

POST-PANDEMIC PEDAGOGIES

WHAT COVID-19 CAN TEACH US ABOUT BLENDED,
DISTANCE, AND EMERGENCY ONLINE LEARNING IN
TOMMOROW'S WORLD



OU SA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ABOUT OUSA



OUSA represents the interests of approximately 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision, we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby the government to implement them.

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TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE USE

In-person education: learners and educators share a common spatial and temporal space and learning occurs synchronously.

Distance education: learners and educators are separated by a spatial and/or temporal space and learning occurs through synchronous and/or asynchronous approaches.

Blended education: learners and educators alternate between sharing and being separated by spatial and/or temporal space(s) and learning occurs through synchronous and/or asynchronous approaches.

Online education: educators impart knowledge through the use of digital components, such as lectures and assessments, using synchronous and/or asynchronous approaches.

Emergency online learning: a sudden, temporary shift of in-person course delivery and instruction to an online format due to crisis circumstances.

Synchronous learning: a learning event in which students are engaged in a common aspect of the course content at the same time.¹

Asynchronous learning: a learning event in which students are engaged in a common aspect of the course content at different times.

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic has posed serious and significant challenges to the post-secondary sector. Institutions across the province, however, remain committed to offering educational experiences for their students this September by adopting predominantly blended and distanced methodologies. While much remains unclear, what is certain is that all students who are willing and qualified to do so should continue to be able to access and excel in Ontario's post-secondary education system. To ensure this is the case, institutions must be able to offer students a high-quality, accessible, affordable, and accountable university experience whether they are pursuing their studies in the traditional in-person context or through developing distance and blended channels. To meet this goal, relevant decision-makers – namely, institutions and governments – should refer to students' experiences with recent blended, distance, and emergency online learning to draw meaningful solutions to the concerns students are facing.



Post-secondary institutions have adopted blended and distance learning pedagogies in recent decades, which has both improved, and created challenges for, the accessibility and quality of post-secondary education in Ontario. These teaching practices have been especially relevant as of late due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in blended and distance learning becoming the dominant pedagogies for the upcoming 2020-2021 academic year.² This sudden shift, in response to the global pandemic, has provided the sector with a unique opportunity to refine, invest, and commit to successful distance and blended learning that works for students in the long term.

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has both improved, and created challenges for, the accessibility and quality of post-secondary education in Ontario. These teaching practices have been especially relevant as of late due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in blended and distance learning becoming the dominant pedagogies for the upcoming 2020-2021 academic year. This sudden shift, in response to the global pandemic, has provided the sector with a unique opportunity to refine, invest, and commit to successful distance and blended learning that works for students in the long term.

The pandemic has already produced affordability-related concerns to pursuing a post-secondary education. Blended and distance learning require a sunk cost to ensure students meet the optimal (or even minimum) hardware and software requirements essential to access and success. These concerns have only been intensified by the negative impacts the pandemic has had on students' access to summer and other employment with no significant provincial investments into student financial aid.

The recent shift to predominately online learning cannot be aptly described as a 'transition to distance learning'; rather, it is more accurately characterized as 'emergency online learning'. These two phenomena are unique and distinct. Emergency online learning is characterized by a rapid shift of in-person course delivery and instruction to an online format due to extenuating circumstances, such as a global pandemic. As such, emergency online learning does not allow for the time, energy, and resources required to meet the same standards as a planned transition to distance learning. While the pandemic rushed the adoption of blended and distance learning as the provincial government and institutions enacted safety measures during the Winter 2020 term, time sensitivities and limitations should not, and do not, preclude universities and governments from supporting this transition in a calculated, effective manner as we move forward. Analyzing institutional responses to the pandemic and student perspectives will help to identify best practices for possible future shifts to emergency online learning and to enhance the quality, affordability, and accessibility of distance and blended learning more broadly.

Drawing on student voices and relevant expert literature, this research report seeks to identify the challenges that Ontario's diverse post-secondary student population has and will continue to face if emergency online, blended, and distance learning opportunities are not implemented carefully. To this end, special attention is paid to equity-related issues, recognizing that certain student groups will require greater support in adapting to distance and blended pedagogies as a result of the systemic barriers that hinder their ability to access and succeed in these contexts. Using this equity analysis of identified challenges, recommendations are made to guide university administrators, government officials, and student association leaders in their policymaking, lobbying, and advocacy.



METHODOLOGY

This research paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What concerns are facing students and particular student groups participating in emergency online learning?
- What can Ontario universities ('institutions') and the provincial government learn from student experiences, and how can this inform policies, initiatives, and approaches to emergency online, blended, and distance learning in future years?

