

Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

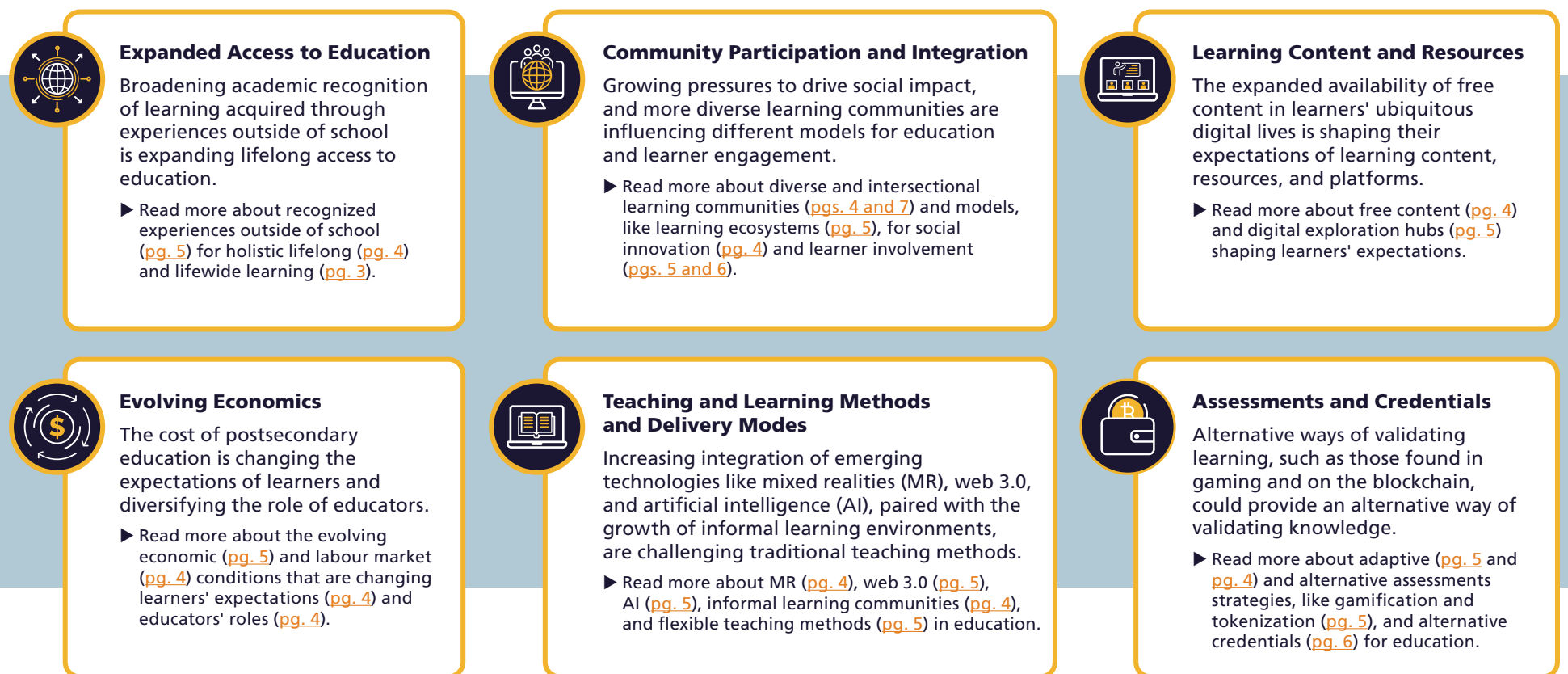
FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 1: Making the Case

In [past publications](#), eCampusOntario explored the rapidly changing landscape of the postsecondary education sector, identified major factors impacting the sector, presented current trends, and proposed questions to examine possible future implications. Through this work, it became clear that today's learners have evolving expectations necessitating more online options and new approaches to learning. How educators and institutes adjust to meet these changing expectations requires increased flexibility in all areas—practice, infrastructure, and policy.

This brief is the first in a set of publications exploring flexibility in postsecondary education. A series of participatory workshops with educators will help uncover how flexibility relates to their role and the factors driving the need for it. This research will deepen our shared understanding of flexibility from an educator's point of view. The insights and recommendations from this work will inform future strategy to create improved and more flexible digital transformation in higher education.

