OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over140,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

POLICY BRIEF: ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning can be a useful option for students seeking more flexibility in completing their degree. Fully-online courses in particular are becoming more popular and provide an excellent alternative means of education to the traditional classroom environment. Having said that, students believe that online learning should not altogether replace traditional classroom learning and the benefits of an on-campus student experience. For this reason, this policy emphasizes online courses, not online degree programs. To all forms of online learning however, the same standards of quality found in traditional classroom environments should apply as well—a key tenant of this policy.

This policy provides recommendations on how to improve the quality of online courses in Ontario, as well as examines the future of eCampus Ontario and outlines students' vision for it. As eCampus Ontario and online learning are still relatively new additions to academia, an opportunity exists for students to impart their recommendations to the consortium and government on how they can best serve online learners going forward.

THE PROBLEM

Establishing the purpose of online learning
The same standards of quality and purpose that apply to traditional education should be applied to online learning. In this regard, students have concerns related to institutional intentions and online access. Students suspect that some institutions offer online courses as revenue generators and as a method of reducing costs. By placing cost first, the quality of student learning may be undermined. Undergraduate students may face access challenges and barriers to participating in online courses, such as internet connectivity, access to suitable computers, and the physical demands of in-person examinations. Additionally, post-secondary institutions often overlook concerns regarding financial accessibility in the context of online courses.

Improving the student experience
Students see convenience and accessibility as the two primary drivers behind online course enrolment. Currently, online courses may require a student to use physical course materials or access a physical setting for assessments. This removes much of the convenience students associate with online courses. As for accessibility, post-secondary institutions often assume that all prospective students have an adequate level of computer literacy, and as such, can easily navigate online courses, when this may not always be the case. At the same time, online courses are not designed with sufficient consideration for accessibility for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, universities have not adequately adapted their support services to serve students taking online courses.

Ensuring the quality of online learning
Measuring the quality of higher education remains an elusive task. Nonetheless, measures have been created, albeit not with a mind towards online learning pedagogy. Currently, the Ontario Council on Quality Assurance uses a quality assurance framework that does not reflect indicators most relevant to online learning. Further exacerbating issues of quality is that online course instructors often lack the training required to ensure high levels of teaching excellence and course delivery.

Creating a vision for eCampus Ontario
In OUSA's previous Online Learning policy paper students called for the creation of a consortium of universities offering online courses; in October 2015 this online consortium was created. While students are grateful to the province for committing to the provision of quality online courses, the consortium could be greatly strengthened. First, if not properly equipped with predictable funding and operational planning, eCampus Ontario could be prevented from planning its longer-term strategy. Second, a lack of integration between eCampus Ontario and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) impedes the development of transferable online courses. Lastly, failure to consult with university students may result in policy decisions that negatively impact the online learning experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accept and adapt to the future of online learning
Online learning should be accessible to all willing and qualified undergraduate students. It is not a replacement for traditional learning, but rather a preferred substitute that can offer flexibility and accessibility to students. With this sentiment in mind, there is much the government

can do to facilitate improvements in online learning and move towards students' vision for it in Ontario. In order to achieve this vision, students recommend the following actions:

- Online learning should not displace traditional learning nor be used as a replacement for the traditional classroom environment;
- Online learning should be used as a tool to improve access and allow flexibility for students;
- The provincial government should invest in expanded internet access for rural, northern, and Indigenous communities;
- The provincial government should provide up-front grants for students that lack access to computers and essential technological requirements; and
- Instructors should only require hardware and software that is necessary for the achievement of course learning outcomes.

Improve accessibility to online courses

Online courses should be as accommodating as possible. A student who cannot attend the physical classroom environment for reasons including geographical challenges or other barriers should not be penalized. This doubly applies to students with disabilities as well as to students who lack digital literacy skills needed to succeed in online courses. While ensuring students have maximum accessibility to online learning, it is also important to recognize concerns regarding academic integrity. To accommodate these students and ensure that they have sufficient access to online learning while mitigating academic integrity issues, OUSA recommends that:

- Insofar as it is possible, all online course materials should be available electronically;
- Moving forward, the provincial government should encourage institutions to gradually eliminate in person assessments for online courses, while doing the utmost to preserve academic integrity;
- The provincial government should provide funding for institutions for the development of secure online assessment technology;
- Post-secondary institutions should strive to develop digital literacy skills that students require to succeed in their online courses;
- Online courses should be proactively designed under consideration of the guidelines and requirements set forth by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA);
- Institutions should ensure that students enrolled in online courses have digital access to high-quality academic and technical support services such as writing centres and IT help desks; and
- Post-secondary institutions should perform regular audits of their support services to ensure they are adequately meeting the needs of students.

Establish standards of quality for online courses

At the heart of this policy is a focus on the quality of online learning. It is crucial that the same standards of quality that apply to traditional, in-classroom courses apply to fully-online courses as well. Ideally, instructors should be capable of teaching an online course as effectively as they would a traditional class.

Additionally, steps should be taken by government and institutions to properly assess the quality of online courses with an understanding that online learning has pedagogical differences from traditional learning that should be considered during assessment. To these ends, students recommend the following courses of action:

- Post-secondary institutions should develop and disseminate resources for instructors to train them in online course design and delivery;
- The province should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to develop the aforementioned training resources;
- The province should continue to provide grants in support of the development of innovative online courses; and
- The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework that recognizes the quality indicators that are relevant and unique to online learning.

Develop eCampus Ontario with a student focus

eCampus Ontario has the potential to become the one-stop-shop for online learners in the province. Through actions aimed towards improving the user-friendliness and accessibility of the eCampus website, to collaboration with ONCAT, to ensuring sustained student input into the vision of eCampus Ontario, the provincial government can continue to build on the foundation of eCampus with the following recommendations from students:

- The provincial government should ensure a minimum of five years of operational funding for eCampus Ontario to support the development of online education and sustainable programming;
- Long term, eCampus Ontario should fulfill its mandate to provide a central hub for online learners in Ontario that promotes accessibility, user-friendliness, and mobility;
- The provincial government should ensure eCampus Ontario and ONCAT share the same pool of funding;
- eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should engage in a collaborative relationship that facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices;
- eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should ensure that students have access to an entirely online and fully-transferable first year;
- eCampus Ontario should ensure students are sufficiently consulted and that student representation on the board of directors is maintained;
- eCampus Ontario should frequently seek student input on governance structures and policy decisions affecting the online learning experience, online course delivery, and ease of access; and
- eCampus should strive to be user-friendly and as interactive as possible so as to facilitate high levels of student engagement and participation.