In order to identify concerns, this report relies predominantly on secondary quantitative data gathered through surveys of students conducted by OUSA member institutions and relevant stakeholders. In particular, this report consulted the following survey results (in order of most to fewest number of respondents):

- The Government of Canada's 2020 Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Postsecondary Students Survey;
- The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey;
- The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's 2017 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey;
- The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations' 2020 Students are Still Worried survey;
- Western University's University Students' Council's 2020 COVID-19 Student Experience Survey;
- Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union 2020 Waterloo-region COVID-19 Outreach Survey;
- CIBC's 2020 CIBC COVID-19 Impact on Post-Secondary Students Poll;
- Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union 2020 Brantford-region COVID-19 Outreach Survey; and
- Trent Durham Student Associations' 2020 COVID-19 Academic Response Assessment survey.

The following table synthesizes relevant methodological information from each survey:

Title	Referred to as	Conducted	Respondents	Sampling Method
The Government of Canada's 2020 Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Postsecondary Students Survey	'Government of Canada survey'	April 19 to May 1, 2020	101,902 post-secondary students across Canada	Voluntary simple random sampling
The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey	'2015 OPSSS'	November 2015	9,197 post-secondary students across 6 of OUSA's then 7 member institutions (Brock, Laurier, McMaster, Trent Durham, Waterloo, and Queen's)	Voluntary non-random sampling targeting all undergraduate and professional students attending six OUSA member schools via e-mail blast
The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's 2017 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey	'2017 OPSSS'	November 2017	8,037 post-secondary students across OUSA's 8 member institutions (Brock, Laurentian, Laurier, McMaster, Trent Durham, Waterloo, Western, and Queen's)	Voluntary non-random sampling targeting all undergraduate and professional students attending OUSA's eight member schools via e-mail blast

Title	Referred to as	Conducted	Respondents	Sampling Method
The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations' 2020 Students are Still Worried survey	'CASA survey'	May 14 to May 23, 2020	1,000 post-secondary students across Canada	Voluntary random sampling of panelists from a set of partner panels
Western University's University Students' Council's 2020 COVID-19 Student Experience Survey	'USC survey'	June 8 to June 22, 2020	1,606 post-secondary students (professional and undergraduate) at Western University's four campuses	Voluntary non-random sampling targeting all students attending Western University via e-mail blast and social media
Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union 2020 Waterloo-region COVID-19 Outreach Survey	'WLUSU Waterloo survey'	June 29 to July 13, 2020	1,273 post-secondary students at Wilfrid Laurier University's Waterloo campus and the University of Waterloo	Voluntary non-random sampling targeting all post-secondary students attending Wilfrid Laurier University's Waterloo campus and the University of Waterloo via e-mail blast
CIBC's 2020 CIBC COVID-19 Impact on Post-Secondary Students Poll	'CIBC Poll'	May 22 to May 27, 2020	1,053 post-secondary students across Canada	Voluntary random sampling of panelists via the Maru Voice Canada panel
Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union 2020 Brantford-region COVID-19 Outreach Survey	'WLUSU Brantford survey'	June 29 to July 13, 2020	219 post-secondary students at Wilfrid Laurier University's Brantford campus	Voluntary non-random sampling targeting all post-secondary students attending Wilfrid Laurier University's Brantford campus via e-mail blast
Trent Durham Student Associations' 2020 COVID-19 Academic Response Assessment survey	'TDSA survey'	March 18 to 23, 2020	40 post-secondary students at Trent University Durham GTA's campus	Voluntary random sampling of post-secondary students attending Trent University Durham GTA's campus via the student association's social media (Facebook and Instagram)

Pre-pandemic context was gathered from OUSA's 2015 and 2017 iterations of the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey, a bi- and triennial survey of student experiences at OUSA member institutions, focusing on the themes of accessibility, affordability, and quality. Most recently conducted in November 2017 with 8,037 respondents from eight university campuses, the 2017 OPSSS provides an effective benchmark to identify students' pre-existing concerns related to blended and online learning, employment, and financial need prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Data from the 2015 OPSSS is used to illustrate how some of these have been ongoing concerns for students. The other seven datasets consulted collected their results after COVID-19 was first reported in Ontario. These surveys are used to identify concerns in the pandemic context, understand how the pandemic may have created new, or contributed to existing, issues related to accessibility, affordability, and quality, and answer the first research question: what concerns are facing students and particular student groups participating in emergency online learning?

