

# **ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES ONLINE:** A Strategic Consortium for Learner Success and System Sustainability



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# Ontario Universities Online: A Strategic Consortium for Learner Success and System Sustainability Viability Study

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## Executive Summary

Ontario's learners increasingly demand flexible, accessible, and high-quality online education that supports timely graduation, lifelong learning, and seamless mobility. However, Ontario's universities are contending with escalating financial, demographic, and workforce pressures, which have been further exacerbated by recent federal policy changes, shifting enrolment patterns, and evolving labour market demands. These pressures have revealed the limitations of fragmented online offerings, resulting in barriers for students who require accelerated progress, wish to catch up, or seek specialized courses not available at their home institution. As a result, progress is delayed, costs increase, and learners, and tuition revenue, are diverted to out-of-province providers.

The proposed Ontario Universities Online Consortium (OUOC), guided by ONCAT and powered by OntarioLearn, offers a pragmatic, evidence-based solution. By centralizing online course sharing, credit recognition, and learner supports, OUOC will enable students to access a broader range of high-quality courses, accelerate degree completion, and benefit from seamless credit transfer across institutions. The consortium model draws on proven best practices from OntarioLearn, Campus Manitoba, Open Universities Australia, and other leading consortia, demonstrating that coordinated, faculty-driven collaboration delivers measurable improvements in access, equity, and student outcomes. This concept is not new to Ontario's university sector.

For institutions, OUOC reduces duplication, lowers costs, and expands enrolment opportunities, while providing actionable data for planning and innovation. The model enables universities to maintain program breadth, respond to emerging workforce needs, and retain learners who might otherwise seek education elsewhere.

For the province, OUOC maximizes the return on educational investment, supports talent development, and enhances system resilience in the face of ongoing financial, demographic, and workforce pressures. A two-year pilot, supported by targeted investment and robust governance, will lay the foundation for province-wide collaboration and scalability.

The timing is critical: Ontario has the infrastructure, expertise, and imperative to act. Launching the OUOC pilot now will position Ontario as a national leader in digital higher education, ensuring universities remain competitive and learners have equitable access to opportunities in an era of global competition. This proposal advances a trajectory the sector set a decade ago, updated for today's pressures and platforms.

# Introduction: Ontario's Postsecondary System at a Crossroads

Ontario's postsecondary sector is navigating a period of significant transition. Universities across the province are facing unprecedented financial pressures, demographic shifts, geopolitical uncertainty, and rapidly evolving workforce demands. The convergence of the federal government's decision to cap international student visas and an aging population has intensified the urgency for system-wide strategies to preserve quality, accessibility, and affordability while responding to the needs of learners and employers. In this context, Ontario's universities are uniquely positioned to capitalize on a strategic opportunity: to reclaim and expand their share of the burgeoning online education market, both within the province and nationally.

The federal cap on international student visas introduced in 2024 has constrained a critical revenue stream for Ontario institutions. Simultaneously, demographic trends are reshaping enrolment patterns. In many regions, the traditional pipeline of secondary-school graduates is stable or declining, while demand from adult and mid-career learners is increasing. At the same time, Ontario's labour market faces persistent skills shortages, an aging workforce, and the imperative to upskill and reskill workers in response to technological disruption and global competition. Employers are calling for flexible, accessible learning pathways, notably high-quality online programs and credit-bearing short courses that allow individuals to balance work, family, and education. Learners themselves are increasingly place-bound due to housing costs, employment obligations, and caregiving responsibilities, yet they expect the same choice, speed, and personalization they experience in other digital services.

These pressures manifest in tangible barriers for students and institutions alike. Students who require a specific course that is full, cancelled, or offered out of sequence often face delays in program completion. Others seeking career advancement encounter limited or inconvenient options that fail to provide the flexibility they need. For individual courses, the current solution frequently involves enrolling as a visiting student at another institution, incurring additional fees, adapting to unfamiliar learning environments, and negotiating transfer credits, a process fraught with complexity and risk. These inefficiencies lead to postponed graduations, unnecessary course repetition, and, in some cases, attrition. For learners seeking fully online programs, the lack of coordinated or convenient provincial options often results in enrolment at out-of-province institutions such as Athabasca University, University of Fredericton, or Royal Roads University, diverting significant tuition revenue away from Ontario.

The challenge is not a lack of capacity, but rather the absence of coordinated access and guaranteed recognition. Ontario universities collectively offer a substantial number of high-quality online courses each term, supported by decades of investment in digital learning infrastructure. However, these opportunities remain fragmented and largely confined within institutional boundaries, limiting their potential impact. Learners who could benefit from existing online seats often face barriers to access and recognition, while institutions struggle to sustain niche programs and avoid duplication of effort. In many cases, multiple universities develop and deliver similar online courses independently, incurring significant costs for content creation, technology integration, and instructional support. This duplication strains resources and undermines system-wide efficiency, particularly in an era of fiscal constraint.

A coordinated approach to online delivery would enable institutions to maintain program diversity, share specialized expertise, and optimize capacity across the province. It would also address persistent equity gaps by ensuring that Ontario learners, regardless of geography, socioeconomic status, or institutional affiliation,

can access the courses they need without unnecessary delays or administrative complexity. Understanding the current state of online programming in Ontario universities is therefore essential to identifying both the strengths that can be leveraged, and the structural limitations that must be addressed. The 2013 “Ontario Universities Online” plan by COU envisioned a collaborative course marketplace and improved transfer processes, later advanced through the Ontario Online initiative and the creation of eCampusOntario (Ontario Online Learning Consortium) (COU, 2013; eCampusOntario, n.d.).

