

## **POLICY PAPER**

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*Online Learning*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This policy paper examines the various avenues in which entirely-online post-secondary learning, specifically entirely-online courses and programs, could develop in Ontario over the coming years.

Online education has the potential to make higher education more accessible, and it has the ability to overcome the financial, social and geographic barriers faced by some students via their pursuit of a post-secondary education. It also has the potential to enhance student learning, both inside the classroom and within distance education context. However, if implemented in the wrong way, it has the potential to be disengaging, impersonal, and costly. Broken down into sections based on OUSA's mandate of seeking accessible, affordable, accountable, and quality post-secondary education for all willing students, this paper addresses some of the major concerns that surround fully-online learning, and provides possible solutions for these issues. There is currently a lot of potential for growth in this area, but a lot of questions remain as well. The following summary presents some of the topics discussed in this paper:

## *Structure for Online Learning*

This section of the paper outlines the building blocks for an online learning structure that already exists in Ontario. By continuing to develop the foundations already in place, online education could find a place for itself alongside in-person classroom learning within the post-secondary sector. OUSA recommends a collaborative system amongst all Ontario universities, such as that offered by Open Universities Australia, to maximize on the transferability of credits.

## *Quality*

Quality among existing online programs can vary quite dramatically, but those taking online courses should not suffer simply because their education is not being delivered in the traditional methods. Online courses should be held to the same standard of quality as those taught in-class, and we propose several ways to encourage instructors and institutions to make the quality of online learning a priority.

## *Student Experience (Accessibility and Affordability)*

Online learning has the incredible ability to bring a post-secondary education to interested students who otherwise would not be able to get such an education. Some of the biggest barriers facing these students are those surrounding accessibility and affordability. We propose that the OSAP need assessment formula be updated to fit the realistic costs of technology in a post-secondary environment, and that the government invest in expanding Internet access to all areas of Ontario.

## *Accountability*

This section is similar to the accessibility and affordability section, however it stresses that a quality assurance framework must be developed to reflect quality in online learning, which is not reflected within the current framework. Once again, online learning should be held to the same standards as any traditionally taught courses, as outlined in the quality assurance framework.

# INTRODUCTION

During 2011, approximately 37 per cent of the Canadian population (roughly 13 million people) engaged in education-related online services (i.e., learning, school work, or job training).<sup>1</sup> The most engaged Internet users in Canada were those who used the Internet for education-related activities, and they did so (on average) five hours a day.<sup>2</sup>

Online education has become very popular with those seeking to improve their qualifications for the labour market, allowing students and workers alike the chance to upgrade their professional credentials, and even change careers.<sup>3</sup> The benefits of entirely-online learning at the post-secondary level has gained the most traction in improving access to higher education for non-traditional students who have not previously had access to this kind of education.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Sloan Consortium, who conducts research on how to improve quality measures put in place within online education programs, faculty members and students are thoroughly satisfied with the benefits of online learning within the post-secondary sector. This finding has been most evident among instructors who have adopted online learning as a part of their curriculum, and in turn, increased the enrollment numbers of traditional students in online courses.<sup>5</sup>

So far in Ontario, there has been some past movement in regards to online learning and the creation of an Online Institute, but currently there is no proposed framework on the table.

## **RECENT GOVERNMENT ACTION ON ONLINE LEARNING**

Major discussion of a province-wide learning strategy began in 2010, when the Premier announced in his throne speech that Ontario would be developing an online institute.<sup>6</sup> This announcement came as a surprise to the province, but it soon developed into a proposal. In this proposal, a terms of reference was created for the establishment of an online institute, which included the following features:

- Accessibility through an online learning portal operated by Contact North.
- A course development fund to fund the development of new online courses. This was initially valued at \$2.25 million.
- Funding for faculty to help them teach and develop online courses.
- Ensuring confidentiality and privacy for student data and the use of up-to-date technology.
- Governance by a board of universities and government officials, with student representation.

The only major component missing from this proposal was the requirement that online courses transfer between multiple institutions, meaning that students would be limited in the availability of courses they could take through an online institute. This lack of transferability would have meant that the likelihood of students building an online degree was very slim. However, with the exception of this missing recommendation, OUSA was satisfied with the proposal.

In 2012, the government circulated a discussion paper entitled *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*. It spurred a series of conversations throughout the summer of 2012 on a variety of topics, including online learning. This paper made no specific proposals, but asked how the online institute could be structured to service the following groups: students who prefer to learn online, lifelong learners, and students with dependents.

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<sup>1</sup> McKeown, L., and Underhill, C. (2007). Learning online: Factors associated with use of the Internet for education purposes. *Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada*, 4(4). Statistics Canada Catalogue Number 81-004-XIE.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. *Canadian Internet Use Survey*. 2012

<sup>3</sup> Kingsbury, K. (2012). *Getting the most out of an online education*. Thomson Reuters. Retrieved from, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/19/us-education-courses-online-idUSBRE8917120121019>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Moore, J. C. (2005). *The Sloan consortium quality framework and the five pillars*. Retrieved from, [sloanconsortium.org/publications/books/qualityframework.pdf](http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/books/qualityframework.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Louis, M. (2011). *Re: Final report, engagement process for an Ontario Online Institute*. Retrieved from, [http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/publications/ooi\\_may2011.pdf](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/publications/ooi_may2011.pdf)

Most recently, in January 2014, the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities announced the formation of Ontario Online. This initiative calls for the incorporation of an organization comprised of existing universities in Ontario who provide, or aspire to provide, courses delivered online. Ontario Online will consist of three 'hubs': a Knowledge Hub, providing research and best practices in course content and delivery; a Course Hub, which would host all available shared online courses offered by participating institutions; and a Support Hub, providing central resources as well as allowing students to access support and resources local to their own institutions. Ontario Online will be built around a 'shared course' model in which students from multiple institutions will attend a 'single' online class, facilitated by an instructor from the institution offering the course. Each student will then receive a credit at their home institution.

As of the writing of this paper, Ontario Online is in the process of becoming an incorporated entity, and universities are submitting existing online courses, as well as proposals for new ones, to the Ministry for approval as 'launch materials' for the initiative.

## **TYPES AND TRENDS OF ONLINE LEARNING<sup>7</sup>**

### *Entirely Online Credit-Courses:*

These are online courses offered by Ontario Universities that students can complete as a part of their normal degree. Students pay tuition for these courses, and are awarded academic completion for successful completion.<sup>8</sup> The University of Toronto and Trent University are both examples of Ontario Universities that offer online courses. At U of T, online-only courses are offered which are accessible to students from all three campuses.<sup>9</sup> These courses are designed with interactivity in mind as they involve interactive audio-visual activities, digital presentations, bulletin and discussion boards with instructor feedback. All courses include a final in-person examination, with assignments, midterms, and final projects making up the rest of their grade. As with traditional courses, textbooks and other course materials must be purchased as a separate cost to tuition. A similar structure is used at Trent University as well, with both universities using Blackboard as the delivery platform. Online-only courses count towards a degree in the same way traditional courses do.

### *Entirely Online Degree Programs:*

These online degree programs are programs that charge tuition for courses, award academic credit, and eventually lead to a degree. For example, York University currently offers two completely online degrees: Bachelor of Administrative Studies and Master of Science in Nursing, as well as one certificate program through their Distance Education Program.<sup>10</sup>

The focus of this paper is entirely online credit courses and degree programs, and what role students believe the provincial government should play in promoting the accessibility, accountability, affordability and quality of existing and planned online offerings.

### *Online Non-Credit Courses (Continuing Education):*

These online courses are offered by Ontario Universities that do not count for academic credit, or towards a degree. However, these courses may lead to certificates or other workplace credentials. For example, the University of Windsor offers distance courses through their Contact North, Ontario Online Learning Portal.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Note: When this paper makes reference to online education and/or online learning this reference includes inclusively the types of online education outlined here as it applies to the context of the policy discussion at hand.

<sup>8</sup> Pappano, L. (2012, November 2). *Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace*. The New York Times. Retrieved from, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

<sup>9</sup> University of Toronto. (2013). *Online learning 2012-2013*. Retrieved from, <http://discover.utoronto.ca/learning/programs-of-study/online-courses>; University of Toronto. (2013). *Online learning*. Retrieved from, <http://learn.utoronto.ca/courses-programs/online-distance-learning>

<sup>10</sup> York University. (2012). *Distance education*. Retrieved from, <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/disted>

<sup>11</sup> Windsor University. (2013). *Distance education*. Retrieved from, <http://www.uwindsor.ca/registrar/distance-education>

At Western University,<sup>12</sup> online courses are delivered through their distance studies department and they allow students on- or off-campus to pursue a university degree. Students enrolled at other Canadian Universities can also take an online course offered by Western once a letter of permission is obtained from their home university.

### *Blended Learning:*

A “blended” course is one that uses technology to enhance the teaching and learning experiences of both professors and students in and outside the classroom.<sup>13</sup> Students attend the classes and lectures in-person but online materials augment the classroom experience. This type of course structure was introduced, not as a cost-saving measure, but to increase course demand and engagement, particularly in the case of large introductory courses where active engagement between the students, instructor, and material can be more challenging. In addition to online-only courses, York University offers blended learning courses whereby 30-70 per cent of a course would be completed through distance education portal, leaving less required in-classroom meeting times.<sup>14</sup>

### *Flip Classroom Model:*

A type of blended learning, this model has academic content delivered online, allowing professors to devote class-time to discussion, group work, and more active pedagogy. Brock University and Queen’s University both adopted this model of blended learning. Brock offers “textbook-based online courses” that incorporate the flipped classroom methodology of short narrative videos followed by deeper discussion, and open web learning that uses publically accessible data sources like Wikipedia and Twitter.<sup>15</sup> Queen’s, on the other hand, as adopted the flip classroom model where students access interactive online textbooks and materials outside the classroom and apply that knowledge inside the classroom with the assistance of the instructor.<sup>16</sup>

### *Learning Management Systems:*

Every university in Ontario currently uses some form of a learning management system that allows for interactions between faculty and students online. These systems are typically used for either posting content, grades and course materials. However, they can also be used for assessment. The two largest providers of learning management systems for Ontario universities are currently Desire2Learn and Blackboard. Trent University, for instance, uses Blackboard as their online platform to deliver blended courses that encourage students to access assignments and communicate with their classmates and instructors.<sup>17</sup>

### *Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs):*

A Massively Open Online Course is another platform of learning that has become increasingly common over the past decade. A MOOC is an online course that is offered for little to no cost by leading academics in their field of specialty, and the enrollment in these courses can often reach up to 100,000 students.<sup>18</sup> MOOCs usually are not completed for academic credit, but it does open access to the world of post-secondary education to students who would not otherwise be able to gain access to such an education.<sup>19</sup> One of the most popular distributors of MOOCs is Coursera.<sup>20</sup> Coursera works with the world’s top universities to disseminate an internationally accessible post-secondary education at no cost. Their technology allows professors to teach upwards of 100,000 students at one time. Coursera’s focus is on learning mastery and their interactive online platform allows for just that. When Coursera partners with an educational institution to offer these courses, the universities keep a small per cent of the revenue collected (no more than fifteen

