

Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 5: Integrated Insights

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. Through a series of participatory workshops, we sought to learn how flexibility impacted the role of educators, the challenges they face, and how they hoped to integrate flexibility in the future. This brief presents a summary of the research, the insights gained, and recommendations for next steps.

Approach

eCampusOntario launched a call for participation to instructors teaching or working directly with instructors at a postsecondary institute (college, university or Indigenous Institute) in Ontario to participate in a collaborative online workshop to discuss flexibility within the postsecondary sector. Through these participatory workshops, eCampusOntario sought to gain a deeper understanding of what flexibility means to the sector and the factors driving the need for it. These workshops utilized strategic foresight methodologies.

Forty-five instructors from Ontario participated over 6 workshops. Twenty-nine taught at publicly assisted colleges and 16 taught at publicly assisted universities. Twenty-four participants self-identified as full-time instructors and 17 self-identified as seasonal or part-time

instructor. Four participants self-identified as staff from teaching and learning departments directly supporting instructors at a postsecondary institute. No instructors from Indigenous Institutes participated. The workshops were designed using strategic foresight methods to frame the conversations: Futures Triangle, to understand the interrelationships among future visions, present drivers of change, and past limitations; Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), to explore the assumptions that underlie the way we frame problems, situations, and solutions; and Three Horizons, to explore what it would take to transition from present situations to future visions. Participants' contributions during the workshops were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis. A summary of the major themes from educators' contributions are presented below and integrated with eCampusOntario's Research and Foresight commentary.

TODAY

what developments and patterns of change are driving the need for flexibility?

Trends identified by eCampusOntario's foresight research:

Expanded access to education: the recognition of learnings acquired outside of established formal education is expanding lifelong access to education.

Assessments and credentials: alternative ways of validating learning, such as those found in gaming and on the blockchain, could provide an alternative way of validating knowledge.

Community participation and integration: growing pressures to drive social impact, and more diverse learning communities are influencing different models for education and learner engagement.

Evolving economics: the rising cost of living and education is changing the expectations of learners, diversifying the role of educators, and forcing the re-evaluation of the postsecondary education financial models.

Learning content and resources: the expanded availability of free content in learners' ubiquitous digital lives is re-shaping their expectations of learning content, resources, and platforms

Teaching and Learning Methods and Delivery Modes: increasing integration of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), mixed realities (MR), and web 3.0, paired with the growth of informal learning environments, are challenging established teaching methods.

Main drivers identified by participating educators from their practice and context:

Rapid Change
The widespread transition to emergency remote and digital teaching and learning forced by the pandemic changed the sectors' perspective on what is possible and completely redefined learners' expectations.

Equitable Access
Equitable access to education has increased the ethnic, socio-economic, and demographic diversity of students, requiring broader and different approaches to learning and learning supports.

Technological Advancement
Technologies are expanding quickly in their diversity and complexity, further enabling different ways of teaching and learning.

what is the experience of participating educators with flexibility?

Quality and Assessment

Educators are concerned about the quality of grades and credentials citing experiences where students expected a high grade due to the significant cost of their education. Further, generative AI has decreased the ability to assess grades using essays and alternative assessment has not yet been widely established.

Increased Learner Diversity

The expectation to accommodate multiple delivery modes, as well as, different cultural and socio economic backgrounds, learning needs, accessibility and life stages.

Technological Change

Learners' use of visual, fast paced technology outside of the classroom is influencing their expectations of technology inside the classroom. However, educators identified lack of time and fear of failure as barriers to mastering new technologies.

Desire to Innovate

Many educators expressed a desire to incorporate more collaboration with a range of stakeholders to evolve their teaching practice. They also desired time to explore more tools and approaches, without negative impact to their career path.

what do participating educators want for the future of flexibility?

Educators as Leaders

Ensure space for educator freedom and autonomy to make choices within the classroom regarding curriculum, techniques, tools, and pedagogy.

Inclusive Education

Design learning environments inclusive of disability, socioeconomic status, culture, language, and geographic location.

Technology Enabled

Re-design physical spaces for active learning and meaningfully integrate AI, virtual and augmented reality, and adaptive assessment tools to facilitate accessibility and agile collaboration.

Collaborative Education

Collaborate and co-create with learners, colleagues, other institutions, and industry as it is essential to enable well-integrated flexibility in the future.

FUTURES

what factors do educators see as enablers of their preferred futures?

Participating educators expressed that

TIME ALLOCATION

WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

INCENTIVES

RESOURCES

FUNDING

STANDARDS AND FRAMEWORKS

need to be re-explored and re-imagined to support further

EXPERIMENTATION

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

COLLABORATION

MENTAL HEALTH

BALANCE

TRANSITIONS

how can we enable transformation to improve flexibility?

Recommendations from participating educators:

Educators referred to flexibility both as a goal for future education systems, but also as a means to get there. Addressing the need for flexibility involves reconsidering and iterating on:

FLEXIBLE PRACTICE

Room for educators to experiment, iterate, and learn, and the autonomy to choose the best methods and tools for them and their students.

FLEXIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE
(PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL)

Dedicated space, supported by institutions, to access new tools and systems.

FLEXIBLE POLICY

Updated funding models and operational structures to support new ways of teaching, learning, enrollment, and assessment.