## The Online Learning Landscape: Strengths and Gaps in Ontario Universities

Ontario’s universities have experienced a rapid and sustained expansion in online and hybrid learning, initially accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforced by evolving student expectations. Recent research confirms that these modalities are now a permanent and growing component of the postsecondary landscape. Students increasingly prioritize flexibility, affordability, and solutions to housing and transportation barriers, factors that disproportionately affect adult learners, working professionals, and residents of rural or remote regions (CDLRA, 2025; eCampusOntario, 2025).

The scale of online learning in Ontario’s university sector is substantial. According to eCampusOntario’s *Learn Online* portal, learners can access thousands of online courses and programs offered by Ontario’s publicly funded universities (eCampusOntario, 2025). Ontario’s universities maintain significant online catalogues. For example:

- University of Toronto: Over 540 online learning opportunities through the School of Continuing Studies.
- University of Waterloo: More than 500 online courses across 40 subject areas, including fully online degree pathways.
- Laurentian University: 26 fully online degree programs and nearly 400 online courses, reflecting its bilingual mandate and commitment to flexible learning.
- Trent University: Over 100 online courses and multiple fully online programs serving diverse learner populations.

According to CDLRA’s 2025 Pan-Canadian survey, there is a growing demand for online courses and programs, with most institutions expecting this growth to continue for at least two more years (CDLRA, 2025). This pattern is further supported by the substantial investment (almost \$200 million) that Ontario universities made in digital infrastructure and course development between 2020 and 2022 due to the pandemic . Additionally, provincial efforts like the Virtual Learning Strategy (VLS) accelerated digital content creation and institutional capacity through short-term, project-based funding. While impactful, this approach resulted in variability in adoption and raised questions about sustainability beyond the funding period (eCampusOntario, 2024). The Council of Ontario Universities continues to advocate for sustained investment in digital infrastructure and online learning, emphasizing its role in meeting Ontario’s workforce development priorities (COU, 2025).

Despite these advances, the university sector remains fragmented in its approach. Unlike OntarioLearn’s collaborative model among colleges, universities typically operate independently, each maintaining separate

online listings and infrastructure. Third-party catalogues, such as eCampusOntario's *Learn Online* portal, improve discoverability but do not provide integrated registration or advising support, often redirecting students back to individual institutional websites. As highlighted by the COU in 2023, Ontario universities are adopting a wide array of digital tools which improve discoverability and access, but do not yet offer fully integrated registration, transfer mapping, or advisory services (COU, 2023). This siloed approach results in duplicated effort, inconsistent learner experiences, and limited opportunities for course sharing or streamlined credit recognition (Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, 2023; Lanthier, S., Coylar, J., & Deakin, J., 2023).

The 2013 sector proposal envisioned precisely this coordination challenge: a shared portal, mapped equivalencies, and predictable recognition across institutions. While the OOU concept did not mature within the university sector at that time, the province proceeded with Ontario Online and subsequently incorporated the Ontario Online Learning Consortium, now operating as eCampusOntario, to support system-wide digital learning advocacy and collaboration, rather than direct delivery or governance of university online course sharing (COU, 2013).

These structural gaps create barriers for students who need flexibility. Learners seeking to complete a required course that is unavailable at their home institution often face complex processes involving visiting-student status, additional fees, and manual credit transfer negotiations. Residency requirements further restrict the number of transferable credits, compounding delays in graduation and increasing attrition risk. While ONCAT's ONTransfer.ca platform provides some assistance, direct collaboration among universities remains limited. Consequently, many Ontario students turn to out-of-province providers such as Athabasca University, which offers open admission, flexible start dates, and seamless online registration, drawing tuition revenue and talent away from Ontario institutions.

In summary, Ontario's universities have demonstrated the ability to scale online learning rapidly and effectively. However, the absence of coordinated access, unified platforms, and standardized credit transfer policies limits the full potential of these investments. Moving from institution-specific solutions to a system-level approach is critical to meeting growing student demand, addressing persistent barriers, and ensuring online learning remains a robust and sustainable component of Ontario's postsecondary system. Recognizing both the strengths and the coordination gaps, we can now situate the case for a consortium within the structural pressures the system faces.

# System Pressures: Financial, Demographic, and Workforce Drivers for Change

Ontario's higher education ecosystem is diverse and interdependent. Research-intensive, regional, bilingual, and specialised universities all operate under common public accountability while serving distinct communities and missions. Several macro trends have converged to create a pivotal moment for system-level collaboration, particularly for scalable, shared online delivery.

## Financial Pressures

Universities are facing significant financial pressures, driven by rising operating costs and increasingly constrained revenue streams. Recent federal reforms to the International Student Program have compounded these challenges by introducing a national cap on study permits, provincial attestation requirements, and changes to post-graduation work eligibility. Due to these policies, Ontario institutions have experienced a sharp decline in international student enrolment, leading to significant losses in both tuition income and valuable talent. These developments underscore the urgency for system-level strategies that enhance efficiency, protect quality, and maintain access in a resource-constrained environment.