In order to provide context, interpret the data, and produce recommendations, this report also refers to relevant research articles drawn from the wealth of knowledge that exists outlining how students learn best in different contexts. Relevant articles were identified using the given search terms ('Online learning'; 'Learning outcome'; 'College teaching'; 'University teaching'; 'Determinants'; 'Teaching quality'; 'Teacher-student relationships'; 'Academic performance'; 'Blended learning'; 'Emergency online learning'; 'Student satisfaction'; 'COVID-19'; 'eLearning'; 'Perceived learning outcomes'; 'Asynchronous learning'; 'Synchronous learning'; and/or 'Learning effectiveness') and filtered to capture those produced in similar temporal and spatial contexts, specifically those produced in the past five years, across Canada and the United States. These articles represent a diversity of perspectives but are typically written from the perspective of professionals who are no longer full-time undergraduate students and are therefore used to fill gaps in context that was not provided in student surveys that are the primary source of data in order to centre student voices and perspectives. In addition, where possible, recent, provincial, and open access research has been prioritized.³

The survey data and secondary sources were synthesized to produce trends by campus, identity group, and for undergraduate students more broadly. These trends were then analyzed using an equitable and intersectional lens. This report is premised on the understanding that students' experiences in post-secondary are not monolithic and are heavily influenced by their identity factors, such as socioeconomic status and age, and the ways in which policies support or hinder these experiences.



LIMITATIONS

Blended and distance learning can be beneficial for some students as a way to support their education. For example, the increased flexibility to learn at your own pace and the opportunity for reducing costs associated with these teaching formats makes them a potentially more accessible approach than in-person learning. This report does not discount the advantages of blended and distance learning. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of what we need to do to improve blended and distance formats in ways that maximize students' learning, research on these advantages should be consulted. However, the purpose of this research is to identify concerns that students and particular student groups have experienced when participating in emergency online learning; therefore, the datasets consulted focus primarily on students' concerns with their transition to emergency online, blended, and/or distance learning during the pandemic. Discussion of the advantages of distance and blended learning is beyond the scope of this research paper.

Another limitation of this research is its reliance on survey research. Surveys, like all self-reported data, anticipate respondents to be truthful and forthcoming in their responses. Even if respondents were totally truthful, it is possible for respondents to misinterpret questions or feel inclined to provide the responses they perceive the survey-gathering institution is seeking. There are also limitations that pertain to the generalizability of the survey data. In particular, the TDSA survey may be unrepresentative of the totality of the student body. Given the survey only offers data from approximately 3% of the student population at Trent University Durham GTA's campus, it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions from this data alone. However, this limitation is mitigated when understanding the post-pandemic context because only aggregate trends identified in all datasets are reported. In the pre-pandemic context, this issue does not exist as the 2015 OPSSS and the 2017 OPSSS adopt a weighted approach which allows for the results to better reflect the broader student population.

Finally, the post-pandemic surveys consulted did not collect or did not publish demographic data. As a result, conclusions about how particular groups of students were affected disproportionately by the pandemic could not be drawn directly but had to be inferred from the pre-pandemic context and existing research that looks at the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on these groups.

Despite these limitations, the datasets that inform this research paper and the research and data analysis methods used allow for useful insights into students' perceptions of emergency online, blended, and distance learning and what we can learn for the future. This is due to the variety of data sources consulted and the institutional and demographic diversity of the respondents. In particular, the datasets represent voices from students across Canada and were conducted at different stages of institutional responses to the pandemic and implementation of emergency online learning. This data provides an understanding of the barriers students are facing now and the challenges they will need to continue to overcome as blended and distance learning continue to be prevalent in the post-secondary context. Therefore, this data provides a good foundation to make recommendations on how to further improve blended, distance, and emergency online learning and identifies areas of improvement that all partners in the post-secondary sector need to focus on.





RESULTS

The results of the nine surveys were analyzed to identify and compare trends in students' concerns with blended and distance learning pre-pandemic, emergency online learning during the Winter 2020 term, and blended and distance learning during the Summer 2020 term.⁴ Several themes emerged, and where possible, this report will share data and statistics to illustrate the results informing the identified themes. However, the TDSA survey was conducted as a program evaluation or quality improvement assessment with the primary purpose to gather data for internal review and not to expand the body of knowledge. Therefore specific results from this survey cannot and will not be shared in this report.

Overall, the datasets consulted shed much-needed light on concerns affecting students across Ontario. In particular, students have expressed concern over financial and employment-related insecurities; concerns over quality of education; and mental health challenges emerging or intensifying due to the pandemic.

THE PRE-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

In order to support its mandate, OUSA collects data on the students it represents through the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey. The most recent iteration of this survey, conducted in November 2017, supplemented by the 2015 OPSSS, helps to provide a holistic understanding of Ontario students' concerns prior to the pandemic. In particular, these surveys show that financial aid, employment, and online learning have long been areas in need of improvement for post-secondary students in the province. With respect to financial aid, only 9% of respondents in the 2017 OPSSS indicated that they were not at all concerned about having enough money to complete their education, while 41% were somewhat concerned and 30% were very concerned. Additionally, 50% of respondents identified their anticipated student debt after graduation to be very burdensome. Students' concerns surrounding financial aid are not homogenous, however; particular student groups are more vulnerable than others. According to the 2017 OPSSS, Indigenous and queer students are more likely than their non-Indigenous ($p=0.000062$) and heterosexual counterparts ($p=0.0002$), respectively, to accumulate student debt.⁵ International students faced significant financial concerns, with 55% of international students indicating that they experienced difficulty affording tuition.

