



POLICY PAPER

Online Learning

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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 student associations 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

BACKGROUND

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 paper 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 paper.

In addition to the quality of online courses, this paper also examines the future of eCampus Ontario, the province's consortium of online course providers, and outlines our 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, postsecondary 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 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.
- 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).
- Post-secondary 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.
- 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 paper 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 of Ontario should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to develop the aforementioned training resources.
- The Province of Ontario should continue to provide grants in support of the development of innovative online courses.
- The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework which recognizes the quality indicators that are relevant and unique to online learning.

Develop eCampus Ontario with a focus on students

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 the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 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.
- Moreover, eCampus should strive to be user-friendly and as interactive as possible so as to facilitate high levels of student engagement and participation.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is fast becoming the preferred and most effective substitute for traditional, in-classroom learning in Ontario. According to Canadian Virtual University estimates, during the 2009-10 year, approximately 146,000 students registered for online courses, 2,000 online courses were offered, and there were 60 online degrees offered.¹ Given the proliferation of online courses, as evidenced by the creation of eCampus Ontario, it is almost certain that these figures have increased since that time.

Across Canada, online learning is evolving in different forms. There are universities that, for the most part, are dedicated to delivering primarily online course offerings, such as Royal Roads University, Thompson Rivers University, and Athabasca University.² Greater accessibility, convenience, and new technology are encouraging institutions and governments to embrace online learning as a complement to the traditional classroom, and Ontario is no exception. Indeed, several institutions in Ontario, including Queen's University, the University of Guelph, and McMaster University, have begun to increase the number of online courses they offer to their students.³

In OUSA's previous Online Learning paper (2013) students called for the creation of a consortium of universities offering online courses.⁴ In October 2015 this online consortium was created; now known as eCampus Ontario, it comprises every publicly funded college and university in the province.

Subsequently this report, with quality in mind, will examine the future of eCampus Ontario and outline our vision for it, as well as online courses in general. 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 students and online learners going forward.

This paper will consist of four sections: Purpose, Student Experience, Quality, and eCampus Ontario. The objectives of this paper are to assess eCampus Ontario, provide a vision for online learning, and call for a high standard of quality to be applied to online courses throughout Ontario. To these ends, OUSA will put forth principles, concerns, and recommendations that students believe should guide the future of online learning in the province.

BACKGROUND

As stated above, OUSA's previous Online Learning paper called for a consortium to be created for delivering online courses. A few of our principles, concerns, and recommendations in that paper included the following:

“Online education in Ontario should be delivered through an integrated, streamlined system that works on the basis of post-secondary sector collaboration.”

“An Ontario online learning consortium should be overseen by a governing council to ensure a cohesive direction to online course and program development and delivery.”

1 Canadian Virtual University, “Online University Education in Canada: Challenges and Opportunities,” last accessed February 19, 2016. <http://www.cvu-uvic.ca/Online%20University%20Education%20%20jan17%202012.pdf>

2 Contact North, “Online Learning in Canada: At a Tipping Point, A Cross-Country Check-Up 2012,” last accessed February 25, 2016. http://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/trends-and-directions/onlinelearningincanadareport_june_2012_-_final_o.pdf

3 Ibid.

4 Meghan Condon and Adam Garcia, *Policy Paper: Online Learning* (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2014).

“Any governing council for province-wide online learning initiatives must include student representation.”

OUSA is pleased to see that these principles, concerns, and recommendations have been acknowledged and integrated into the eCampus Ontario model; however, more work is needed to ensure that Ontario’s schools are delivering a student-friendly, quality online product. A more detailed analysis assessing eCampus Ontario will be provided in a later section.

Types of Online Learning

There are several models of online learning employed by institutions in Ontario. Below you will find a table detailing the most prevalent of these models (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Types of online learning

Entirely Online Credit-Courses	Entirely Online Degree Programs	Online Non-Credit Courses (Continuing Education)	Blended Learning	Flip Classroom Model	Learning Management Systems	Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCS)
Courses offered by Ontario universities that students can take online as part of their normal degree. ⁵	Fully online programs that students can take to earn a degree. All courses are online. For example, York University offers a completely online Bachelor of Administrative Studies program. ⁶	Online courses that do not count towards academic credit or a degree, but may lead to certificates or other workplace credentials. ⁷	Refers to courses that combine both in-classroom as well as online learning. For example, a blended class might require its students to be physically present for 70 per cent of the course, leaving the remaining 30 per cent for online learning. ⁸	A flip classroom model typically has students learn and study online with videos and other lecture materials, then come to the physical classroom to engage in discussions and other critical learning exercises. ⁹	An online system that allows for interaction between faculty and students online, as well as the facilitation of course materials and exercises. The two largest LMS providers for Ontario universities are Blackboard and Desire2Learn. Trent University, for instance, uses the former. ¹⁰	MOOCS are online courses that are offered for little to no cost by universities to large amounts of students. MOOCS typically do not provide academic credit, but completion of a course can lead to receipt of a certificate. ¹¹

⁵ Pappano, Laura, “Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace,” November 2, 2012, The New York Times. Last accessed March 4, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

⁶ York University. “Distance education,” 2012. Last accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/disted>

⁷ Windsor University. “Distance education,” 2013. Last accessed March 4, 2016 <http://www.uwindsor.ca/registrar/distance-education>

⁸ Allen, I.Elaine and Seaman, Jeff. “Staying the course - online education in the United States 2008,” 2008. Retrieved from, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/staying_course

⁹ Brock University, “Current e-learning courses at Brock University,” 2013. Last accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.brocku.ca/pedagogical-innovation/elearning-initiative/current-online-courses>

¹⁰ Trent University, “*Learning system*,” (n.d.). Last accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.trentu.ca/it/learningsystem/overview.php>

¹¹ Corbyn, Zoe, “This could be huge,” Times Higher Education, 2012. Last accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

The distinction between fully-online courses and fully-online degrees

Although both are growing in use, there are distinct differences between fully online degrees and entirely online courses. In this paper, students are calling attention to the latter. While fully online degrees are becoming more popular and provide an excellent alternative means of education to the traditional classroom environment, they cannot altogether replace traditional classroom learning and the benefits of an on-campus student experience. That being said, the same standards of quality traditional learning is held to should be applied to online education, including in its forms that utilize both in-class and online elements such as the blended learning and flip classroom models. These models and other forms of technology-enabled learning are addressed in OUSA's Teaching and Assessments paper (2015).¹² Regardless of the delivery method, the means of receiving an education should be comparable, and the ends should be equal, in that students enrolled in either type of learning should receive the same outcome: a quality education. That will be the focus of this paper, with an emphasis on online courses, not online degree programs.

