field of tall, green grass. The desk is on the left, and the chair is on the right. The background is a dense field of grass and some small yellow flowers. The top half of the image has a dark blue overlay with white text.

The Ontario Online Institute: Students' Vision for Opening Ontario's Classrooms

August 2010

OUA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

THE ONTARIO ONLINE INSTITUTE: Students' Vision for Opening Ontario's Classrooms

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About OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at seven institutions across Ontario.

Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ontario students are supportive of the provincial government's recent decision to create an Ontario Online Institute. This endeavour could significantly advance access, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups facing financial, physical, social, cultural, and geographic barriers which prevent them from attending a traditional post-secondary institution. Moreover, such an Institute could provide increased flexibility for the thousands of current students looking to blend online learning with an in-class education.

It is the responsibility of all post-secondary stakeholders to ensure that an online education in Ontario is accessible, affordable, accountable, and of the highest quality. To ensure the Institute realizes its full potential, students have developed recommendations to guide the implementation process.

Designing the Institute

After examining organizations dedicated to the provision of online learning in Ontario and around the world, students recommend that the Ontario Online Institute be designed as a consortium of universities and colleges that would share online courses, resources and infrastructure. To overcome the drawbacks of such a decentralized model, and ensure students can easily navigate the system, provider institutions should come together to create integrated systems of admissions, student support services, quality assurance, and credit transfer, as has been done at Open Universities Australia. Best practices from other online providers, such as ContactNorth/elearnnetwork.ca, OntarioLearn, and BC Campus, should also be incorporated.

Accessibility

While open access may be an option for some programs offered through the Institute, students recommend that undergraduate degree programs continue to employ entrance standards in order to ensure legitimacy and to reduce the dropout rate. However, a robust set of bridging programs, similar to those already in place at a number of Ontario universities, should be available to assist under-qualified students in accessing an undergraduate degree online. To increase student mobility and allow institutions to pool resources, a credit transfer framework should be negotiated between all provider institutions. Already a long-term priority for the Government, enhanced credit transfer is vital to the success of the Institute. Finally, the Ontario government should build on its current investments in expanding broadband internet access to rural and northern Ontarians so that all Ontarians have the option of learning online.

Affordability

With Ontario already charging the highest tuition fees in Canada, students reject the idea that tuition fees for courses delivered through the Institute could or should be higher than fees for the same course at a traditional institution. If cost savings do materialize, they should be passed on to students. Furthermore, the Ontario government should work to reduce financial barriers by making Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) available to part-time students and by correcting the flawed need assessment formula so that the true cost of computer hardware, software and internet access is included. Finally, in recognition of the fact that charging HST on e-books is a barrier to increasing online learning, the Ontario government should exempt e-books from the HST, as it has done with printed books and audio books.

Accountability

One of undergraduate students' chief concerns with the Institute is that, for a variety of reasons, the quality of education may be lower than what is found in a traditional university setting. To ensure the Institute is providing a high-quality education, provider institutions should be asked to collaborate on a quality assurance framework targeted specifically to online education, and the Institute should be tasked with insuring that all providers are abiding by the framework. The Institute itself should also undergo regular external reviews.

Quality

While there is great potential in online learning, it will only be realized if the academic experience is properly designed. Students studying online must receive the same level of interaction with their instructors and peers as they would receive at a traditional institution. Furthermore, the Institute should be tasked with conducting research on improving online pedagogy and developing the quality of instruction through the creation of a Centre for Online Teaching and Learning. Courses should be designed in such a way as to maximize flexibility for a diverse group of learners.

Dropout rates for online learning tend to be quite high; however, there is evidence to suggest that a strong set of student support services will improve persistence. Because many online learners face additional barriers to education, support programs for these students should be held to a higher standard. Academic support and IT support are particularly important, though personal supports, such as counselling services, disability services, and career services, must also be available. Students would prefer to see all support services offered through the Institute, as it has been shown that this centralized approach tends to be more effective, and institutions currently do not have the resources to offer support services on evenings and weekends, let alone twenty-four hours a day.

To support the development of the Institute, the provincial government should provide significant start-up funding and commit to a long-term funding framework. Part of this start-up funding should be used to incent the creation of high-quality courses and programs at Ontario institutions, and long-term government funding should be directed to student support programs so that students are not asked to pay for this essential aspect of the learning environment through ancillary fees. Finally, students are adamant that online learning should not be viewed by government or by institutions as a mechanism to realize cost-savings.

Beyond Online Access

While the Institute presents an opportunity to expand access to higher education, much more needs to be done. Students ask that the Ontario government create and fund a holistic access and early outreach strategy with specific access targets for underrepresented groups. This strategy should include, but not be limited to, community and institutional outreach programs, enrichment and dual credit programs in primary and secondary schools, bridging programs, student supports in post-secondary institutions, and education pathway planning through improved guidance counselling, curriculum enhancement, and parental engagement.



Given the need to address these barriers, students applaud the Ontario government's decision to create an Ontario Online Institute.



INTRODUCTION

In March 2010, Premier McGuinty affirmed the importance of access to education and its impact on Ontario's ability to compete globally when he stated, "70 per cent of new jobs will require a post-secondary education, and we need to be ready."¹

For many years, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance has, in agreement with the Premier, stressed the need to eliminate barriers to post-secondary education. That is why students are in full support of the concept of creating an Ontario Online Institute, as announced in the 2010 Speech from the Throne. This endeavour could significantly advance access, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups, including Aboriginal students, rural and northern students, students with disabilities, first-generation students, students with dependants, and students from low-income backgrounds. These students often face financial, physical, social, cultural, and geographic barriers which prevent them from physically attending a post-secondary institution, leaving them without a diploma or degree and the prosperity this can provide.

For instance, young people hailing from rural and northern parts of Ontario often live beyond commuting distance from a post-secondary institution (80 kilometers or more) and have a participation rate of 11 per cent, less than half the proportion of their counterparts living within 40 kilometers of an institution.² The Ontario Online Institute could provide these students with a much-needed alternative pathway to a diploma or degree.

Similarly, mature students and students with dependants are often forced to find educational pathways that can adapt to their time and monetary constraints. A study conducted by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that approximately 19 per cent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 have dependant children while only 7.9 per cent of university students have children.³ The Ontario Online Institute could significantly improve access for students with dependents. As the Advisory Committee on Online Learning at the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has said, "For many lifelong learners, especially adults with family and job commitments, online learning may be their only chance to obtain the higher education they need to compete and survive in a labour market driven by rapidly changing demands for new knowledge and skills. Online learning, properly implemented, should allow them to take courses at home, work or a public access site."