<sup>12</sup> Western University. (n.d.). *Distance studies*. Retrieved from, [http://www.registrar.uwo.ca/applying/distance\\_studies/index.html](http://www.registrar.uwo.ca/applying/distance_studies/index.html)

<sup>13</sup> Allen, I.E., and Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the course - online education in the United States, 2008*. Retrieved from, [http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/staying\\_course](http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/staying_course)

<sup>14</sup> York University. (2012). *Distance education*. Retrieved from, <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/disted>

<sup>15</sup> Brock University. (2010). *Current e-learning courses at Brock University*. Retrieved from, <http://www.brocku.ca/pedagogical-innovation/elearning-initiative/current-online-courses>

<sup>16</sup> Queen’s University. (2013). *Blended learning*. Retrieved from, <http://www.queensu.ca/artsci/academics/teaching-and-learning/blended-learning>

<sup>17</sup> Trent University. (n.d.). *Learning system*. Retrieved from, <http://www.trentu.ca/it/learningsystem/overview.php>

<sup>18</sup> Corbyn, Z. (2012). *This could be huge*. Times Higher Education. Retrieved from,

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Coursera. (n.d.). *About coursera*. Retrieved from, <https://www.coursera.org/about>

per cent) and about twenty per cent of the gross profits, leaving the remainder of the profit for Coursera.<sup>21</sup> The newest and most high profile edition to the Mooc's family is edX,<sup>22</sup> which was started in by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University to build upon their collective reach globally while expanding their online education presence. While edX will remain an open source entity offering certificates to those students who successfully complete one of their courses, the primary goal of the platform is to expand Harvard's and MIT's blended learning opportunities at their own institutions. Lastly, the University of Toronto is currently the only Ontario university offering a full-scale MOOC.

## **EXAMPLES OF ONLINE UNIVERSITY CONSORTIA**

### *Open Universities Australia (OUA)*

Open Universities Australia was established in 1993 and utilizes an organizational structure that relies on the online courses offered at nineteen institutions across Australia. This system differs from that which currently exists in Ontario, whereas the OUA provides integrated administration and student support services, therefore it builds on the existing online infrastructure of Australian universities while avoiding the drawbacks of the consortia model that is currently found in Ontario.

### *Western Governors University (WGU)*

Western Governors University is a non-profit online-only university that is physically based out of the United States.<sup>23</sup> Their online degree is solely based on competency therefore students with prior knowledge on a particular subject are free to accelerate through their degree on what they already know to study what they have yet to learn. Unique to the university is their ability to allow students to set their own rate of completion around their personal schedules, which they do with the help of a personal mentor who is with them from enrollment to graduation. Finally, WGU charges their students a flat-rate for their tuition every six months they are in the program but they have the opportunity to save on the cost of tuition should they be able to complete their degree in less time.

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<sup>21</sup> Lewin, T. (2013). *Students rush to web classes, but profits may be much later*. The New York Times. Retrieved from, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/07/education/massive-open-online-courses-prove-popular-if-not-lucrative-yet.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/07/education/massive-open-online-courses-prove-popular-if-not-lucrative-yet.html?_r=0)

<sup>22</sup> edX. (2012). *Organization, students, platform*. Retrieved from, <https://www.edx.org/faq>

<sup>23</sup> Western Governors. (2013). *How we're different*. Retrieved from, [http://www.wgu.edu/about\\_WGU/WGU\\_different](http://www.wgu.edu/about_WGU/WGU_different)

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# A STRUCTURE FOR PUBLICALLY FUNDED ONLINE LEARNING IN ONTARIO

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***Principle One: Online education is not a substitute for traditional in-classroom models of post-secondary education but should be understood as a complement to in-classroom education.***

As OUSA put forth in its 2013 paper on Student Success, there is great value in providing students with meaningful campus experiences that would allow them to enhance their learning through co-curricular activities and OUSA is not straying from this principle now.<sup>24</sup> However, trends in online learning are on the rise and will continue to develop over the coming years, and shape the landscape of post-secondary education as a result. By providing policy on online learning in its infancy stages, OUSA can emphasize the ways in which online learning falls under OUSA's principles of quality, accountability, and affordability.

OUSA also recognizes that not all students may feel the need to incorporate online courses into their degrees, however, for those seeking more flexibility in the building of their degrees, or wish to supplement their in-person classroom education with online courses, online learning is a great opportunity. OUSA is proposing these recommendations with the goal of facilitating discussion surrounding online learning and how both the landscape and pedagogy of online learning can be developed in the coming years.

***Principle Two: As a means to promote accessibility, flexibility, and student choice, students in Ontario must be able to pursue entirely-online undergraduate credit courses and degree programs.***

From the student perspective, support for progression in the realm of online-delivered education is to ensure that students who may not be able to succeed in traditional campuses are able to pursue an undergraduate education. For several groups of students, traditional campuses are not the ideal places of learning. For example, students with dependents may find childcare incompatible, for either financial or other reasons, with the course offerings and schedules at a traditional campus. Or perhaps a student from a rural or northern community may find it difficult to move to another city to pursue an undergraduate education. Similarly, even students who are enrolled primarily in traditional, in-class courses, may wish to combine online courses with in-class courses so as to accommodate part-time or full-time work schedules to cover the costs of their education. Therefore, students believe that innovative education delivery models, such as online learning, should be used to promote accessibility, flexibility, and student choice. Students must be able to pursue entirely online undergraduate credit courses and degree programs regardless of their geographic location or home institution.

***Principle Three: Online education in Ontario should be delivered through an integrated, streamlined system that works on the basis of post-secondary sector collaboration.***

## **CASE STUDY**

*Online courses at the University of Waterloo (U of W) are offered in part through their centre for extended learning. These courses do not come at an extra cost for U of W students to take and they appear alongside traditional classroom lecture offerings as one of many possible sections of a given course. The evaluation of online learners also takes place at no additional cost to the student who is expected to take their tests in-person at examination centres on- or off-campus. In addition, the university has made student services such as mail delivered library books and digitally available career centre guides-to-employment available to students taking online-only courses. However, student support services do not extend access to physical services such as a membership to the campus gym.*

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<sup>24</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. (2011). *Policy paper: Student Success*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/policy-papers>

*The online course development side of things follows a rigorous process, which begins when faculty members submit a proposal for a new online course to the Dean of the Faculty where the course is to be housed. Once the proposal is approved, faculty members who are planning to lead an online course will work closely with the University of Waterloo online course development team for anywhere between 8 hours to 1-year to produce an online course that stresses quality-learning outputs. The cost of which is high at the initial investment but the U of W is eager to decrease that cost by collaborating with other universities seeking to develop comparable course offerings.*

*Disciplines that have traditionally relied on qualitative forms of evaluation (i.e., English, Philosophy, and Languages) are the largest representation of online offerings at the university in contrast to engineering, the largest program by far, which has only one online offering to date. However for the online courses that do exist, student-faculty interaction is high. Furthermore, non-mature students<sup>25</sup> by far make up the largest proportion of online learners at the institution, which the university hopes to boost engagement among by reproducing the ‘Waterloo campus life’ experience virtually.*

*Finally, the rise in online courses has ushered in a simultaneous rise in Intellectual Property (IP) rights discussions, which are becoming a growing concern. Currently, the U of W permits their online instructors to maintain ownership over the IP resulting from a new online course they have designed while the university shares ownership with faculty in terms of the development agreement.<sup>26</sup>*

Online education in Ontario should not be offered in a piecemeal manner that leaves behind many of the traditional checks and balances surrounding academic integrity and quality that has been traditionally associated with learning within physical classrooms. OUSA views online education in Ontario as one of the many ways post-secondary students can gain a university credential alongside in-person classroom learning and blended models.

Academic systems that seamlessly offer online and offline courses already exist internationally, most notably in the United Kingdom and Australia who have both achieved great amounts of success with these integrated online systems. For example, Open University Australia (OUA) was originally established through a partnership between seven post-secondary institutions, each of which owns an equal share in the consortium.<sup>27</sup> While these institutions have the option of collecting any profits gained by OUA, to date, all profits have been reinvested in the organization.<sup>28</sup> OUA’s Board of Directors is also made up of executive staff originating from the seven-partnered institutions that make up the OUA, in addition to five independent directors.<sup>29</sup> This governance system has allowed for greater integration, a stronger sense of ownership, and a robust quality assurance framework between institutions to be established.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of academic structure, individual courses are provided through the seven-partnered institutions while all student support services, which include enrollment and tuition payments, are provided through the OUA with the exception of financial assistance.<sup>31</sup> The OUA has also put in place service providers to assist with registration, academic counseling, career services, and responding to telephone inquiries from their around-the-clock counseling services.<sup>32</sup> The responsibility of technical support services remains largely in the hands of the home institution, although OUA does provide assistance for students working within learning management systems like Blackboard and Moodle.<sup>33</sup> Another development in online support services has cropped up through the OUA’s online bridging programs that are being made available to increase access to students requiring extra help with preparing for a university education using “taster

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<sup>25</sup> “...the University of Waterloo’s definition of a mature student varies by faculty. In all cases, it is not defined by your age but by the level of your academic background and number of years since you last attended formal high school” (University of Waterloo. (n.d.). *Admission requirements*. Retrieved from, <http://findoutmore.uwaterloo.ca/admissions/requirements.php#Mature>)

<sup>26</sup> The case study on online learning at the University of Waterloo was retrieved from the transcript of a campus interview with Ms. Catherine Newell Kelly, Director of the Centre for Extended Learning at the University of Waterloo.

<sup>27</sup> Open Universities Australia. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved from, <http://www.open.edu.au/about-us/>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



courses” that would allow a prospective student to experience approximately ten hours of online instruction that looks and feels like the real thing.<sup>34</sup>

The building blocks for a collaborative post-secondary learning system such as this already exist both within Ontario and Canada at large. Twenty-four Ontario Colleges have already streamlined their online education offerings through *OntarioLearn*, which gives students access to all the courses they need to meet the requirements of their programs.<sup>35</sup> At the university level, the Canadian Virtual University (CVU), formed in association with several public universities in Canada (Laurentian University, University of Manitoba, Carleton University, and Athabasca University, to name a few), who were seeking to increase their students’ involvement through online and distance education opportunities using an intra-university online platform.<sup>36</sup> All universities registered with the CVU are also members of the Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada (AUCC).<sup>37</sup> In order to participate, students must be registered at one of the CVU’s associated universities and have permission from their home institution to transfer credits from another CVU institution.<sup>38</sup> Outside of providing access to online and distance courses, the CVU cannot directly supply its students with the financial assistance they may need to take the courses offered, but it does encourage its students to seek financial aid through alternative means (i.e., their home institution, the government, etc.).<sup>39</sup>

Ontario students who seek to pursue some or all of their post-secondary studies online seek to do so with the assurance that they will receive the same academic experience and benefits as students who take some or all their courses in-person. Therefore, OUSA stands behind the full integration of online and in-person classroom studies within a collaborative learning system.

