

CONTACT NORTH | CONTACT NORD'S 10 PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND THOUGHTS

***Government's Role in Digital Learning:
Review and Recommendations for
the Ontario Ministry of Colleges
and Universities***

**A Report by the Higher Education
Quality Council of Ontario**

10 PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND THOUGHTS

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) review of digital learning in Ontario's higher education system is insightful, timely and appropriate. The review and recommendations focus attention on Ontario's current leadership role in online and blended learning in Canada and provide important suggestions for the future. As we begin a new decade, we will see significant and dramatic developments in digital learning, aided by the arrival of 5G networks and the developments in technology.

Contact North | Contact Nord offers the following 10 preliminary observations and thoughts on HEQCO's report, ***Government's Role in Digital Learning: Review and Recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities***, released on January 6, 2020.

1. WE NEED TO FOCUS ONTARIO'S ONLINE LEARNING STRATEGY ON HELPING ONTARIANS GET FUTURE-READY

Ontario currently leads Canada in student registrations in credit courses offered fully online. In 2018, 16% of all course registrations in colleges and universities were for an online course. A further 22% of post-secondary students registered for an online course in 2018 – the largest group in Canada. Students have significant choices – there are over 20,000 online courses, 981 fully online certificate, diploma or degree programs and some 7,637 basic skills and training courses.

But we can do more. The HEQCO report rightly identifies the need for a focused strategy to produce greater access, improved quality and enhanced learner outcomes. The context is changing quickly with artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, and 5G developments creating new design opportunities, which will impact learning. Our demography, economy and work patterns are also changing quickly, with these same technologies impacting the future of work. We need to focus Ontario's online learning strategy on helping Ontarians be future-ready.

2. REIMAGINING COMMUNITY SUPPORTS AND COMMUNITY HUBS, INVESTING IN LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ONLINE LEARNING AND CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS WHICH OVERCOME THE BARRIERS DISADVANTAGED ONTARIANS CURRENTLY FACE

What should the vision be? The vision must deliver access to quality, focused and effective online learning for all Ontarians, no matter where they live and what kinds of technology they have access to. This is currently not the case. Many in rural and remote parts of Ontario do not have access to broadband and find the technology needed to be an effective online learner both prohibitively expensive and difficult to use. Expanding access to all – especially those who need learning the most – must be the key motivation of Ontario's vision.

Delivering on this vision means reimagining community supports and community hubs, investing in local infrastructure for online learning and creative technology solutions, which overcome the barriers we currently face.

We must create a policy framework which delivers rich, focused online learning experiences that improve learner outcomes. This requires ongoing investment in improving learning design, supporting innovative use of emerging technologies to increase learner engagement and supporting investments in faculty development.

The policy framework also needs to encourage the more widespread use of open educational resources (OERs), which can significantly lower the costs of education for students, ensure quality and build capacity within the system for better design.

We need to continue to build collaboration between colleges, between colleges and universities, and between public educational institutions and the private sector if we are to tackle the skills shortages. The upskilling needed for those working and the new skills for those seeking work require such collaborations to open up possibilities, enabling new approaches to learning and fully leveraging the power of emerging technologies.

3. FIVE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ONTARIO ONLINE LEARNING STRATEGY

- i. **There is a difference between online learning for “critical access” and online learning for “flexible access”.** For some, online learning increases the flexibility they have in making educational choices, but for many in Ontario, online is the only way to access certain programs and courses in their community.
- ii. Developing student-focused design skills and capabilities across the system so online courses are an authentic, quality experience, which produce strong learning outcomes and the skills Ontario needs. **New approaches to design, which fully leverage our understanding of neuroscience, adaptive learning and personalization,** can make online courses much more effective.
- iii. **Increasing the acceptance of online learning for disciplines, which resisted this approach to learning in the past,** as well as strengthening the role online and blended learning play in the system as a whole. This also requires improving transferability and flexibility in the system as a whole.
- iv. **Recognizing and encouraging the growth of micro-credentials** (certificates and nanodegrees, which are modular and can be used as part of degrees and diplomas). Modular, stackable learning is widely seen as a key component of future-focused lifelong learning.
- v. Focusing resources on supporting the development of online learning strategies dedicated to improving learning outcomes for

Indigenous learners. **Make use of emerging technologies, coupled with Indigenous ways of knowing**, to create new designs which make a difference for this fast-growing learner group.