On the whole, when asked to select their top three of eleven priorities in need of improvement at their university, the top two priorities selected by respondents were tuition and ancillary fees (48%) and financial aid (44%). Importantly, these concerns are not new or recent; tuition and ancillary fees (51%) and financial aid (47%) were also the top two priorities chosen by respondents in the 2015 OPSSS.

Students also expressed concerns about access to employment. Students rely on summer employment to remain financially secure and afford their education. Respondents were asked whether they had a paying job the previous summer and if so, what their primary reason for working was. Of the 77% of respondents who had one or more paying job, the majority (49%) indicated that they needed to earn money in order to continue going to school, with the second most commonly reported reason being to have more disposable income during their studies (26%). With respect to the latter, students identified that employment opportunities provide additional benefits outside of increased income security. Respondents made it clear that they also value access to employment and other forms of professional development because these allow for skill building and help students transition into competitive members of the labour force. In fact, 89% of respondents who participated in a work-integrated learning opportunity (internship, community or co-op placement, practicum, etc.) felt it was beneficial to their educational experience.

Teaching quality was also a priority for students prior to the pandemic. According to the 2017 OPSSS, 30% of survey respondents chose teaching quality from a list of eleven priorities as the most important initiative in need of improvement at their university. Quality of online learning was also a concern for students. Students in the 2017 OPSSS indicated that they had experiences in online learning environments and that – even when these experiences were not the result of an emergency transition – they were dissatisfied with the online learning opportunities that they were being offered. Of the 60% of respondents who had taken a class that was primarily online, only 49% indicated that they would retake such a course again. The most popular reasons for not taking a primarily online course again were: lack of personal connections and interaction in the distanced context; the online course being difficult, more work, or less educational than a similar in-person course; and such courses requiring too much of a self-disciplined approach to learning.

Students also indicated an interest in more active learning strategies, such as discussion-based learning, seminars, problem-based learning, and inquiry-based learning; while 40% were comfortable with the current degree of active learning they received, 50% wanted more active learning, and only 10% wanted less.

Challenges pertaining to student mental health also existed prior to the pandemic. While assessing student mental health was not within scope of the 2015 or 2017 OPSSS, the 2019 National College Health Assessment – Ontario results provide important context for student mental health pre-pandemic⁶. The results of this survey, when compared to the 2016 iteration illustrate that students' mental health has been a growing concern:

- 53% of students reported feeling so depressed in the previous year it was difficult to function (up from 46% in 2016);
- 69% of students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety in the previous year (up from 65% in 2016);
- 17% of students reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the previous year (up from 14% in 2016);
- 3.1% of students reported a suicide attempt within the previous year (up from 2.2% in 2016); and
- 11% of students had indicated that they had attempted suicide, but not in the previous year.

SINCE THE PANDEMIC

Key themes across data sets emerged when analyzing the concerns students have expressed since courses transitioned online as a result of the pandemic in March.⁷ Specifically, students are concerned about financial and income insecurity associated with the pandemic; employment; the quality and accessibility of online learning; and health, wellness, and engagement.

Students in all seven datasets expressed concern that their financial and income security has been compromised by the pandemic. In the Government of Canada's survey, 75% of respondents said the pandemic has had a financial impact on them; 69% of respondents indicated they were concerned that, as a result of the pandemic, they would have difficulty paying for tuition next term; 63% of respondents anticipated difficulty paying for accommodations next term; 76% expressed concern over keeping up with bills and other payments; and 63% of respondents expressed concern over having to take on more student debt in order to address their financial needs. According to the CASA survey, two-thirds of respondents reported that COVID-19 impacted their own finances and the finances of their families. CASA concluded that students have already faced and are currently facing financial struggles as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and predict that these concerns will continue until at least Winter 2021. When the CASA survey participants were asked to select their primary financial concerns from a predetermined list, the results indicate that students' primary financial concerns were with respect to living expenses during the summer months (66%), fall-semester tuition (62%), living expenses in the fall semester (60%), winter-semester tuition (58%), winter-semester living expenses (59%), and increased student debt (57%).

