

Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 3: Understanding the Problem

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. After discussing what educators think about flexibility in *Brief 2: Framing the Problem*, this brief digs deeper into educators' assumptions in relation to flexibility.

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 educators' motivations, feelings and underlying factors with regards to flexibility are presented in the sections below.

What motivates educators?

Meeting learner and institutional expectations and creating equity appeared as a key motivators for educators in the pursuit of more flexible practices in teaching. There was a shared understanding that meeting diverse needs by providing accessible education options was fundamental in this goal. However, as noted in the previous brief, while flexibility enables solutions it also exposes issues to be addressed.

"Students have a lot of non-academic demands they are juggling (family, work, etc.) They want/need flexibility to help them juggle their full lives."

— Ontario postsecondary instructor

Meeting Expectations

Educators believe that learners have come to expect flexibility in their postsecondary experience. This is reinforced by new institutional norms that have embraced more flexible modalities and pathways to education. Educators feel they must meet these new expectations to stay relevant and in some cases to stay employed. However, they often feel under-supported and consequently unprepared to fully meet all the expectations placed on them.

Creating Equity

Meeting diverse needs in pursuit of equity in education was a key motivator. Diverse needs include socioeconomic position, ethnicity, neurodiversity, mental health, and learning styles. These place added pressure on educators to devise new teaching strategies and assessment methods to better meet the needs of all students.

How do educators feel?

Frustration around a lack of time, support, funding, and resources was a common sentiment among the educators we engaged with. Unpacking the combination of emotions experienced by educators is important for understanding the complex issues impacting flexibility. Participating Ontario postsecondary instructors expressed:

"More support is needed for educators to deliver with flexibility."

"Fear of looking foolish if they try something and it fails"

"The expectations that teachers will do whatever it takes without regard to the amount of time it takes."

"I'm concerned that I may become obsolete as a college professor."

"[Learners] expect to get a certain grade without putting in the work."

Powerless

Educators feel they are trying their best to integrate flexible methods but are left out of critical decisions regarding the resources, training, and tools they need. Yet they are held accountable through student evaluations that may reflect poorly on their performance.

Embarrassed

Flexible teaching requires trial, error, and iteration. However, educators may feel they need to be seen as experts at all times. There is a fear that if they try new approaches and fail, they will appear unpolished, unprepared, or just plain silly.

Overwhelmed

Educators feel they are doing it all alone and are not supported by the institutes, administration, or students. At the same time, educators feel under-resourced, underpaid, and under-supported to deliver the desired level of quality they feel is required.

Uncertain

Educators expressed deep concern over the integrity of the postsecondary education system. With traditional assessment methods coming into question, educators are seeking more authentic forms, but remain unclear on how to proceed.

Disrespected

Educators are unhappy with students' level of engagement and don't know how to grab and keep their attention. Once revered knowledge experts, some educators now feel as though they are viewed as simply there to hand out credits.

What assumptions underlie how educators feel?

The different perspectives on flexibility shared by educators implied a set of assumptions that underpinned their framing of challenges and feelings. Each educator's perspective is different; for this reason, there are contradictions among the assumptions presented below and such assumptions are not necessarily representative of all educators.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MONEY:

- Postsecondary institutions are delivering online content to increase revenue rather than to meet learner needs.
- The role of the educator is separate and not directly concerned with the financial operations of the institute.
- Capitalism is a problematic financial model.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT QUALITY:

- Previous ways of grading and assessing knowledge were high-quality.
- In-person learning is superior to online delivery.
- The established system worked well for most learners and educators.
- Postsecondary education is a valuable endeavour.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE:

- Learners attend for the value of learning, not just to gain accreditation for a job or to support their path to citizenship.
- Educators teach for the love of teaching, not just to do research, write books, gain tenure, or earn a paycheck.
- Administration is working against educators rather than supporting their needs.

What's next?

Some educators feel overwhelmed due to the increased expectations and skills required to do their job, while also feeling under supported. Providing the appropriate resources and supports may improve emotional well-being and allow educators to shift from feeling reactive to proactive. It is critical to enable spaces for evidence supported dialogue to reflect upon the underlying assumptions. In *Brief 4: Exploring the Possibilities* we look at what educators want for the future and the criteria to get there. Then, ideas for actions are proposed to move us closer to an envisioned future.

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 1:
Making the Case
WHY FLEXIBILITY IS IMPORTANT

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 2:
Framing the Problem
WHAT EDUCATORS THINK ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 3:
Understanding the Problem
WHAT EDUCATORS FEEL ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 4:
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WHAT EDUCATORS WANT FOR FLEXIBILITY

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 5:
Integrated Insights
THE NEXT STEPS FOR FLEXIBILITY



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