***Principle Four: Ontario university students should benefit from all local and global innovations in entirely-online learning.***

This principle showcases the importance of building on innovations in online education achieved globally by applying them locally for the benefit of all Ontario students. If Ontario seeks to be a leader in post-secondary education online, they must start reaching out to post-secondary institutions and organizations worldwide who are already leaders in the field of online education; in addition to learning more about how Ontario-based students can gain from their offerings.

Provincially, Ontario has made significant steps in online learning through the development of organizations such as *OntarioLearn*, *Contact North/Contact Nord*, *Elearnnetwork.ca* and the recently announced *Ontario Online*.<sup>40</sup> In a 2010 survey on the state of online post-secondary education in Ontario, it was found that across 45 post-secondary institutions (both colleges and universities) 20, 338 courses were offered online, which accounted for approximately 15 per cent of the total number of courses offered that year.<sup>41</sup> Specifically in the case of Ontario’s 21 universities, 4,743 online courses were offered.<sup>42</sup> Most of these universities (18 out of 21) have been strategic about expanding their online education programs by offering the majority of their online courses through the Faculty of Arts and Science, which at most of these universities, represents the faculty that is the academic home for the majority of their students.<sup>43</sup> For instance, The University of Toronto was one of the first international institutions to partner with the MOOC organization Coursera to offer three courses from their Computer Science Department;<sup>44</sup> and in 2006, Loyalist College became the first post-secondary institution to adopt the virtual technology program *Second Life* to create an immersive experiential learning environment.<sup>45</sup> These existing online platforms should be advertised to students in the most effective ways possible to promote and increase both student knowledge and involvement in these learning platforms.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> OntarioLearn. (2012). *About us*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ontariolearn.com/en/about-us>

<sup>36</sup> Canadian Virtual University. (2012). *Quality education online*. Retrieved from, <http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/partners.html>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Canadian Virtual University. (2009). *Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from, <http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/faqs.html>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Bates, T. (2011). *Fact sheet: Summary of eLearning surveys of publically assisted PSE institutions*. Retrieved from, [www.tonybates.ca/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Feb-22-Final.pdf](http://www.tonybates.ca/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Feb-22-Final.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> DeClerq, K. (2012). *Post-secondary institutions jumping online with Coursera*. Canadian University Press. Retrieved from, <http://cupwire.ca/articles/53242>

<sup>45</sup> Academica Group. (2012, November 27). *Loyalist aims to become Ontario centre for virtual learning technology*. Retrieved from, <http://ht.ly/fAFz>

Even with their small presence in the global online education sector, research has found that Ontarians are most likely to use the Internet for education-related services among Canadians.<sup>46</sup> Specifically, Statistics Canada reported that 32 per cent of Ontarians use the Internet for this specific reason, which is the highest percentage out of all other Canadian provinces.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, by encouraging growth in online post-secondary education, Ontario's online education offerings could set the province on course to being a world leader in a matter of years. A first step in this direction could be to increase the transferability of online courses across Ontario universities. Without the barrier of transferring credits across all Ontario university institutions, students would have more freedom to explore online learning opportunities in Ontario to fulfill their post-secondary goals. Thus the main aim for Ontario should be to increase the freedom of students to explore their studies online by allowing for greater transferability of credits across Ontario university institutions.

OUSA stands behind advancing innovations in online education by ensuring that Ontario university students have access to online learning abroad and domestically. In order for Ontario to become a global leader in the area of online education, there must be no barriers to participation for Ontario students to accessing a quality post-secondary education online.

***Concern One: There is a piecemeal approach to the development of online courses that has left gaps and redundancies in the availability and delivery of fully-online undergraduate degree programs.***

Online learning in Ontario has been burdened by the diverging development of online course offerings among university institutions in the province. Specifically, Ontario universities have moved forward with online education at their institutions independent of direct collaboration with other institutions seeking to fill a similar gap in their academic offerings, which may lead to inevitable redundancies. OUSA stands behind the development of a more cohesive online education strategy in Ontario that removes redundancies in course offerings and that fosters greater collaboration and more flexible credit transfer procedures to be in place across all 20 Ontario universities.

Despite the progress made so far in online education in Ontario, the problem remains that Ontario lacks an integrated system where a common accreditation of comparable online courses exists alongside the seamless transfer of credits earned. There are some tools at our disposal to help with the creation of a universal and transferrable learning system but further research is required. The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) has developed one such tool. This tool provides a credit transfer portal called ONTransfer that works with universities and colleges to facilitate a credit transfer system across post-secondary institutions.<sup>48</sup> A transfer guide has been developed by ONCAT to serve as an archive of the transferable credit courses in Ontario, if a new course is not listed in this guide, the student must file an appeal with their home institution to make the credit(s) transferable.<sup>49</sup> Another tool is the Canadian Virtual University (CVU) platform, which allows for the transfer of online credits through the CVU platform but makes no guarantees that the courses offered will be transferrable between institutions in all cases.<sup>50</sup> Yet, these tools cannot replace the need for an integrated online learning system that both offers online courses for credit and that allows for the free transfer of those credits to different university institutions in Ontario.

The disparity in online educational offerings poses a huge barrier for those university students seeking to take online courses for credit from different Ontario universities with the possibility of transferring and applying credits earned directly to their degree. As we move to further develop online education in the province, Ontario could take its cues from the likes of Open University Australia, which offers comparable online courses across university institutions that have complete transferability.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> McKeown, L., and Underhill, C. (2007). Learning online: Factors associated with use of the Internet for education purposes. *Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada*, 4(4). Statistics Canada Catalogue Number 81-004-XIE.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> ONTransfer. (n.d.). *Credit transfer in Ontario*. Retrieved from, [http://www.ontransfer.ca/www/index\\_en.php?page=credit\\_transfer\\_in\\_ontario](http://www.ontransfer.ca/www/index_en.php?page=credit_transfer_in_ontario)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Canadian Virtual University. (2009). *Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from, <http://www.cvu-uvic.ca/faqs.html>

<sup>51</sup> Open Universities Australia. (n.d). *FAQs*. Retrieved from, <http://www.open.edu.au/faqs/> ; The Open University.(2013). *Have a question? Maybe we have already answered it*. Retrieved from, <http://www3.open.ac.uk/contact/faq.aspx?t=S>

OUSA believes that one way to address any redundancies in online course offerings is to build a consortium for online university courses to be developed, accessed, and transferred without barriers between universities in Ontario.

***Recommendation One: The government should incentivize the development of a consortium of existing online infrastructure offered by current Ontario universities.***

This recommendation is calling for the consolidation of online courses offered by existing Ontario universities into a single collaboratively governed structure. Online education in Ontario as a whole cannot benefit from a hodgepodge approach to online university courses. Instead, a highly robust system is needed to guarantee that the quality and reach of online learning in Ontario is not compromised in anyway. Therefore OUSA is calling for improved collaboration in online education in Ontario through the introduction of an online learning consortium that would be both university and student led.

Ideally, the model for this online consortium would follow the example set by Open University Australia, which would allow students to build their degrees from courses taken from any university in the province.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, these online courses could be both a mix of credit-based online courses that teach a particular subject more in-depth, and for credit MOOC courses that allow students to delve into more broad- or niche-based areas of study. Fortunately, this is not an unreachable goal for Ontario.

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance have a quality assurance framework that outlines several ways to regulate a degree being built in collaboration with multiple post-secondary institutions; some of which includes a Conjoint Degree, a Dual Credential, and a Joint Degree Program. The Conjoint Degree Program is a program of study between two post-secondary institutions that results in a single degree document signed by both institutions involved. The Dual Credential Program is similar as it involves multiple institutions, but upon completion, the student would be awarded a degree (or an alternative certification) from each institution involved. Finally, the Joint Degree Program refers to the degree conferring status agreed upon by two or more post-secondary institutions that results in a single degree document.<sup>53</sup>

Once again, the Canadian Virtual University (CVU) has provided a domestic example of how such a system is possible to develop online. Yet, a combination of both the CVU's and OUA's approach to an online learning system with full credit transfer capacity would be the best model to adopt here in Ontario. In addition, all Ontario universities should be encouraged to form an online learning consortium, which would open up new possibilities for Ontario students seeking to pursue a post-secondary degree online.

OUSA believes that for Ontario to truly be a leader in online learning, Ontario universities and students must come together in support of an online learning consortium that allows for students to take accredited courses from any university in the province and to transfer credits earned to their home institutions.

***Recommendation Two: The government should continue to offer course development funds in order to fill gaps in available online programming.***

Even if Ontario's universities were to pull together to form a consortium of online universities with fully transferrable courses, it is highly unlikely that Ontario's course offerings would suit every student's needs right away. In all likelihood, gaps would exist in the provision of degree programs. As such, it is highly likely that an initial offering of degree programs would need to be supplemented by new program offerings. The Ontario Online announcement from January 2013 included 8.5 million dollars for a shared course development fund among consortium members.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Woolcott, D. (n.d.). *Quality assurance framework*. Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. Retrieved from, <http://www.cou.on.ca/related-sites/the-ontario-universities-council-on-quality-assura.aspx>

This fund will allow Ontario's online institute to not only be a collection of current university course offerings, but will also allow the system to grow. Professors at universities across the province with ideas for online courses would be able to apply, with government selecting successful online courses based on a variety of strategic and academic criteria. OUSA strongly believes that the online institute must be a foundation for the growth of online learning in Ontario, and thus must continue to offer funds for course development.

***Recommendation Three: The government should utilize credit transfer incentives to prioritize the development of course-to-course equivalencies for credits that would allow students to graduate, where possible, with a degree from a currently existing Ontario university.***

All Ontario university students who are taking a course offered by an Ontario university should be able to receive full credit for that course from their home institution. One of the benefits of an online education is its ability to give students a great degree of flexibility with how they pursue their studies. However, the current university credit transfer system in Ontario hinders the flexibility of courses by limiting where students can take their courses, whether it will be applicable to their degree requirements, and whether credit earned from a transfer course will be recognized by their home institution. OUSA is calling for the introduction of government incentives to be put in place for universities in Ontario to support a learning system that both allows for the development of course-to-course equivalent university course credits, and for the fluid transfer of these course credits between all Ontario university institutions.

Furthermore, course-to-course equivalencies for credits would allow for a student to graduate from an existing Ontario university while having taken accredited online university courses from different universities in Ontario. For example, the University of Helsinki offers academic credit for a human-computer interaction course offered through Coursera in exchange for the equivalent course on the same topic offered on their campus;<sup>54</sup> and, Colorado State University also permits its students to take courses through Udacity (another popular MOOC organization), for academic credit.<sup>55</sup> Thus, a learning system that guaranteed the transfer of university course credit(s) provincially and even worldwide, would allow for greater flexibility for Ontario students pursuing a post-secondary degree online.

