

Assignment 1: Analysis and Comparison of Rationales for E-Learning

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Queen's University

To understand Queen's University's rationale for e-learning I have reviewed documents that relate to the overall strategic plan. Each of these documents informs the others and offers the best overall picture of the university's strategy regarding e-learning. In addition, these documents give insight to the changing landscape and prioritization of e-learning over time. The primary documents I will discuss are "The Strategic Framework" (2014) and "Online Education Planning: Digital Learning Opportunities" (Online Education Planning Report) (2018).

Queen's University launched a 5-year The Strategic Framework in 2014 that includes four strategic drivers which are the "priorities that will guide our decision making over the next five years" (p. 1). The Office of the Principal website (<https://www.queensu.ca/principal/planning-initiatives/strategic-framework>) indicates that the framework is meant to align with the Academic Plan (last updated in 2011) and the university's Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) with the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (first cycle in 2014, second cycle in 2017). The Teaching and Learning Action Plan (2014) was also developed to support the drivers of the strategic framework. Queen's University references Online Learning under the umbrella of a larger Digital Planning Framework (2018), specifically in "Online Education Planning: Digital Learning Opportunities" (2018), which are meant to support the institution's strategy. Figure 1. Shows the timeline that each of the document's proposes to fall within, as well as the key components derived from each document.

It is interesting that the earlier strategy documents: The Academic Plan (2011) and Virtualization and On-Line Learning Task Force (2013) indicate broader reasons for e-learning strategy at the institution. Whereas the new Digital Strategy and Online Education Planning Report limit e-learning to the more distance learning/fully online definitions. The perspective and recommendations of the historic documents were more indicative of an understanding of e-learning from the continuum perspective. One could argue that the change has come as Queen's has integrated technology throughout the student learning experience and because of this it is no longer necessary to identify technology as e-learning separately from general learning activities. For example, one principle of digital planning is to "leverage advances in technology with a digital strategy that is adaptable over time" (Online Education Planning Report, p. 17). In addition, in the Online Education Planning Report (2018) they assert that the funding received from eCampus Ontario for developing online courses and programs was in part due to their evidence-based approach to development which would have come from experience gained developing e-learning at Queen's in previous years:

"Queen's was the most successful institution in the competitions, receiving the largest portion of funding from eCampus Ontario (formerly the Ontario Online Initiative), and some of this success can be attributed to the evidence-based approach to instructional design highlighted in the submissions and the efforts to ground pedagogical approaches, learning design and assessment in the literature on cognitive science" (p. 3).