PURPOSE

A VISION FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Principle: Online Learning is the preferred substitute for traditional learning, and offers flexibility and access to students.

Principle: Online Learning is not a replacement for traditional learning, but rather the most preferred and flexible alternative.

Concern: Online learning could be used exclusively as an institutional revenue generator and as a method of reducing costs that may undermine the quality of student learning.

Recommendation: Online learning should not displace traditional learning nor be used as a replacement for the traditional classroom environment.

Recommendation: Online learning should be used as a tool to improve access and allow flexibility for students.

Online learning offers students the opportunity to participate in supplementary courses that complement a degree path. OUSA recognizes that not all students may feel the need to incorporate online courses into their degrees; however, for those seeking more flexibility when building their degrees or those wishing to supplement their in-person classroom education with online courses, online learning can be a useful option.

There are several reasons students decide to engage in online learning. For students that are unable to participate in traditional classroom settings, online learning offers a practical solution for addressing access barriers. Prospective students may not have access to traditional classroom settings and can use online learning as a substitute; similarly, traditional classroom settings may not be suitable learning environments for particular students. For example, students with dependents, who have busy schedules, can use online learning to accommodate their available study time. Furthermore, online learning can accommodate part-time and/or full-time students working and studying simultaneously.

Online learning is a resource that should be available for all willing and qualified students that wish to supplement their degree. However, this resource should not evolve to displace traditional

¹² Wai, Joyce, Read Leask, and Spencer Nestico-Semianiw. Policy Paper: Teaching and Assessment. (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2015).

learning nor be used as a replacement for the traditional classroom environment. The traditional learning environment, where students and professors physically interact in a classroom setting, is regarded by OUSA students as the most effective learning method currently available. Online education should complement this learning format.

Similarly, online learning should not be used as a cost-cutting measure for institutions. While online learning offers positive benefits for students, institutions offering online courses purely for the financial gains (such as reduced operating costs and higher course fees) could negatively impact the quality of online programming and ultimately, students' learning outcomes. The purpose of online learning should be to provide the best possible substitute for the traditional classroom experience; institutions should refrain from using online courses as cost-saving measure and as a means of revenue generation. Students are concerned that the misuse of online learning would undermine the quality of a university education for those students taking online courses.

ONLINE ACCESS

Principle: Online Learning should be accessible to all willing and qualified undergraduate students.

Concern: Undergraduate students may face access challenges and/or barriers participating in online courses at Canadian institutions, such as internet connectivity, access to suitable computers, and the physical demands of in-person examinations.

Concern: Post-secondary institutions often overlook concerns regarding financial accessibility in the context of online courses.

Recommendation: The provincial government should ensure undergraduate students participating in online courses in Ontario have access to online education by investing in expanded Internet access for rural, northern, and Indigenous communities.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide up-front grants for students that lack access to computers and associated technological requirements, including software and hardware upgrades.

Recommendation: Instructors should only require hardware and software that is necessary for the achievement of course learning outcomes.

All willing and qualified domestic and international students should have access to online education; students may have no other option but to study online for reasons including their physical or mental health, geographic location, or socioeconomic background. In these cases the appropriate infrastructure must exist to support these students.

Currently, the infrastructure necessary to support Internet connectivity may not exist for rural, northern, and/or Indigenous students located in isolated regions. To accommodate this barrier, the provincial government should continue to invest in infrastructure development programs designed to provide Internet access to rural, northern regions, and Indigenous communities.

OUSA also recommends that students facing extremely cumbersome access issues should be able to complete an entirely online degree so as to accommodate their needs. Government and institutions should make online learning as convenient and accessible as possible for those students hamstrung by personal, geographic, or infrastructure-related barriers.

Another barrier to online learning involves the financing of technological purchases. Students see two primary means to remove this barrier. First, students recommend that instructors carefully consider financial accessibility when deciding on the technological requirements of their online courses. For example, a digital arts course should not require a Photoshop license if a free alternative would allow students to achieve the same learning outcomes.

Second, students recommend that the cost of technology should be recognized in the Ontario Student Assistance Program. Currently, the OSAP cost assessment pegs the cost of acquiring a computer and software at \$500.¹³ While this may allow students to purchase a low- to mid-range laptop, when other costs such as software are factored in this becomes an insufficient amount. For example, a student license for Adobe Creative Cloud (Photoshop, Illustrator, etc.) costs USD \$240 (\$320 CAD at time of writing) per year¹⁴. Thus, students recommend re-instating a technology grant. More information on this recommendation can be found in OUSA’s paper on Student Financial Assistance.¹⁵

To further maximize flexibility and accessibility, online courses should be designed to be entirely online in nature. Regardless of the reason for taking online courses, students should not be burdened with unnecessary physical obligations, such as in-classroom examinations. OUSA believes the provincial government should encourage institutions to eliminate in-person examinations, thus removing potential barriers and moving toward a system that is conducive to entirely online courses. To further this initiative, the government should also encourage institutions to explore and invest in technologies that allow for students to participate in online exams, such as Respondus Lockdown—a custom browser that encloses the testing environment within online learning platforms, including Blackboard, Brightspace, and Moodle. While in the exam, students cannot access other URLs or other applications.¹⁶ Employing technologies such as this could significantly mitigate concerns regarding academic integrity.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

AVAILABILITY

<p>Principle: Online courses should be as accommodating as possible.</p> <p>Principle: Institutions offering online courses should employ assessment formats that are delivered electronically.</p> <p>Concern: Currently, online courses may require a student to access physical course materials.</p> <p>Concern: Current online courses may require assessments that are delivered in a physical setting.</p> <p>Recommendation: Insofar as it is possible, all online course materials should be available electronically.</p> <p>Recommendation: 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.</p> <p>Recommendation: The provincial government should provide funding for institutions for the development of secure online assessment technology.</p>
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Among students, online courses are seen as a way to overcome concerns relating to scheduling, accessibility, or course availability at their home institution. This section in particular relates to how to make online courses as convenient as possible. Assessments for fully online courses should not require students or institutions to make accommodations for distance learners. It is important to have reasonable access to assessments for online courses. Therefore, OUSA recommends a strategic shift away from in-person assessment formats within online courses, as long as the online assessment format is comparable to an in-person equivalent and does not harm

13 Student Financial Assistance Branch, Eligibility, Assessment and Review Manual Part I., 35.

14 Adobe, “Discover the Creative Cloud Experience,” last accessed February 14, 2016, <https://creative.adobe.com/plans?plan=edu&promoid=KTROQ>.