As per the recommendations for credit transfer laid out in the 2011 Student Mobility paper, OUSA is proposing that all first year and second year courses be recognized as valid credits should the students switch institutions before completing their entire degree at their home institution. To better facilitate student mobility, OUSA is recommending that Ontario universities develop learning outcome requirements that would be consistent across institutions.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, specified upper year courses should be developed on the basis of creating course-to-course equivalencies among institutions. That being said, students building their degrees by accessing courses through other institutions (online or offline) should be held to the residency policies of their home institution. This would ensure that a student would still obtain enough credits from their home institution to obtain a degree from that institution. OUSA believes that with the right government incentives, Ontario universities will have the means to develop course-to-course equivalences in their course offerings that could be easily transferred for credit between all Ontario university institutions.

***Recommendation Four: In conjunction with wider credit transfer initiatives, institutions participating in online consortia should ease their residency requirements for students enrolled in fully-online degree programs.***

Residency requirements are imposed upon students at most universities to ensure that a certain threshold of courses that are counted towards a degree are completed through the institution conferring the degree. In the context of limited course offerings at particular institutions – even with broader and more comprehensive credit transfer agreements – students will not be able to benefit from the widest possible

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. (2011). *Policy paper: Student Mobility*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/policy-papers>

course selection offered by participating institutions in a consortium unless residency requirements are eased for fully-online students.

This is not to imply that students support a “race to the bottom” where students make pick and choose courses and ultimately accept a degree from their home institution without having completed more than a handful of courses. Simply put, institutions must be willing to critically evaluate their residency requirements, and ensure students pursuing fully-online programs are able to access a wide selection of courses without burdensome requirements.

## QUALITY

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***Principle Five: Current post-secondary education institutions must deliver high quality online learning in Ontario.***

Online learning, like traditional learning methods in post-secondary education, is best administered through the institutional bodies employed to deliver this form of education. Keeping online learning under the jurisdiction of existing post-secondary educational institutions ensures that the record of excellence of these institutions is also incorporated in the dissemination of online learning through these channels. OUSA fully stands behind the continued leadership of Ontario universities in providing students with a post-secondary education whether it is in the classroom or online.

In previous years, online education in the form of distance learning at the post-secondary level was relatively unknown and held little prestige within the post-secondary education sector; however, this has recently begun to change.<sup>57</sup> Opportunities for online learning have been actively incorporated into the curriculum at almost every post-secondary institution<sup>58</sup> therefore we should take advantage of the structures already in place as we delve into the creation of a regulated online learning consortium for Ontario university institutions.

Current post-secondary institutions are recognized and trusted brands that are invested in and supported by students through tuition fees and government support. While private providers have a role to play in the provision of online education, public universities and colleges are ultimately more accountable and equipped at educating the public at large.

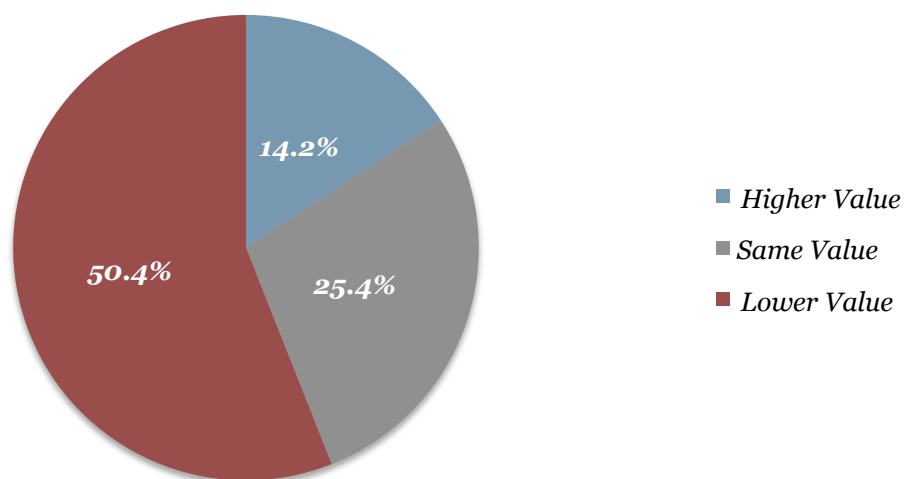
In a recent OUSA poll conducted in the spring of 2012, the majority of participants responded that a degree offered by a new Ontario Online University would be of a lower value to Ontarians than a degree from a current post-secondary institution (50.4 per cent), and only 14.2 per cent of respondents expressed that a degree from an Ontario Online University would be of a higher value (Figure 1).

### **FIGURE 1: THE VALUE OF A UNIVERSITY DEGREE OFFERED THROUGH A NEW ONLINE UNIVERSITY VERSUS A CURRENT UNIVERSITY AS PERCEIVED BY ONTARIANS**

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<sup>57</sup> Kozak, S. (2012). *Do online universities measure up?* Albanian Journalism. Retrieved from, <http://albanianjournalism.com/do-online-universities-measure-up/>

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



OUSA has heard from students that maximizing the amount of value that can be gained from their educational pursuits is a real and attainable goal of theirs, which includes receiving an education that is credible and recognized—two things existing post-secondary institutions can provide.

***Principle Six: Online learning offered by Ontario universities must facilitate learning outcomes comparable to in-person classroom education.***

This principle is meant to bring attention to the importance of the successful achievement of learning outcomes in-person and online. Furthermore, learning outcomes serve as an indicator of how teaching methodology and material employed by an instructor has accomplished what it set out to do, particularly in terms of increasing a student’s knowledge and application of that knowledge on a particular subject.

Learning outcomes are highly influenced by the adoption of effective learning strategies that can help to further engage students in an online forum. Robert Gagne developed a model to successfully meet learning outcomes when learning takes place off-campus, like in the case of online learning or traditional distance learning.<sup>59</sup> Below are nine conditions outlined by this model to maximize learning outcomes, they include:<sup>60</sup>

- *Reception*: This learning outcome describes the process whereby the delivery of instruction successfully gains and sustains the attention of the learner through critical questions and visuals throughout the duration of the interaction, and thus striking a balance between rote memorization and attention grabbing content;
- *Expectancy*: Author of the book *Strategies for stimulating the motivation to learn*, John Keller, stresses that making learning outcomes apparent at the onset to students will formalize their expectations as learners.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, creating and communicating clear expectations to students connects future evaluation measures more closely to long-term learning outcomes;
- [First] *Retrieval*: This learning outcome calls for the design of built-in processes for recalling past knowledge alongside the dissemination of new knowledge;
- *Selective Perception*: This learning outcome targets the kinds of mediums employed by an instructor to ensure that what the student learns is meaningful, clear and explained;
- *Semantic Encoding*: This learning outcome highlights the use of case studies, graphics and analogies capable of demonstrating how a concept actually works;

<sup>59</sup> Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://clearmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Keller, J. M. (1987). *Strategies for stimulating the motivation to learn*. *Performance and Instruction*, 26(8), 1-7.

- *Responding*: This learning outcome depends on how effective the learner is at expressing the knowledge and skills they learned in a way as basic as repetition to something as complex as a behaviour change;
- *Reinforcement*: This learning outcome is based on the level and frequency of interactivity between the instructor and student as demonstrated through regular feedback sessions, question and answer periods and similar activities;
- [Second] *Retrieval*: This learning outcome involves eliciting unprompted responses from students by their instructor through regular class engagement. Here students should feel comfortable enough with the course material to base the content of their course-related interactions on the information learned;
- *Generalization*: This learning outcome calls for the built-in capacity of learners to transfer knowledge, skills, and application gained in-study to other relevant areas of life such as employment.

Furthermore, online learning has been known to provide their students learning outcomes that have directly been connected with labour market opportunities. For example, MOOCs like Udacity and Coursera have been collecting data on the learning outcomes of their students; and in the case of students with the highest academic performance who opt-in to their results being shared, these online education companies will automatically connect these students to willing employers seeking the best candidates with proven skills and ability.<sup>62</sup>

OUSA stands behind the successful transmission of learning from the instructor to their students, which can be exemplified through the learning outcomes and experiences produced.

***Principle Seven: Expansion in the delivery of online education must be driven by an agenda to ensure a high quality learning experience.***

This principle is based on the belief that all education in Ontario should be delivered with quality in mind, with online learning being no exception. Hence, online education in Ontario must not only follow a comprehensive quality assurance framework it must champion quality from the start when developing new online programming. OUSA stands behind an online education in Ontario that recognizes a quality education as their number one goal. For example, the MOOC, Udacity, recently offered an identical computer science course that was also being offered in-person at Stanford University.<sup>63</sup> The test results were collected and compared, and the top 411 students across both courses were all participants of Udacity's MOOC course.<sup>64</sup> Udacity credits this difference to the attention to quality that the developers, instructors, and students themselves placed on the education that was delivered through this online platform.<sup>65</sup>

Increasing and ensuring the quality of online learning should be our main concern as we continuously develop its structure. Furthermore, student feedback should be the main priority throughout this process, as their concerns will ultimately dictate the success of any online learning initiatives put forth.

The presence of progress indicators in an online curriculum can help to signal the level of quality present. For instance, progress indicators can signal the average time a particular lecture activity or evaluation tool will take to complete, or even signal a student's progression in mastering a particular topic or subject area compared to what they have yet to learn.<sup>66</sup> Program indicators like these are critical to ensuring that the quality of online learning desired, is achieved and maintained, and that corners are not being cut in an effort to save costs.

In an effort to achieve and maintain these standards of quality, students taking online courses must be held to the same standards of academic integrity that students enrolled in traditional courses are held to, this includes standardized structure for examinations and other forms of evaluations. Students enrolled in online

<sup>62</sup> Young, J.R. (2012, December 4). *Providers of free mooc's now charge employers for access to student data*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from, <http://chronicle.com/article/Providers-of-Free-MOOCs-Now/136117/>

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>

courses should be subjected to the same evaluation process as students enrolled in offline or traditional courses.

OUSA believes that quality must be a priority when delivering online learning in Ontario that is either akin to, or exceeds, the level of quality demanded of in-person classroom instruction.

***Concern Two: Teaching online requires a new form of pedagogy that not all instructors have acquired the necessary skillset for.***

This concern reiterates the idea that online learning is not a replacement for learning that takes place in-person but it is simply a different form of learning, which requires a different set of skills to navigate instruction outside a physical classroom. For instance, faculty members hired for their excellence in research are equipped to teach in traditional classrooms; however, when those same faculty members are called upon to teach an online course, a whole new set of training must be adopted to ensure the most effective delivery of instruction is put forth.<sup>67</sup> OUSA believes that making sure students participating in an online course are thoroughly engaged by both the information delivered in the course and by an instructor who is capable of effectively leveraging the course technology, are essential parts of a quality online course.