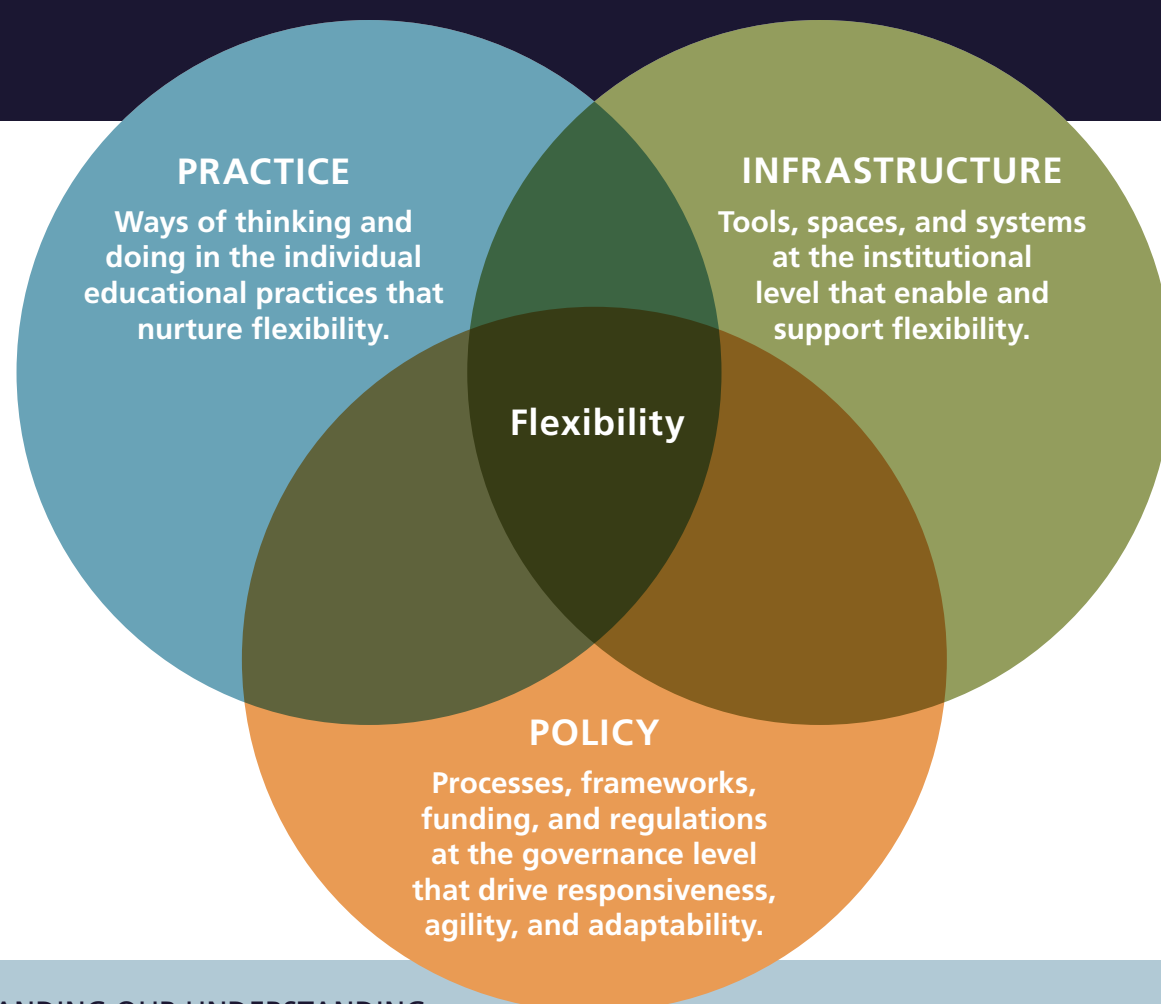
Understanding Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

Our [previous research](#) revealed several emerging trends which suggest an increasing need and desire for flexibility in postsecondary education. These trends are adding pressure to explore more in depth what flexibility means for the postsecondary education sector.



FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING and DEFINING FLEXIBILITY

In our research, we found themes related to flexibility in education can be categorized into three main areas: practice, infrastructure, and policy.

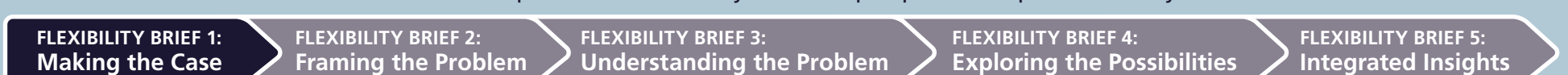


Questions explored in the upcoming briefs include:

- ▶ What does flexibility look like today?
- ▶ What are the current problems and opportunities surrounding flexibility?
- ▶ What exists today and what needs to be developed to help improve flexibility in the future?

EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING

A series of briefs will further uncover the complexities of flexibility from the perspective of postsecondary educators.



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Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education

FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 2: Framing the Problem

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. Building on *Brief 1: Making the case*, which discussed why flexibility is important, this brief looks at what flexibility means to educators and what concerns them.

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.

45 instructors from Ontario participated over 6 workshops. 29 taught at publicly assisted colleges and 16 taught at publicly assisted universities. 24 participants self-identified as full-time instructors and 17 self-identified as seasonal or part-time instructor. 4 participants self-identified as staff from teaching and learning departments directly supporting instructors at a postsecondary institute. No instructors from Indigenous Institutes participated. Participants' contributions during the workshops were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis. Major themes related to what flexibility means to educators and their concerns are presented in the sections below.

What does flexibility mean?

In conversations with educators, flexibility was initially defined as a delivery mode. Further discussion led to expanded definitions that considered it a characteristic of many things. In this broader context, flexibility is viewed as an approach to be applied to ways of thinking and doing (practice); tools, spaces, and systems (infrastructure); and processes, frameworks, funding, and regulations (policy). In this way, flexibility is both the goal and the means to get there.

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.

Why do we need flexibility?

The pandemic launched the postsecondary education sector into a state of rapid online delivery and remote learning integration and educators expressed that flexibility is now expected. Educators shared the sentiment that increased flexibility better supports diverse learner needs, but also the fear that if the sector doesn't evolve, it may become extinct.

FLEXIBILITY IS REQUIRED BECAUSE:

"It's critical to the future of education in Canada."

— Ontario postsecondary instructor

We can't go back to how we did things before the pandemic.

It enables sustainability of the sector by adjusting to economic pressures.

It is crucial to address equity gaps by meeting diverse student needs.

Learners expect it in every aspect of their postsecondary experience.

What are the contradictions within flexibility?

Educators noted that many of the factors enabling flexibility can also constrain it. Added to this is the overarching theme that educators feel the need for additional and better support. Educators expressed the need to address the tensions between the added pressures placed on them and the benefits flexibility provides to students.

"Technology can help make things more flexible, or, the reverse—more rigid."

— Ontario postsecondary instructor

Diversity and Personalization

Flexible delivery modes enable more inclusive and personalized learning experiences, supporting diverse students' needs and expectations.



Educators agree this is "the right thing to do," but need additional professional development and resources to adequately support diverse needs.

Multiple Pathways to Education

Flexible pathways to education, with multiple entry and exit points, to meet learners where they are.



Educators perceive that flexible pathways currently impose a part-time staffing model which limits educator career development, job security, and the continuity to improve course delivery.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning

Flexible modalities allow learners to access education anytime, anywhere, making it viable to work, learn, and live at home. This alleviates some of the financial burden of living on their own or in expensive city centres and helps balance education, work, and family.



Educators often feel frustrated with the lack of learner engagement in online formats, and the expectation to be available 24/7. Clear boundaries need to be established to also address their own work-life balance.

Interactive Tools and Resources

Flexible online environments have inspired educators to integrate more interactive tools and resources into their curriculum—inspiring the development of a vast library of resources to engage learners.



Educators can become overwhelmed with the options and don't always have adequate time to test new tools.

Authentic Assessment

Flexible teaching practices challenge traditional assessment and allow room for more authentic methods.



Educators lack updated policies that guide these new ways of assessing while maintaining academic integrity.