The severity of these pressures is evident in confirmed financial data. The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) reports that eight universities recorded operating deficits in 2023–24 totaling \$152 million, and this number increased to at least twelve universities in 2024–25 with combined deficits of \$293 million (COU, 2025). These figures demonstrate that financial challenges are persistent and require collaborative mechanisms to reduce duplication, lower marginal costs, and expand timely access in capacity-constrained fields.

Sector leaders, including COU, have highlighted the importance of system-level solutions that stabilize quality, capacity, and student supports. Independent reviews, such as the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability and the Auditor General's reports, have similarly highlighted the value of collaborative, efficiency-oriented approaches to protect quality and access (Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, 2023; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2022). A coordinated online delivery model is well-positioned to address these pressures and help institutions adapt to the new financial realities.

## Demographic Pressures

Ontario's learner profile is shifting toward a more diverse mix of traditional students and adult, mid-career learners seeking flexible, short-cycle, and modular pathways for reskilling and upskilling. Nationally, the share of workers aged 55 and older has grown from approximately 13% in 2000 to about 22% in 2023, intensifying retirement risk and tightening labour supply. These demographic trends increase demand for rapid, adaptable education and training options that accommodate work and caregiving responsibilities (Labour Market Information Council, 2024; Statistics Canada, 2024).

Recent analysis by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) indicates stable or rising university enrolments and continued growth in STEM participation, with forecasts of substantial seat demand through the 2030s and 2040s. These trends require more flexible provision to reach under-served learners and regional markets efficiently (Lanthier, S., Button, A., & Kaufman, A., 2025).

Evidence from the college sector’s online consortium further illustrates the strong demand among adult learners for flexible delivery. OntarioLearn reported more than 80,000 course registrations in 2024–25, supported by monthly intakes and retention rates approaching 90%. Findings from its Winter 2025 demographic survey reinforce this trend: 68% of respondents were employed while studying, 45% intended to complete a microcredential, and over 75% were aged 30 or older (OntarioLearn, 2025). Although OntarioLearn serves colleges rather than universities, these indicators provide valuable insight into adult-learner behaviour across Ontario’s postsecondary landscape.

A related dynamic is the persistent outflow of Ontario learners to out-of-province online providers. Athabasca University’s factbook lists Toronto (ranked third) and Ottawa (ranked fifth) among its top ten learner cities and reports that more than 9,000 undergraduate students and over 1,500 graduate students reside in Ontario. This represents approximately 30% of the institution’s total enrolment (Athabasca University, 2023). Athabasca’s enrolment is also predominantly part-time, reflecting patterns typical of adult learners. Establishing a coordinated Ontario university approach to online course sharing and credit recognition would help retain these learners in-province and accelerate time-to-completion through seamless credit portability.

## Workforce and Geopolitical Pressures

Ontario’s labour market is undergoing profound transformation driven by technological change, global competition, and shifting economic priorities. Automation, artificial intelligence, climate adaptation, and supply-chain realignments are reshaping the skills required for success. Many existing roles are evolving or disappearing, while new positions demand rapid reskilling and continuous learning. International frameworks such as the OECD emphasize lifelong, modular learning ecosystems to support the green-digital transition, while Canada’s Future Skills agenda prioritizes flexible, work-integrated upskilling to meet emerging workforce needs (OECD, 2023; ESDC, 2023).

Ontario’s universities are increasingly called upon to produce more degree-qualified talent in STEM, health, and other priority sectors, and to align capacity with labour-market requirements (COU, 2025). This urgency is amplified by geopolitical instability and global competition for talent, making it essential for Ontario to offer nimble, high-quality online pathways for both domestic and international learners.

Ontario’s university system possesses the content expertise, platforms, and faculty capacity to deliver online learning at scale and quality. What remains absent is inter-institutional integration: mechanisms for course sharing, cross-registration, common learner supports, and policy alignment on credit recognition, intellectual property, and quality assurance. Building on Ontario’s allocation priorities and digital learning infrastructure, as outlined in the province’s ongoing efforts to support labour market needs, a coordinated model would mobilize existing expertise quickly, scale short-cycle offerings, and create “in-family” pathways for domestic, out-of-province, and international learners (Ontario Newsroom, 2025). Taken together, these pressures make a coordinated consortium not simply advantageous, but necessary for timely, affordable, and equitable access.

# Why a Consortium Model? Delivering Tangible Benefits for Learners

A consortium model enabling online course sharing among Ontario universities offers significant advantages for learners by addressing persistent challenges related to access, flexibility, and timely degree completion. Through this framework, institutions can collaboratively leverage online courses, technological infrastructure, and student support services within an integrated governance structure, that balances institutional autonomy with shared outcomes (Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, 2023; OntarioLearn, 2025). This approach enhances scalability, cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and system resilience.

## Accelerated Time-to-Degree and Cost Reduction

Students can complete degrees more efficiently and affordably by enrolling in equivalent online offerings from partner universities when required courses are unavailable at their home institution, preventing graduation delays and reducing extended tuition and living costs (TeachOnline.ca, 2017). Research confirms that well-designed online courses can match or surpass traditional formats in supporting academic progression (EDUCAUSE, 2022; Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, & Tamim, 2014).