15 Bassett, Laura, Stéphane Hamade, Matt McLean, Doug Turner, and Danielle Pierre. Reforming Ontario’s Student Financial Assistance System. Policy Paper. Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2015.

16 Respondus, “Lockdown Browser,” last accessed February 26, 2016, <https://www.respondus.com/products/lockdown-browser/>

academic integrity. There are several reasons for this gradual shift, including, but not limited to, addressing barriers for different types of online learners, such as students living in remote areas; students taking Ontario online courses out of province or out of country, and online learners with busy and demanding professional schedules.

Building on the principle of convenience, students are concerned that many online courses require access to physical resources such as textbooks and readings. The student on an internship in northern Alberta, or spending summer in a rural location cannot simply walk to the campus bookstore or library. For students taking online courses for convenience, as well as students with accessibility limitations, having these resources available online is essential. Students recommend that instructors and course designers choose course readings and textbooks that are available electronically. For example, instructors could adopt and adapt textbooks produced through the Government of British Columbia's Open Textbook Project, which provides free online textbooks, most of which are fully accessible, under a Creative Commons license.¹⁷ Similarly, the Government of Ontario could implement its own open textbook project, whereby it provides free textbooks for the most popular courses taken in the province. Having recognized the value of such a project, OUSA recommended it be developed in its 2013 Ancillary Fees paper.¹⁸

Just as course materials should be made available in an online format, students believe that online courses should have online forms of assessment. If we see two primary drivers of online course enrolment as convenience and accessibility, it seems counter-intuitive to require in-person assessment. Instructors and educational developers should create online assessments that replicate the same learning outcomes as in-person alternatives. Moreover, educators developing online courses should recognize that there may be temporal constraints placed on students as well. For example, a student taking a summer course while in Australia may not be able to take an online exam or participate in an online seminar at the same time as a student in Ontario.

Students recognize that there may be concerns relating to academic integrity that arise from online assessments, particularly in regards to quizzes and exams, i.e., it may not be possible for instructors to develop assessments that are equally rigorous, both in the achievement of learning outcomes and assurance of academic integrity, as in-person alternatives.

Many of these concerns can be alleviated through deliberate and accommodating design; for example, by using papers or other assignment-based forms of assessment. Additionally, instructors can take advantage of emerging technologies like the aforementioned Respondus Lockdown software.¹⁹ Online proctoring replicates the in-person proctoring experience by using screen capture, and audio-video connections to ensure students are following academic integrity requirements²⁰.

However, with that being said, students recognize that these technologies may not be adequate for all purposes, and that any shift to online examinations must be deliberate and strategic. Thus, OUSA recommends that the provincial government provide targeted investments to develop secure online examination software that alleviates academic integrity concerns and gives instructors more options in addition to those cited here.

¹⁷ BCcampus, "Open Textbook Project," last accessed February 15, 2016, <https://bccampus.ca/open-textbook-project/>
¹⁸ Eftekarpour, Amir, Roland Erman, Drew Ursacki, and Christopher Yendt. Ancillary Fees. Policy Paper. Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2013.

¹⁹ Respondus, "Lockdown Browser," last accessed February 26, 2016, <https://www.respondus.com/products/lockdown-browser/>

²⁰ BrowserU, "How Remote Proctoring Works," last accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.proctoru.com/howitworks.php>.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND FUNCTIONAL BARRIERS

Principle: Online courses should be delivered with a focus on universal accessibility.

Concern: Post-secondary institutions often assume that all prospective students have an adequate level of computer literacy, and can thus easily navigate online courses.

Concern: Currently, online courses are not designed with sufficient consideration for its accessibility for students with disabilities.

Recommendation: Post-secondary institutions should strive to develop digital literacy skills that students require to succeed in their online courses.

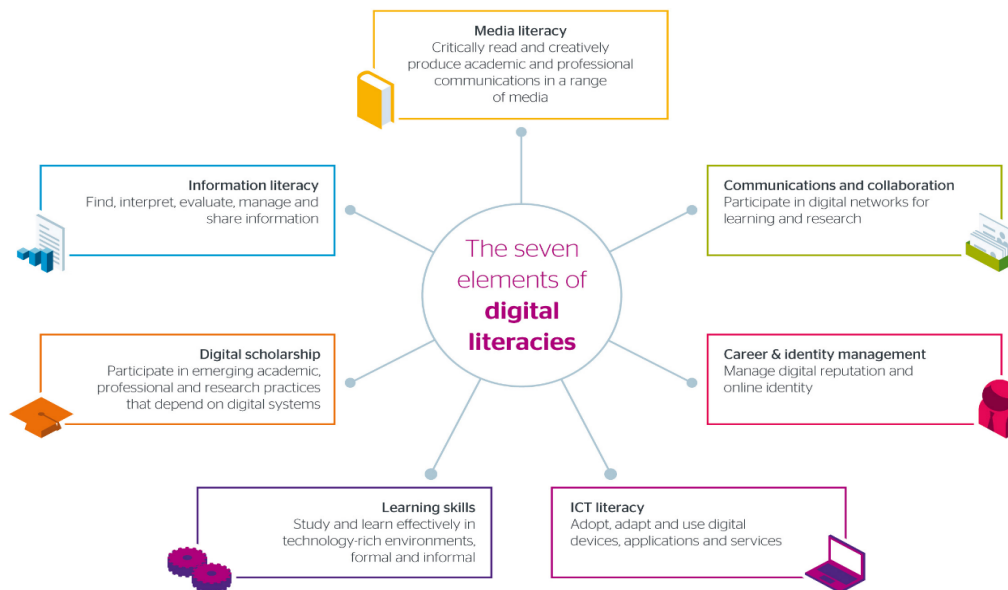
Recommendation: Online courses should be proactively designed under consideration of the guidelines and requirements set forth by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

Accessibility to post-secondary education is a key pillar of OUSA’s mandate, and informs much of our policy creation. By creating a system that allows and encourages more students to enrol in a post-secondary education, Ontario will be providing the means to enhance social mobility and capital for disadvantaged groups within society. With respect to online learning, accessibility comes in a number of forms: *this section deals with accessibility for students lacking digital literacy skills and accessibility for students with disabilities.*

First, in order to alleviate concerns relating to an increasingly online post-secondary environment, universities must strategically address digital literacy among students, staff, and instructors. Jisc, an arms-length public post-secondary organization in the United Kingdom, defines the term as such: “Digital literacy looks beyond functional IT skills to describe a richer set of digital behaviours, practices and identities.”²¹ Moreover, they provide seven elements that together encompass a broad idea of what digital literacy means in a university context (see Figure 2). Students see digital literacy as especially important in an online context because online learning is frequently accessed by non-traditional and mature students who may not have had access to the same kinds of technology growing up.