Furthermore, some students face either physical or learning disabilities that inhibit their academic success in a traditional post-secondary setting. The Ontario Human Rights Commission issued a report in 2003 indicating that Ontarians with disabilities do not have equal access to education in Ontario. The report identifies inadequate funding, physical inaccessibility, and cumbersome and time-consuming accommodation processes as reasons why people with disabilities had difficulties with access.⁴ Traditional classroom settings often do not allow for the flexibility that many students with both physical and learning disabilities require to succeed. Online methods of learning have the ability to allow students to learn at their own pace and reconcile their education with the demands of their everyday life.

Given the need to address these barriers, students applaud the Ontario government's decision to create an Ontario Online Institute. Technological advancements have created great strides in distance learning and this initiative could provide students the flexibility to fit their education comfortably within their individual circumstances, thus greatly expanding access to Ontarians who are currently left out of the system and the promise of a bright future.

Of course, simply offering more online courses is not enough to guarantee greater access for students from underrepresented groups.⁵ Online learners in Canada are generally motivated, employed and enjoy a high level of education and income, a stark contrast from the Open University in the United Kingdom which has been successful in attracting and retaining less privileged students.⁶ The Ontario Online Institute must not only unite what currently exists, but it must also strive to ensure greater accessibility, quality and accountability of online learning for all Ontarians.

In addition to assisting students from underrepresented groups, the Institute has the potential to expand opportunities for students already studying at an Ontario institution. Every year, thousands of Ontario students turn to institutions such as Athabasca University in Alberta for online courses to supplement their in-class education. With the creation of the Institute and a strong credit transfer framework to support it, current students will be able to fulfil their online education needs more easily and right here in Ontario.

While students fully support the idea of the Institute, some significant concerns exist. Perhaps the greatest of these is the possibility that an online education may not provide the same level of quality that Ontarians expect from traditional in-class post-secondary education. This concern is exacerbated by the erroneous, but not uncommon, belief that online education will necessarily reduce costs for government and allow for cheaper delivery of education.

To address these and other concerns, this document has been developed as a student-centred vision for the Ontario Online Institute, derived from the belief that above all this initiative must help students access and succeed in higher education. At OUSA's General Assembly in March 2010, focus groups were held with a total of over 50 student leaders to discuss the student vision for the Institute, and the ideas and opinions that emerged have been incorporated.

It is important to note that the majority of discussions and recommendations contained in this document speak to the needs of students using the Institute to access a full degree, diploma or program, on the assumption that ensuring access and success for these students will, for the most part, also address the needs of those students looking for only a handful of courses.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

The concept of online universities is not new, and there are currently numerous examples operating around the world. These institutions were founded with the purpose of providing education in a flexible manner so as to serve a wider demographic. In order to understand how an Ontario Online Institute should be designed, it is prudent to first explore what is currently available in Ontario and what exists in other provinces and countries.

Online Learning in Ontario and Canada

In general, online college courses significantly outnumber university courses in Ontario, and full online diploma programs are similarly more numerous than full online degree programs. Furthermore, most online courses at the university level are developed to supplement the education of students studying in-class, partly because universities are struggling to keep up with recent enrolment increases.⁷

A number of online consortia have been created in Ontario at both the university and college level to allow students to more easily access and transfer online credits to suit their individual needs. These organizations bring together information into one easily accessible place, but take little or no part in the admissions and fee payment process or the delivery of financial aid, student support and academic instruction. As such, they cannot be considered institutions in their own right, and act more as portals to assist students in accessing and transferring credits over great distances.

Contact North is the most advanced of the consortia operating in Ontario. Founded in 1986 and funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Contact North offers access to higher education for Ontarians in northern communities through 15 educational institutions and 94 Access Centres located in small, remote, rural, First Nation and francophone communities. In 2007, the government asked Contact North to establish a similar network of centres in small, remote, rural, First Nations and francophone communities in Eastern, Central and Western Ontario. Under the "elearnnetwork.ca" brand, Contact North established 18 centres in this region and partners with all Ontario colleges and universities. Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca functions as a single, Ontario-wide network. It serves about 8,000 students a year across Ontario and facilitates close to 25,000 course registrations annually, a number they hope to increase by 50% in the next five years.

Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca also hosts and maintains the Ontario Online Learning Portal, a search engine which provides 24/7 access to information about 10,000 online courses and over 800 online programs available from Ontario's publicly-funded colleges, universities and other training providers.⁹

Though it provides detailed information on thousands of online courses available across Ontario, Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca is not at all involved in the delivery of courses, nor is it involved in application, registration or fee payment processes. On all facets of administration, students interact directly with the institutions that provide their courses.¹⁰

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While Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca provides some support in navigating the post-secondary system, it can only take this support so far. Students in need of academic or other supports must again go through the institutions that provide their courses. This lack of integrated support is problematic for students taking courses from multiple institutions.

Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca does provide free technical and video support to students in both French and English between the hours of 7:30AM and 11:00PM, Monday to Friday. While they can provide support for hardware and software issues, technical support staff do not have access to the learning platforms, such as Desire2Learn and Blackboard, used at provider institutions.¹¹

Because it must respect the academic autonomy of the providing institutions, Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca has no leverage to impose a quality assurance mechanism on its partner institutions. Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca does, however, provide robust assistance to academic staff in order to improve their online teaching pedagogy. This includes free training on the development of online courses, as well as modules to educate faculty on emerging technologies. All training and support is voluntary.

OntarioLearn is a consortium of 22 colleges that share in the development and delivery of 1,100 online courses to expand individual offerings and reduce duplication.¹² Through this partnership, a student attending their local college can gain access to hundreds of additional courses offered online at colleges across Ontario, provided their home institution has agreed to recognize the course and grant credit upon successful completion. The initiative began in 1995 with 4 colleges and a few hundred registrations and has grown to over 65,000, an annual increase of over 15%.¹³

Students register for courses and pay their tuition fees through their home college. In fact, they may never know their course instructor is from another institution. Tuition fees are more or less equivalent to in-class courses and cover the administration of the OntarioLearn program (one full-time administrator and three-part time staff all working from home), the cost of the institution offering the course and employing the instructor, and the 24/7 IT support offered through a third-party. College IT departments cannot support a 24/7 online learning environment so the majority of OntarioLearn courses are run on a third party server. They supply all technical support to faculty and students and can assist with all five versions of learning management systems that are run through OntarioLearn's 22 colleges.¹⁴

OntarioLearn has also implemented a quality assurance process whereby courses are reviewed regularly to meet agreed upon standards. This includes responding to poor results on student course evaluations.¹⁵

When asked about the feasibility of expanding OntarioLearn to include university courses, Executive Director Alan Brady said this could be done quite easily through the infrastructure already in place.¹⁶

Canadian Virtual University (CVU) is an association of 10 Canadian universities (including 3 in Ontario), which together offer over 300 online degree, diploma and certificate programs.¹⁷ Each degree is awarded through one of the participating institutions. There is almost no central administration, and matters such as financial aid, student support services, IT assistance, fees, application procedures, and required materials will differ depending on the institution that hosts a given course.¹⁸ In the end, CVU does little more than provide links to online courses, programs and tools through a central location. Where CVU has made notable progress is in reducing application fees between participating institutions and ensuring some transfer of credits, though more could be done on the latter. The Board of Directors is composed of administrators representing seven of the participating institutions.