## Enhanced Access and Flexibility

The consortium model expands opportunities for learners facing geographic, scheduling, or personal constraints. Working professionals, caregivers, rural and remote students, and those with family obligations benefit from a broader selection of online courses, reduced wait times, and personalized scheduling. OntarioLearn data indicate that over two-thirds of its learners are working adults, underscoring the importance of flexible online options for this group (OntarioLearn, 2025). Studies further affirm that engaging and well-supported online environments promote high satisfaction and persistence rates among non-traditional and underserved populations (EDUCAUSE, 2022; Spencer & Temple, 2021).

## Streamlined Credit Transfer and Mobility

Consortium platforms leveraging ONCAT and ONTransfer enable predictable and transparent credit recognition across institutions. ONCAT's 2023–2026 Strategic Plan explicitly prioritizes “improving and understanding learner mobility” and “removing barriers to transfer and credit recognition” (ONCAT, 2023). The consortium model directly supports these goals by allowing students to pursue individualized learning pathways, stack credentials, and transfer seamlessly without losing academic progress, an essential feature for lifelong learners and those seeking accelerated programs options.

## Advancing Equity and Inclusion

By reducing barriers to course accessibility and ensuring credit mobility, the consortium model promotes equitable access for first-generation, Indigenous, and rural learners, who are often disadvantaged by rigid program structures and limited local options (Lanthier, S., Button, A., & Kaufman, A., 2025; OntarioLearn, 2025). The ability to assemble a degree from multiple institutions broadens participation and advances Ontario's goals for inclusive talent development.

### **Continuous, Year-Round Learning Opportunities**

Course sharing across the consortium permits year-round enrollment, including summer and intersession periods, enabling continuous advancement and skill development. During the COVID-19 transition, Ontario universities saw record levels of online participation in spring and summer terms, reflecting strong demand for flexible, ongoing study options (Lanthier, Colyar, & Janice, 2023).

### **Economies of Scale and Cost Efficiency**

Consolidating online course offerings reduces redundancy, optimizes resource use, and supports a more sustainable financial framework for digital education (Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, 2023; OntarioLearn, 2025). By sharing responsibilities for course development and delivery, costs are distributed across a broader student population, enhancing the viability of specialized or low-demand courses and eliminating unnecessary duplication.

### **Retaining Ontario Learners and Expanding Market Reach**

A unified consortium offers Ontario students a compelling in-province alternative to external online providers. Athabasca University reports significant enrollment by learners located in Ontario, demonstrating provincial demand for flexible online education (Athabasca University, 2023). An Ontario-centric university marketplace can help retain these learners and attract new audiences, including out-of-province and international students.

### **Agility in Meeting Workforce Needs**

Consortium collaboration accelerates the creation and deployment of modular online programs, stackable short courses, and hybrid professional offerings, effectively supporting upskilling and reskilling in response to labour market evolution (Future Skills Centre, 2025; OECD, 2023).

### **Proven Success in Ontario**

OntarioLearn's college consortium provides a validated model of effective governance, seat-sharing, quality assurance, and student support, with retention and achievement rates exceeding sector averages (OntarioLearn, 2025). Research substantiates that centralized course sharing enhances access, completion, and systemic efficiency (EDUCAUSE, 2022; Palmer, 2025)

In summary, a university-sector consortium is a high-impact solution for learners. It enables faster and more affordable degree completion, expands access and flexibility for diverse student populations, supports seamless credit mobility and lifelong learning, and advances equity and inclusion. These benefits are reinforced by strong evidence and align with ONCAT's strategic priorities, demonstrating that well-designed digital ecosystems and seamless credit transfer deliver measurable improvements in student outcomes.

## Lessons from Leading Consortia: Evidence for Success

Ontario is not starting from scratch. Across Canada and internationally, collaborative models have demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale course sharing, centralized marketplaces, joint program delivery, and automatic credit recognition. Common success factors include faculty-driven quality assurance, clear credit transfer policies, unified registration systems, and aligned financial incentives.

### 1. OntarioLearn (Ontario Colleges, Canada)

OntarioLearn is Canada’s largest and most established online learning consortium, with over 1.5 million course registrations since its inception in 1995, and 82,914 enrollments in 2024–25. With its host–home structure, one college (the “host”) creates and manages a course, while another (the “home”) registers its students through a central system and grants them credit automatically. The platform provides 600 fully online programs, featuring flexible admission options and boasting retention rates of 90% (OntarioLearn, 2025).

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* OntarioLearn demonstrates the value of a single-entry point for course discovery and registration, pre-approved equivalencies that eliminate ambiguity, and a host–home structure that benefits both sending and teaching institutions. Central coordination does not diminish local control, as institutions choose which courses to contribute and adopt within a shared framework.

### 2. Campus Manitoba (Manitoba, Canada)

Campus Manitoba operates *eCourses Manitoba*, a centralized portal aggregating online courses from all public postsecondary institutions in the province. Students can search, compare, and register for close to 1,400 online courses across institutions, with credit transfer facilitated by pre-arranged agreements. The portal emphasizes a unified learner experience, transparent pathways for credit recognition, and support for student mobility. Campus Manitoba also participates in national transfer and articulation networks, reinforcing inter-institutional collaboration (Campus Manitoba, n.d.; Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2022).

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* Campus Manitoba’s central portal and streamlined registration process highlight the importance of user-friendly design, clear credit transfer policies, and inter-institutional cooperation. The model supports student choice and flexibility, enabling learners to build personalized pathways across institutions.