²¹ Jisc, “Developing Digital Literacies,” last accessed February 14, 2016, <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-digital-literacies>

Figure 2: “The seven elements of digital literacies”²²



Source: Jisc. "The Seven Elements of Digital Literacies." Digital image. Jisc. December 16, 2014. Accessed February 14, 2016. <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-digital-literacies>.

Currently, many institutions do very little to proactively develop digital literacy skills. A 2014 survey of students at 213 post-secondary institutions in 15 countries reports that: “Half of students (51%) said they could be more effective if they were better at using the LMS [Learning Management System]²³... This finding was nearly universal among different types of students and institutions.” Interestingly, it was students who self-identified higher levels of technological inclination who saw a greater than average potential.²⁴

From this, we can infer that higher levels of digital literacy improves students’ ability to see the potential for technology to aid them in their learning. Therefore, we recommend that universities focus on creating comprehensive digital literacy resources for students taking online classes. Ideally, this would be part of a broader strategic focus of improving digital literacy skills among all members of the university community.

Universities should also develop LMS-specific resources that help students apply their digital literacy skills to the unique context of their institution’s online learning environment. With the founding of eCampus Ontario, a major government priority is to encourage students to enrol outside of their home institution²⁵. Students agree that this provides better opportunities to tailor degrees to specific interests. However, it also can pose difficulties for students using different LMS’s that each have their own set of features. It is essential that students have access to resources that help them apply their digital literacy skills in different contexts, and improve their ability to meet their courses’ learning outcomes.

²² Jisc. "The Seven Elements of Digital Literacies." Digital image. Jisc. December 16, 2014. Accessed February 14, 2016, <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-digital-literacies>.

²³ In this section, we are assuming that all online courses to which our recommendations apply will be administered through a Learning Management System, or similar online environment, such as Brightspace, Blackboard, or Moodle.

²⁴ Dahlstrom, Eden, and Jacqueline Bichsel. ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2014. Research report. Louisville, CO: ECAR, October 2014. Available from <http://www.educause.edu/ecar>.

²⁵ eCampus Ontario, “Minister’s Message for the eCampus Ontario Portal,” last accessed February 12, 2016, <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/news/ministers-message-for-the-ecampus-ontario-portal>.

Accessibility for students with disabilities

As referenced throughout the paper, online learning provides students who may not be able to otherwise access in-person education with a comparable alternative. This is especially true for students with disabilities that may find a traditional classroom environment ineffective. On the other hand, students with disabilities may take online courses for convenience. Regardless of the motivation, students believe that online learning should be fully accessible to all students, regardless of any disabilities they possess.

For post-secondary institutions, accessibility is not simply a worthy objective – it is a legal requirement. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) regulates online content, including online courses delivered by Ontario universities. Outlined in the Act is an obligation for institutions to adhere to the highest standard of the internationally recognized Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. Briefly, these guidelines state that online content must include accessibility aids such as text captions and specific contrast ratios for images, descriptive headings and labels, and the ability to resize text without altering clarity.²⁶

Much of this is built into learning management systems; however, a great degree relies on course designers and instructors knowing AODA requirements and how to ensure their course content complies with the regulations. This is an area where instructors must receive support. To this end, students recommend that online course approval processes at each institution include components relating to AODA compliance. Requiring course designers to comply during the approval and design phase will ensure that proper attention is paid to AODA compliance. Thus, students with disabilities will be able to access content on day one of being enrolled in an online course instead of needing to request an accommodation.

Beyond AODA compliance, creating an accessible online education environment also requires a re-thinking of course design and ultimately, the adoption of the Universal Instructional Design (UID) approach to course development. The University of Guelph describes UID as follows:

“UID is not just about accessibility for persons with a disability – it’s about truly universal thinking – considering the potential needs of all learners when designing and delivering instruction. Through that process, one can identify and eliminate barriers to teaching and learning, thus maximizing learning for students of all backgrounds and learner preferences, while minimizing the need for special accommodations and maintaining academic rigour.”²⁷

Students believe that universities should adopt a UID approach to course development, and provide adequate resources to instructors and educational developers to help them understand and implement UID principles. In doing so, institutions will provide courses in the most accessible fashion possible and create a better learning experience for all students. More on this topic can be found in OUSA’s forthcoming paper on students with disabilities.²⁸

²⁶ Government of Ontario, “How to make websites accessible,” last accessed February 14, 2016, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/how-make-websites-accessible>

²⁷ Palmer, Jaellayna, and Aldo Caputo. The Universal Instructional Design Implementation Guide. Report, last accessed February 14, 2014. http://opened.uoguelph.ca/en/students/resources/UID_implimentation_guide_15.pdf.

²⁸ Bassett, Laura, Sarah Letersky, Raelle Ricci, and Danielle Pierre. Policy Paper: Students with Disabilities. Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2016.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Principle: Students enrolled in online courses should be able to access adequate academic and technical support services to facilitate their success.

Concern: Universities have not adequately adapted their support services to serve students taking online courses.

Recommendation: Post-secondary 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.

Recommendation: Post-secondary institutions should perform regular audits of their support services to ensure they are adequately meeting the needs of students.

Universities have become increasingly aware of the need for technical and academic support services. Most offer a wide-range of services, including IT help-desks, writing centres, and learning strategies workshops. These services are incredibly helpful and can contribute to students' overall academic achievement as well as student retention rates.²⁹ For example, the FAQ on the Writing Center and its services from Columbia College in New York discusses how the Center works to help each student “improve as a reader, writer and thinker,” illustrating the value and usefulness of such services for students.³⁰

Online learners have similar need for support services and must have the opportunity to develop the same skills as on-campus learners. In fact, due to the nature of online learning they may require greater access to services like technical support. Although online students tend to pay similar if not equal amounts for tuition, they have less support available to them, sometimes simply because they are located off-campus or in remote areas.

Technical support is essential for online students, yet delivering that support can be difficult. Physical technical support for computers or Internet connections, although offered on-campus, provides little-to-no help for distance learners. Providing support for LMS-related difficulties, however, falls squarely on institutions. Universities often provide basic “frequently asked questions pages” and IT help desk emails, but this ignores patterns of how students seek help when they experience technical difficulties within their online courses.