Online course development and delivery is also unique in that it requires a certain combination of pedagogical conditions to be met for a quality online course to be produced. Some of these conditions include requiring all instructors to be trained in how to teach online and on how to develop and deliver an online course alongside a team of specialists, which may include: Experts on a specific course topic, an instructional designer, support administrators, a graphic designer, a programmer, and an information technologist to field technical support concerns.<sup>68</sup>

OUSA stands behind Ontario post-secondary students receiving the best online education possible, which starts with online learners receiving the best instruction possible. Therefore, OUSA believes that professors who have the desire and ability to teach online should receive the training they need to deliver high quality and highly engaging instruction.

***Concern Three: Some forms of online education are less engaging than others.***

This concern addresses the fact that online education is much more than simply taking the materials used to teach students in-person and uploading that material on the Internet. A marrying of course content and the needs of the learner is required to develop an online course that is engaging, informative, and challenging for all participants.<sup>69</sup> OUSA stands behind greater engagement online to ensure a quality education for Ontario learners in this space.

University faculty who teach online have found different ways of engaging with students. One effective way has been through intuitive course development that uses video sequencing design to communicate course material to students in a way that balances engagement and the retention of content.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in order to remove redundancy, in-person classroom courses being developed for online use can use existing curriculum to inform the way technologies such as videos, animations, interactive tools, and storytelling are adopted when designing an online course.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, while the evaluation of a quality engagement experience online is largely subjective,<sup>72</sup> instructors can make use of tried and tested engagement strategies offline, which may include opportunities for reflection, critical dialogue, frequent participation and access to useful data to keep track of student

<sup>67</sup> See recommendation eight in this policy paper for details.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Pappano, L. (2012, November 2). *Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace*. The New York Times. Retrieved from,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

<sup>71</sup> Neal, L. (2001). *Storytelling at a distance*. eLearn Magazine. Retrieved from, <http://elearnmag.acm.org/archive.cfm?aid=566979> ; Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>

<sup>72</sup> Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>



engagement.<sup>73</sup> Yet, it is important to reiterate that online post-secondary studies are not meant to be a replacement for traditional classroom learning. Instead, online learning offers both educators and students a learning platform capable of meaningful engagement that includes all learners through the use of targeted technology and an intuitive feedback design that reaches out to students who may be falling behind early on.<sup>74</sup>

OUSA believes that a post-secondary education should be thoroughly engaging; but online education in particular should provide a high quality learning experience where engagement takes centre stage.

***Recommendation Five: New instructors and teaching assistants should be required to complete formal training in online course design and online teaching.***

OUSA stands behind the implementation of a long-term online learning strategy that includes the training of all new faculty and teaching assistants at Ontario universities on how to effectively teach online. Ensuring that as many faculty members and teaching assistants as possible are equipped with the skills needed to successfully teach online is critical to the longevity of any province-wide online learning consortium.

Having an engaged, knowledgeable, and qualified instructor is an important building block when it comes to designing a successful course, whether online or in-person. For example, the University of Toronto offers a variety of training tools for their faculty to learn how to effectively teach and design a course that will engage their students in an online setting.<sup>75</sup> Some of these training resources include: Information on the theory and research behind online learning,<sup>76</sup> a collection of international best-practices,<sup>77</sup> and a U of T specific teaching strategy that professors on all three campuses have adopted.<sup>78</sup>

By contrast, having an instructor who is unfamiliar with the technology required for an online course is detrimental to students in terms of minimizing student dropout rates and their overall learning experience.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, OUSA believes that the only way to ensure the sustainability of teaching quality online is to train all new faculty and teaching assistants on how to effectively teach and engage their students in this space.

***Recommendation Six: The government should provide funding for research into online education pedagogy.***

This recommendation calls for the adoption of technology-enabled pedagogical approaches to improve the level of engagement possible in online courses and in physical classrooms whose student enrollment numbers exceed 100 students per lecture. OUSA believes that technology-enabled pedagogical approaches proved to be effective at engaging student audiences of various sizes online can be re-oriented to improve the engagement practices of instructors who teach courses with large student enrollments within physical classrooms. Thus, OUSA stands behind the adoption of technology-enabled pedagogical approaches that can be used online and offline to engage large classes.

The rise in online education in recent years has been followed closely by an increasing number of innovations in the pedagogical delivery of information being taught to students online and offline.<sup>80</sup> The “flipped classroom” is one of those innovations that emerged. Flipped classrooms leave traditional lecture material to be acquired on a student’s own time at their own pace while class time is reserved for the facilitation of deeper inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and on-hands skill development.<sup>81</sup> Although

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>75</sup> University of Toronto. (n.d.) *Engaging students online*. Retrieved from, <http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/teachingcontexts/online-learning/engaging-students.htm>

<sup>76</sup> University of Toronto. (n.d.). *Theory and practice*. Retrieved from, <http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/teachingcontexts/online-learning/engaging-students/theory-practice.htm>

<sup>77</sup> University of Toronto. (n.d.). *Online teaching: Example activities*. Retrieved from, <http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/teachingcontexts/online-learning/engaging-students/activities.htm>

<sup>78</sup> University of Toronto. (n.d.). *Spotlight: U of T faculty share strategies*. Retrieved from, <http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/teachingcontexts/online-learning/engaging-students/uoft-spotlight.htm>

<sup>79</sup> Arsham, H. (n.d.). *Interactive education: Impact of the Internet on learning and teaching*. Retrieved from, <http://home.ubalt.edu/ntsbarsh/interactive.htm>

<sup>80</sup> Corbyn, Z. (2012). *This could be huge*. Times Higher Education. Retrieved from, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*.

present in various formations offline, the technological application of the flipped classroom has driven the design of more intuitive and adaptive learning tools online.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, by introducing new funds to go towards the research and development of online pedagogy, instructors may have a greater incentive to invest time into developing technology-enabled methods of online instruction. Or, alternatively, the government could fund new teaching awards to recognize innovation and excellence in online teaching and course development. For instance, the founders of Udacity chose their professors based on how well they were able to apply what they had learned about teaching online by effectively engaging their students on a particular topic of study using the technology provided.<sup>83</sup> In fact, they have turned away 98 per cent of the professors seeking to work with them in favor of choosing professors that excelled at teaching while utilizing the technology provided to deliver a highly engaging course.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Pappano, L. (2012, November 2). *Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace*. The New York Times. Retrieved from, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE

***Principle Eight: Online learning in Ontario must be accessible to all willing and qualified students, especially students from groups that have lower levels of access in traditional, physical institutions.***

This principle reiterates OUSA's longstanding position that all qualified students regardless of financial capacity, place of residence or other barriers to accessing post-secondary studies in Ontario, be given the opportunity to receive a post-secondary education (PSE). Online learning's inherent flexibility makes it an ideal pathway for overcoming existing barriers to PSE faced by many prospective and current Ontario university students. For example, embedding a Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) methodology into the development of an online course automatically broadens its accessibility and reach.<sup>85</sup> OUSA stands behind the belief that a post-secondary education should not be a privilege but a societal good that all students who are qualified and interested in pursuing a post-secondary degree could do without barrier.

Issues of accessibility and affordability have always been of great concern for students; issues that only continue to grow as the cost for tuition rises.<sup>86</sup> For students with disabilities, advances in online learning technology have allowed for greater adaptability to be built into learning systems where universal accommodation was a prior concern.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, rural youth in Ontario are among some of the highest users of the Internet for participation in online education;<sup>88</sup> which comes at a benefit for rural students since access to an online education has also been proven to significantly reduce the cost of travel for students living great distances away from a post-secondary institution.<sup>89</sup> Together, these findings suggest that increasing the number of online learning opportunities at the post-secondary level may in fact be a very effective way of improving access for Ontario university students.<sup>90</sup>

Increasing accessibility to professional development can also be a great incentive for enrolling in online courses due in part to the fact that online learning allows students to continue to pursue professional opportunities while in-study and to use income earned from paid opportunities to go towards the cost of tuition and living. For students with a dependent(s) being able to work while continuing their studies online allows them to save on the additional cost of hiring a caregiver if they were to be taking their courses on-campus.<sup>91</sup> Online learning can also increase access for summer students who might take courses on campus in the fall and winter months while working off-campus in the summer. For these students, having the opportunity to get ahead on their degree requirements, to raise their academic standing or to simply work while taking a course that is only offered in the summer, is invaluable.

OUSA believes that the expansion of online learning opportunities in Ontario can be pursued in such a way that accessibility to a post-secondary degree for all Ontario students can be increased and not diminished.

***Concern Four: Online courses can have higher dropout rates than traditional courses if students are not appropriately supported.***

This concern drives home the fact that online learning requires as much support and strategic coordination as in-person classroom learning to ensure that the needs of all participating students are adequately met. However the rates of student retention online, in some cases, are extremely low;<sup>92</sup> and as a result, the

<sup>85</sup> Nicholls, S., and Li, A. (2012). *Policy paper: Students with disabilities*. Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/policy-papers>

<sup>86</sup> Zeman, K. (2007). A first look at provincial differences in education pathways from high school to college and university. *Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada*, 4(2). Statistics Canada Catalogue Number 81-004-XIE.

<sup>87</sup> Pappano, L. (2012). *Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace*. The New York Times. Retrieved from, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

<sup>88</sup> McKeown, L., and Underhill, C. (2007). Learning online: Factors associated with use of the Internet for education purposes. *Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada*, 4(4). Statistics Canada Catalogue Number 81-004-XIE.

<sup>89</sup> Frenette, M. (2003). Access to college and university: Does distance matter? *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, Issue 201. Statistics Canada Catalogue number 11F0019MIE.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>91</sup> See, Minniti, S. (2012). *Policy paper: Mature students*. Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/policy-papers>

<sup>92</sup> Corbyn, Z. (2012). *This could be huge*. Times Higher Education. Retrieved from, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

benefits of learning online is lost to those unable to continue. OUSA stands behind decreasing student dropout rates online by increasing the channels for support available to these students.

There has been mixed research as to how high the dropout rates are for online learners. A Canadian study found that online courses offered for academic credit from Canadian universities and colleges reported completion rates as high as 95 per cent for university online courses and 79 per cent for online college courses.<sup>93</sup> However, it has been reported that online courses adhering to a MOOC structure have experienced dropout rates as high as 90 per cent.<sup>94</sup> Clearly, different types of online courses can lend themselves to high dropout rates for a myriad of reasons;<sup>95</sup> however, more research is needed to learn more about what exactly those reasons are. For instance, it is quite possible that the high dropout rates associated to some types of online courses stem more from the type of course it is (i.e., recognized versus not recognized by a student's home institution) opposed to the fact the course is online. Yet it is worth noting that online course developers are making great strides to increase student retention through the integration of activities such as peer grading and group discussion boards that showcase the academic perspectives of people from all over the world.<sup>96</sup>

OUSA believes that the high dropout rates observed among some online learners can be reduced with the right combination of support from the instructor, post-secondary institutions, and as a result of the development of a more strategic program design.