Students also expressed employment-related concerns stemming from complications the pandemic has had on their ability to find, retain, or pursue summer employment. Per the Government of Canada's survey, 17% of respondents lost their job(s), 16% were temporarily laid off, 13% had their start dates delayed, 15% lost jobs that were supposed to start in the future, and 22% no longer had employment prospects as a result of the pandemic. Only 17% of respondents indicated no change in their employment situation as a result of the pandemic. This is a concern shared by the respondents of the other six relevant survey pools: 75% of CASA survey respondents indicated that the pandemic will change their employment situation beyond 2020; 5% of USC survey respondents indicated that maintaining or securing employment is their primary concern returning to campus in the fall; 43% of WLUSU Waterloo survey respondents indicated that COVID-19 negatively impacted their employment status and 54% anticipated rent being a financial challenge as a result of lost employment; and 36% of WLUSU Brantford survey respondents indicated COVID-19 negatively impacted their employment status and 52% anticipated rent being a financial challenge as a result of lost employment.

Further, students from all relevant data sets expressed concern that the quality of their education will shift due to a speedy transition to distance and/or blended learning. In particular, students are concerned that the quality of their education is likely to be negatively affected when delivery is predominantly distanced rather than in-person, and asynchronous rather than synchronous. In the Government of Canada's survey, 87% of respondents indicated that the pandemic had an impact on their academics. CASA attributes some of the impacts students reported to the quality of education to concerns over accessibility: 43% of respondents reported that it is not as easy to complete assignments and exams online as it is in-person, and 30% reported that it is not easy to access their classes when they are online. Moreover, of the 90% of CASA survey respondents who experienced remote learning in the 2019 Fall and 2020 Winter academic terms, a majority did not feel online learning offers the same value, learning experiences, or support as its in-class equivalent.

Finally, students identified concerns with respect to their health, wellness, and academic engagement as a result of grappling with the aforementioned issues associated with the pandemic: over 70% of CASA survey respondents reported feeling stressed, anxious, or isolated due to the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to use what we have learned to date from the recent COVID-19 pandemic to inform policies, initiatives, and approaches to emergency online, blended, and distance learning in future years. The transition to emergency online learning was unprecedented and tested the ability of institutions and governments to provide accessible, affordable, accountable, and high-quality educational experiences to students. Transitions like this are understandably bumpy, but rather than dwell on the difficulties of the situation we are in, we should use this opportunity to learn best practices for future growth and development. It is entirely possible that emergency online learning will need to be implemented again at some point, and it is certainly a reality that blended and distance learning will continue to be relevant as increasingly utilized post-secondary pedagogies. The following section brings together surveys



and academic research and applies an equity and intersectional lens to identify what future instances of emergency online learning should prioritize. It also provides best practices for blended and distance learning in general.

FUTURE INSTANCES OF EMERGENCY ONLINE LEARNING

It seems likely that, as it has been in recent months, emergency online learning will be necessary at some point in the future. Learning from students' experiences in the context of COVID-19 can help to inform how institutions, instructors, and governments respond to future transitions to emergency online learning. Since March 2020, students have struggled financially, worried about the quality of their education, and expressed concerns about their health and wellness in light of the pandemic and

the sudden transition to a new way of learning. These concerns tell us that students would benefit from increases to financial aid, greater leniency when repaying loans, the implementation of educational quality assurances and supports, and more health and wellness support services.

Financial and income-related considerations

Evidently, affordability was one of students' primary concerns as they adapted, first, to emergency online learning in the Winter 2020 term and then, again, to emergency-related blended and distance learning in the Summer 2020 term. These financial concerns, however, are not the result of having adapted to new pedagogies; rather, they are by-products of the pandemic's effect on Ontario's labour market. Students have expressed that the pandemic has reduced their ability to retain employment and, in turn, has compromised their financial stability.

Although the pandemic has exacerbated many students' financial concerns, particular groups of students have been affected more than others. In particular, students from low-income backgrounds, as well as those with precarious employment status and/or little familial financial support, are more likely than others to be detrimentally impacted by the pandemic. This is because these groups of students lack the financial and income security required to navigate the unexpected financial stressors brought about by a global pandemic. Further, prior to COVID-19, Indigenous and/or queer students were already more likely to encounter financial struggles, making them especially vulnerable to financial and income-related challenges during the pandemic.

These financial concerns have been exacerbated by a few important factors. Students still have to pay the same amount in tuition; course materials, in some cases, are still costly; and many students have to buy hardware and software required for blended and distance learning. As a result, many students need immediate financial support in order to attend post-secondary education this fall and recover from the pandemic.

Unfortunately, the current scheme of financial aid offered to students is ineffective. The Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) has helped students throughout the summer; but when CESB expires in the fall, students will rely primarily on OSAP, which has not been adequately revised to reflect the effect the pandemic has had on student finances. The provincial government should enhance OSAP and follow the example set by other provinces who have matched the federal government's contributions and/or made enhancements to their provincial loan programs.