Athabasca University is the largest Canadian online university. Founded in 1970, Athabasca currently has about 38,500 students, many of whom are studying concurrently in Ontario. In fact, most of Athabasca's registrations come from two sources: students taking a particular course or two to supplement their education at another institution, and students with a college diploma looking to upgrade to a degree through two years of online courses.¹⁹ Athabasca University is also a major graduate school, awarding some 450 graduate degrees each year, including doctoral degrees.

Online universities in Canada are generally governed by the same quality and accountability structures as their traditional counterparts. At Athabasca, program and degree offerings must be approved by the provincial government, and the institution is governed by provincial legislation. Athabasca has also gained accreditation from one of the largest American regional accreditation agencies, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.²⁰ This recognition helps to demonstrate the quality of their online

degrees and allows the university to better attract international students through recognition by a major American organization that accredits traditional campus-based American universities.

While most learning is done at a distance, in-person learning at Athabasca is often facilitated through regional learning centres and locally-based tutors and teachers. For instance, Athabasca University has small satellite campuses in Edmonton and Calgary. These provide advising services and exam invigilation, and they also house a number of other university staff.²¹

BC Campus is different from the other organizations examined here in that it mainly provides services to post-secondary institutions in British Columbia rather than to students, thus focusing on the production rather than the consumption of online learning. That said, it does operate a comprehensive database of online courses and programs which is of value to students. One of its objective is to promote the sharing of information between institutions, which allows for a more streamlined student transfer system. It also facilitates collaboration between institutions on the implementation of learning management systems and administers a fund to assist in the development of new online courses.

Online Universities in Other Countries

A wide variety of online universities can be found around the world, many with unique operating models. Binding them together is a shared emphasis on flexibility and opportunity for individuals who may find it difficult to enter into traditional campus environments. In order to make higher education more accessible for these individuals, online universities break down barriers such as time, place, past educational experience, pace, and income. Access is ensured through flexible scheduling of courses and student services, through a variety of delivery methods, through a progressive credential structure, and through ladder curricula, which all allow students to move in and out of post-secondary education as their personal and professional needs dictate. Students are often able to begin courses throughout the year or on a monthly basis. Many online universities are also open universities that allow all individuals entry regardless of educational qualification.

When it comes to international online universities, the hallmark institution is the **Open University** in the U.K., which was established in 1971 and currently has about 180,000 students studying at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, of whom 25,000 are from outside the United Kingdom.²² The Open University is a standalone institution in its own right, with full responsibility for delivering its own programs and courses. It has taken many decades to grow into the institution it is today, recognized widely for a high-quality of online instruction.²³

Because it is itself a provider of online education, the Open University has developed a unique model of online course delivery. Students in a given course are grouped into sets of 25 and each set is assigned an associate lecturer as a tutor for the duration of the course. This tutor is the student's first point of contact and the two will have regular one-on-one interaction, while providing instruction, feedback and assessment of learning. These tutors require an advanced degree and are generally career tutors, working with multiple groups of students in multiple courses at a time. In addition, over half of the tutors have been through the Open University as students, and every faculty member at the Open University must be a tutor for at least one section. Because tutors handle the vast majority of interaction with students, faculty efforts can focus mainly on course development. Student concerns can be brought forward to their tutor or, if necessary, escalated to the level of the professor.^{24,25}

Established in 1993, **Open Universities Australia (OUA)** employs a different organizational structure that relies on the online courses offered at 19 institutions across Australia. Unlike the consortia found in Ontario, the OUA provides integrated administration and student support services, thus overcoming many of the drawbacks of this model while still building on the existing online infrastructure of Australian universities.

OUA was established through a partnership of seven institutions, each of which owns an equal share in the organization. These shareholder institutions have the option of collecting any profits made by OUA, though to this day all profits have been reinvested in the organization. A Board of Directors made up of the executive heads of the seven shareholders, as well as five independent directors, governs OUA. This shared governance allows for significantly greater integration between institutions, a strong sense of ownership, and a robust quality assurance framework.²⁶



Online universities break down barriers such as time, place, past educational experience, pace, and income.





Open Universities Australia offers an example of how they can be blended to overcome most of the challenges we have identified.



While it does not provide academic courses itself, from the student perspective, OUA is a one-stop-shop. The student enrolls through the OUA, pays its tuition to the OUA, and accesses most support services through the OUA. Its student advisors can assist with issues of financial assistance or registration, and they have access to a student's academic record at all provider institutions, improving their ability to provide academic counselling. There is also a 24/7 telephone counselling service, a full career services department, and online skills modules that help students hone the academic skills they need to succeed.²⁷ For students who need further assistance preparing for their university education, online bridging programs are available, and the OUA is in the process of creating "taster" units that will allow a prospective student to experience about ten hours of online instruction that would look and feel exactly like they were enrolled a course.²⁸ Technical support is largely still the responsibility of the provider institution, though OUA does provide assistance for students in navigating learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle.

To clearly delineate the relationship between OUA and each of its provider institutes, a thorough, 60-page provider agreement is negotiated. These agreements include everything from details about the release date of course material to the division of tuition fees. The registration process is integrated so that provider institutions are immediately notified when a student enrolls in one of their courses through the OUA. Tuition fees at OUA are equal to or slightly lower than the in-class equivalent of the same course, but never higher. For undergraduate courses, approximately 60% of tuition fees go to the provider institute to cover the cost of delivering the course, with the remaining 40% allocated to OUA to cover administrative costs.²⁹

Also included in the provider agreements are clear guidelines for quality assurance, credit transfer and intellectual property rights. To ensure provider institutions are meeting their responsibilities, the OUA employs a quality assurance manager.

DESIGNING THE ONTARIO ONLINE INSTITUTE

In announcing the Ontario Online Institute, the Ontario government indicated that students would have the option of pursuing a full online degree or diploma, but how the Institute will be designed to provide these options is still unclear. This decision is critical to the success of this initiative and will indicate how serious the government is in promoting e-learning over the long term.

From the student perspective, online learning in Ontario and around the world is basically provided through two models: the consortium model and the standalone institution model. The former model provides students with information about the courses available at partner institutions, thus building on existing online infrastructure. However, most consortium models leave responsibility for administration, quality assurance, and support services to the individual institution – a significant drawback. In addition, the lack of a central administration limits opportunities to grow and evolve. With consortia such as Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca, Ontario Learn, and Canadian Virtual University already operating in Ontario, adding another would not lead to any meaningful increase in online opportunities.

Conversely, the standalone institution model would ensure that the Ontario Online Institute has full responsibility for administration, quality assurance and student support, as well as a full range of courses and programs. While this is an attractive model for the long term, developing such an institution from scratch would require tremendous resources and time and would not meet the provincial government's requirement that the Institute build on existing online infrastructure.