We know in terms of performance that adjusting for only university for-credit online courses (getting rid of trade training, short term one offs, k-12 etc), *performance* is not notably better or worse. Some scholars and instructors think that with properly constructed and supported courses that those numbers could actually move toward positive for online.

A study reviewing such a support and preparation trial had findings in support of this. Persistence rates were about 10 per cent lower (70 per cent) than average university persistence rates, but with appropriate support and preparation that number goes back up to in-class, in-person averages or better. This university had a control group for 'appropriately' supported students and compared them to the general population in the same online delivered class. What's most interesting is that the people in the supported group were students most likely to need support of any kind (had dropped out of an online class, had less than a 'C' or had never taken an online class) and actually persisted better than the general population.<sup>97</sup>

***Concern Five: Some institutions charge fees for online courses that are not proportional to the education or support services received by the student, and may be higher than the fees for comparable courses offered in-classroom.***

In comparing online learning to traditional classroom learning at the same institutions, the Campus Computing Survey revealed that one-third of campuses charge the same amount of tuition, one-fifth charge less tuition for students in online programs, and almost half of the institutions surveyed charge higher tuition for online students.<sup>98</sup> In some cases, students in online programs paid tuition fees of 10 per cent or more than on-campus students in parallel programs, a trend that appears to be reflected in Canadian online institutions. For instance, tuition and ancillary fees for Alberta students at Athabasca University total \$646 per course, or \$6460 per year – nearly \$1000 more than the average undergraduate tuition fees in Alberta. Students from elsewhere in Canada pay even more at \$7510 per year.<sup>99</sup>

With Ontario's students already paying the highest tuition fees in Canada, OUSA categorically rejects the idea that tuition fees at an online consortium could or should be higher than fees for the same course at a

<sup>93</sup> Bates, T. (2011). *Fact sheet: Summary of elearning surveys of publically assisted PSE institutions*. Retrieved from, [www.tonybates.ca/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Feb-22-Final.pdf](http://www.tonybates.ca/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Feb-22-Final.pdf)

<sup>94</sup> Corbyn, Z. (2012). *This could be huge*. Times Higher Education. Retrieved from, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>96</sup> Pappano, L. (2012, November 2). *Massive open online courses are multiplying at a rapid pace*. The New York Times. Retrieved from, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

<sup>97</sup> Cintron, R. & Lang, J. *Preparing Students for Online Education: A Case Study of a Readiness Module*. 2012. New York University.

<sup>98</sup> The Campus Computing Project. *Campus Computing Survey*. October 2013

<sup>99</sup> Athabasca University Course Calendar. 2012

traditional institution, particularly given that students taking online courses may not have access to the same support services and infrastructure as those studying in a physical classroom.

***Concern Six: The OSAP need assessment formula undervalues the costs of technology required to participate in post-secondary education.***

This concern highlights the post-secondary costs, in addition to tuition, which a student who chooses to pursue all or part of their studies online must invest in, in order to successfully meet the requirements of their online studies. In the past, the provincial government set aside funding to specifically target the estimated cost of technology that a post-secondary student would encounter as they progress through their degree (i.e., the \$150 Textbook and Technology Grant discontinued in 2012-2013); however, the amount of funding allocated to each student at the time did not directly compensate for the actual costs faced by students.

The current OSAP formula recognizes an amount of \$500 per year for computer costs, which seems extremely low given that the cost of purchasing a computer such as a basic model Acer Laptop, with an 11.5-inch screen from Future Shop is \$300.<sup>100</sup> This price does not include any other costs associated with additional software, a printer, or the price of repairs should the computer encounter any technical difficulties. On top of that, the rollback of the Textbook and Technology Grant means that students in 2013-2014 will have \$150 less than they had in previous years to pay for their post-secondary expenses. From observation alone, the use of personal laptops to take notes in class, write and upload assignments and to contribute to online discussions have even become a staple item for many post-secondary courses that meet in person. For instance, students at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) are required to purchase a laptop through the university and have the software updated each year as part of a fee referred to as the “technology-enriched learning ancillary fee,” which ranges in cost from \$1,145 to \$1,333.<sup>101</sup> This makes technology for education-related purposes a substantial amount of the overall post-secondary costs students are expected to shoulder alone.

OUSA stands behind the introduction of a dual assessment formula that closely approximates the real technology costs faced by the average university student on the one hand; and the technology and Internet related costs faced by students who take 50 per cent or more of their courses online, on the other. As such OUSA believes that meeting the cost of technology and Internet access for Ontario university students learning online should not be insurmountable but supported as much as possible.

***Concern Seven: Many institutions provide fully-online degree programs without ensuring students have access to the necessary technical and support services required to be successful.***

The Campus Computing Survey 2013 indicates that – among campuses and campus information technology professionals – their highest ranked strategic priorities for the coming 3-5 years are providing adequate user support and assisting instructors in better utilizing technology in online, blended and in-class learning. This would suggest that the current campus environment is not fully equipped to respond to the technical needs that students may require while enrolled in fully-online courses. Similarly, a paper from the Canadian Virtual University (CVU – a consortium of Canadian universities collaborating in online university education) points out that so far Canada has lagged behind in innovation in support and delivery in online learning.<sup>102</sup> CVU points out that in many cases the approach has been to simply translate face to face practices to an online environment instead of the more specialized supports and pedagogy that is needed to really capitalize on an online environment.

***Concern Eight: Due to the nature of a consortium model, students may be subject to***

<sup>100</sup> Future Shop. (n.d.). *Laptops and macbooks*. Retrieved from, <http://www.futureshop.ca/en-CA/category/laptops-macbooks/1002opt.aspx#PRe7LY/TLhqZB8nNVErhog>

<sup>101</sup> University of Ontario Institute of Technology. (2013). *Compulsory ancillary fees*. Retrieved from, <http://uoit.ca/main/current-students/money-matters/tuition-and-fees/compulsory-ancillary-fees.php>

<sup>102</sup> Canadian Virtual University (2012). *Online University Education in Canada: Challenges and Opportunities*. Retrieved from <http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/Online%20University%20Education%20%20jan17%202012.pdf>.

***multiple academic policies and procedures as they complete online courses at multiple institutions, which may prove difficult to navigate with inconsistent outcomes.***

In a consortium model, where students take courses from multiple institutions, students may be subject several differing academic calendars and academic policies. This can be particularly confusing as students who enroll in fully-online programs, may also be more likely to have other responsibilities such as full-time employment or family matters.

Navigating multiple academic policies and procedures can also prove to be complicated when issues arise. For example, in the case of alleged academic misconduct on the part of students from different institutions if differing academic policies apply, disciplinary measures may not be equal for the same incident. From another perspective, in the case of unfair treatment or procedural inconsistency on the part of the instructor, it may not be clear to students which academic policies and recourse applies.

***Concern Nine: Ontario still faces a significant digital divide between those who have access to a reliable high-speed Internet source and those who do not.***

For those Ontarians who already enjoy unfettered access to the Internet may be surprised that not all Ontarians can afford or even live in an area where they can receive reliable high-speed access to the Internet. For Rural Ontarians in particular, online learning may be the only pathway they can take to receive a post-secondary education when their distance from an existing institution cannot be overcome. OUSA stands behind efforts to bridge the digital divide in Ontario wherever possible.

Statistics Canada defines the digital divide as the unequal attainment of information communication technology (ICT) skills and literacy, opportunities for usage, and access to ICT equipment and infrastructure.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, in a recent World Bank report, increases in broadband Internet access were followed by bursts of economic growth within the developed nation states that initiated these changes.<sup>104</sup> Domestically, efforts have been made by the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) who called for a public hearing on the feasibility of providing increasing accessibility of broadband Internet services to close the digital divide in Canada just over two years ago.<sup>105</sup> Since then, no national strategy has materialized; however, many provinces like Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia have initiated their own funding strategies for increased broadband access to rural areas in their provinces respectively.<sup>106</sup>

Some effort to close this divide was made by the Canadian government in the form of a quarter of a million dollars investment to buildup broadband infrastructure in non-urban regions.<sup>107</sup> Yet, countries such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, Australia and the United States of America have committed billions of dollars over the years to expand their broadband infrastructure to places traditionally left untouched by such technology.<sup>108</sup>

Sixty per cent of rural Canadians who access the Internet do so through broadband infrastructure that tends to be both expensive and unpredictable in terms of regular connectivity,<sup>109</sup> which has exacerbated the expansion of these ICTs into more rural and northern homes.<sup>110</sup> In terms of increasing access to other Internet technologies, satellite and wireless access represents a little less than half of all Internet services used by Rural Canadians who make up about 20 per cent of the population.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Sciadas, G. (2002). *Unveiling the digital divide*. Statistics Canada. Catalogue No. 56F0009XIE. Retrieved from, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/56f0004m/56f0004m2002007-eng.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> World Bank.(2008). *Global Economic Prospects: Technology Diffusion in the Developing World*. Washington, District of Columbia: World Bank; World Bank. (2008). *World Development Indicators Online Database*. Washington, District Columbia: World Bank.

<sup>105</sup> Marlow, I. (2010). *Canada's digital divide*. Globe and Mail. Retrieved from, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/canadas-digital-divide/article4313761/?page=all>

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Theckedath, D., and Thomas, T. (n.d.). *Advancing Canada's digital society*. Parliament of Canada. Retrieved from, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/cei-23-e.htm>

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

OUSA believes that a digital divide to reliable high-speed Internet access for educational purposes is a real concern in Ontario that will require the collaborative efforts of multiple government ministries, post-secondary institutions and students.

***Recommendation Seven: Any consortium should offer a self-diagnostic assessment tool that students can use to assist with decision-making to pursue and enroll in fully-online courses or programs, and institutions should promote the use of this tool for its students.***

One school in Louisiana set up a module for each student interested in an online course that tested their suitability for online learning while simultaneously giving them some exposure to generalized online learning skills, library skills, and ability to navigate learning management systems.<sup>112</sup> The module consisted of a written assignment, a discussion assignment, a receive and send email exercise, and quiz regarding the student's readiness for online learning. Students are given several types of resources to consult when attempting these exercises, including the ability to contact course instructors. Through this module, the course materials are available in a variety of formats so that students can access information in the format that they are most comfortable with as learners. Students who used this module had a 10 per cent higher completion rate in the course. This type of module should be employed through a consortium model to promote student success and ensure that students engage in fully-online learning with an understanding of what their engagement and success will be.

***Recommendation Eight: Tuition and fees for online courses should be no more than what is charged for an equivalent in-person classroom experience and if savings are realized, these must be passed on to the student.***

This recommendation calls for cost pairing between online and in-person instruction, such that online courses are treated as a different but comparable form of post-secondary study when compared to in-person classroom learning, especially when learning online and offline incurs a similar cost to both the institution and to students. Therefore, an online course should not exceed the tuition-related cost of participation required for an equivalent in-person classroom course for an Ontario university student.