According to the Educause Centre for Analysis and Research (ECAR), a post-secondary research centre, only 22 per cent of students go to university help desks for assistance. Most students use Google or YouTube, or ask their peers. Within different age, gender, and technological inclination groupings, however, we see a number of variations. For example, older students are more inclined to use a help-desk than younger students (31% vs. 19%).³¹ What OUSA draws from the report is that students require a diverse range of technical support services that take into account how different students learn and access information.

Students recommend that universities ensure that there are adequate resources available for students seeking technical support. Given the diversity of online learners, this requires a multi-pronged approach. Universities need help desks that are adequately staffed, whether they are run through the LMS provider or in-house. When these services are not available, universities ought to acknowledge and promote what ECAR calls “the paradigm shift to DIY support” by encouraging students, as a supplement to institutional services, to seek help from peers and referring them to useful online resources that house information or academic resources, such as Google Scholar or Khan Academy.³² One way of doing this would be to put a link to support

29 Hanover Research. “Overview of Student Retention Theories, Strategies, and Practices at Peer Institutions,” last accessed February 22, 2016. <http://www.algonquincollege.com/student-success/files/2014/12/Overview-of-Student-Retention-Theories-Strategies-and-Practices-at-Peer-Institutions.pdf>

30 Columbia College. “Undergraduate Writing Program FAQ,” last accessed February 22, 2016, <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center/faq#why>

31 Dahlstrom, Eden, and Jacqueline Bichsel. ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2014. Research report. Louisville, CO: ECAR, October 2014.

32 Ibid.

videos on the LMS login page. This acknowledges the different ways that students access help, and saves resources while providing better outcomes.

Equally as important as technical support are academic support services. On-campus students have access to a myriad of support services, yet at many universities the selection for online students is limited. Students need access to a diverse range of supports with a focus on personal interaction between students and academic support staff. In the 2014 ECAR report, students reported higher levels of satisfaction with their IT help desk when there was a greater degree of personal interaction such as with a phone call or in-person visit.³³ Given this, services that provide personal interaction between students and support staff should continue to be developed and enhanced.

To date, universities have been slow to adapt their support services to an increasingly online audience. For example, an environmental scan of online learning and writing centre websites at OUSA's members' institutions shows that only two, Queen's University and the University of Waterloo, advertise online/telephone appointments for writing assistance. This is worrying for two reasons: it shows a lack of understanding of the needs of online students, and it may dissuade students from enrolling in online courses due to a perceived lack of appropriate support.

Therefore, students recommend that universities seek to bring their academic support services into the digital age. For example, Queen's University's Arts and Science Online, which provides online courses and degree programs for thousands of students every year, has academic advisers who are available via Skype or telephone.³⁴ Additionally, Queen's Student Academic Success Services offers writing and learning strategies assistance to distance students via telephone.³⁵ Students welcome these services and recommend that universities continue to improve on them. However, we recognize challenges related to scalability, and believe further research should be done into the effectiveness of different academic support services for distance students.

Moreover, students believe that universities should adopt similar approaches to those outlined in the previous section. By referring students to "do it yourself"-type academic success resources, universities can complement their existing services and leverage a pre-existing tendency amongst students. eCampus Ontario already offers a number of such resources³⁶, and students recommend that those offerings continue to expand and adapt to student needs.

Auditing

While transitioning their support services to the age of online learning, students believe that universities must be mindful of how well these services are performing. The same techniques that are used for in-person support may not be directly transferable to distance support. For example, a writing specialist may not be able to effectively walk students through their paper over the phone – but, they may be able to do so using Adobe Connect: a video-conferencing software.³⁷ It is these small adaptations that amount to a re-thinking of how universities deliver support.

In order to ensure that universities get the transition right, it is essential that administrators reflect on the quality of support services for online students. Thus, students recommend that universities track student satisfaction and other key performance indicators for both online and in-person supports, and make adjustments as necessary. As a potential avenue for tracking these

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Arts and Science Online, "Learning Support," Queen's University, last accessed February 14, 2016, http://www.queensu.ca/artsci_online/current-students/learning-support.

³⁵ Student Academic Success Services, "SASS - How We Help," Queen's University, last accessed February 14, 2016, <http://sass.queensu.ca/how-we-help/>

³⁶ eCampusOntario, "Student Supports Search," last accessed February 15, 2016, <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/Resource/Student#!/search>

³⁷ Adobe, "Discover Adobe Connect Solutions," last accessed March 4, 2016. <http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html>

indicators, institutions should consider participating in the ECAR Study of Students and Information Technology in 2016. ECAR will provide the participating university with the institution-specific survey results, which includes data on satisfaction with IT support services³⁸. It would then be possible for administrators to benchmark their IT supports against those of similar universities.

QUALITY

ENSURING THE QUALITY OF COURSE DELIVERY

Principle: Instructors should have access to resources that provide training regarding the design and delivery of online courses.

Concern: Currently, online course instructors lack the training required to ensure a high level of teaching quality and course delivery.

Recommendation: Post-secondary institutions should develop and disseminate resources for instructors to train them in online course design and delivery.

Recommendation: The Province of Ontario should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to develop the aforementioned training resources.

Recommendation: The Province of Ontario should continue to provide grants in support of the development of innovative online courses.

As new online learning formats have proliferated in the post-secondary sector, there has also been an increased awareness of the pedagogical and technological differences between online and in-person course design. While a traditional classroom setting has the option of including various forms of multimedia into its curriculum, online course formats often necessitate use of these technologies, and indeed, can excel in their delivery and use.³⁹ However, online courses are often criticized for their inability to facilitate the meaningful and “authentic” forms of interactions necessary for “knowledge creation.”⁴⁰ As Chia-Wen Tsai and Pei-Di Shen, authors of the article “Improving Undergraduates’ Experience of Online Learning and Involvement: An Innovative Online Pedagogy” note, online courses are also highly reliant on “self-regulated learning” in which students must choose their own pace and “learn independently, without the teachers’ on-the-spot assistance.”⁴¹

Additionally, while learning-enabled technologies can improve teaching and learning, online course formats still face fundamental challenges that require nuance to overcome. These difficulties can be simple “ad hoc issues” that stem from the fact that instructors and students are simply not in the “same place at the same time.” This situation often precludes direct and instantaneous communication, which means that it will take longer to resolve issues or answer questions. Therefore, an online course instructor would have to “anticipate things that might go wrong” with course material or technological access, and generate significantly more complex contingency plans than an in-person course instructor would.⁴² Finally, while learning management systems are now highly sophisticated and customizable, their complexity may “encourage [the use of] standard online course delivery formats” if a course designer does not

38 eLearning and Educational Technology Working Group, “Minutes of the Meeting of December 7, 2015,” last accessed February 15, 2016,

<https://wiki.queensu.ca/display/CIOEETWG/eLearning+and+Educational+Technology+Working+Group>

39 Nicole C. Green et. al, “Reconceptualising Higher Education Pedagogy in Online Learning,” *Distance Education* 31/3 (2010): 262.

