

CMEC Vision Statement on On-Line Learning in Postsecondary Education

CMEC On-Line Learning Working Group

Leadership in Learning

In September 1999, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) re-affirmed their responsibility for providing leadership in education through the Victoria Declaration and identified areas for joint action at the pan-Canadian level, while acknowledging responsibility for education in their own jurisdictions.

Ministers affirmed that education is a lifelong learning process, and whether delivered through traditional, digital or other media, lifelong learning will be increasingly the focus of CMEC activities and of individual provinces and territories in the development of education policy over the next few years. On-line learning plays an important part in enhancing lifelong learning opportunities.

Building on provincial/territorial priorities, trends in education, and some of the themes of the Advisory Committee for Online Learning, this document is aimed at providing pan-Canadian leadership for on-line learning in postsecondary education in Canada. Priorities for action outlined below may be implemented by jurisdictions through individual and/or collective activity. The attached overview of current initiatives highlights the variety of activities that provinces/territories and their institutions have already launched.

On-Line Learning: a Pan-Canadian Priority

As learning modes and needs change in response to the knowledge-based economy, education is also changing. On-line learning is pedagogically increasingly important, and a subject of discussion within individual provinces/territories, at the pan-Canadian (i.e., CMEC) level, and in the international arena. Provincial/territorial governments, postsecondary institutions, the on-line learning community, and the Advisory Committee for Online Learning have all noted that an increasingly global and technological society creates new and increased pressures for learning systems to be adaptable, accessible, and flexible. The enhanced accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness made possible by on-line learning technology make it well-suited to support lifelong learning, whether used in conjunction with and as an enhancement to traditional models of education, or as a stand-alone option.

Provincial/territorial jurisdictions have been responding to these emerging learning needs and pressures, and have made significant investments in technology, technological infrastructure, education policy, and supports for postsecondary learners and educators. Provincial/territorial innovation and investment have helped Canadian jurisdictions to remain leaders in this new and rapidly evolving global learning environment. However, CMEC members recognize that more needs to be done. As on-line learning opportunities based outside of Canada increase in scope and stature, maintaining Canada's leadership position will require ongoing collaboration and coordination of activities and initiatives among provinces and territories, while recognizing jurisdictional diversity and priorities.

Toward a Pan-Canadian Vision for On-Line Learning

CMEC members believe that:

- on-line learning initiatives should work to narrow the digital divide, as experienced by provinces/territories, urban/rural areas, and by specific demographic groups such as First Nations and Métis peoples.
- learners are best served when quality learning opportunities reflect local needs and strengths, are developed in consultation with learners and postsecondary educators, and are built on existing investments and initiatives.
- successful pan-Canadian on-line learning initiatives should promote quality assurance, transferability, and high technical standards, while respecting diversity among postsecondary educators and recognizing provincial and regional developments.
- pan-Canadian initiatives should be developed in a collaborative and coordinated way to build on existing initiatives and contribute to provincial/territorial policy directions.

Priorities for Action

CMEC members are committed to cooperation and coordination in on-line learning, while recognizing provincial distinctiveness and regional diversities in on-line learning initiatives. While needs in on-line learning will change to reflect the technological and learning environment, areas of current priority for ministers include:

- ensuring that on-line learning is of high quality, reflecting a high standard in content and the ongoing adoption of best practices in on-line education pedagogy.
- promoting the development of high quality on-line learning content.
- providing access to quality on-line learning opportunities in all parts of Canada.
- promoting collaboration among provincial postsecondary educators to develop and support on-line learning.
- promoting research and the identification and adoption of best practices in on-line learning.
- sharing of information among provinces/territories on best practices for on-line learning curricula and curriculum development.
- promoting and sharing of best practices in professional development among instructors and course developers.
- helping to competitively position provincial/territorial on-line postsecondary educators internationally.

Appendix: Priorities for Next Steps

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The priorities identified by CMEC members set the direction to begin provincial/territorial actions to achieve the pan-Canadian on-line learning vision. Some priorities will be achieved through partnerships within jurisdictions, while others will present opportunities for pan-Canadian collaboration among provinces/territories, the federal government (regarding infrastructure, and research and best practices), learners, institutions, and existing consortia. These approaches will produce strong benefits for Canadian learners and Canada's on-line learning community and address the unique challenges of and opportunities for on-line learning in provinces/territories.

In all cases, work will respect provincial/territorial responsibility for education and specifically for on-line learning policy direction and program delivery, and ensure the accountability of governments to their own publics. Recognizing the importance of this work, provincial and territorial ministers wish to begin a multi-year action plan immediately, with a view to setting strong foundations over the 2001-02 period.

Infrastructure

- Infrastructure development is key to enabling the growth of on-line learning. Jurisdictions will work with the federal government to develop priorities, methodologies, and funding of broadband communications access (connectivity) in all parts of Canada. This work will be a multi-year task, and must build on the significant infrastructure investments already made/planned by provinces and territories, and equitably address provincial/territorial differences.

Digital Copyright

- While copyright is an area of federal jurisdiction, provinces/territories will work to promote digital copyright laws which ensure fair dealing for learners, content developers, and education institutions, and respect the educational component of Internet use.

Content development

- Provinces and territories will explore potential collaborative approaches to support the development of on-line content for public postsecondary institutions through provincial/territorial and/or postsecondary institutional partnerships. Such collaborative approaches may respond to the needs of regional economies or communities.

Promoting Research and Best Practices

Provinces and territories will:

- develop collective priorities for research and development to be implemented by individual jurisdictions and/or the Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda, which build on common provincial/territorial interests or policy directions in on-line and lifelong learning.
- develop flexible provincial/territorial/institutional networks and approaches to promote innovation, share best practices, and highlight them in enhanced professional development opportunities for postsecondary educators.
- develop support for applied research, enabling the transfer of basic research and pilot project learning to scalable applications, including integrated learner support services, that can be broadly implemented.
- work with the federal government and the private sector to develop strategies for broad, pan-Canadian on-line learning research initiatives and funding for these initiatives (e.g., through SSHRC and/or other research mechanisms).

International Strategy

Jurisdictions may decide to work individually or collaboratively to pursue international opportunities to:

- Identify opportunities to focus marketing efforts, collective goals regarding international sales of learning products (“learnware”) and participate in international consortia, etc.
- Ensure provincial/territorial direction-setting regarding the international positioning of Canadian on-line learning programs, research, products and services. Provincial/territorial jurisdictions may initiate cooperation with the federal government, where appropriate, to identify the venues within which marketing will occur, and the international organizations within which pan-Canadian efforts will be pursued.

Provincial and territorial Ministers will choose from among these priorities, according to their individual priorities and needs, and adopt innovative and collaborative partnerships on other projects.