Currently, MOOCs are the only form of online education that has managed to keep their tuition costs significantly lower than their competitors, and in most cases, free.<sup>113</sup> That being said, we are not advocating that no tuition be charged to students taking online courses, but that tuition for online courses not be greater than that charged for in-person classroom courses.

However, it has been said by some that the burden associated to online learning is less a factor of cost as it is a product of the initial investment of time and effort put into making it successful.<sup>114</sup> This argument may have originated from the fact that instructors generally bear the cost of this initial investment along with their online course development team, who must work diligently at the onset to ensure that the learning objectives they set can be met.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, students who pursue their post-secondary studies online should not be saddled with unnecessary tuition-related costs that exceed that of in-person classroom instruction especially when the financial cost in question cannot be justified.

OUSA believes online learning needs to be made accessible to qualified and interested students whenever possible and therefore participation in online post-secondary studies should not produce a greater financial burden for students than in-person classroom learning.

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<sup>112</sup> Cintron, R. & Lang, J. *Preparing Students for Online Education: A Case Study of a Readiness Module*. 2012. New York University.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://clearmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

***Recommendation Nine: The OSAP needs assessment formula must be updated to include the real market costs of technology required to participate in the current climate of post-secondary education.***

This recommendation calls for the Ontario government to provide university students with a needs assessment tool that accounts for the actual technology-related costs students must incur as a result of pursuing post-secondary studies in this province. OUSA understands that as technology changes so do the associated costs that a student, who depends on some form of technology to participate, pursue, and successfully complete their post-secondary studies, must incur.

As mentioned in concern four, the OSAP need assessment formula severely under-represents the costs associated with technology in a post-secondary environment, which becomes of an even greater importance with concern to online learners. The OSAP need assessment should be updated to include the real market cost of technology used for education-related purposes for technology such as: Computers, smartphones, high-speed Internet access, computer software, and required technology for the classroom such as iClickers or tablets. Although the technology costs assumed by each university student will vary by discipline, full-time/part-time status, and the number of courses taken online, OUSA recommends the introduction of an OSAP need assessment formula that more accurately reflects the changes in technology costs over the course of a single degree program taking into account the differences mentioned above.

OUSA believes that OSAP's current need assessment formula would more readily address the full extent of need expressed by many post-secondary students if it were to account for the real cost of securing the necessary technology to successfully pursue a post-secondary degree.

***Recommendation Ten: The provincial government should continue to invest in expanding reliable high-speed Internet access to all parts of the province.***

This recommendation calls for the Ontario government to ensure that reliable high-speed Internet infrastructure is expanded into the northern and remote parts of the province and that this new infrastructure responds to the needs of post-secondary students in those regions. Urban Ontario areas have long enjoyed regular access to the Internet to serve all their online needs but this has not been the case for residents outside the urban reach. Therefore, for Ontario to be a global leader in online education they must ensure that all eligible post-secondary students have the technological infrastructure necessary to guarantee continuous Internet access anywhere in the province whenever students need it to fulfill the online requirements of their studies.

Within the past decade, the Ontario government has committed to investing almost \$33 million into building high-speed Internet and broadband service in Rural and Northern Ontario, which included the installation of a fiber-optic network within twenty-seven Northern First Nation communities.<sup>116</sup> That being said, since 2012 only half of the individuals who should be receiving this access have reported receiving this service, which suggests that there is still much work that needs to be done in terms of bringing reliable high-speed Internet services to Rural and Northern Ontario regions.<sup>117</sup>

Provincially, Internet use in Canada was highest among those who used it for education-related services, but differences were observed between those living in rural and urban areas.<sup>118</sup> For example, Urban Canadian residents were more likely to use the Internet to do research for assignments than rural residents (66 per cent versus 62 per cent), while Rural Canadian residents were more likely to use the Internet for distance education than urban residents (29 per cent versus 25 per cent).<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, the Rural Connections Program, initiated by the provincial government, carries the potential to bring reliable high-speed Internet

<sup>116</sup> Government of Ontario. (2010). *Progress report 2010*. Retrieved from, [http://www.ontario.ca/ontprodconsume/groups/content/@onca/@initiatives/@progress/documents/document/ont06\\_024792.pdf](http://www.ontario.ca/ontprodconsume/groups/content/@onca/@initiatives/@progress/documents/document/ont06_024792.pdf)

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> McKeown, L., and Underhill, C. (2007). Learning online: Factors associated with use of the Internet for education purposes. *Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada*, 4(4). Statistics Canada Catalogue Number 81-004-XIE.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*



to these communities, but the program continues to remain without the necessary funding to address the need at hand.<sup>120</sup>

OUSA stands behind any efforts made to ensure that all post-secondary students in Ontario who pursue their studies online or with the assistance of the Internet can do so with the re-assurance that they will have access to reliable, and affordable high-speed Internet. Still, OUSA believes that the provincial government has made steps towards ensuring universal access to high-speed Internet in all parts of Ontario with their 2007 Ontario Budget announcement of \$10 million towards expanding broadband technology to rural provincial regions.<sup>121</sup> However, the broadband program that was announced in 2007 and began in June 2009 completed its operation in April 2012 with some projects still left uncompleted.<sup>122</sup> Therefore OUSA urges the provincial government to make a firm commitment to introduce new funding to complete what the government started in order to ensure that all Ontarians have access to reliable high-speed Internet infrastructure.

***Recommendation Eleven: Any consortium of online programs offered by current Ontario university institutions must include technical and student support services that would facilitate success.***

The Ontario universities who would make up the membership of a single online learning consortium should ensure that all university students who participate in this consortium have access to technical and traditional student support services comparable to that available to students who attend classes in-person. At present, online-only learners have the benefit of receiving university-level instruction online, but this does not always include the benefit of technical and student support services. OUSA is recommending that, with the full participation of Ontario universities who make up the online learning consortium, all technical and student support services can be made available centrally through this collaborative network. Specifically, students participating in the consortium should be granted access to technical and student support services either through the nearest post-secondary institution or through a comparable service to be made available through a local community partner at no additional expense to the student.

In a recent Columbia University Teacher's College study on the affect of online learning on a student's academic performance compared to in-person classroom learning, researchers found significant differences in course persistence and grades among 40, 000 post-secondary students residing out of Washington State.<sup>123</sup> While only small differences were observed between the course persistence (94.45 per cent for in-person learning versus 91.9 per cent online) and grades (2.98/4.00 grade-point average (GPA) in-person versus 2.77/4.00 GPA) of in-person learners and online learners across demographics, when the results were broken down by sex and by ethnicity even wider distinctions were observed.

Specifically, the researchers of this study found that women significantly out-performed males in course persistence<sup>124</sup>; and students who did not identify as having a Black ethnicity were found to have significantly out-performed students who did identify as having a Black ethnicity when comparing the grades they received as a result of participating in an online course.<sup>125</sup> Lastly, mature students older than the age of 25 significantly out-performed students who were under the age of 25 in terms of both course persistence and grades online.<sup>126</sup>

To address these differences, the researchers of this study proposed a handful of possible solutions to this perceived learning gap, many of which coincided directly with the kinds of changes OUSA has proposed in this paper. For instance, researchers Di Xu and Shanna Smith Jaggars<sup>127</sup> suggested providing training

<sup>120</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. (2012). *Policy paper: Rural and northern students*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/policy-papers>

<sup>121</sup> Ministry of Agriculture. (2007). *McGuinty government connecting rural communities: Ontario municipal rural broadband partnership program invites applications from rural municipalities in Southern Ontario*. Retrieved from, <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/infores/releases/2007/060607.htm>

<sup>122</sup> Industry Canada. (2012). *Broadband: Program update*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/719.nsf/eng/home>

<sup>123</sup> Xu, D., and Smith Jaggars, S. (2013). Adaptability to online learning: Differences across types of students and academic subject areas. *Community College Research Center, Working Paper No. 54*, 1-32.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

specific to online skill development (referred to as “scaffolding” in the study),<sup>128</sup> which echo’s recommendation eight of this paper that calls for all new instructors and teaching assistants to be required to complete formal training to teach online. This recommendation is based on the idea that learning the skills to teach online and teaching students the skills to learn effectively online are both critical to the successful transmission of learning outcomes in an online education setting.<sup>129</sup>

A second approach is embedding methods of intervention into every online course as part of an early warning system that would automatically pick up on anyone falling behind.<sup>130</sup> This approach falls in line with this paper’s sixth concern, which highlights the need for online education to be more engaging by providing additional opportunities for direct interaction with a course instructor especially when a student is falling behind in a course. The adoption of technology-enabled pedagogical methods is one way in which these feedback mechanisms can be designed right into the course itself.

Finally, the researchers in this study suggest an approach that champions improving the quality of online education as a whole.<sup>131</sup> This shared concern is most prominently expressed in this paper’s tenth recommendation that calls for the development of a quality assurance framework specific to online learning in Ontario. OUSA believes that online education has the potential of becoming a high-quality learning alternative to in-person classroom learning by allowing for all students to excel academically and to sustain that excellence for the duration of their post-secondary career. However, failing to develop an online education system that provides a high degree of support and quality measures for teaching, learning and general engagement online will continue to disadvantage students. Yet, this need can be addressed in part by the adoption of a robust suite of technical and student support services tailored to the needs of online learners taking either some or all of their post-secondary courses online. Thus, technical and general student support services must be made readily available to online learners in the province.

In the case of students participating in an online learning consortium and taking online courses from multiple post-secondary institutions in Ontario, having one central place to locate technical and student support services is critical to students getting the support they need right when they need it most. Sharing resources among Ontario university institutions, local community partners, and the online learning consortium itself is the most effective way to offer technical and student support services to all Ontario university students who seek to pursue their education online.

OUSA believes that technical and student support services are a crucial aspect of the post-secondary experience for Ontario university students and thus should be coordinated by the institutions that house them as part of an online learning consortium regardless of where an online learner is located in the province.

***Recommendation Twelve: Institutions that allow students to enroll in courses at other institutions for completion of fully-online programs should develop agreements regarding academic policies and procedures to provide consistency for students.***

Institutions participating in consortium-models of online course and program delivery need to recognize that the student experience must be as seamless as possible. As mentioned above, navigating several academic calendars and academic policies may be problematic and lead to confusion for the individual student. In many cases, institutions may develop agreements with other institutions for the purposes of providing cross-country or international student exchange programs, where students can attend another institution for one or more academic terms. These types of agreements should be pursued for the purposes of providing a seamless academic experience for students engaging in fully-online programs. At the very least, any consortium should serve the purpose of directing students to all of the relevant academic calendars and academic policies to ensure this information is transparent and readily available.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> See, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. (2010). *The Ontario Online Institute: Student’s vision for opening Ontario’s classrooms*. Retrieved from, <http://www.ousa.ca/research-type/government-submissions>

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

## ACCOUNTABILITY

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***Principle Nine: Courses offered through an Ontario online learning consortium must be subject to a robust quality assurance framework specific to online learning.***

This principle addresses the need for having a relevant and robust quality assurance framework in place when evaluating the educational merits of an online education. Currently, there is no official quality assurance framework specific to online learning although the demand for one is already in place. OUSA stands behind the creation and adoption of a quality assurance framework that recognizes the unique learning needs of an online learning environment.