Other specific recommendations by participating educators to enable better flexibility in the sector included:

- Prioritize educator mental health and well-being.
- Include enough time before and after terms to enable part-time and full-time faculty collaboration.
- Support small class sizes to allow for robust personalized and authentic assessment within the cohort.
- Schedule ongoing collaboration meetings with industry to inform future-focused course content.
- Review incentives for tenure and revisit compensation structures for all faculty.
- Promote sharing of perspectives and challenges, within and across institutions, through cross-functional teaching teams.

Recommendations from eCampusOntario:

Supporting any future-focused transformation strategy requires a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the different actors involved. Listening to educators' experience and perspectives of flexibility was highly informative, and it shaped the following recommendations to support transition design and change management:

Meeting the complexity of diversity with systems for agile, large-scale dialogue

Educators shared that the increasing diversity in postsecondary education learners' profiles is a key driver of flexibility and personalization, as well as a motivator for their own practice. However, they recognize the need for further professional development to adequately support diverse needs.

Additionally, the profiles, needs, and perspectives of educators are very diverse. This was reflected in the conversations about feelings and assumptions underlying the educators' perspectives around flexibility. The feelings, assumptions, and visions shared in our workshops do not represent all educators' experience; having the space to hear, understand, and consider all perspectives is critical.

We need systems that allow us to identify, make sense of, and address the complexity of diverse experiences, needs, and perspectives in an agile way. Systems like *Ethelo* and *Polis* leverage machine learning technology to gather, process, and understand what large groups of people think on a particular issue, and find consensus areas. Similar systems could be piloted in the postsecondary education sector to discuss areas of action and pathways to improve flexibility.

Enabling the scalability of innovation with exnovation

Participating educators' feelings of being overwhelmed were ever-present throughout the conversations. Educators shared perspectives on the need to learn more and more technological tools and teaching methods reflected a perception of continuous increase of workload as opposed to modification of workload.

Additionally, some of the perspectives and recommendations shared by educators could be interpreted as a continuous call for increased funding, at a time of critical economic pressures facing the sector.

We need a multi-stakeholder working group to explore exnovation strategies for the sector, as a way to identify programs, tools, processes, etc. that need to be phased out. The efficiencies realized from the exnovation areas can be re-allocated to areas that require further support for experimentation and innovation.

Facilitating a forum for ongoing multi-stakeholder collaboration with a bias towards action

The experiences and perspectives shared by educators in this study are only representative of a portion of Ontario's postsecondary education instructors. Ensuring sustainable [digital] transformation strategies, enabled by flexibility, will require continuous mechanisms for multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Establish a multi-stakeholder forum where representatives from the sector can come together to co-design and agree on future-focused challenges and opportunities facing the sector. This forum would also co-design and agree on productive ways to explore the issues and commit to action.

Supporting agile, shared, and safe spaces for experimentation and iteration

Educators shared that rapid pace of change within and around the sector is a key driver of the need for flexibility, but they shared a concern about the ability to keep up with the pace.

Additionally, we observed that new measures to support flexibility in practice, infrastructure, and policy need to be tested before they can be scaled. Furthermore, sector collaboration in those experiments would be critical if it is intended to have larger transformative impact in a shorter timeframe.

Supporting a shared hub for safe experimentation, where multiple institutions with similar needs can collaborate on pilots for improving flexibility and then scale the results in their institutions, can reduce implementation time and cost. This model was piloted in the rollout of the *Virtual Learning Strategy* after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The need to better understand flexibility emerged as a result of related changes in the education sector due to COVID-19. Research conducted by eCampusOntario's Research and Foresight Team also suggested the need for more information about this topic. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a level of flexibility, never seen before in the sector, to support the transition to emergency remote teaching and learning and the continuity of the different functions of postsecondary institutions. Additionally, the foresight research we conducted over the past two years, reflected a need for flexibility as a key to achieve agility in the sector in response to major drivers of change, including expanded access to education, community participation and integration, learning content and resources, evolving economics, teaching and learning methods and delivery modes, and assessments and credentials. We wanted to explore what a "flexible-by-design" postsecondary education system means, especially for educators as key stakeholders of implementing change.

The primary goal of this project was to explore the idea of flexibility from an educator's perspective from multiple angles: past, present, future; personal experience and hearsay; what people think, feel and believe, to create a multifaceted model of what flexibility is. With these briefs, we have mapped a starting model of flexibility in Ontario postsecondary outlining challenges and opportunities, as well as possible ways forward. Capturing the voices of 45 educators in Ontario's postsecondary, this series of briefs represents an important but incomplete perspective. While we, the eCampusOntario Research and Foresight team attempted to capture the variety of perspectives of voices expressed by these 45 educators, no doubt we failed to fully capture the nuanced of individuals' ideas and dissenting opinions due to our limitations as researchers and the confines of the format and methodology.

It is our intention that these briefs be used as a starting point to bring others into future focused conversations. We need to understand and unpack the perspectives of other key stakeholders in the system, for example, how do other members of the sector, administrators, learners, industry, and government, understand and shape flexibility? Where is the alignment, where do they differ, and why? This collective understanding will allow us to shape nested theories of change from a multi-stakeholder, multi-level perspective that can create the conditions for shared vision and coordinated action.

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 1: Making the Case WHY FLEXIBILITY IS IMPORTANT

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

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

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 4: Exploring the Possibilities WHAT EDUCATORS WANT FOR FLEXIBILITY

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 5: Integrated Insights THE NEXT STEPS FOR FLEXIBILITY



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