Both of these models have clear drawbacks; however, Open Universities Australia offers an example of how they can be blended to overcome most of the challenges we have identified. Under the OUA model, the Ontario Online Institute would negotiate agreements with Ontario's colleges and universities to deliver their online courses through the Institute. These courses would be brought together to create shared degree programs, with the final degree being conferred by one of the participating institutions. A council of provider institutions would oversee the governance of the Institute. Responsibility for fee collection, admissions, student support programs, and quality assurance would remain in the hands of the Institute so as to better serve Ontario's students. The revenue derived from provincial government grants and student fees would be shared by formula between the institution delivering a given course and the Institute for its provision of student support programs, administration, and technical support.

This option is OUSA's model of choice. It would fulfill the government's wish that the Institute build on the online courses and learning environments already available through other institutions, but would also allow the Institute to grow and evolve over the long-term. Furthermore, this model is significantly easier for students to navigate. Students urge the government to complete a thorough examination of the OUA and to base the Ontario Online Institute off of this model.

In addition to the OUA, much can be learned from other online learning organizations. For instance, BC Campus has had great success in promoting the sharing of technology and information between institutions, and these activities should be emulated in Ontario. Similarly, Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca has developed a unique system of access centres that should also be incorporated into the Institute. Combining these and other best practices will ensure the strongest possible result for Ontario students.

Before moving on, it is important to note that many aspects of the Institute will depend heavily on the initial design, and many of the solutions presented in the following pages will only be achievable if a heavily integrated consortium model, such as the one employed by the OUA, is selected for the Institute.

Finally, students wish to highlight that the Institute will have significant long-term effects on the post-secondary sector in Ontario, and that all stakeholders and partners deserve an opportunity to provide input into this process. With only a vague notion of what the Institute is meant to do, students have found it difficult to participate in these deliberations and are concerned with how little information is available months after the initial announcement. Moving forward, students urge the government to facilitate real input from all stakeholders.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should aim to build on existing online infrastructure by employing a consortium model, but should ensure that as much as possible, systems of fee collection, admissions, administration, quality assurance and student services are integrated and placed in the hands of the Institute.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should be governed by a council of provider institutions.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should be modeled after Open Universities Australia but should also incorporate best practices from others in the online learning world.

ACCESS

Students strongly believe that entrance standards should be employed for undergraduate degree programs at the Ontario Online Institute. As has been noted, some online and open universities in peer jurisdictions have almost no entrance requirements other than age. At least at the undergraduate level, this should not be emulated in Ontario. If a student is admitted without the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed, the student may find themselves frustrated and withdraw from the program, costing them financially and lowering the likelihood they will re-enrol at a post-secondary institution.

Furthermore, an open enrolment policy is likely to limit the value and prestige associated with a degree conferred by or through the Institute. Students, parents and employers will already be skeptical of the quality of these degrees. It is only through maintaining consistent entrance standards that the Institute will be viewed as a legitimate, high-quality institution. If degrees are to bear the name of a provider institution, then it is the prestige of that institution that is at stake, and it is unlikely our colleges and universities would agree to a completely open admissions policy.

That said, life-long learning should be a priority of the Institute and open admissions should be available for students not enrolled in degree programs. Furthermore, under-qualified students must have the opportunity to prove themselves and to work toward a full degree from the Institute. First, equivalency tests and personalized skills assessments should be used to assess the students' academic merits to determine if they have the ability to succeed in their program of study. The provincial government should look to Athabasca University and Open Universities Australia where free online modules have been designed to assist students in assessing their learning before they enrol.^{30,31} To provide assistance to those not fully prepared for a full diploma or degree program, a full range of bridging programs and

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Many students who face physical, cultural, geographic, and other barriers to higher education are further limited by their inability to access the public student financial assistance system.



preparatory classes should be established. To ensure students do not view bridging programs as another barrier to education, it is important that those who successfully complete these programs immediately gain credit toward their final degree. Bridging programs are already in use on a small scale at institutions across Ontario. The University of Guelph, for example, offers the Open Learning Program that allow students open access to the university and guaranteed admission to degree programs once they have completed a number of prerequisites.³² Additionally, the Bridges to Ryerson program offers preparation courses to mature students who lack the traditional entrance qualifications.³³

Flexibility in when students may begin a course is also necessary to promote access to the Institute. Online learning does not need to abide by the traditional semester model, and popular courses in particular should begin on a frequent basis. According to Alan Brady, Executive Director of OntarioLearn, more and more students are unwilling to wait for a specific time of year to begin studying, especially when they have just lost their job.³⁴

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should employ high entrance standards to ensure student success and degree legitimacy. To enhance access for under-qualified students, a variety of robust bridging programs should be developed as part of the Institute.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should, where possible, offer monthly start dates and avoid the inflexible semester model.

INTERNET ACCESS

It goes without saying that accessing an online education requires internet access. Unfortunately, thousands of Ontarians, especially in rural and northern regions, are without reliable internet access. *Unveiling the Digital Divide*, a study by Statistics Canada, reports that “the digital divide is sizeable; ICT [information and communication technology] penetration rates grow with income,” and that although the divide is generally closing, it “is widening when the lowest income deciles are compared with the highest income decile.”³⁵ Other studies have shown additional worrying impacts of the digital divide on accessibility. In particular, individuals in rural settings, individuals from low-income families, females, the elderly, and Aboriginals access a home internet connection in lower numbers than the rest of the Canadian population.^{36,37} This digital divide presents the additional problem that these Ontarians face a much larger learning curve since they are unfamiliar with the basic systems of online learning.

Students are pleased that the provincial government has recognized this divide and has implemented programs to address it. In the past three years, over \$27 million has been allocated to 47 broadband projects through the Rural Connections initiative and another \$32 million has gone to support the federal government’s Broadband Canada program.³⁸

Recommendation: The provincial government should continue to invest in expanding broadband access to rural and northern Ontarians.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Many students who face physical, cultural, geographic, and other barriers to higher education are further limited by their inability to access the public student financial assistance system.

Students’ first concern is that, depending on the model used for the Institute, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) could have difficulty identifying students who are eligible for assistance. In a consortium model that does not provide integrated admissions, the government would have difficulty verifying how many courses a student is taking when multiple institutions are involved. Of course, if the admissions process were integrated, the Institute itself could verify exactly how many courses a student is taking from the provider institutions.

Students are also concerned that the OSAP program currently bars part-time students from receiving a loan. In order to ensure that all qualified students can afford to attend post-secondary education, and in particular the new Ontario Online Institute, OUSA recommends that all students who meet the

requirements to attend a post-secondary institution in any capacity – online, part-time or otherwise – also have access to OSAP. Students' eligibility to receive financial assistance would then be based purely on need rather than enrolment status.