### 3. Open Universities Australia (OUA)

Open Universities Australia (OUA) acts as a national hub for online education, linking students to more than 1,700 courses and 400 programs from 20 Australian universities. In 2023 alone, OUA managed over 80,000 student enrollments, boasting a satisfaction rate above 78% among online learners (Open Universities Australia, 2025). The platform allows individuals to enroll in single subjects and provides straightforward credit pathways towards university qualifications. Many undergraduate and graduate courses offer open entry, so students can sample classes before committing to a full degree program. While OUA manages centralized activities like course discovery, registration, verification, and fee payments, the partner universities are responsible for teaching and assessment. As a not-for-profit owned by multiple universities, OUA’s governance model supports both institutional goals and strong value for students (Open Universities Australia, n.d.).

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* OUA's stackability principle, standalone online subjects can be applied to certificates or degrees, is particularly relevant for continuing education and upskilling pathways. The marketplace design also reinforces two usability norms that boost uptake: (1) show learners exactly how a course counts *before* they enrol, and (2) minimise system-hopping by offering single sign-on and consistent, plain-language policies.

#### **4. Acadeum + Council of Independent Colleges (United States)**

Acadeum connects hundreds of U.S. colleges through pre-mapped equivalencies and a centralized registration workflow, allowing students to remain enrolled at their home institution while taking online courses from a host. The network has facilitated hundreds of thousands of course completions, generating \$45 million in new revenue for member institutions and improving retention by enabling students to stay on track for graduation. Case studies report strong “on-track recovery” rates for students who were short credits or off-sequence, along with tuition retained by home institutions that might otherwise have been lost to stop-outs (The Council of Independent Colleges, 2025).

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* Efficiency gains come from standardized equivalency maps and automated data exchanges. Transparent revenue splits make participation a retention strategy rather than a competitive threat.

#### **5. Great Plains IDEA (Innovative Digital Education Alliance, United States)**

Great Plains IDEA (now IDEA) is a consortium of 20 public universities offering fully online graduate programs in human sciences and agriculture. Operating for over 20 years, it has served 11,500 graduates through collaborative program delivery, shared tuition models, and faculty-led governance (IDEA, 2025). Member universities co-design curricula, agree on a single tuition rate, and share delivery. Students apply to a home institution but take courses taught by faculty across the alliance, ensuring disciplinary breadth without duplicating costs.

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* Deep collaboration can protect disciplinary breadth without each institution bearing the full cost of small cohorts. Faculty-centered governance is especially transferable: discipline committees set standards and approve courses, while a central office handles logistics.

#### **6. European Universities Initiative (EU Alliances)**

Across Europe, university alliances have made it standard to automatically recognize qualifications and promote virtual mobility among institutions, regardless of country or language. These alliances connect 65 groups and over 570 universities in 35 nations, representing nearly half of Europe's higher education students, about 11 million people. Since 2019, alliances have launched hundreds of jointly developed modular routes and collaborative degree pathways, with substantial growth in student and staff mobility (European Commission, n.d.). These partnerships offer shared course catalogs, joint or dual qualifications, and unified quality assurance systems. Support from national governments and the European Commission has sped up these changes by clearing administrative hurdles and rewarding collaboration and mobility in funding initiatives (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2025).

*Lessons for Ontario universities:* While Ontario's context is different, the EU experience shows that ambitious integration is possible when policy and performance metrics signal the desired behaviours. Ontario's own 2013 OUA proposal anticipated many of these success factors, faculty-led quality assurance, mapped equivalencies, and a single learner-facing portal, reinforcing that the present proposal is evolutionary rather than novel.

# Guiding Principles: Building a Collaborative, High-Impact Consortium

Drawing on Canadian and international experience, successful consortia share principles that balance efficiency, equity, and scalability. Collaboration is most effective when centralized coordination is paired with institutional flexibility, underpinned by clear governance and a learner-focused design. These principles ensure that course sharing does more than expand access, it creates a seamless, predictable, and high-quality experience for learners while delivering system-wide efficiencies. From province-wide college networks to international course-sharing platforms, common patterns emerge that can guide Ontario in creating a cohesive, efficient, and accessible approach to online learning.

## 1. Student-Centric Design

The learner experience must be intuitive and frictionless. A single portal for course discovery, eligibility, and registration, integrated with advising and technical support, removes barriers and confusion. Students should see upfront how a course counts toward their program, with faculty-approved equivalencies validated in advance. Research confirms that well-designed online environments can match or exceed traditional formats when paired with strong support systems.

## 2. Leverage Existing Infrastructure

Ontario can accelerate implementation by building on proven assets: ONCAT's credit transfer frameworks, eCampusOntario's Virtual Learning Strategy artefacts, and OntarioLearn's technical infrastructure and operational model. Collectively, these resources provide the foundation for a centralized platform, reducing duplication and cost while fostering trust through familiar systems.

## 3. Large Shared Inventory and Flexible Scheduling

A robust catalogue of shared courses, including high-demand, specialized, and niche offerings, ensures students can avoid waitlists, fill gaps, and accelerate progress. Frequent start dates and asynchronous delivery expand flexibility for working adults, caregivers, and rural learners, supporting personalized learning pathways.

## 4. Incentive Alignment

Collaboration thrives when financial incentives are clear and fair. Revenue-sharing models, as seen in OntarioLearn and Great Plains IDEA, ensure both host and home institutions benefit. Policy alignment, such as OSAP eligibility and recognition in performance metrics, reinforces institutional participation and system-wide efficiency.

