

Tracking Online and Distance Education in Canadian Universities and Colleges: 2017

Sub-report on inter-provincial differences in online learning

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ANALYSING INTER-PROVINCIAL DIFFERENCES

Each of the survey questionnaires was analysed according to the province in which responding institutions were located. Some provinces had very few institutions, but there were sufficient institutions in British Columbia, Ontario and Québec for a comparison to be made between these provinces, and with the rest of Canada.

In particular, this analysis provides a means of examining the impact of different provincial government policies towards online learning in Canadian post-secondary education.

RESPONSE RATES

Responses to the survey varied considerably from province to province, although there was a response from at least one institution in every province or territory except Nunavut.

Table 1: Response rates by province

	Universities		Colleges/CEGEPs		All institutions		
	Responding	All	Responding	All	Responding	Total	%
Ontario	18	20	21	26	39	46	85%
Québec	10	15	29	50	39	65	60%
British Columbia	10	11	9	15	19	26	73%
Rest of Canada	18	26	24	40	42	66	64%
Total	56	72	83	131	139	203	68%

Responses were particularly high from Ontario, with 39 out of 46 (86%) institutions responding. On the other hand, institutions in Québec had a lower response rate on average. The response rate for Québec universities was slightly lower than the national average (two thirds responded compared with three-quarters nationally) but there was a much lower response from the equivalent of colleges in the Québec system, the CEGEPs (29 out of 50 - 58%).

INSTITUTIONS OFFERING DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

Distance education includes all forms of delivery to students off-campus, not just online. Of the 140 institutions responding to the questionnaire, 116 (83%) said

they offered distance education courses, and 19 (13%) did not. In all provinces and territories except Nunavut, there was at least one institution offering distance education programs. Institutions responding that they did not offer distance education programs were smaller in size, with fewer than 7,500 students.

Of the 19 institutions who replied that they do not offer distance education, 16 were CEGEPs. This is not surprising in that there is a central distance education program for CEGEPs, Cégep à distance. Nevertheless, in addition to the Cégep à distance program, 12 of the CEGEPs surveyed also offered their own distance education courses. The lower response rate for CEGEPs is probably because many do not offer distance or online courses compared with the rest of Canada.

On the other hand almost all responding institutions in Ontario and British Columbia offer online courses, as well as all ten responding universities in Québec (even though Université TÉLUQ is a specialist fully distance university in Québec).

VARYING RATES OF GROWTH

The most striking differences between the three provinces were in terms of the rate in which online course enrolments are growing. Table 2 provides a comparison of rates of growth in online enrolments.

Table 2: Differences in annual online course enrolment growth rates, 2011-2015

	Universities	Colleges/CEGEPs
Ontario	20%	25%
Québec	12%	-3%
British Columbia	5%	1%
All Canada	13%	15%

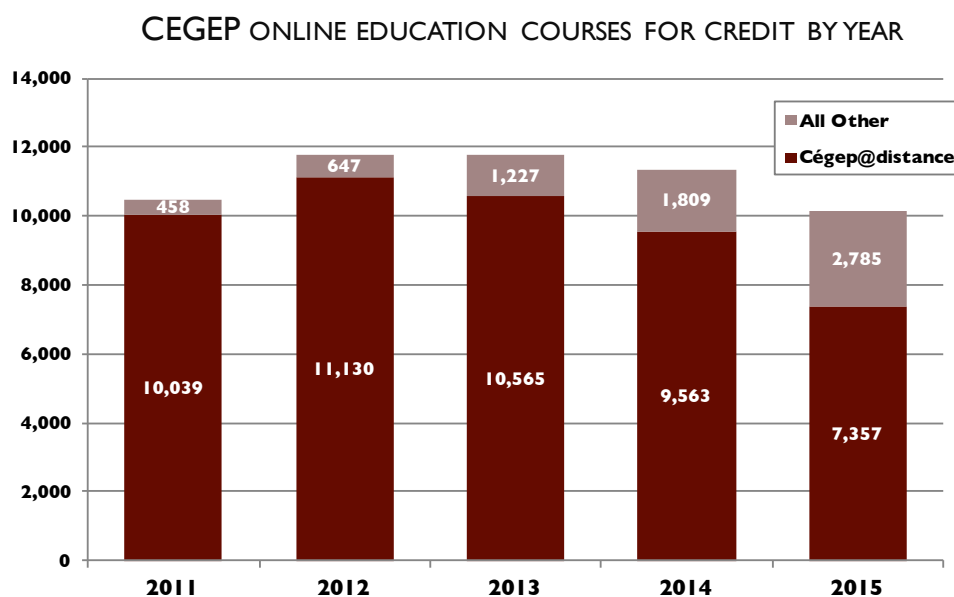
It can be seen that for those institutions that provided data, online course enrolments grew across the country by an average of 13% per annum in universities and 15% per annum in colleges, between 2011-2015.

The growth rate though was much greater in Ontario (enrolments actually doubled in the college sector over the five years) and considerably less in British Columbia than the national average (especially low growth in the BC college sector).