Those who choose the online learning path will require access to a computer and to the internet. The OSAP need assessment formula assumes \$500 each year for computer costs, but part-time students cannot access OSAP. The government's Textbook and Technology Grant provides an additional \$150 grant each year to OSAP-eligible students but this amount is much too small to cover even the cost of books, and part-time students, again, are ineligible. Finally, the cost of utilities, such as broadband internet, is said to be included in OSAP's living allowance. However, the living allowance is insufficient as it does not provide flexibility for geographic location and asks students to live below the poverty line.³⁹

In order to decrease the 'digital divide' and increase equality and access for students who may not otherwise be able to afford the technology necessary to participate in online methods of learning, grants and loans to cover the full cost of a computer and internet access must be incorporated into OSAP.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should ensure that a mechanism exists to verify the OSAP eligibility of students studying at the Ontario Online Institute.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should make OSAP available to part-time students to assist them in accessing the Ontario Online Institute.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should amend the OSAP living allowance to provide a realistic amount of funding to cover computer and internet costs.

STUDENT FEES AND AFFORDABILITY

Tuition fees, as both a significant student expense and a source of revenue for institutions, are a key part of the discussion on the affordability of e-learning. In comparing online learning to traditional classroom learning at the same institutions, the Campus Computing Survey revealed that one-third of campuses charge the same amount of tuition, one-fifth charge less tuition for students in online programs, and almost half of the institutions surveyed charge higher tuition for online students.⁴⁰ In some cases, students in online programs paid tuition fees of 10% or more than on-campus students in parallel programs, a trend that appears to be reflected in Canadian online institutions. For instance, tuition and ancillary fees for Alberta students at Athabasca University total \$646 per course or \$6,460 per year – nearly \$1,000 more than the average undergraduate tuition fees in Alberta. Students from elsewhere in Canada pay even more at \$7,510 per year.⁴¹

With Ontario's students already paying the highest tuition fees in Canada, OUSA categorically rejects the idea that tuition fees at the Ontario Online Institute could or should be higher than fees for the same course at a traditional institution. If anything, cost savings should be passed on to the student.

The increased use of flat-fee tuition, where a student pays the same fees regardless of the number of course they take, is a worrying trend among Ontario universities. This not only reduces flexibility but also negatively impacts students who take a reduced course load and work part-time to pay the bills. If the Ontario Online Institute is to increase access for part-time and mature students, it is vital that tuition fees be charged on a per-credit basis.

There are also a number of additional course fees outside of tuition costs that students in online courses often incur, such as one-time registration fees, charges for individual courses, or fees for technology resources and services. As at all Ontario universities, such ancillary fees should not be levied without student consent. Control of ancillary fees must remain firmly in the hands of the students who enrol in the Institute. As a critical part of the online learning environment, the provision of adequate support services is the responsibility of the Institute and its partner institutions and, as addressed above, students should not be expected to fund these services through ancillary fees.

Recommendation: Tuition fees should be no more than what is charged for an equivalent class-based course and, if savings are realized, these must be passed on to the student.

With Ontario's students already paying the highest tuition fees in Canada, OUSA categorically rejects the idea that tuition fees at the Ontario Online Institute could or should be higher than fees for the same course at a traditional institution.



The idea that online education will necessarily provide cost savings is dangerous and is wholly rejected by students.



Recommendation: The Institute should charge tuition fees on a per-credit basis.

Recommendation: As at any other Ontario institution, the students enrolled at the Institute must have full control over the ancillary fees that are charged.

HARMONIZED SALES TAX ON E-BOOKS

During the recent introduction of the Ontario harmonized sales tax (HST), students were pleased to see that critical student costs, such as tuition fees and public transit, would continue to be exempt from provincial tax. The government also announced that textbooks would continue to be exempt from the HST, but only as long as they are “printed books”. According to the GST/HST Info Sheet GI-065, “for purposes of the rebate, the term ‘printed book’ has its ordinary meaning. Therefore, electronic and digital books will not qualify as printed books for purposes of the rebate.”⁴²

This decision is strange when one considers that Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador all exempted e-books when they completed their tax harmonization. In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Revenue’s website consistently highlights that audio books are now exempt from provincial tax, while saying nothing of the tax on e-books.^{43,44} Online education materials are the backbone of online learning, yet the Ontario government seems to have made online education less affordable with one hand, while, with the other, it is trumpeting the need to expand online options.

Recommendation: In recognition of the fact that charging HST on e-books is a barrier to increasing online learning, the Ontario government should exempt all forms of textbooks from the HST.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Before discussing recommendations for funding of the Ontario Online Institute, it is important to state categorically that promoting online learning may never save the government money. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), “the use of learning technologies, while possibly leading to savings in the future, has not yet proven to be less expensive than traditional forms of teaching. In fact, it may prove to be more expensive given the ongoing need for course design support, faculty training and technology maintenance and upgrading.”⁴⁵ The idea that online education will necessarily provide cost savings is dangerous and is wholly rejected by students.

The costs of designing new online courses are almost entirely up-front. In order for the Institute to succeed, the government must first provide a sizeable up-front investment to encourage institutions to develop a wider array of online course and programs. Students suggest that the funding model be modified to include incentives for universities and colleges to invest further in online learning, perhaps by offering a higher Basic Income Unit (BIU) weight for online learners.

From the perspective of the institutions, the cost of developing a course must be balanced by the expected future revenue from tuition fees and government grants. Greater funds can be invested to create a higher quality learning experience, but only if the course is scalable to a greater numbers of students. Thus, the government should ensure courses are designed strategically to fill system-wide gaps, and that institutions are collaborating to avoid unnecessary duplication. It is only through greater communication and partnership (and a strong credit transfer framework) that Ontario institutions will be able to provide a learning experience of the highest quality.

Once the Institute has been established, the government will need to provide continuous operating funding to both the Institute and to the institutions providing the courses. As the CMEC’s Advisory Committee on Online Learning has recognized, a substantial, continuous investment from the government will be necessary to ensure the Institute’s success: “Because Canadian institutions of higher learning face enormous challenges in producing and maintaining an adequate volume of high-quality online learning, governments need to work together to provide substantial funding in such a way as to stimulate new online education and renew existing material both at the course and program levels.”⁴⁶

Finally, given the importance of adequately supporting students in the online environment, support services must also receive adequate funding from the government, and ancillary fees charged to students must not be relied upon to fund them.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should not be viewed as mechanism to realize cost-savings.

Recommendation: The government should modify the funding formula to provide incentives for institutions to develop and implement a wider variety of online courses and programs.

Recommendation: To increase the funds available for course development, and thus the quality of the courses provided, the government should encourage collaboration between institutions on the development of new online courses.

Recommendation: Student support services must receive adequate government funding and ancillary fees should not be levied on students to pay for these services.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should provide the Institute with significant start-up funding and a framework for long-term operating funding.

