Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 2: Framing the Problem

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. Building on *Brief 1: Making the case*, which discussed why flexibility is important, this brief looks at what flexibility means to educators and what concerns them.

Approach

eCampusOntario launched a call for participation to instructors teaching or working directly with instructors at a postsecondary institute (college, university or Indigenous Institute) in Ontario to participate in a collaborative online workshop to discuss flexibility within the postsecondary sector. Through these participatory workshops, eCampusOntario sought to gain a deeper understanding of what flexibility means to the sector and the factors driving the need for it. These workshops utilized strategic foresight methodologies.

45 instructors from Ontario participated over 6 workshops. 29 taught at publicly assisted colleges and 16 taught at publicly assisted universities. 24 participants self-identified as full-time instructors and 17 self-identified as seasonal or part-time instructor. 4 participants self-identified as staff from teaching and learning departments directly supporting instructors at a postsecondary institute. No instructors from Indigenous Institutes participated. Participants' contributions during the workshops were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis. Major themes related to what flexibility means to educators and their concerns are presented in the sections below.

What does flexibility mean?

In conversations with educators, flexibility was initially defined as a delivery mode. Further discussion led to expanded definitions that considered it a characteristic of many things. In this broader context, flexibility is viewed as an approach to be applied to ways of thinking and doing (practice); tools, spaces, and systems (infrastructure); and processes, frameworks, funding, and regulations (policy). In this way, flexibility is both the goal and the means to get there.

FLEXIBLE PRACTICE
Room for educators to experiment, iterate, and learn, and the autonomy to choose the best methods and tools for them and their students.

FLEXIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE (PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL)
Dedicated space, supported by institutions, to access new tools and systems.

FLEXIBLE POLICY
Updated funding models and operational structures to support new ways of teaching, learning, enrollment, and assessment.

Why do we need flexibility?

The pandemic launched the postsecondary education sector into a state of rapid online delivery and remote learning integration and educators expressed that flexibility is now expected. Educators shared the sentiment that increased flexibility better supports diverse learner needs, but also the fear that if the sector doesn't evolve, it may become extinct.

FLEXIBILITY IS REQUIRED BECAUSE:

"It's critical to the future of education in Canada."
— *Ontario postsecondary instructor*

We can't go back to how we did things before the pandemic.

It enables sustainability of the sector by adjusting to economic pressures.

It is crucial to address equity gaps by meeting diverse student needs.

Learners expect it in every aspect of their postsecondary experience.

What are the contradictions within flexibility?

Educators noted that many of the factors enabling flexibility can also constrain it. Added to this is the overarching theme that educators feel the need for additional and better support. Educators expressed the need to address the tensions between the added pressures placed on them and the benefits flexibility provides to students.

"Technology can help make things more flexible, or, the reverse—more rigid."
— *Ontario postsecondary instructor*

Diversity and Personalization
Flexible delivery modes enable more inclusive and personalized learning experiences, supporting diverse students' needs and expectations.

Educators agree this is "the right thing to do," but need additional professional development and resources to adequately support diverse needs.

Multiple Pathways to Education
Flexible pathways to education, with multiple entry and exit points, to meet learners where they are.

Educators perceive that flexible pathways currently impose a part-time staffing model which limits educator career development, job security, and the continuity to improve course delivery.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning
Flexible modalities allow learners to access education anytime, anywhere, making it viable to work, learn, and live at home. This alleviates some of the financial burden of living on their own or in expensive city centres and helps balance education, work, and family.

Educators often feel frustrated with the lack of learner engagement in online formats, and the expectation to be available 24/7. Clear boundaries need to be established to also address their own work-life balance.

Interactive Tools and Resources
Flexible online environments have inspired educators to integrate more interactive tools and resources into their curriculum—inspiring the development of a vast library of resources to engage learners.

Educators can become overwhelmed with the options and don't always have adequate time to test new tools.

Authentic Assessment
Flexible teaching practices challenge traditional assessment and allow room for more authentic methods.

Educators lack updated policies that guide these new ways of assessing while maintaining academic integrity.

What's next?

The educators we heard from agreed that flexibility is desired and expected by the majority of their learners. However, while enabling positive change in postsecondary education, flexibility also presents challenges. Addressing these contradictions requires us to fully understand these challenges and dig deeper. In *Brief 3: Understanding the Problem*, we explore how motivations, feelings, and beliefs play into the challenges around flexibility.

ecampusontario.ca/research-and-foresight/
research@ecampusontario.ca

eCampus Ontario | Ontario