Currently, OUSA recommends that the provincial government:

- Extend the current moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual until September 30, 2022;
- Eliminate expected parental, spousal, and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation to ensure students have the financial supports to go back to school;
- Establish, in its tuition protocol, an international tuition set-aside at the same 10% rate of the domestic set-aside, with funds raised directed specifically to needs-based financial aid for international students; and
- Increase non-refundable grants for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue their post-secondary education in 2020-2021.

Quality-related considerations

Students are also rightfully concerned about the quality of emergency online education. By definition, teaching methodologies adopted in response to an emergency are not afforded the time and energy required to meet the varied needs of students. Students have expressed dissatisfaction with emergency online and related forms of learning, citing concerns around quality, effectiveness, and accessibility.

Achieving success in blended, distanced, and emergency online learning requires: accessible course content; reliable and fast broadband connection; and an up-to-date laptop. Course content should be active yet flexible for students, including those living in a different time zone than their home institution. Further, learning platforms should come equipped with accessibility features such as speech-to-text, captioning, and speech-recognition functionalities.

A student in WLUSU's Brantford survey shared:

"The quality of classes delivered online leaves much to be desired, and is not comparable to in person learning. Many professors delivering my current spring online courses have not provided quality instruction and information, and have structured their assessments [sic] in ways that make student's already difficult lives much harder. Many professors find it acceptable to have little to no course notes, making inaccessible expensive textbooks the only source of education, despite being paid to deliver their own teaching. Many professors find it acceptable to expect group work in an entirely online setting, during a health pandemic, which is unnecessarily arduous [sic] and less feasible than even in person group work. As well many retain inaccessible and unrealistic expectations regarding late assignments and participation, even during these difficult times. To sum up, my concerns with the online fall semester are that I will not receive [sic] quality education, despite the premium I pay for it, and that the education I will receive [sic] will be not only lackluster, but extremely taxing mentally, emotionally, and physically due to the high expectations and lack of instruction and support."

Granted, the entire post-secondary education community is navigating an unprecedented and uncharted territory. It is important to recognize that students, instructors, institutions, and governments may not have all the answers to the problems our campuses are facing. Nonetheless, we may refer to pre-existing knowledge on blended and distance learning (such as the work of eCampus Ontario and Contact North) and to the voices of students who have been vocal in sharing their concerns. While students can and must be included at decision-making tables, we must also remember that students themselves are navigating the difficulties of the pandemic. They continue to face financial, academic, social, and health stressors, which makes it difficult for them to be their own advocates. We must support students as they support themselves, their peers, and their families. Our universities and governments must be aware of this fact and receptive to students' mental health and wellness.

Health, wellness, and engagement-related considerations

The pandemic has detrimentally impacted the mental and physical wellness of students, who continue to experience stress due to anxieties surrounding their health, finances, and future. These anxieties prevent students from dedicating themselves to their education; they also demand a reprioritization of personal commitments and engagements. Even in non-emergency contexts, such as when the 2015 and 2017 OPSSS were conducted, students have expressed that they find school stressful. The pandemic has only heightened these concerns, per student respondents to the post-pandemic surveys.

As a result of the increased stress, anxiety, and isolation associated with the pandemic, students have also expressed that they are less engaged and focused. When asked, "What concerns, if any, do you have with the fall semester being online?", many participants in WLUSU's surveys indicated concerns surrounding their ability to focus, concentrate, or remain engaged. For example, one student remarked, "Being at home there are many distractions as well as additional responsibilities placed on you in regards to family since you are at home." Students are not procrastinating or lazy; rather, they are increasingly struggling to remain focused and committed to their education due to stress. Students need support to overcome these challenges. To some extent, they will benefit from simple, band-aid solutions that respond to their academic needs, such as more lenient academic accommodations. However, they also require more long-term, structural solutions, such as increased wellness support and financial aid; these will help alleviate some of the stressors of pursuing post-secondary education during a pandemic. Employing solutions that target students' mental and physical wellbeing will help them be more engaged and experience increased academic success.



EFFECTIVE BLENDED AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Blended and distance learning opportunities can be important and useful learning experiences for post-secondary students, but only if implemented correctly. The recent shift to blended, distance, and emergency online learning can teach us a lot about how we can better implement blended and distance learning moving forward, recognizing that the prioritization of online learning is a new reality in the post-secondary education sector. In particular, blended and distance learning often poses detrimental financial, quality-related, and wellness-related challenges for students. In order to make the most of their blended and distance learning opportunities in the future, students must be provided with the financial support to ensure blended and distance learning remains affordable, blended and distance learning must adopt the appropriate pedagogies, and students must be provided with the services they need to feel and operate at their best.