STUDENT SUPPORTS

Students using online learning methods generally face other life commitments that can have a significant impact on their ability to complete a post-secondary program. As a result, the dropout rates for distance education courses are usually higher than those for comparable on campus courses. For example, dropout rates in Europe are between 20 and 30 per cent, and in Asia they have reached heights around 50 per cent. Social and environmental factors, such as having the time and space to study, patterns of work, and the inability to take part in tutorials and institutional support, were cited as the main reasons why students discontinued their distance education.

In an article for the *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, Judith Potter examines the existing research on the importance of student support services to online learning. She finds evidence that online learners at Canadian universities have higher drop out rates than some of their peers in other countries. For example, Athabasca University reports a completion rate of only 25 per cent, less than half of the rates at the Open University where “the student support network is much tighter.” She concludes, “there is evidence to suggest that student support services [for online learners] can play a significant role in helping students to persist.”⁴⁸ High dropout rates are unacceptable to Ontario students. The Institute must provide a flexible academic environment where students feel that support structures are in place to assist them in completing their program.

At the most basic level, all can agree that online learners deserve at least the same level of support as in-class learners at any Ontario institution. But because many online learners face additional barriers to education and cannot turn to their friends and peers for counsel, their support programs must be held to an even higher standard. Furthermore, high dropout rates would only be detrimental to the Institute, and it is in everyone’s best interest to ensure that as many students as possible can persist through to graduation.

We should begin by indentifying the support services that should be available to all students studying through the Institute. OUSA recommends that these services be divided into three primary categories:

IT Support

One prevailing myth about online learning is that students are so tech-savvy they will feel right at home in an online environment. Students strongly caution that this is simply not the case, and strong IT support is essential to facilitate all online learning.⁴⁹

While all universities provide some IT services, an online institute, by definition, must excel in this area. Students insist that comprehensive, 24-hour IT support must be available to provide increased flexibility

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to online learners. These supports should cover everything from hardware and software issues to problems navigating learning management systems. Based on OUSA's research, the technical support model employed by OntarioLearn appears to be superior to other models in a number of ways. Options for incorporating these best practices should be explored further as the Institute is developed.

Academic Support

All students will, from time to time, require advice and assistance with their academic future. Students studying through the Institute must be provided with the same wide range of academic supports that are available on campuses, and they must be made available for more hours and in multiple forms. Access by phone to an academic counsellor should be guaranteed at most hours of the day. In addition, supplementary academic supports, such as writing and language training, and advice navigating the credit transfer system, should be readily available in multiple forms.

Personal Support

Throughout their education, students often require support of a personal nature. Students insist that all students studying through the Institute have access to the following personal support services:

- counselling services
- disability services
- career services
- financial aid services
- human rights, equity and diversity office

All these supports are necessary in order to attract and retain students who have traditionally faced barriers to education. To provide further flexibility and to adapt to diverse student needs, support services should be accessible seven days a week and well beyond normal work hours, even 24/7 in some cases.

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It is also important that services are provided which are appropriate for the type of student that is being served. Simply replicating services that are available to students on campus is not enough to meet the needs of students enrolled at the Institute. As an example, students with both physical and learning disabilities will require significant assistance to ensure resources are tailored to their individual needs, an idea that is strongly supported by CMEC's Advisory Committee for Online Learning.⁵⁰ For instance, blind and visually impaired students may require access to various forms of assistive technology, such as screen readers and video magnifiers.

Once the set of necessary student support services has been identified, the Institute will have to work with Ontario colleges and universities to determine who has final responsibility for providing these services. Students wish to stress that support programs should be grouped together as much as possible for easy access, as it has been shown that this centralized approach tends to be more effective.⁵¹

From the student perspective, support services would ideally be provided through the Institute itself. Barriers to providing IT and academic support could be overcome through the integration of academic records and IT systems between provider institutions, as has been done through OntarioLearn and Open Universities Australia, respectively. Personal support services would also function more effectively as they would be free to target their efforts toward the distinct needs of online learners. Inside the Institute, services could be grouped together as a single unit with one easily accessible mechanism for finding help both online and by phone. Of course, this model would mean duplicating services already available through provider institutions, likely resulting in a greater cost.

Alternatively, each student studying through the Institute could be assigned a home institution that is responsible for some of their support needs. While this would reduce duplication, institutional support services are already stretched too thin and, under current circumstances, would be unable to provide support that is targeted to the needs of online learners. For instance, while all Ontario universities provide counselling services, few to none are available on evenings and weekends when many online learners would require access. A concerted effort to improve support programs system-wide would be necessary for students to accept this option.

Finally, a blended model could be developed where the Institute would provide services that must be targeted to the needs of online learners, such as IT support and counselling services, while the home institution would provide whatever remains, such as financial aid services and academic counselling. Before following this path, however, it should be restated that the effectiveness of grouping support services in one central location has been demonstrated, and that this fact should be taken into account.

Recommendation: Online learners must have access to comprehensive, 24-hour IT support as a staple student support service.

Recommendation: Online learners must have access to comprehensive academic supports including academic counsellors, credit transfer advisors, and writing and language services.

Recommendation: Online learners must have access to a variety of personal support services including counselling services, disability services, career service, financial aid services, and a human rights, equity and diversity office.

Recommendation: All support services should be accessible 7 days a week and well beyond normal work hours, even 24/7 in some cases.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

While there is great potential in online learning and great potential in an Ontario Online Institute, it will only be realized if the academic experience is properly designed. As the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) has said, “technology enhanced learning can provide enormous benefits to students and universities. But quality is paramount – the use of technology in learning should enrich the quality of the education and the learning experience being provided.”⁵² The Council of Ontario Universities’ Task Force on Learning Technologies would seem to agree, warning of “...the potential for simply transferring current ‘knowledge transmission’ models of teaching and learning to these new media resulting in a ‘passive’ student learning style with a ‘talking head learning environment.’”⁵³ Students couldn’t agree more; if we are going to move forward with this initiative, we should do it right or not at all.

Teaching and Learning

While much of a student’s online learning is completed alone, opportunities for interaction with peers and instructors is vitally important. Many online courses ask the student to read the course material, complete assignments, email them to an unseen and unheard instructor, and accept a grade which is emailed back. But this is not the high-quality online learning environment Ontario students deserve. Again quoting from the AUCC, “technology is not a substitute for a strong relationship between teacher and learner. Rather, it can and should be used to nourish, transform and enrich these relationships and to promote a more active and student-centred learning.”⁵⁴

In order to ensure course developers and instructors are making the most of the online environment, they should receive considerable training in online teaching, learning and assessment. We know, and have known for decades, that the traditional lecture model of teaching is significantly less effective than active learning pedagogies that promote deep learning. To assist in implementing new methods, a Centre for Online Teaching and Learning should be established at the Institute to assist instructors at participating institutions, and further investments in instructional and professional development should follow. The Institute should also budget funds to assist provider universities in improving their online courses, as is done at BC Campus and Open Universities Australia.