What's next?

The educators we heard from agreed that flexibility is desired and expected by the majority of their learners. However, while enabling positive change in postsecondary education, flexibility also presents challenges. Addressing these contradictions requires us to fully understand these challenges and dig deeper. In *Brief 3: Understanding the Problem*, we explore how motivations, feelings, and beliefs play into the challenges around flexibility.

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FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 3: Understanding the Problem

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. After discussing what educators think about flexibility in *Brief 2: Framing the Problem*, this brief digs deeper into educators' assumptions in relation to flexibility.

Approach

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What motivates educators?

Meeting learner and institutional expectations and creating equity appeared as a key motivators for educators in the pursuit of more flexible practices in teaching. There was a shared understanding that meeting diverse needs by providing accessible education options was fundamental in this goal. However, as noted in the previous brief, while flexibility enables solutions it also exposes issues to be addressed.

"Students have a lot of non-academic demands they are juggling (family, work, etc.) They want/need flexibility to help them juggle their full lives."

— Ontario postsecondary instructor

Meeting Expectations

Educators believe that learners have come to expect flexibility in their postsecondary experience. This is reinforced by new institutional norms that have embraced more flexible modalities and pathways to education. Educators feel they must meet these new expectations to stay relevant and in some cases to stay employed. However, they often feel under-supported and consequently unprepared to fully meet all the expectations placed on them.

Creating Equity

Meeting diverse needs in pursuit of equity in education was a key motivator. Diverse needs include socioeconomic position, ethnicity, neurodiversity, mental health, and learning styles. These place added pressure on educators to devise new teaching strategies and assessment methods to better meet the needs of all students.

How do educators feel?

Frustration around a lack of time, support, funding, and resources was a common sentiment among the educators we engaged with. Unpacking the combination of emotions experienced by educators is important for understanding the complex issues impacting flexibility. Participating Ontario postsecondary instructors expressed:

"More support is needed for educators to deliver with flexibility."

"Fear of looking foolish if they try something and it fails"

"The expectations that teachers will do whatever it takes without regard to the amount of time it takes."

"I'm concerned that I may become obsolete as a college professor."

"[Learners] expect to get a certain grade without putting in the work."

Powerless

Educators feel they are trying their best to integrate flexible methods but are left out of critical decisions regarding the resources, training, and tools they need. Yet they are held accountable through student evaluations that may reflect poorly on their performance.

Embarrassed

Flexible teaching requires trial, error, and iteration. However, educators may feel they need to be seen as experts at all times. There is a fear that if they try new approaches and fail, they will appear unpolished, unprepared, or just plain silly.

Overwhelmed

Educators feel they are doing it all alone and are not supported by the institutes, administration, or students. At the same time, educators feel under-resourced, underpaid, and under-supported to deliver the desired level of quality they feel is required.

Uncertain

Educators expressed deep concern over the integrity of the postsecondary education system. With traditional assessment methods coming into question, educators are seeking more authentic forms, but remain unclear on how to proceed.

Disrespected

Educators are unhappy with students' level of engagement and don't know how to grab and keep their attention. Once revered knowledge experts, some educators now feel as though they are viewed as simply there to hand out credits.

What assumptions underlie how educators feel?

The different perspectives on flexibility shared by educators implied a set of assumptions that underpinned their framing of challenges and feelings. Each educator's perspective is different; for this reason, there are contradictions among the assumptions presented below and such assumptions are not necessarily representative of all educators.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MONEY:

- Postsecondary institutions are delivering online content to increase revenue rather than to meet learner needs.
- The role of the educator is separate and not directly concerned with the financial operations of the institute.
- Capitalism is a problematic financial model.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT QUALITY:

- Previous ways of grading and assessing knowledge were high-quality.
- In-person learning is superior to online delivery.
- The established system worked well for most learners and educators.
- Postsecondary education is a valuable endeavour.



ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE:

- Learners attend for the value of learning, not just to gain accreditation for a job or to support their path to citizenship.
- Educators teach for the love of teaching, not just to do research, write books, gain tenure, or earn a paycheck.
- Administration is working against educators rather than supporting their needs.

What's next?