## 5. Faculty-Led Quality Assurance

Academic integrity depends on faculty governance. Discipline committees should define learning outcomes, approve courses, and monitor performance data. Adopting recognized quality frameworks (e.g., Quality Matters) guarantees consistency and rigour across institutions (Quality Matters, 2023).

## 6. Technology Integration and Support

Interoperable systems are critical. The consortium must integrate with existing student information and learning management systems, supported by secure data exchange and federated identity. A 24/7 help desk ensures students receive timely assistance, minimizing disruptions.

## **7. Data-Driven Improvement**

Continuous improvement requires robust analytics. Tracking enrolments, completion rates, and learner feedback enables evidence-based enhancements to access, quality, and flexibility while demonstrating impact to the institutional members.

## **8. Equity and Regional Access**

The consortium must intentionally address barriers for underrepresented learners, including Indigenous, francophone, rural, and international students. Shared bilingual and culturally relevant courses, flexible scheduling, and targeted outreach will make equity measurable, not aspirational.

## **9. Institutional Leadership and Collaborative Culture**

Strong executive commitment and transparent communication are essential. Institutions must view the consortium as a strategic investment in student success and system sustainability, not as a competitive threat.

## **10. Phased Implementation**

Start small, scale smart. A pilot with willing institutions and high-demand courses will validate governance, technology, and financial models. Early wins, such as enabling students to catch up or accelerate in their academic program, will build momentum and confidence for broader adoption.

Together, these principles provide the blueprint for Ontario's proposed university online consortium: a model that combines centralized coordination with institutional flexibility, delivering a learner-first experience while optimizing resources across the system. These principles translate directly into the following integrated solution architecture.

# Proposed Solution: A Centralized Consortium for Ontario Universities

The **Ontario Universities Online Consortium (OUOC)** is designed to address the unique challenges and opportunities facing Ontario’s universities and learners. At its core, the consortium represents a system-level innovation, combining shared infrastructure, academic agreements, and coordinated governance to deliver flexibility, quality, and equity in online learning.

## Centralized Learner Portal

Leveraging OntarioLearn’s proven technology, the consortium’s web-based portal will serve as the primary gateway for learners throughout Ontario and beyond. Students will be able to search for online courses offered by participating universities, register regardless of their home institution, and access integrated academic and technical supports. The portal will feature intuitive navigation, personalized recommendations, and real-time eligibility checks for credit transfer, eliminating the confusion and administrative burden currently associated with cross-institution enrollment.

## Shared Course Catalogue

Participating universities will contribute a diverse array of online programs and courses to a centralized catalogue, including:

- **Core Degree Requirements:** High-demand first- and second-year courses that often create bottlenecks.
- **Specialized Electives:** Advanced courses that reflect institutional strengths and research expertise.
- **Short Courses and Modules:** Targeted offerings aligned with labour market needs and professional upskilling.

Flexible start dates and asynchronous delivery, based on best practices from OntarioLearn and other consortia, will support personalized learning pathways. The catalogue will be regularly updated to reflect emerging fields and learner demand, enabling universities to offer high-quality programming that would be difficult or inefficient to develop independently

## Seamless Credit Transfer

A cornerstone of the consortium model is guaranteed credit recognition. Courses completed through the consortium will be accepted at the learner’s home institution under pre-approved equivalencies, supported by standardized assessment criteria and robust quality assurance. OUOC will work closely with ONCAT to harmonize credit transfer policies and maintain academic integrity across institutions.

## Revenue-Sharing Model

Financial sustainability is critical. Building on OntarioLearn’s approach, OUOC will implement a transparent revenue-sharing framework that compensates host universities for course delivery while covering platform administration and technical costs. Registering institutions will pay a per-seat fee or share tuition revenue with the host, either directly or through a pooled mechanism. Additional revenue opportunities include attracting Ontario learners who might otherwise study out-of-province, increasing international and adult enrollments, and scaling customized program offerings in partnership with industry.

### Data-Driven Evaluation

The consortium will prioritize evidence-based decision-making, tracking key performance indicators such as enrollment growth, retention and graduation rates, learner satisfaction, and financial sustainability. Regular evaluation will inform continuous improvements to the platform, policies, and practices.

### Governance and Quality Assurance

OUOC will be governed by a board comprising representatives from participating universities, ONCAT, COU, OntarioLearn, OUAC, Contact North, and eCampusOntario. Sub-committees will address academic equivalency, registrar and logistics, governance and policy, marketing, and student services. All shared courses will adhere to recognized quality assurance standards and institutional e-learning frameworks, with regular review and faculty oversight to ensure consistency and accessibility.

### Technology Backbone

OntarioLearn's established systems will enable seamless integration with existing student information and learning management systems, supported by secure data standards and privacy protocols. Key features will include flexible start dates, 24/7 help desk support, LMS accessibility, shared orientation modules, and specialized services such as online proctoring.

### Leveraging Existing Online Programs and Courses

The consortium will prioritize universities with established online programs, reducing the need for new course development and optimizing existing resources. Institutions with limited online offerings will gain access to an expanded catalogue, promoting equity and regional access. Digital assets developed through eCampusOntario's Virtual Learning Strategy will be actively utilized.