Students do believe that the Institute could lead the way to new models of teaching and learning which fundamentally rethink the roles of teacher and learner in the twenty-first century. Students are concerned, however, with the widely-held view that online learning will, by itself, force a change in the way we teach. Unfortunately, even with new teaching tools at their disposal, most faculty still teach the way they were taught.⁵⁵ If we are to see serious advancement in teaching and learning, cultural change is required, and that is only possible through government and institutional leadership.

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Above all, students studying online must receive the same level of interaction with their instructors and peers as they would receive at a traditional institution.



Online Course Development

Ensuring that courses are well-developed is especially important in the online environment. The difficulties associated with joining technology, active learning and a diverse set of students is encapsulated well by Goodyear and Ellis in a forthcoming book: "What teachers say to their students about 'good learning' has little effect if their words are not backed up by salient features of the learning context – especially, but not exclusively, the assessment regime. The introduction of new technologies and new kinds of study activity, such as problem-based learning, make the context much more complex than it used to be – they add complexity and uncertainty to the activity system. Managing complexity and uncertainty, while also helping align the activity system with sound pedagogical principles, is a very difficult task. It demands a careful kind of planning – a *design-based* rather than a *traditional* approach."⁵⁶

Students are concerned that online course developers at our universities are not receiving the recognition and support that they deserve, thus driving away top educators from participating in this process. Most full-time faculty are stretched too thin to engage in such a time-intensive process, and tenure criteria are such that tenure-track professors are often not rewarded for time spent developing online courses. As a result, a lot of online course development is contracted out to sessional or part-time instructors who may not have a firm understanding of online pedagogy.⁵⁷ If Ontario is to excel at online education, the government and our universities should stress the need to involve experienced and qualified professors in the course design process. As a first step, a set of provincial teaching awards should be established to reward those innovation and excellence in online teaching and online course development.

To ensure a high-quality learning experience, OUSA recommends that all online courses offered through the Institution be modeled on the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, originally framed by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson in 1986 and commonly used today as a concise summary of many decades of educational research findings about the kinds of teaching and learning activities most likely to improve learning outcomes.⁵⁸

Good practice in undergraduate education:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty;
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. encourages active learning;
4. gives prompt feedback;
5. emphasizes time on task;
6. communicates high expectations; and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Regarding the first three of the practices listed by Chickering and Gamson, there are a number of ways technology can be used to encourage contact between students and faculty, to encourage cooperation among students, and to promote active learning, even over long distances. For instance, group interaction can be integrated into online education through options like web conferencing and chat rooms. Discussions and tutorials containing students from all corners of Ontario can and should be organized through these emerging technologies. Above all, students studying online must receive the same level of interaction with their instructors and peers as they would receive at a traditional institution.

Another critical aspect of online instruction is the mechanisms available to the student to have their questions answered. Posing a question during a lecture may not be possible, so instructors or tutors must be available to answer questions with a very short turnaround time. The answers to these questions should be posted on the course website so that all students have access.

As long as there is still a strong mechanism for answering student questions, the online environment eliminates the need for lectures to be delivered live. An entire set of video lectures, perhaps captured through a free, open-source platform such as Matterhorn, can be posted at the start of the course for students to view on their own schedule, provided there are frequent tutorials that offer significant opportunity for student-faculty interaction. Again to allow maximum flexibility, weekly tutorials should be offered at multiple times including evenings and weekends.

Access to an online library is also vital. Provider institutions should commit to allowing students taking their courses to have full access to online library resources.

Finally, students must have periodic one-on-one access to an instructor. Time should be made available each week, including on evenings and weekends, to web conference with individual students.

More broadly, the principle of maximum flexibility should underpin all aspects of the online learning environment. This will be vital in attracting and retaining a diverse array of students, especially those who face barriers that prevent them from enrolling in an in-class post-secondary program.

Physical Infrastructure

Though the vast majority of online learning can take place anywhere, there are a number of reasons why the Ontario Online Institute should also offer students the option of physically visiting a satellite learning centre. First, some online courses require final exams to be taken in-person and in the presence of an invigilator. Second, even if robust phone and online supports are available, some students will prefer seeking assistance face-to-face. Third, they could provide students with access to computer facilities, internet and study space that is expected at Ontario post-secondary institutions, while also enabling the use of complex e-learning tools such as videoconferencing, which may not otherwise be accessible to students. Fourth, they can provide a sense of community that is often lacking in online learning and has been shown to be vital to a high quality online learning environment.⁵⁹

Because of the work of Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca, 112 Access Centres have already been built across Ontario that could serve all of these purposes. In addition, the Institute should explore ways of sharing existing college and university infrastructure to create satellite learning centres.

Recommendation: All courses offered through the Ontario Online Institute should reflect the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.

Recommendation: A Centre for Online Teaching and Learning should be established to assist instructors in improving their online teaching and assessment techniques.

Recommendation: New instructors and teaching assistants should be required to complete formal training in online teaching.

Recommendation: The Ontario government and institutions should work together to ensure that experienced and qualified professors are engaged in the online course development process and that they are rewarded for their efforts.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should establish a set of teaching awards to recognize innovation and excellence in online teaching and online course development.

Recommendation: Opportunities for online interaction with peers and instructors must be built into every course. This should include one-on-one access to instructors, methods for organizing group study sessions, and the availability of live web tutorials.

Recommendation: Ensuring maximum flexibility for the learner should be a principle underpinning all online courses offered through the Ontario Online Institute.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should use and build on the Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca Access Centres to facilitate the writing of exams, provide another option for students seeking support, enable broader access to computer facilities and complex e-learning tools, and provide a sense of community for online learners.



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QUALITY ASSURANCE

One of students’ chief concerns with the Ontario Online Institute is that, for a variety of reasons, the quality of education may be lower than what is found in a traditional university setting. If students, parents and employers are to trust a degree from the Institute, a conscious effort should be made to demonstrate the quality of education that is provided. To begin with, all programs, diplomas and degrees offered by the Institute should be held to the same quality assurance standards that apply on campuses across Ontario, including periodic internal and external reviews.

To ensure the Institute is providing a high-quality online education, participating institutions should further collaborate on a quality assurance framework targeted specifically to online education. Such an agreement would also ensure accountability between institutions that are accepting one another’s transfer credits. While, for the sake of academic autonomy, the Institute itself would not be involved in creating a quality assurance process, it should have a role in ensuring accountability. Furthermore, one of its core tasks should be to conduct research on teaching and learning in an online environment and provide recommendations for improvement (see “Research”). Thus there must also be a mechanism in place for the Institute’s scholars to provide feedback and advice to partner institutions on how to improve their online courses.

