

Executive Summary

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- E-learning holds the potential to profoundly change the way post-secondary education (PSE) is designed and delivered.
- From a quality perspective, e-learning may be more engaging, less passive, and more customized to different learning styles than traditional lecture-based learning.
- There are about 1.3 million enrolments in fully online university and college courses in Canada. E-learning accounts for between 10 and 15 per cent of PSE learning.
- Greater adoption of e-learning will happen if institutional focus on traditional classroom delivery can be reduced; faculty are adequately supported when they teach online; and e-learning design, development, and delivery practices improve.

E-learning is the common term for the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver learning.¹ E-learning holds the potential to profoundly change the way post-secondary education is designed and delivered. The essence of learning is information—the transfer of information to students and the development of students' ability to understand information and apply it in a variety of situations. Clearly, ICTs have greatly lowered the cost of transferring information. And, they also hold the potential to change the learning process by which students understand and apply information.

One of the purported benefits of face-to-face instruction is personal connection. Yet, average class sizes have been growing, which undermines the engagement between student and instructors and among students. From a quality perspective, e-learning may be more engaging, less passive, and more customized to different learning styles than traditional lecture-based learning. It permits learning to be delivered just-in-time, when the learner needs it. It allows learners to learn from each other, through networking technologies. Although e-learning is not appropriate in every setting, it does hold the potential to greatly improve the quality of post-secondary education.

This report explores the potential of e-learning in the Canadian setting.

The What and Why of E-Learning?

E-learning uses a range of ICTs to deliver and manage learning. Typically, e-learning involves creating and storing content in a digital form. Learning software helps interaction with content; electronic communication with and among learners; online verification of learning (testing and exercises); and class management (e.g., registration and attendance tracking).

E-learning relies heavily on the use of ICTs and is used to reach learners at their preferred location. In face-to-face learning, ICTs are usually used as a presentational device or administrative adjunct to the traditional lecture/tutorial approach. Generally, ICTs are not as essential to pedagogy.

There are three reasons why the e-learning market is large and growing and why it will be a feature of the post-secondary market for many years to come. E-learning:

1. appeals to learners;
2. is attractive to learning providers;
3. technologies and instructional design competencies are improving.

Today, e-learning is a very media-rich experience that can mimic many aspects of face-to-face learning. Sophisticated animation and video is being used to recreate the physical face-to-face learning environment. When

properly designed, the combination of synchronous and asynchronous technologies can make for an even more engaging learning experience than face-to-face instruction. And learners are able to easily access learning content through a wide variety of devices. All of these technologies will continue to improve in the coming years.

Post-Secondary E-Learning in Canada

There is no definitive statistic on the amount of online learning in Canada's post-secondary system. There has yet to be any large-scale survey of Canadian post-secondary e-learning practices. Individual institutions tend to merge e-learning and classroom registration data. Hence, we only have a rough idea of e-learning practices based on miscellaneous data sources.

Jean Louis estimates that there are about 1.3 million course enrolments in entirely online university and college courses in Canada.² Tony Bates, of Contact North, suggests that e-learning accounts for about 10–15 per cent of all post-secondary, full-time, equivalent (FTE) enrolments. Contact North estimates that there are between 875,000 and 950,000 registered online students in Canada and, conceivably, between 92,000 and 100,000 of these are full-time students who pursue only online courses.³

There is considerable variation among institutions in the emphasis they place on e-learning.

The 10–15 per cent adoption rate for e-learning is not equally distributed across Canada's post-secondary institutions. Some institutions, such as Athabasca University and Télé-Université du Québec (TELUQ), are completely online; others have little or no e-learning. In 2010, Memorial University had 31 per cent of its enrolments online compared with the University of Manitoba's 19 per cent. There is considerable variation among institutions in the emphasis they place on e-learning.

[The Canadian Virtual University](#) is a partnership of 11 universities that collaborate on the marketing and development of university e-learning courses. CVU universities offer almost 6,000 courses and 500 online degrees, and registrations are approaching 400,000.

Advancing E-Learning in Canada

Based on this report's analysis, the following recommendations are made for consideration in the Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education (SPSE) national strategy:

1. Reduce Economic Barriers to E-Learning Adoption

This report argues that e-learning adoption is being held back by funders' and institutions' capacity planning. There is a well-established focus on physical classroom facilities. Once created, there is a strong incentive to use the existing physical infrastructure as opposed to developing competing e-learning or blended learning capacity.

Institutional administrators, governments, and benefactors need to work together to change the PSE approach to capacity planning. They need to consider how to use e-learning and blended learning to lower costs, improve accessibility, and increase quality.

2. Tackle Institutional Constraints to E-Learning

Institutional focus on developing physical classroom capacity affects a number of other factors that hold back e-learning adoption.

There are a sufficient number of faculty members who are interested in the possibilities of the format and might be willing to give it a try. However, unsupported faculty are not likely to be successful and therefore may be less willing to try. Faculty resistance will be broken down when more faculty members are supported in approaching their

teaching responsibilities through blended and e-learning formats. This will result in better courses and less skepticism on the efficacy of the approach. While some faculty will always be wedded to classroom teaching, sufficient numbers of supported faculty will increase adoption.

3. Adopt Excellent E-Learning Practices

Most institutions that conduct e-learning are too focused on the “e” (i.e., LMS) part and not enough on the “learning.” This results in e-learning technology being used as an adjunct to classroom learning or to host poorly designed courses. Post-secondary institutions need to recognize e-learning instructional design as a unique discipline. They need to access these distinctive skills either through their own in-house teams or external providers.

Forums need to be created for post-secondary stakeholders to share and adopt best practices in e-learning design and execution.