Financial and income-related considerations

Although blended and distance learning is sometimes viewed as less expensive than in-person learning, this does not account for the sunk costs necessary for online access and success, or for the fact that tuition fees are often the same for online and in-person courses. If universities expect more students to pursue more blended and distance learning, supports such as subsidies on required technologies must be in place to make this type of learning accessible and affordable. This should be complemented by increased financial aid to support the pursuit of a university degree in general. After all, students have already articulated that, in the in-person context, affordability is one of their top priorities and concerns.

In particular, students pursuing blended and distance courses for the first time are expected to invest in the hardware and software required for success, such as a faster laptop or a reliable broadband Internet connection. Many students raised concerns about how their technological limitations will impact their grades and the quality of their assessments. For example, students who do not have an adequate broadband Internet connection will have more difficulty completing research-based assignments on time, relative to their counterparts who do not face such an issue. Such was the subject of study in the Quello Center's study entitled *Broadband and Student Performance Gaps*, which found that students with fast home Internet access obtain higher grades and do more educational activities online when away from school.⁸ Institutions and governments must investigate how they can support students who need help adjusting to the expectations of blended and distance courses. Further, educators should refrain from requiring students to purchase textbooks when relevant open educational resources exist. In particular, OUSA advocates for: (1) the creation and development of open educational resources (OERs) to be included in Ontario's Strategic Mandate Agreements as a metric for effective pedagogy and faculty innovation, linking performance-based funding to increasing financial access to education; and (2) the provincial government to invest in the development of OERs that can be applied through an interdisciplinary approach to the largest introductory courses taken by students in the province, similar to the implementation of British Columbia's 'Open Education Resource' Project.

Quality-related considerations

Even prior to the pandemic, students were concerned about the quality of blended and distance learning opportunities. In 2017, students did not think the quality of online education was up to par. Students feel the same in our current emergency context, suggesting that the base level of quality for online learning continues to be a concern. Evidently, students do not feel as though predominantly distance learning offers comparable value or learning experiences to in-person learning. This is perhaps because there was never a strong foundation of quality online learning for instructors to build off of in response to the pandemic.

Concerns over quality appear to be the result of educators adopting pedagogies ill-suited to blended and distance learning. One respondent to the WLUSU Waterloo survey identified “not being able to properly learn material as no classes will be offered in class” as a primary concern for the upcoming school year. Another worried that “most professors do not provide sufficient help nor do they understand how to post lectures online in different formats for students.” Similarly, a student in the Brantford-region survey expressed concern that, in online learning, it would be “harder to understand concepts [and there would be a] lack of speed with replies from professors to questions that need to be answered in the moment.” Overall, some of the most frequently identified quality-related concerns included: an overemphasis on passive learning strategies (such as readings and recordings); an underemphasis on participatory, active, and experiential learning components (such as labs and discussions); a perceived reduction of support from educators; and a perceived reduction in accountability from educators and their institutions. Course instructors should be cognizant of the importance of active learning in blended and distanced contexts and should, where possible, promote these forms of learning.

The ways in which learning occurs is heavily reliant upon the synergies between methodology and pedagogy. Particular pedagogies are more effective when coupled with appropriate methodologies. In particular, when learning occurs through predominantly online or distanced mediums, it becomes increasingly important to use strategies that foster community, take advantage of social media, and offer online support.⁹ As well, instructors who mediate learning (in that they engage and interact with students without directly managing them) are more effective than those who are excessively active or excessively passive educators.¹⁰

In order to maximize students’ learning in blended and distance environments, online learning methodologies must be accompanied by the appropriate pedagogies. In this sense, course instructors may benefit from training guides (produced by a relevant agency such as eCampus Ontario or Contact North) that identify best practices when creating and instructing blended and distance learning opportunities.¹¹ Further, institutions must support their instructors by providing training for all educators teaching blended and distance learning courses. This training should dictate how to appropriately correspond instructional formats with best practices.

Even with all the best pedagogical practices in place, however, blended and distance learning will still disproportionately disadvantage particular communities of students over others. This is because many students do not have the infrastructure required to fully benefit from blended and distance learning methodologies. Access to and knowledge of the Internet, as well as modern, up-to-date technology, is a near-universal necessity in our province for education, employment, and social connectivity.¹² Yet many students are concerned about access to a reliable and fast Internet connection: 17% of the USC’s survey respondents identified struggling with their Internet connection; 13% of the WLUSU’s Waterloo survey identified having an unreliable Internet connection; and 20% in the same survey identified struggling with their Internet speed. Internet aside, 29% of the WLUSU Waterloo survey respondents stated that they do not have adequate technological support to complete the upcoming Fall 2020 term.