40. *Ibid.* 270.

41. Chia-Wen Tsai and Pei-Di Shen, “Improving Undergraduates’ Experience of Online Learning and Involvement: An Innovative Online Pedagogy,” *International Journal of Enterprise Information Systems* 9/3 (2013): 101.

42. Anthony G. Picciano, “Online Learning: Implications for Higher Education Pedagogy and Policy,” *Journal of Thought* 41/1 (2006): 79.

understand the capabilities and limitations of the learning management system, according to Anthony Picciano, author of an academic paper on online learning.⁴³

Given the pedagogical and technological specificities of online course formats, course designers and instructors must have access to sufficient training and information resources. While many materials are accessible for in-person course designers and instructors, the same cannot be said for those teaching online. Because online learning is relatively new to the post-secondary sector, it is especially pertinent that course designers and instructors have access to well-circulated training resources that can inform them of both the pedagogical and technological capabilities of online learning. These resources will complement the online course design and delivery specialists that OUSA is also advocating for in this paper, therefore providing course designers and instructors with both the training resources and personnel required to develop high-quality online courses.

Although the newly created eCampus Ontario does offer teaching resources, it is important to acknowledge that each post-secondary institution has different learning management systems and technologies, and therefore requires specific training resources for the course designers and instructors at their respective institutions.⁴⁴ For instance, the University of Toronto's Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation has developed an Instructor Toolkit, amongst other teaching resources, that serves to inform course designers and instructors of relevant online pedagogies and technologies that can be employed at the University of Toronto.⁴⁵ Correspondingly, OUSA is recommending that the Province of Ontario provide financial support to allow universities to develop and disseminate training resources pertaining to online course design and delivery. This can include training on building interactive discussion boards, using multimedia and proper online assessment methods. These training resources will enable course designers to understand the virtues of limitations of the pedagogies and technologies associated with online learning at their particular institution, and allow them to adapt their courses such that they create high-quality, meaningfully engaging, effective, and innovative online courses.

Online courses are a new feature of higher education, and have created a field that has the potential to be highly innovative. It is OUSA's belief that the Province of Ontario should support the development of innovative online courses that can set unprecedented standards and create new teaching methods for others to follow. Therefore, OUSA supports the continuation of the Ontario Ministry for Training, Colleges and Universities' Ontario Shared Online Course Fund.⁴⁶ We believe that this fund provides effective support to course designers and instructors who are actively creating innovative online courses that consistently improve students' learning and experience.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF ONLINE LEARNING

Principle: While online courses and in-person courses should have comparable learning outcomes, they employ fundamentally different pedagogical methods.

Principle: Ontario's quality assurance framework for post-secondary studies must be sensitive to the pedagogical differences between online and on-campus courses.

Concern: Currently, the Ontario Council on Quality Assurance uses a quality assurance framework, which does not reflect the quality indicators most relevant to online learning.

Recommendation: The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework which recognizes the quality indicators that are relevant and unique to online learning.

43. *Ibid.* 80.

44. eCampusOntario, "Teaching Resources Search," last accessed February 15, 2016, <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/Resource/Instructor#!search>.

45. University of Toronto's Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, "Instructor Toolkit," last accessed February 15, 2016, <http://teaching.utoronto.ca/ed-tech/online-learning/toolkit/>.

46. Queen's University Arts and Science Online, "New Course Development," last accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.queensu.ca/artsci_online/courses/new-course-development.

Recently, it has become fairly common for post-secondary institutions to offer select courses in both online and in-person formats; in these instances, it is important to recognize that both course formats should have comparable learning outcomes. This means that online courses should seek to impart learning outcomes that are similar to those gained from courses taught in-person. For example, if an in-person course seeks to develop a student's critical thinking and public speaking abilities, the learning outcomes of an identical or similar online course should not significantly differ. However, as was previously mentioned, online pedagogies are distinct from traditional pedagogies employed by in-person courses because the learning environments are different. While traditional in-person courses tend to involve a lecture and tutorial component, online courses often rely on different teaching mediums, including written material, different forms of multimedia, and discussion forums. Moreover, online pedagogies utilize technology to create virtual simulation exercises; this is especially important for disciplines such as biology, where laboratories are generally considered to be a requirement to fulfill the course's learning outcomes.^{47 48} At Queen's University, an online first-year Gender Studies course develops its students' critical thinking and communicative abilities through a collaborative project, which allows students to create a podcast, filmed presentation, or online academic poster on a topic of choice that pertains to the course material.⁴⁹

Since online pedagogies employ different teaching methods and mediums than in-person pedagogies do, quality assurance frameworks that apply to online courses must be sensitive to these differences. This ensures that the quality assurance indicators used are relevant to online learning, therefore producing an accurate picture of how a course could be improved to better achieve its outcomes. Currently, universities in Ontario measure the quality of their programs in accordance with a framework established by the Council of Ontario Universities in 1996.⁵⁰ While this framework was renewed and updated in 2014, very few changes were made to address the growing need for a quality assurance framework for online courses. Moreover, the original framework was not designed with online learning in mind, and the updated framework fails to set adequate quality assurance indicators for an online course environment. Critically, what must be addressed is that the quality of an online course is highly reliant upon the effective use of technology; this concept is not well addressed in the current quality assurance framework.

OUSA recognizes the distinctness of online pedagogies, and recommends that the Ontario Council on Quality Assurance develop a quality assurance framework that recognizes the quality indicators that are most relevant to online course formats. This framework would serve as a guideline for online course approvals, and apply to courses available through eCampus Ontario.