Some educators feel overwhelmed due to the increased expectations and skills required to do their job, while also feeling under supported. Providing the appropriate resources and supports may improve emotional well-being and allow educators to shift from feeling reactive to proactive. It is critical to enable spaces for evidence supported dialogue to reflect upon the underlying assumptions. In *Brief 4: Exploring the Possibilities* we look at what educators want for the future and the criteria to get there. Then, ideas for actions are proposed to move us closer to an envisioned future.

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FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 4: Exploring the Possibilities

Flexibility is a key aspect of digital transformation in postsecondary education, and educators are often at the forefront of implementation. In *Brief 3: Understanding the Problem* we highlighted how supporting educators' emotional well-being is essential to creating change. In this brief, we look at educators' visions of the future and possible steps to get there.

Approach







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How do educators envision the future?

In the last two briefs we discussed the problems around flexibility as identified by educators. While educators expressed frustrations associated with integrating more flexibility in their practice, they are also excited about what it might hold for the future.

Participating Ontario postsecondary instructors envisioned a future where:

 <p>Educators are leaders with freedom to experiment with new techniques and tools and make decisions to improve flexibility and the learning experience.</p>	 <p>Learning is inclusive of disability, socioeconomic status, culture, language, and geographic location.</p>	 <p>Learning is technology-enabled with artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, and adaptive assessment tools facilitating personalization and agile collaboration.</p>
 <p>Learning experiences are co-designed with learners, fellow educators, industry, and employers, and are supported by processes and strategies.</p>	 <p>Learning happens in physical and mixed reality environments that are redesigned to promote accessibility, active learning, and leverage multi-sensory virtual and augmented reality.</p>	 <p>Teaching is collaborative and co-teaching is celebrated. The role of educator has evolved to be part of a community of learners rather than the 'sage on the stage'.</p>

"Experimentation Labs: learning spaces to test drive, make mistakes, and succeed." *"We are using assistive AI technologies to tailor our learning to students' unique needs."* *"Educators are part of communities of learning, rather than the 'all knowing'."*

What do educators identify as enablers of their envisioned futures?

Achieving these visions of the future means re-imagining established practices, infrastructure, and policies within the postsecondary education system—approaching them with a focus on future flexibility. Educators expressed wants and needs they felt were required to enable flexibility. Those wants and needs are represented in the questions below:

<p>TIME ALLOCATION was identified by educators as essential to learn new technology and revise course content. Dedicated time to collaborate with other colleagues and students is also needed to figure out new ways of teaching and learning.</p>	<p>RESOURCES AND FUNDING for more full time, permanent teaching roles are needed for continuity and professional development. Additionally, IT professionals, mental health experts, and instructional designers are needed to support educators. Safe testing spaces allow for experimentation with new technologies and approaches.</p>	<p>WORKING ARRANGEMENTS should be reconsidered to strive for balanced workloads and incentives for educators to test, learn, and adapt. Building in channels for shared decision making, communication, feedback, and consultation between educators and administration supports agility.</p>	<p>PRACTICE STANDARDS such as frameworks for professional development, collaborative work, and assessment and evaluation need to be reviewed and updated to provide guidance while maintaining flexibility. Guidelines must be agile enough to respond to changing technologies and approaches.</p>
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What's next?

The core pillars of educators' visions of the future are leadership and autonomy to shape and deliver flexibility with the purposeful allocation of time, resources, and funding. Additionally, collaboration and convergence are critical to reflect this evolution, primarily in working arrangements and practice standards. In *Brief 5: Integrated Insights*, we synthesize our research and provide recommendations for next steps.

<p>FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 1: Making the Case WHY FLEXIBILITY IS IMPORTANT</p>	<p>FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 2: Framing the Problem WHAT EDUCATORS THINK ABOUT FLEXIBILITY</p>	<p>FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 3: Understanding the Problem WHAT EDUCATORS FEEL ABOUT FLEXIBILITY</p>	<p>FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 4: Exploring the Possibilities WHAT EDUCATORS WANT FOR FLEXIBILITY</p>	<p>FLEXIBILITY BRIEF 5: Integrated Insights THE NEXT STEPS FOR FLEXIBILITY</p>
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