Together, these features provide a robust foundation for a collaborative and accessible online learning environment. To better illustrate the practical impact and real-world advantages for learners, the following example student journeys demonstrate how the consortium's approach translates into meaningful experiences across diverse scenarios.

- *Catch-up scenario:* A second-year engineering student fails a required calculus course. Through the portal, she enrolls in a mapped online section at a partner university over spring–summer, completes it successfully, and remains on track for a fall co-op.
- *Breadth scenario:* A small university cannot run an advanced language elective every term. Three students enroll via the consortium into a partner's online section. The department retains those programs and continues to actively advertise the field in their community.
- *Graduate niche scenario:* A master's student in environmental policy completes a specialized modeling course taught by a partner renowned in the area. The mapping counts it as a named elective at the home institution, enriching the program without duplicating delivery.

In summary, OUOC benefits all stakeholders: students gain choice and accelerate progress, universities share resources while retaining students, and the system achieves greater efficiency and capacity. By leveraging OntarioLearn's technology and experience, OUOC will deliver a seamless, equitable, and high-quality online learning experience while supporting institutional sustainability and collaboration.

# Consortium Benefits: Learner Impact, Institutional Value, Provincial Returns

Ontario’s learners deserve a postsecondary system that is flexible, accessible, and responsive to their evolving needs. The proposed online course-sharing consortium is designed to put students first, removing barriers to course access, accelerating progress toward graduation, and expanding opportunities for lifelong learning. Through shared infrastructure and collaboration, the consortium delivers measurable benefits for learners, institutions, and the province.

## Learner Benefits

- **Expanded Course Choice and Flexibility:** Students gain access to a much wider selection of courses beyond what their home campus offers. This means they can find courses that match their interests, scheduling needs, or program requirements without transferring schools. For example, a student at a smaller university can take specialized electives, such as data analytics, languages, or Indigenous studies, offered online by larger institutions. If a required course is full or cancelled, the consortium provides alternatives, reducing wait times and frustration.
- **Faster and More Efficient Path to Graduation:** By accessing needed credits promptly, including summer or off-term options, students can stay on track or accelerate their studies. This leads to more students graduating on time or even early, saving tuition and living costs. Year-round availability (e.g., during co-op or summer catch-up) helps learners balance academic, work, and family commitments, improving retention and reducing debt.
- **Seamless Credit Transfer:** The consortium guarantees advance credit recognition for shared courses, eliminating complex transfer processes or petitions. This removes uncertainty and paperwork, allowing students to focus on learning. Effectively, students gain access to a wider “home” campus that spans Ontario, supporting mobility for those who relocate or need flexible study options.
- **Lifelong Learning and Accessibility:** Shared online courses offer greater flexibility for part-time students, working professionals, caregivers, and those in remote areas. International students can begin studies online if facing delays, and learners experiencing life events (e.g., health issues, relocation) can continue without interruption. The consortium makes university education more accessible, convenient, and customizable for modern learners.

## Institutional Benefits

- **Cost Savings and Efficiency:** Participation reduces duplication and lowers costs by enabling universities to share online programs and courses rather than develop them independently. Institutions can avoid running low-enrolment classes or hiring additional sessional instructors for niche offerings, while pooled demand ensures sustainable delivery.
- **Expanded Enrolment and Revenue:** Offering consortium courses enables universities to attract new student populations and retain existing learners who might otherwise pursue opportunities elsewhere, such as adult learners, out-of-province applicants, and international students. This approach generates additional revenue without major recruitment costs and optimizes existing online capacity.

- **Program Breadth and Competitiveness:** Smaller and mid-sized universities benefit from access to a broader catalogue, enabling them to maintain comprehensive program offerings and remain competitive. This flexibility helps prevent course cancellations and supports retention by ensuring learners can complete required courses on time. Shared resources also allow institutions to quickly launch new online options, such as stackable short courses and modular pathways, to meet emerging labour market needs. A unified “Ontario Universities Online” brand further strengthens market reach.
- **Data-Driven Planning and Innovation:** Shared analytics on course demand, enrolment patterns, and learner behaviour provide valuable insights for curriculum planning and resource allocation. Universities can identify gaps, spot emerging areas of interest, and make evidence-based decisions. These insights also foster faculty collaboration and continuous improvement in online teaching.

## Provincial Benefits

- **Maximized Return on Educational Investment:** Ontario invests over \$5 billion annually in university operating funding (Government of Ontario, 2024). The consortium helps stretch these dollars further by reducing redundant delivery and improving student retention. Shared services and course consolidation lower system-wide costs, freeing resources for high-demand areas without requiring emergency funding increases.
- **Meeting Ontario’s Talent and Economic Needs:** The consortium accelerates time-to-degree and expands access to upskilling opportunities, producing more graduates and skilled workers in critical fields such as STEM, health care, and business. By enabling timely course completion and supporting mid-career reskilling, the model aligns with provincial priorities for education-to-employment pathways.
- **Equitable Access Across Regions:** Ontario’s geography creates disparities in program availability, particularly in northern and rural areas. The consortium ensures equitable access to specialized courses and online programs, reducing relocation needs and supporting regional development. It also advances inclusion for francophone learners, Indigenous students, newcomers, and working adults.
- **System Resilience and Innovation:** A coordinated online network enhances Ontario’s ability to adapt to future challenges, from public health crises to climate disruptions. By interconnecting universities, the consortium creates instructional redundancy and continuity, ensuring learning can continue even if individual campuses face disruptions. It also positions Ontario as a national leader in digital education, fostering innovation and attracting potential federal investment.