A primary example of this comes from the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) who is a leader in providing quality assurance research and metrics to providers of online education.<sup>132</sup> Sloan-C has developed the 5 pillars of continuous quality improvement (CQI), which can be applied to either the academic classroom or to educational training initiated by the private sector.<sup>133</sup> The five pillars of CQI address the following: learning and cost effectiveness, institutional commitment, access, and faculty and student satisfaction.<sup>134</sup> Using the five pillars of CQI as a starting point, a province-specific quality assessment tool for online education could be developed and applied to an Ontario Online Learning consortium.

OUSA believes that an Ontario Online Learning Consortium would be the ideal place to apply and test the adoption of a new online learning quality assurance framework.

***Principle Ten: An Ontario online learning consortium should be overseen by a governing council to ensure a cohesive direction to online course and program development and delivery.***

A governing council for an online learning consortium would serve as an academic governing body to ensure that there is strong mission and strategic direction to online learning delivery, but need not replace institutional autonomy over academic regulations and policies. Governing councils exist for other online learning consortiums such as Distance Minnesota<sup>135</sup> or Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium<sup>136</sup>. Viewing a consortium as a partnership between participating institutions that requires similar strategic visioning and operational expertise as a separate institution will ensure that the programming is of the highest quality for students.

***Concern Ten: The current post-secondary studies quality assurance framework is not well suited to the needs of online learning.***

This concern stems from the fact that while a very robust post-secondary studies quality assurance framework already exists it does not reflect the quality indicators most relevant to online learning. Therefore, expanding the existing framework would not take into account the fact that traditional classroom learning and online learning do not employ the same kinds of learning conditions<sup>137</sup> and thus cannot be held to the same set of measurements used to assess a quality post-secondary education. OUSA stands behind the development of a new quality assurance framework that is designed around assessing quality from the learning conditions and outcomes indicative of an online learning environment.

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<sup>132</sup> Moore, J. C. (2005). *The Sloan consortium quality framework and the five pillars*. Retrieved from, [sloanconsortium.org/publications/books/qualityframework.pdf](http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/books/qualityframework.pdf)

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> <https://distanceminnesota.org/app/custom/about/administration/session/L3RpbWUvMTM5NDAoNzM4NigzaWQvOXNCRFd1T2w%3D>

<sup>136</sup> <http://www.ctdlc.org/About/council.cfm?nav=10>

<sup>137</sup> Corbyn, Z. (2012). *This could be huge*. Times Higher Education. Retrieved from, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422034&c=2>

In 1996, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) established a detailed framework to measure quality within Ontario Universities, while at the same time establishing a system of review that would apply to all undergraduate programs province-wide.<sup>138</sup> This was renewed and updated in 2010, but contains little mention of online programming. The areas of focus included: the protocol for new programs, the protocol for expedited approvals, the protocol for the cyclical review of existing programs, and the audit process.<sup>139</sup> However, this framework was not developed with online learning in mind, which leaves a large pool of post-secondary courses offered online without a quality assurance framework that adequately meets the needs of an online learning environment.

OUSA believes that an Ontario post-secondary quality assurance framework specific to online learning is a critical piece of ensuring a quality post-secondary online education in Ontario.

***Concern Eleven: Currently, fully-online programs may not always be subject to external reviews separate from program or department reviews at the institutional level.***

As an example, at the University of Waterloo, a three-year or four-year General Degree with a major in Social Development Studies can be pursued entirely online through an affiliated University College, Renison University College. The last program review was submitted to a Senate Committee in May 2010<sup>140</sup>, yet this review did not comment on the difference (if any) in quality between the online program and the in-class delivery. It is important that in considering program quality, institutions ensure that their online courses are subject to scrutiny that acknowledges that online delivery and in-class delivery require different techniques and innovative models of pedagogy to ensure similar outcomes. Students are concerned that online delivery of courses within a department or program unit is not being reviewed appropriately leading to potential issues in quality, academic and support service provision, and student experience.

***Recommendation Thirteen: The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework specific to online learning in Ontario.***

This recommendation calls for an online learning quality assurance framework to be developed and made accessible to educators alongside the current Ontario post-secondary assurance framework used to assess quality within traditional learning classrooms. The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance, in particular, should develop a robust quality assurance framework specific to the conditions most applicable to the kinds of courses to be offered through an Ontario Online Learning Consortium that is akin in scope to the current framework in place for in-person classroom learning. OUSA stands behind The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance's development of an online learning quality assurance framework that can be adopted by an Ontario Online Learning Consortium. This new framework should align itself with the current framework applied to traditional classrooms to maintain consistency in the quality of post-secondary education, regardless of method of delivery. For instance, institutions must ensure that policies are set in place that would take into account the unique situations facing online students such as power outages or technology failures, as these setbacks can be detrimental to a student's success if proper policies are not in place (i.e., policies surrounding inclement weather for students enrolled in traditional courses). The framework surrounding online education should also ensure that public institutions remain as the primary providers of material for online courses.

The process of developing an online learning quality assurance framework should be informed by global best practices. From our research we found a collection of questions that have been used to guide quality assurance measures for traditional distance learning, which OUSA believes can be applied to the development of an online learning quality assurance framework. Some of these questions include:<sup>141</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Woolcott, D. (n.d.). *Quality assurance framework*. Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. Retrieved from, <http://www.cou.on.ca/related-sites/the-ontario-universities-council-on-quality-assura.aspx>

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> [https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/sites/ca.secretariat-general-counsel/files/uploads/files/20100511ugc\\_ag.pdf](https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/sites/ca.secretariat-general-counsel/files/uploads/files/20100511ugc_ag.pdf) (p. 180-196)

<sup>141</sup> Gottschalk, T.H. (n.d.). *Distance education at a glance guide 4: Evaluation for distance educators*. University of Idaho Engineering Outreach. Retrieved from, <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/eo/dist4.html>; Neal, L., and Miller, D. (2005). *The basics of e-learning an excerpt from handbook of human factors in web design*. Retrieved from, <http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1082219>

- *Technology*: How is the technology being used?
- *Course structure*: Are the materials and activities structured to meet course objectives?
- *Atmosphere*: Are the conditions necessary for learning, present?
- *Engagement*: What is the quality and quantity of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions?
- *Assignments*: Are participants exposed to challenging and meaningful assignments?
- *Tests*: What testing measures are in place to determine whether knowledge was gained?
- *Support structures*: Are the necessary supports for students in place?
- *Student achievement*: How is student learning measured and are they involved in the material?
- *Instruction*: How effective is the instruction provided?

OUSA believes an Ontario Online Learning Consortium would be strengthened by the development and subsequent adoption of a quality assurance framework that is informed by global best practices in online learning.

***Recommendation Fourteen: Fully online programs should be subject to regular external reviews, separate from institutional department or program reviews.***

Students believe that a consortium model of delivery for fully-online courses and programs provides an opportunity to ensure that regular, external reviews of all academic programming can be provided consistently to ensure quality. The Course Hub, described in the conceptual design for Ontario Online, will be tasked with providing acceptable standards of delivery and applying best practices in pedagogy. However, this hub as it is now will not be empowered to oversee content but rather delivery models. Students recommend that programs delivered through Ontario Online should be subject to expert review conducted, or facilitated, by Ontario Online as opposed (or in addition to) reviews conducted by the hosting institution or program.

***Recommendation Fifteen: Any governing council for province-wide online learning initiatives must include student representation.***

As noted above, Distance Minnesota and the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium offer examples where governing councils demonstrate the partnership between participating institutions in setting strategic vision and sound operational management. However, these models do not demonstrate student participation in such governing councils. As noted in OUSA's Accountability paper, students believe that those who are integral to the functioning of a university should be responsible for assisting in holding it accountable. Students believe that this principle should be applied to inter-university initiatives. Similar to the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, where there is university and college student representation on the Board, any governing body on province-wide online learning initiatives must include student representation.

## ONLINE LEARNING POLICY STATEMENT

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**WHEREAS** The following proposed expansions to online learning in Ontario should not detract from the value of in-person classroom learning and the on-campus student experience.

**WHEREAS** Current post-secondary education institutions should deliver high quality online learning in Ontario.

**WHEREAS** Ontario university students should benefit from all local and global innovations in online learning.

**WHEREAS** For university students, online learning in Ontario lacks consistency across institutions that have independently developed online courses that address shared programming needs.

**Be It Resolved That (BIRT)** The government should incentivize the development of a consortium of existing online infrastructure offered by current Ontario universities, and that is governed by a council of provider institutions and students.

**Be It Further Resolved That (BIFRT)** The government should launch a course development fund in order to fill gaps in available online programming.

**BIFRT** The government should utilize credit transfer incentives to prioritize the development of course-to-course equivalencies for students to graduate, where possible, with a degree from a currently existing Ontario university credits that would allow.

**WHEREAS** Online learning offered by Ontario universities must facilitate learning outcomes comparable to in-person classroom education.

**WHEREAS** The pursuit of an online education must be driven by an agenda to increase quality.

**WHEREAS** Teaching online requires a new form of pedagogy that not all instructors have acquired the necessary skillset for.

**WHEREAS** Some forms of online education are less engaging than others.

**BIRT** New instructors and teaching assistants should be required to complete formal training to teach online.

**BIFRT** The Ontario government should incentivize professors who teach both online courses and current in-person courses with large student enrollments, to make use of technology-enabled pedagogy.

**WHEREAS** Online learning in Ontario must be accessible to all willing and qualified students.

**WHEREAS** Ontario still faces a significant digital divide between those who have access to a reliable high-speed Internet source and those who do not.

**WHEREAS** The OSAP need assessment formula undervalues the costs of technology required to participate in post-secondary education.

**WHEREAS** Online courses can have higher dropout rates than traditional courses.

**BIRT** Tuition fees for online courses should be no more than what is charged for an equivalent in-person classroom experience.

**BIFRT** The OSAP need assessment formula must be updated to include the real market costs of technology required to participate in the current climate of post-secondary education.

**BIFRT** The provincial government should continue to invest in expanding reliable high-speed Internet access to all parts of the province.

**BIFRT** Any consortium of online programs offered by current Ontario university institutions must include technical and student support services that would facilitate success.

**WHEREAS** Courses offered through an Ontario Online Learning Consortium must be subject to a robust quality assurance framework specific to online learning.

**WHEREAS** The current post-secondary studies quality assurance framework is not well suited to the needs of online learning.

**BIRT** The Ontario Council on Quality Assurance should develop a quality assurance framework specific to online learning in Ontario.