The Online Learning Consortium, formerly known as Sloan-C, can serve as a starting point for this project. Their Quality Assurance Framework identifies five pillars for successful online learning: learning effectiveness, scale, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction. This framework calls for course designers and instructors to "take advantage of the unique characteristics of online environments" while ensuring accessibility; this notably includes "technical infrastructure."⁵¹ Thus, the Online Learning Consortium's quality assurance framework recognizes the defining role that technology plays in online course quality, and emphasizes this as a key quality indicator. It is integral for Ontario's quality assurance framework to follow suit so that the quality of online programming can be assessed based on relevant factors. There are, of course, other quality indicators that are unique to online learning; the emphasis on learning-enabled technology merely serves as a tangible example of such a quality indicator, and illustrates the need to develop a quality assurance framework which best suits the increasingly prevalent

47. Jenni Parker, Dorit Maor and Jan Herrington, "Authentic Online Learning: Aligning Learner Needs, Pedagogy and Technology," *Issues in Educational Research* 23/2 (2013): 229.

48. Anthony G. Picciano, "Online Learning: Implications for Higher Education Pedagogy and Policy," 80.

49. Queen's University Arts and Science Online, "Women, Gender, Difference," last accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.queensu.ca/artsci_online/courses/women-gender-difference.

50. Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, "Quality Assurance Framework," last accessed February 15, 2016, <http://oucqa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Quality-Assurance-Framework-and-Guide-Updated-September-2015.pdf>.

51. Online Learning Consortium, "Our Quality Framework," last accessed February 15, 2016, <http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/about/quality-framework-five-pillars/>.

online learning environment. Other metrics could include the quality of assessments, the quality and quantity of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions, and the accessibility of support structures for students. Additionally, in accordance with our policies regarding students with disabilities, OUSA recommends that any quality assurance framework for online courses encourage consideration for the Universal Design for Learning in all online course designs; this would proactively create a maximally inclusive and accessible environment for all students.⁵² Finally, quality assurance processes should utilize learning analytics to “optimize both student and faculty performance, refine pedagogical strategies, and allow instructors to judge their own educational efficacy.”⁵³

ECAMPUS ONTARIO

FUNDING AND VISION

Principle: A stable, consistent, and predictable long-term funding plan from the provincial government provides institutions and eCampus Ontario with the stability of efficient long-term planning.

Principle: eCampus Ontario requires a vision that encourages a sustainable and prosperous future for online learning.

Concern: An inconsistent and unstable funding plan from the provincial government prevents eCampus Ontario from strategic long-term planning.

Recommendation: 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.

Recommendation: 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 online education system in Ontario is in a period of innovation and development. In 2015, the provincial government announced plans to invest \$72 million dollars to support the development of online education in Ontario.⁵⁴ Since the emergence of eCampus Ontario, students have gained access to a web portal of 13,735 online courses offered by 45 institutions across the province.

Currently, the investment from the provincial government provides eCampus Ontario with five years of operational funding; OUSA is pleased with this arrangement. In order for the online education system to continue evolving and providing students with a high-quality and flexible online learning experience, eCampus Ontario requires a long-term vision and commitment from the provincial government; the growth and sustainability of a high-quality post-secondary online education system is vital for students in Ontario.

Students believe that eCampus Ontario should continue the mission of providing a high-quality and flexible student experience and therefore have the means to effectively conduct long-term planning. Again, to this end, eCampus Ontario should have a minimum of five years of operational funding from the provincial government to support the development of online education and sustainable programming.

52. Wilfred Laurier University, “Universal Design for Learning,” last accessed February 15, 2016, https://legacy.wlu.ca/page.php?grp_id=12604&p=25517.

53. Johann Ari Larusson and Brandon White, *Learning Analytics: From Research to Practice* (New York: Springer, 2014), 2.

54. Government of Ontario, “Ontario Launches Online Educational Portal,” last accessed February 22, 2016, <https://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2015/10/ontario-launches-online-education-portal.html>

Further to the short, medium, and long-term vision of eCampus Ontario, students recommend that it continue to build its website to allow for greater ease of use, and indeed, usefulness. To this end, eCampus Ontario should allow students to locate online courses by academic discipline and level of study—whether they are undergraduate, professional, graduate, or not-for-credit courses. Furthermore, eCampus Ontario could also implement a universal user-login system accessible to all member institutions. Specifically, students would like to be able to register with eCampus Ontario with their personal university usernames and passwords, rather than having to create several online registration profiles with each institution. By expanding the tools of the website to encourage greater student use, eCampus Ontario can ensure a prosperous future for itself and for online learning in Ontario.

Finally, students believe that eCampus Ontario should function as a complement to institution’s existing online learning infrastructure while gradually finding innovative ways to collaborate in the future. Going forward, students should have a strong voice in deciding the relationship between eCampus and Ontario post-secondary institutions to ensure their collaboration is in the best interests of online student learners.

COLLABORATION WITH ONCAT

Principle: Collaboration and a joint funding model between eCampus Ontario and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) will allow for efficient resource allocation, knowledge sharing, and the compatibility of policy decisions.

Concern: A lack of organizational integration between eCampus Ontario and ONCAT would impede the development of transferable online courses.

Recommendation: The provincial government should ensure eCampus Ontario and ONCAT share the same pool of funding.

Recommendation: eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should engage in a collaborative relationship that facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices.

Recommendation: eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should ensure that students have access to an entirely online and fully-transferable first year.

The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) and eCampus Ontario currently share funding from the provincial government and collaborate to provide transferability among Ontario institutions for online courses. Students believe that both organizations should continue to develop in tandem by sharing resources and advancing the goal of further transferability of online courses among Ontario institutions. ONCAT and eCampus Ontario should remain distinct organizations but should maintain a healthy relationship and work towards a shared mission of seamless transferability among of online courses. Students feel that a lack of organizational integration would impede the development of this shared mission.

For this reason, OUSA believes that ONCAT and eCampus Ontario should share the same pool of funding and maintain a collaborative relationship that facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices. Furthermore, the collaboration between both organizations should eventually result in an entirely online and fully transferable first-year of university. Depending on the program, students should be able to complete their first year through online courses at multiple institutions from across the province. OUSA recognizes that not all programs will be able to implement a fully transferable first year of university; in light of this, emphasis to offer entirely online and transferable programs should be given to humanities and social science programs as a foundation. Moving forward, a fully transferable online first year should attempt to incorporate other disciplines.

STUDENT VOICE

Principle: Student consultation, feedback, and representation allows eCampus Ontario to act in the best interest of post-secondary students.

Concern: Failure to consult with university students may result in detrimental policy decisions that negatively impact the online learning experience.

Recommendation: eCampus Ontario should ensure students are sufficiently consulted and that student representation on the board of directors is maintained.

Recommendation: 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.