The benefits of the online course-sharing consortium are clear: more choice, flexibility, and opportunity for learners; greater efficiency and sustainability for institutions; and a stronger, more equitable postsecondary system for Ontario. To realize these gains, coordinated action and investment are needed. The next section will present the projected costs associated to a proposed two-year pilot to establish OUOC.

## Pilot Proposal: Laying the Foundation for Success

A two-year pilot project is proposed to test a centralized online course-sharing consortium involving up to eight universities. ONCAT will lead governance, policy harmonization, and evaluation, while OntarioLearn will provide the technical infrastructure and operational leadership. The pilot will focus on high-demand courses with strong existing online capacity to ensure feasibility and immediate impact.

All funds acquired for the pilot will flow through ONCAT, acting as the single point of accountability for financial management and reporting. ONCAT will oversee governance, policy alignment, and evaluation, while disbursing funds to OntarioLearn and participating universities based on agreed deliverables. OntarioLearn will receive funding to lead technical implementation and provide operational leadership through a dedicated program administrator, serving as the primary liaison with universities and ensuring seamless technology integration. Participating universities will receive targeted funding to support course adaptation, faculty training, student advising, and local system integration.

The funding will support the development of a centralized online course-sharing platform, shared academic equivalency resources, and a coordinated support network, while enabling participating universities to adapt their processes and build capacity. This approach is designed to deliver measurable outcomes, including increased learner participation, faster course completion, improved credit portability, and enhanced system-wide efficiencies.

Together, these targeted investments lay the foundation for a robust, scalable pilot program, setting the stage for province-wide collaboration. With clear roles and dedicated funding, Ontario's universities will be equipped to innovate and respond to evolving learner needs. The next step is mobilizing collective efforts and ensuring strategic alignment among all stakeholders.

## Call to Action: Mobilizing Leadership for System Transformation

Ontario's postsecondary system stands at a pivotal juncture. A centralized online university consortium is not only technically feasible but also fiscally responsible and educationally transformative. Realizing this vision requires coordinated action from all participants:

*Students and Student Organizations:* Active engagement from student bodies is essential to ensure the consortium reflects learner needs. Student associations should advocate for the initiative, contribute to its design, and provide feedback on course demand and user experience. Participation in consortium offerings will validate the model and inform continuous improvement.

*University Leadership and Academic Senates:* Institutional leadership must prioritize the consortium as a strategic initiative. This includes allocating resources, enabling faculty collaboration, and revising policies to support course sharing and credit recognition. Universities with established online capacity can lead implementation, while others can leverage shared infrastructure to expand offerings efficiently.

*Government of Ontario (MCURES):* Provincial support is required to provide catalytic funding and policy alignment. Endorsing the consortium as a sector-wide innovation will advance efficiency, student success, and public value. Recognition of consortium outcomes within performance metrics and reinvestment of

realized efficiencies will amplify impact. Timely regulatory adjustments and public endorsement will accelerate adoption and further signal Ontario’s commitment to modernizing higher education.

*COU, ONCAT, eCampusOntario, Contact North, OUAC, and Partner Agencies:* Implementation leadership must be exercised collaboratively by agencies with expertise in credit transfer, online pedagogy, student support, and platform integration. Responsibilities include ensuring technological interoperability, maintaining rigorous quality assurance, and promoting equitable access for all learners.

Ontario possesses the infrastructure, expertise, and imperative to act. The foundational elements are in place, the benefits are compelling, and the opportunity to modernize the system is immediate.

## Conclusion: Seizing the Moment for Ontario’s Postsecondary Future

Ontario’s postsecondary system faces an urgent challenge: providing faster, more flexible access to high-quality online courses for learners across the province. Current offerings remain fragmented and constrained by institutional boundaries, creating barriers for students who need to catch up, accelerate, or access specialized courses unavailable at their home university. At a time when Ontario must rapidly upskill its workforce and deliver responsive pathways in fields such as STEM, health care, and business, the need for a coordinated solution has never been greater.

The proposed Ontario Universities Online Consortium (OUOC), guided by ONCAT and powered by OntarioLearn, offers a pragmatic, evidence-based response aligned with provincial priorities for access, sustainability, and workforce development. By implementing the OUOC pilot, Ontario can retain learners who might otherwise seek online education outside the province, respond quickly to labour market needs through flexible, high-quality offerings, and optimize system resources by reducing duplication and improving efficiency.

Although the consortium may not resolve every challenge, it represents a critical structural reform that addresses financial, demographic, workforce, and system fragmentation pressures, thereby strengthening overall system resilience. It lays the foundation for future policy innovations, such as new funding models and expanded credential pathways, while delivering efficiencies and learner-centred improvements that government and institutions have called for.

Launching the OUOC pilot now positions Ontario as a national leader in digital higher education, ensuring universities remain competitive and learners have equitable access to opportunities in an era of global competition. The imperative is clear: collaborative action must be taken to modernize Ontario’s postsecondary system. Ontario’s universities first signalled this path in 2013. The difference today is the urgency, the maturity of our digital learning capacity, and the existence of provincial infrastructure that can make a university-sector consortium practical, fast, and accountable. The creation of an Ontario Universities Online Consortium is a bold, timely step toward a more accessible, efficient, and future-ready higher education system.

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