However, in Québec, online enrolments in the CEGEP sector actually went down by 3% overall between 2011 and 2015. The cause for this was a sharp drop in course enrolments at Cégep à distance during this period (see Table 3 below), although the change was volatile. Cégep à distance enrolments increased in 2012, before declining in the remaining three years. More

importantly, perhaps, though is the steady increase in online enrolments from the regular CEGEPs, which increased seven-fold over the five years, although they still constitute just a quarter of all the CEGEP enrolments.

Table 3: Online course enrolments, CEGEPs, 2011-2015



Nevertheless it appears that there are major changes taking place in the CEGEP sector, which raises questions about not only institutional but also provincial goals and strategies for online learning in this sector.

However all the results regarding online course enrolments need to be viewed with caution. Online course enrolment data were provided from only about a half of the institutions across the country, and some key institutions offering online learning did not or were unable to provide the data.

Also growth rates are heavily influenced by market maturity. It is difficult to grow if you have reached capacity. It was not possible to tell from the overall course enrolment data exactly how many overall course enrolments there are in each province, so it is not known if the slower rate of growth in BC is because it is reaching capacity quicker than the rest of the system having started earlier and from a larger enrolment base. Better data in subsequent surveys should help answer this question.

Nevertheless because institutions that did provide data were able to provide consistent data internally for online enrolments between 2011 and 2015, the results should be considered reasonably reliable.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

There were also differences between the three provinces in their use of technology.

Institutions in all provinces used learning management systems.

However, institutions in Québec and British Columbia were more likely also to use web conferencing and Ontario less likely than the national average. On the other hand institutions in Québec made greater use of recorded video than institutions in other provinces.

Both BC and Ontario institutions were more likely to use social media and Québec less than the national average.

Both BC and Ontario used OER more and Québec considerably less than the national average, and the use of open textbooks was higher in BC than elsewhere.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Ontario institutions were more likely to see online learning as helping with a shortage of physical teaching spaces, and also this applied to institutions in British Columbia.

Institutions in British Columbia in particular complained of a lack of training for instructors in teaching online.

Lastly, Québec institutions were much more likely to report lack of provincial government support for online learning as a barrier, and institutions in Ontario and to a lesser extent in British Columbia were much less likely to report this.

VARYING PROVINCIAL POLICIES

These results need to be set in the context of different provincial policies for online learning.

British Columbia was first to develop a provincial strategy for online learning. In 2003 it created BCcampus, a province wide organization that works with the post-secondary institutions. BCcampus offered a range of services, including shared services such as province-wide software licensing, a community of practice for those working in online learning, and significantly, funding opportunities for the institutions to develop online courses. This led to a growth of online courses up to about 2011, when there was a change of strategy and the resources for online learning were re-allocated to support open educational resources and open textbooks.

In Alberta, eCampus Alberta had a somewhat similar role to BCcampus, providing a portal for online courses, but was funded mainly through contributions from the provincial post-secondary institutions, and when there were severe budget cuts due to the sudden drop in oil prices in 2014, funding stopped and it closed in 2016. However Campus Manitoba is still active.

The big change though came in Ontario. First in 2013 the provincial government allocated funds to the Council of Ontario Universities to develop online courses and a portal for all the post-secondary online courses, then in 2015 the provincial government created eCampus Ontario, with funds to allocate to institutions for the development of online courses and programs and open educational resources, as well as a research and development fund.

However, Québec, the second largest province in Canada, has no equivalent service. Instead it has two fully distance institutions, T luq in the university sector, and C gep   distance in the college sector.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is necessary to hedge these conclusions with concerns about the quality of the online student enrolment data, there does seem to be strong evidence that the growth of online learning is driven as much if not more by government policies and strategies as by institutional initiative. Basically, money talks. The recent rapid growth in online enrolments in Ontario coincide with the Ontario government's funding of eCampus Ontario, whereas in British Columbia, the initial burst of online course development in the early 2000s has slowed as direct government funding for online course development has been switched to open textbooks and OER.

Qu bec on the other hand is (as usual) more complex and interesting. The regular universities appear to be moving into online learning at about the same pace as the rest of the country, but if anything the college sector is going backwards in terms of enrolments, mainly due to the dramatic drop in enrolments in C gep   distance in the last two or three years. However there are signs that some of the regular CEGEPs are moving to fill this gap.

It is difficult for those outside Qu bec to comment on the CEGEP sector as it is very different. CEGEPs range from large urban colleges, to small regional colleges, and many place a heavy emphasis on engagement with their local community. However, the Qu bec Minist re de l'Education et de l'Enseignement sup rieur is faced with a challenge here. How important is online learning to its college sector? If it is important, what needs to be done to strengthen it? Put more money into C gep   distance to strengthen its online capacity, or encourage the other CEGEPs to move into space - or both?

In the meantime, what about British Columbia? Is it reaching capacity in its fully online enrolments or is it now falling behind the rest of the country? In this context, are open textbooks the best place to put its resources? Should BC institutions be doing more themselves to invest in online learning?

Lastly, the results showing greater use of OER in British Columbia and Ontario and open textbooks in British Columbia raises the question about what Québec's strategy should be for OER. Given that French is a minority language and therefore there is likely to be a shortage of francophone OER, should Québec try to be an international leader in the development of francophone open educational resources or is this not where Québec's focus in online learning needs to be? Are there greater priorities?

These are all questions that more and better data could help answer.

Please use the comment box for your views on these results.

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