These concerns are likely to be intensified for particular communities of students, such as international students in different time zones with access to different services on the Internet, as well as students in rural and northern regions of the province where access to broadband Internet or universal target speeds is limited. As such, students' elected officials must commit to strengthening their access to strong and reliable broadband Internet connections and individual universities must commit themselves to providing students with the hardware required for success without inequitable debt.

Health, wellness, and engagement-related considerations

How students learn is inextricably linked to their individual health and wellness; students' health and wellness impacts and is impacted by their post-secondary experiences. In this sense, blended and distance learning pedagogies have the potential to be harmful to students' wellbeing, especially when such learning promotes isolation or forces students to spend more time in unsafe environments, such as at home with abusive family members, friends, roommates, or dependents. These concerns reinforce the importance of greater investments in student supports, as well as active learning strategies that introduce students to new supports and communities..



It is important to remember that concerns related to life at home, as well as concerns over physical health, employment status, financial security, and other factors which influence student health and wellness are not new. In the 2017 OPSSS, students expressed concerns over access to mental health, sexual violence prevention and response, career, and academic supports. Although the struggles that have created a demand for these

supports have only intensified over the years, students' access to resources often have not.¹³ As a result, important supports that students require access to have become increasingly overburdened and underprovided. This does not negate the important investments the provincial government has made in recent years to support students; rather, it highlights the need for increased and additional supports—especially as students transition online.

In addition, online and distance learning amplifies and alters demand for at least some of these support services. For example, although students' experiences with gender-based violence will manifest differently in an online context, it is unlikely to disappear. After all, the Internet is frequently used for widespread and systematic gender-based discrimination and students' homes are often the site of intimate partner violence.¹⁴ The issues that students face will persist in this new online arena, which means students' supports must adapt to this new context as well. Universities must consult with students to assess which resources require further investments and partner with stakeholders, such as government agencies, to ensure an equitable provision of these services. Students must play an integral role in this conversation as they are best-suited to assess what their unique needs are.

Self-efficacy, a student's belief in their ability to execute the behaviours necessary to succeed, is an important component to any effective learning.¹⁵ For online learning to be successful, five dimensions of self-efficacy must be present: (a) self-efficacy to complete an online course; (b) self-efficacy to interact socially with classmates; (c) self-efficacy to handle tools in a Course Management System (CMS); (d) self-efficacy to interact with instructors in an online course; and (e) self-efficacy to interact with classmates for academic purposes.¹⁶ Students are concerned about how their health and wellness, and, in turn, engagement with academics will be affected by learning being offered through distance or blended channels. As it is, students have expressed disinterest in this approach to learning and, generally speaking, do not believe in their ability to succeed in such contexts. The student surveys consulted indicate that students do not feel confident in their abilities to succeed, nor are they adequately engaged or encouraged to succeed. One student from WLUSU's Waterloo-region survey remarked, "Because of the change in environment and also being easily distracted at home and not having access to a study space I am afraid I will not be able to keep up with my classes as efficiently as would have been able to if I were on campus." Evidently, many students lack confidence in their ability to succeed in learning contexts different than the traditional in-person approach. Therefore, in addition to universities and governments providing relevant supports, instructors must commit themselves to helping students develop all five dimensions of self-efficacy in a blended or distanced context. This means encouraging students and providing them with the tools they need to succeed in an online or blended classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

Ontario's post-secondary education sector has a unique opportunity to respond to COVID-19 by reinvesting and rebuilding in ways that will address students' existing and new-found concerns. By comparing the results of nine student-facing surveys, two of which were conducted prior to the pandemic, and seven of which were conducted at various stages during the pandemic, this report has identified that Canada and Ontario's post-secondary students are worried: worried about financial and employment-related insecurities; worried about the quality of their education; and worried about their mental health. It has also identified that particular student groups are more prone to these challenges than others. In particular, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged, northern, rural, international, and/or mature backgrounds are more likely to be disadvantaged than other students when pursuing blended, distanced, or emergency online learning.

As well, this report has identified ways in which relevant decision-makers—from governments to universities themselves—can seize the opportunities presented by COVID-19 to build better post-secondary experiences for students and deliver more accessible, high-quality blended, distance, and emergency online learning opportunities in the future. In particular, this report has identified the need for greater financial, pedagogical, and health and wellness-related improvements to blended, distance, and emergency online learning opportunities. Currently, students feel as though blended, distance, and emergency online learning does not offer them a post-secondary experience comparable to in-person learning. Our institutions, governments, and instructors must, therefore, seize the opportunities provided by COVID-19 to improve upon the education we offer to students and build a future in which students are confident in their ability to succeed in in-person, blended, distance, and emergency online learning contexts alike.

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Endnotes

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