4. DIGITAL LEARNING

There is potential confusion in the HEQCO report about the use of the term “digital learning.” Digital learning is correctly defined early on as including classroom, blended, and fully online learning. It should be made clear the recommendations refer only to online/blended learning, and not classroom learning.

5. QUALITY ISSUE

HEQCO expressed concern about the quality of online courses. Currently, the government does not get involved in student performance assessment or quality assessment for face-to-face learning. There’s no rationale to do it for online learning. Institutions have offices of quality assurance and program review requirements to address the quality requirements.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities could consider **addressing** online quality at the input/design level, assisted by peer review through a provincial license or assist colleges and universities to participate in the [Quality Matters](#) consortium. Currently, [19 Ontario colleges and 4 Ontario universities](#) are members of the consortium. The advantage of participating in Quality Matters is courses are certified by an extensive peer review process. Institutions are far more likely to participate in Quality Matters versus the ministry setting up a quality monitoring process.

6. FUNDING FOR OPEN TEXTBOOKS

While funding for open textbooks is a major building block to an online strategy and should be maintained, open textbooks or resources (open educational resources) face challenges:

- 1) There’s no incentive for faculty to keep them updated after funding runs out.
- 2) Faculty don’t have the editorial/production skills to make professional looking textbooks.
- 3) With the extra time faculty must spend vetting open textbooks, it’s more expedient for them to adopt a commercial textbook.

These challenges can be overcome with targeted and sustained support.

The ministry could consider the option of negotiating or assisting colleges and universities with licensing of digital content from key publishers in major undergraduate course areas. [Indiana University](#) (IU) is a model to emulate in this regard. IU claims “program has served close to 200,000 students in almost 8,000 course sections

and have saved students more than \$13 million in textbook costs.” Open textbooks could be included in such an initiative as well.

7. TRACKING ONLINE COURSE ENROLMENTS

HEQCO makes a good point of the province not having a handle on the number and growth in online enrolments. Clear definitions of online/blended is essential as noted in the report.

The ministry could consider increasing its support to the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association to continue to produce an Ontario report but an even more inclusive one involving all institutions.

8. ACCESSIBILITY TO ONLINE LEARNING

There’s no question about the need to continue and enhance support to rural and remote communities. However, HEQCO does not directly address the issue of accessibility in urban locations.

A substantial number of college and university students in cities must work to cover tuition and expenses. Many have family responsibilities as well. Online learning is appealing to these students. Therefore, we should not think of accessibility as a strictly a rural or remote issue.

Commuting to campus in afternoons and evenings to take one course is an expensive and time-consuming venture, not to mention pollution, congestion and parking issues in urban centres. Traditional “mature” students in urban areas also need access to online education.

9. ONTARIO EDTECH INDUSTRY

There are currently 81 EdTech companies with their headquarters or with a major hub in Ontario, many of them with reach throughout the world. These companies create jobs and they offer opportunities to market and sell educational technology and solutions developed right here in Ontario around the world. Contact North | Contact Nord plans to feature these companies in a searchable directory on teachonline.ca in March 2020.

We need to make this growing, homegrown Ontario EdTech industry a major building block of an Ontario strategy.

10. PRIVACY CONSIDERATIONS

The ministry may wish to consider providing guidance on ethical data use and storage to educational institutions at all levels. For example, as learning analytics systems start harvesting data to make predictions about student success from outside the learning management system, such as libraries and student services, guidelines must be in place to protect student privacy. This is too large an issue to be included in a policy directly; however, the policy might flag this issue and recommend a working group to address it.

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT – LET’S EMBRACE “WHAT IF”

As we collectively set out to develop an Ontario Digital Learning Strategy, let’s not limit ourselves to focusing on what currently exists in Ontario. Let’s embrace the concept of “what if we did this...” or “what if we did that...” and how does “this” or “that” improve access for students, support more students to succeed, improve quality for students, reduce costs for students or better prepare students for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

We have an opportunity to use the HEQCO review and recommendations to build on our world-class post-secondary education system and deliver even better outcomes for students and the province as a whole.

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