2021 Ontario Report: Tracking the Impacts of the Pandemic on Digital Learning in Ontario
Derived from the National Survey of Online and Digital Learning (Spring and Fall 2021)

Survey Overview

The purpose of the 2021 National Survey of Online and Digital Learning was to explore key issues in digital learning and to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital learning at publicly funded postsecondary institutions in Canada. The following insights were derived from respondents from Ontario publicly-assisted colleges and universities. The survey was sent directly to key administrative contacts at institutions who answered on behalf on their institutions. A full Ontario report will be made available in early 2022 (http://www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/publications/).

Ontario’s publicly-funded post-secondary institutions include Indigenous Institutes, colleges, and universities. eCampusOntario and the CDLRA affirm that the voices, perspectives, and histories of Indigenous Peoples are critical for the understanding of the landscape of online and digital learning. eCampusOntario and the CDLRA are working to ensure future reports include Indigenous Institutes as an equal and third pillar in the Ontario postsecondary system.

Challenges of the Pandemic (2020-2021)

Institutional Operations

Top 5 Institutional Operations Challenges

- Student retention: 72% (Ontario), 59% (National)
- Implementing health protocols: 69% (Ontario), 70% (National)
- International student recruitment: 59% (Ontario), 57% (National)
- Forced restructuring: 55% (Ontario), 52% (National)
- Technology infrastructure: 48% (Ontario), 60% (National)

Faculty and Students

Top 5 Challenges Related to Faculty and Students

- Student stress and mental health: 90% (Ontario), 90% (National)
- Faculty stress and mental health: 76% (Ontario), 74% (National)
- Online assessment practices: 76% (Ontario), 80% (National)
- Faculty attitudes toward online course delivery: 55% (Ontario), 44% (National)
- Student access to technologies (including high-speed internet): 41% (Ontario), 51% (National)

Respondents were asked to select the most pressing challenges affecting institutional operations (left) and the most pressing challenges faced by their faculty and students in 2020-2021 (right).

Changes Anticipated by Ontario Colleges and Universities

- 77% anticipate adding one or more programs.
- 82% anticipate more choices in delivery method.
- 76% anticipate more alternative credential offerings.
Institutional Definitions of Delivery Methods

As the Ontario postsecondary sector shifts from emergency remote teaching and learning to digital-by-design approaches, it is important that we develop and share vocabulary related to methods of learning delivery. In the 2020-21 National Survey, Ontario colleges and universities were asked about their institutional definitions of key terminology related to the modes of learning spectrum described by the CDLRA in 2021.

The Modes of Learning Spectrum

"In order to effectively track and investigate the evolution of digital learning in Canada, common definitions are critical, and some institutions may need to modify their existing definitions. [...] The Modes of Delivery Spectrum is proposed to provide a framework for common understanding and it is designed in such a way that the definitions will hold their meaning over time (as technologies and ways of teaching and learning continue to advance)" (Johnson, 2021).

Link here for more information.

Additionally, HyFlex (Hybrid + Flexible) models prioritize learner choice and autonomy. Learners select day-to-day how they will engage in their hybrid learning (i.e., in-person or virtual, synchronous or asynchronous). To learn more about Hybrid Futures, please visit eCampusOntario’s 2021 Foresight Report: Hybrid Futures (Link here).

Institutional learning delivery definitions

- **Distance Learning**
  - Single Institutional Definition: 45%
  - Multiple Varying Definitions: 26%
  - No Definition: 12%

- **Online Learning**
  - Single Institutional Definition: 21%
  - Multiple Varying Definitions: 74%
  - No Definition: 64%

- **Hybrid Learning**
  - Single Institutional Definition: 10%
  - Multiple Varying Definitions: 56%
  - No Definition: 34%

In-Person Learning (Face-to-Face Learning, On-Campus Learning)

- **In-Person Technology-Supported Learning**
  - (in-person instruction is technology-supported, use of digital resources)

- **In-Person Learning**
  - (no technology or digital resources)

Teaching and Learning in 2021-22

- **84%** of institutions anticipate greater use of digital teaching materials.
- **90%** of institutions anticipate increased support for the use of Open Educational Resources.
- **94%** of institutions anticipate greater use of technology.

Supporting Educators in 2021-22

The majority of Ontario colleges and universities anticipate the following supports will be available to educators in 2021-22.

- **Further professional development for faculty**
  - Very unlikely: 3%
  - Somewhat unlikely: 41%
  - Neutral: 56%

- **Increased support for the use of Open Educational Resources**
  - Very unlikely: 3%
  - Somewhat unlikely: 7%
  - Neutral: 47%
  - Somewhat likely: 43%

- **Upgrades to the institution’s technology infrastructure**
  - Very unlikely: 3%
  - Somewhat unlikely: 12%
  - Neutral: 30%
  - Somewhat likely: 55%

- **Additional resources in instructional design for online course development**
  - Very unlikely: 10%
  - Somewhat unlikely: 7%
  - Neutral: 23%
  - Somewhat likely: 37%
  - Very likely: 23%

"What is now needed are faculty development workshops geared toward integrating these new approaches and techniques [that emerged during the pandemic] from a thoughtful pedagogical and design perspective to ensure that such innovative ways are maximized for teaching and learning."

Quote provided by a participant in a qualitative study on the perspectives of teaching and learning leaders (the Teaching and Learning Study, 2021)