Recommendation: Moreover, eCampus should strive to be user-friendly and as interactive as possible so as to facilitate high levels of student engagement and participation.

OUSA is pleased to see that eCampus Ontario's Board of Directors (BOD) includes student representation.⁵⁵ Moving forward, eCampus Ontario should maintain BOD positions for student representation. On matters that affect post-secondary students, student input is a valuable resource. Students can offer a live interpretation of the student experience and provide useful advice for post-secondary matters. Failing to consult with students may negatively impact the online student experience and result in detrimental policy decisions. In order to maintain adequate student input into online learning, eCampus Ontario should frequently seek student input on eCampus affairs and ensure students are consulted and encouraged to offer feedback on online course delivery, design, and assessment. Moreover, eCampus should strive to be user-friendly and as interactive as possible so as to facilitate high levels of student engagement and participation. Moving forward, eCampus Ontario should be an interactive and user-friendly website that promotes engagement and participation using tools such as a live chat and frequently-asked questions section.

As a first step, the Government of Ontario should apply this report's recommendations regarding the purpose of online learning, the quality of online courses, and the online student experience to eCampus Ontario and mould it so as to be reflective of OUSA students' vision for it as Ontario's online consortium.

⁵⁵ eCampus Ontario, "Board of Directors," last accessed February 19, 2016.
<https://www.ecampusontario.ca/content/board-of-directors>

POLICY STATEMENT

Online Learning

Whereas: Online Learning is the preferred substitute for traditional learning, and offers flexibility and access to students.

Whereas: Online Learning is not a replacement for traditional learning, but rather the most preferred and flexible alternative.

Whereas: Online learning could be used exclusively as an institutional revenue generator and as a method of reducing costs that may undermine the quality of student learning.

Whereas: Online Learning should be accessible to all willing and qualified domestic and international students.

Whereas: Domestic and international students may face access challenges and/or barriers participating in online courses at Canadian institutions, such as internet connectivity, access to suitable computers, and the physical demands of in-person examinations.

Whereas: Online courses should be as accommodating as possible.

Whereas: Currently, online courses may require a student to access physical course materials.

Whereas: Current online courses may require assessments that are delivered in a physical setting.

Whereas: Online courses should be delivered with a mind towards universal accessibility.

Whereas: Post-secondary institutions often assume that all prospective students have an adequate level of computer literacy, and can thus easily navigate an online course.

Whereas: Post-secondary institutions often overlook concerns regarding financial accessibility in the context of online courses.

Whereas: Currently, online courses are not designed with sufficient consideration for its accessibility for students with disabilities.

Whereas: Students enrolled in online courses should be able to access adequate academic and technical support services to facilitate their success.

Whereas: Universities have not adequately adapted their support services to serve students taking online courses.

Whereas: Instructors should have access to resources that provide training regarding the design and delivery of online courses.

Whereas: Currently, online course instructors lack the training required to ensure a high level of teaching quality and course delivery.

Whereas: While online courses and in-person courses should have comparable learning outcomes, they employ fundamentally different pedagogical methods.

Whereas: Ontario's quality assurance framework for post-secondary studies must be sensitive to the pedagogical differences between online and on-campus courses.

Whereas: Currently, the Ontario Council on Quality Assurance uses a quality assurance framework, which does not reflect the quality indicators most relevant to online learning.

Whereas: A stable, consistent, and predictable long-term funding plan from the provincial government provides institutions and eCampus Ontario with the stability of efficient long-term planning.

Whereas: eCampus Ontario requires a vision that encourages a sustainable and prosperous future for online learning.

Whereas: An inconsistent and unstable funding plan from the provincial government prevents eCampus Ontario from strategic long-term planning.

Whereas: Collaboration and a joint funding model between eCampus Ontario and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) will allow for efficient resource allocation, knowledge sharing, and the compatibility of policy decisions.

Whereas: A lack of organizational integration between eCampus Ontario and ONCAT would impede the development of transferable online courses.

Whereas: Student consultation, feedback, and representation allows eCampus Ontario to act in the best interest of post-secondary students.

Whereas: Failure to consult with university students may result in detrimental policy decisions that negatively impact the online learning experience.

Be it resolved that: Online learning should not displace traditional learning nor be used as a replacement for the traditional classroom environment.

Be it further resolved that: Institutions should refrain from using online courses as a revenue-generating tool and as a cost-saving measure.

BIFRT: The provincial government should ensure domestic and international students participating in online courses in Ontario have access to online education by investing in infrastructure development programs that provide internet access to rural, northern, and indigenous communities.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide up-front grants for students that lack access to computers and associated technological requirements, including software and hardware upgrades.

BIFRT: The provincial government should encourage institutions to eliminate in-person examinations associated with online courses in order to maximize convenience and accessibility.

BIFRT: The provincial government should encourage institutions to invest in technology that make it possible for students to take online exams.

BIFRT: Insofar as it is possible, all online course materials should be available electronically.

BIFRT: 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.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide funding for institutions for the development of secure online assessment technology.

BIFRT: Post-secondary institutions should strive to develop digital literacy skills among students.

BIFRT: Instructors should only require hardware and software that is necessary for the achievement of course learning outcomes.

BIFRT: Post-secondary institutions should strive to develop digital literacy skills that students require to succeed in their online courses.

BIFRT: Online courses should be proactively designed under consideration of the guidelines and requirements set forth by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

BIFRT: Post-secondary institutions should ensure that students enrolled in online courses have access to high-quality academic and technical support services.

BIFRT: Post-secondary institutions should perform regular audits of their support services to ensure they are adequately meeting the needs of students.

BIFRT: Post-secondary institutions should develop and disseminate resources for instructors to train them in online course design and delivery.

BIFRT: The Province of Ontario should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to develop the aforementioned training resources.

BIFRT: The Province of Ontario should continue to provide grants in support of the development of innovative online courses.

BIFRT: The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework, which recognizes the quality indicators that are relevant and unique to online learning.

BIFRT: 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.

BIFRT: 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.

BIFRT: The provincial government should ensure eCampus Ontario and ONCAT share the same pool of funding.

BIFRT: eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should engage in a collaborative relationship that facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices.

BIFRT: eCampus Ontario and ONCAT should ensure that students have access to an entirely online and fully-transferable first year.

BIFRT: eCampus Ontario should ensure students are sufficiently consulted and that student representation on the board of directors is maintained.

BIFRT: 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.

BIFRT: Moreover, eCampus should strive to be user-friendly and as interactive as possible so as to facilitate high levels of student engagement and participation.