

Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 4: Exploring the Possibilities

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. In *Brief 3: Understanding the Problem* we highlighted how supporting educators' emotional well-being is essential to creating change. In this brief, we look at educators' visions of the future and possible steps to get there.

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' visions of the future of flexibility are presented in the sections below.


How do educators envision the future?

In the last two briefs we discussed the problems around flexibility as identified by educators. While educators expressed frustrations associated with integrating more flexibility in their practice, they are also excited about what it might hold for the future.


Participating Ontario postsecondary instructors envisioned a future where:




Educators are leaders with freedom to experiment with new techniques and tools and make decisions to improve flexibility and the learning experience.




Learning is inclusive of disability, socioeconomic status, culture, language, and geographic location.




Learning is technology-enabled with artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, and adaptive assessment tools facilitating personalization and agile collaboration.



Learning experiences are co-designed with learners, fellow educators, industry, and employers, and are supported by processes and strategies.



Learning happens in physical and mixed reality environments that are redesigned to promote accessibility, active learning, and leverage multi-sensory virtual and augmented reality.



Teaching is collaborative and co-teaching is celebrated. The role of educator has evolved to be part of a community of learners rather than the 'sage on the stage'.

"Experimentation Labs: learning spaces to test drive, make mistakes, and succeed."

"We are using assistive AI technologies to tailor our learning to students' unique needs."

"Educators are part of communities of learning, rather than the 'all knowing'."

What do educators identify as enablers of their envisioned futures?

Achieving these visions of the future means re-imagining established practices, infrastructure, and policies within the postsecondary education system—approaching them with a focus on future flexibility. Educators expressed wants and needs they felt were required to enable flexibility. Those wants and needs are represented in the questions below:

TIME ALLOCATION was identified by educators as essential to learn new technology and revise course content. Dedicated time to collaborate with other colleagues and students is also needed to figure out new ways of teaching and learning.

RESOURCES AND FUNDING for more full time, permanent teaching roles are needed for continuity and professional development. Additionally, IT professionals, mental health experts, and instructional designers are needed to support educators. Safe testing spaces allow for experimentation with new technologies and approaches.

WORKING ARRANGEMENTS should be reconsidered to strive for balanced workloads and incentives for educators to test, learn, and adapt. Building in channels for shared decision making, communication, feedback, and consultation between educators and administration supports agility.

PRACTICE STANDARDS such as frameworks for professional development, collaborative work, and assessment and evaluation need to be reviewed and updated to provide guidance while maintaining flexibility. Guidelines must be agile enough to respond to changing technologies and approaches.

What's next?

The core pillars of educators' visions of the future are leadership and autonomy to shape and deliver flexibility with the purposeful allocation of time, resources, and funding. Additionally, collaboration and convergence are critical to reflect this evolution, primarily in working arrangements and practice standards. In *Brief 5: Integrated Insights*, we synthesize our research and provide recommendations for next steps.

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