To design the strongest possible quality assurance framework, participating institutions should look to the standards already developed in Ontario, Canada and the rest of the world. The Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) has recently developed requirements for online courses, including requirements for consortial agreements, safeguards for students and their work, and mandatory elements in the delivery of online education.⁶⁰ Outside of Ontario, the Canadian Association for Community Education has produced guidelines for outcomes, inputs, processes, practices, and resources for online learning, and the BC Ministry of Education has developed Standards for K-12 Distributed Learning.^{61,62} In the U.K., the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has developed a Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education that includes specific requirements for e-learning, such as delivery, learning support, and assessment of students.⁶³ Finally, the Joint Information System Committee (JISC), which provides guidance on the use of information and communications technology to post-secondary institutions in the U.K., has compiled a thorough guide to effective practice in technology-enhanced learning.⁶⁴ All of these examples should be evaluated as a starting point for a thorough and detailed quality assurance framework between the Institute’s provider institutions.

To further ensure the Institute, and the courses offered through it, are adequately serving its students, feedback opportunities must be widely available. At the end of each course, students should have the chance to complete an online evaluation on everything from the instruction they received, to the content of the course, to their interaction with the Institute. The aggregate results of these surveys should be made public.

Finally, the success of the Institute itself must be evaluated on a regular basis. Students recommend an external review of the Institute take place after the first three years of operation and at least once every five years after that.

Recommendation: Courses offered through the Ontario Online Institute must be subject to the same quality assurance mechanisms that apply to existing universities.

Recommendation: A specific quality assurance framework for online education should be negotiated between all institutions offering courses through the Institute, and the Institute should be tasked with ensuring accountability.

Recommendation: A mechanism should exist to allow scholars at the Institute to provide feedback and advice to participating institutions on how to improve their online courses.

Recommendation: Students must be surveyed regularly at the course and institutional level to ensure students’ diverse needs are being addressed.

Recommendation: The Ontario Online Institute should undergo external evaluations on a regular basis.

RESEARCH

The creation of an Ontario Online Institute is an opportunity not only for our province to lead the world in the provision of a high-quality online education, but to move to the forefront of research into effective online pedagogies. As CMEC's Advisory Committee for Online Learning writes, there is significant need for new research in this area: "If the goal is world leadership in learning as a key condition for competitive success, then the Canadian commitment to learning research and development does not measure up. Though faculties of education have taken a major responsibility for pedagogical research, there is a serious need now for research at the level of the individual discipline on how to teach it in the online environment."⁶⁵

To ensure we make the most of this opportunity, OUSA recommends that the mandate of the Ontario Online Institute include conducting research on the most effective online pedagogies.

Recommendation: The mandate of the Ontario Online Institute should include conducting research on improving online learning.

CREDIT TRANSFER

The provincial government has identified increasing student mobility as a long-term priority, and OUSA is in full support. The barriers to credit transfer must be removed to ensure students can access whatever education pathway is right for them. With the introduction of the Ontario Online Institute, a simplified credit transfer system is even more critical so that students can take online courses from many institutions to complete a whole degree, and so that on-campus students may supplement their education at another Ontario institution.

Students believe the development of the Institute should be viewed as a catalyst for broad change to the credit transfer system. The creation of the Institute will hinge on sector-wide agreement in this area, and is a vital part of building trust between institutions. Without this trust, a consortium model cannot survive. Credit transfer is no longer an abstract need; it is critical to the success of the Institute.

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance has prepared extensive recommendations on the implementation of a university-to-university credit transfer system and is currently working with the Council of Ontario Universities to see them implemented. A few of the most relevant are included here. Please contact OUSA for more on our credit transfer recommendations.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to provide robust funding to incentivize a system-wide credit transfer framework.

Recommendation: At a minimum, universities must allow all courses offered at Ontario universities to transfer between universities as electives.

Recommendation: Universities should significantly reduce residency requirements and stop requiring a minimum grade for the transfer of credits.

Recommendation: All universities should adopt the Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits and agree to accept all first- and second-year courses from any university.

Students believe the development of the Institute should be viewed as a catalyst for broad change to the credit transfer system.



The Government must devise a holistic access strategy and invest further in access and early outreach programs both in at-risk communities and in primary and secondary schools across the Province.



BEYOND ONLINE ACCESS

By offering a greater level of access and flexibility to students, the Ontario Online Institute offers one option for students facing financial, physical, social, cultural, and geographic barriers. However, the creation of the Institute must not be seen as the answer for equal access to higher education. Existing post-secondary institutions must continue to strive to be accessible to students who face barriers.

More broadly, the provincial government must increase efforts to assist traditionally underrepresented groups in accessing all higher education pathways. To ensure these students have access to a higher education, the Government must devise a holistic access strategy and invest further in access and early outreach programs both in at-risk communities and in primary and secondary schools across the Province.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should create and fund a holistic access and early outreach strategy with specific access targets for underrepresented groups. This strategy should include, but not be limited to, community and institutional outreach programs, targeted enrichment and dual credit programs in primary and secondary schools, bridging programs, student supports in post-secondary institutions, and education pathway planning through improved guidance counselling, curricular enhancement and parental engagement.

CONCLUSION

The creation of an Ontario Online Institute is a worthy goal, fully supported by students. As we have covered here, however, a number of significant concerns exist, spanning the issues of accessibility, affordability, accountability, and quality. In an effort to identify practical solutions to these concerns, OUSA has undertaken research into potential models and features of the Institute and has consulted with our students and with experts in the field of online learning. The recommendations we have presented represent the best practices that students wish to put forward for inclusion in the Institute.

Of course, translating ideas from paper to reality will prove challenging. Students' model of choice – the highly integrated consortium employed at Open Universities Australia – is based on a complex network of agreements and a willingness from provider institutions to take collective responsibility for the governance of the Institute.

Regardless of the model that is finally implemented, students suggest that the first step toward securing buy-in from stakeholders is to create an Online Institute Steering Committee to facilitate an open conversation about the path to implementation. The Steering Committee should include university and college administrators, students, faculty, and online learning experts. By the time the 2011 Ontario Budget is announced, a secretariat should also be in place to support the Steering Committee and to carry out implementation. The first priority of both bodies should be to develop an infrastructure plan and timeline, followed by a governance model, credit transfer framework, and quality assurance framework.

It is the government's responsibility to provide the leadership and funding that will create an environment in which the Ontario Online Institute can thrive. At the institutional level, incentives must be provided to entice colleges and universities to place a greater emphasis on all facets of online learning, including improving support services and online pedagogy. In addition, the government should challenge Ontario institutions to take bold, measurable and collaborative steps in the short-term to increase their online infrastructure and offerings. Groups such as the Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, Ontario Council for University Lifelong Learning (OCULL) and the Ontario Universities Council on E-Learning (OUCEL) should all be formally engaged to contribute in preparing the way for the Institute.

Finally, students recognize that it will take time and cooperation between stakeholders to achieve the vision that is the Ontario Online Institute. Throughout this process, students are eager to work collaboratively with the Government and its partners to develop a world-class online learning environment for the people of Ontario.

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