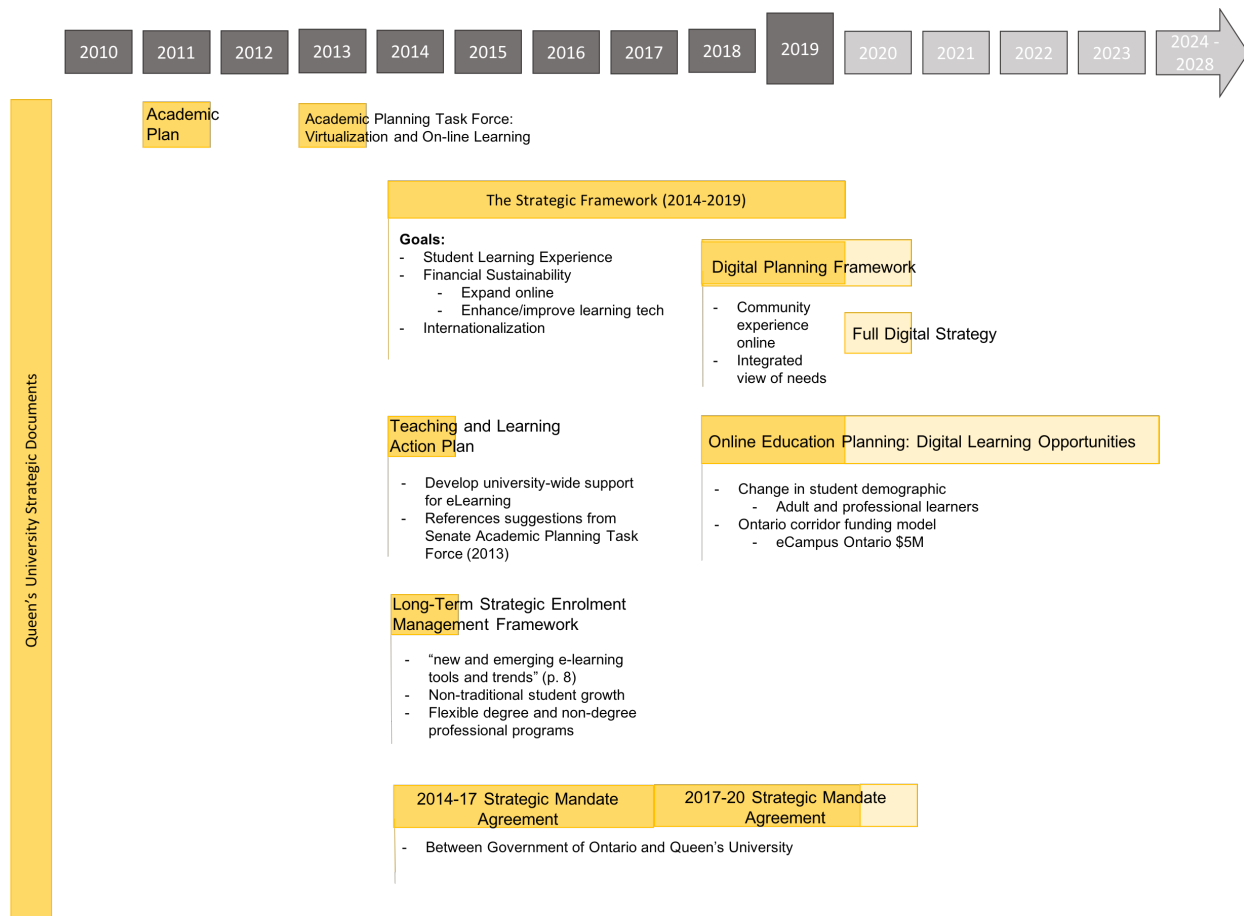


Figure 1. Queen's University Strategic Plan Timeline

The Online Education Planning Report (2018) from Queen's University (Queen's) defines online learning as courses or programs where the students are not required to be on-campus or meet instructors in person ("fully online") or where there are final exams or intensive components of the course which are in person but the majority is online (p. 14). The online learning plans and strategy refer to the entire university. Separately, the Faculty of Arts and Science proposes strategies for blended learning. The blended learning strategies and initiatives are decentralized and managed by individual faculties, and none of the recent university-wide documents refer to or mention blended learning as part of the digital or online strategy. I see

not reconciling the historical planning and reports regarding blended learning and the new strategies that focus specifically on online learning as a gap in the overall digital strategy.

Financial Stability

The current strategy indicates that one rationale for e-learning is to diversify revenue streams (moving away from traditional undergraduate for-credit model) by developing online courses and programs that attract and are relevant to a different demographic. The Strategic Framework (2014) indicates this in its third driver: “ensuring financial stability” (p. 6), and the university expands upon this in the Online Education Planning Report (2018). Non-traditional learners have been identified as a segment of customers that is growing naturally, and an area that Queen’s would like to see continued growth in. In the 2014 Queen’s Strategic Enrolment Management Group (SEMG) reported that “any enrolment growth must include non-traditional student populations (e.g. mature students, part-time students) and will require willingness on the part of government to fund this growth” (p. 3).

In 2016 in Ontario there was a change in the per-student funding model to a corridor funding model which limits growth of enrolment in the for-credit model (Online Education Planning Report, 2018). These factors are implicit and explicit reasons for the necessity and expansion of online learning opportunities at Queen’s. Non-traditional students require greater program flexibility, and the new funding model means that enrolment growth will rely more heavily on alternative credential models, where a key component is the development of online courses and programs (see The Strategic Framework, p. 6; Online Education Planning Report recommendations 4 & 7).

E-Learning for the Student Experience

In addition to referring to students in terms of financial stability and enrolment growth, the e-learning strategy proposed by Queen's addresses online learning as solutions for three kinds of students for different reasons: the traditional student, the non-traditional (adult or professional) learner as discussed, and the international student body.

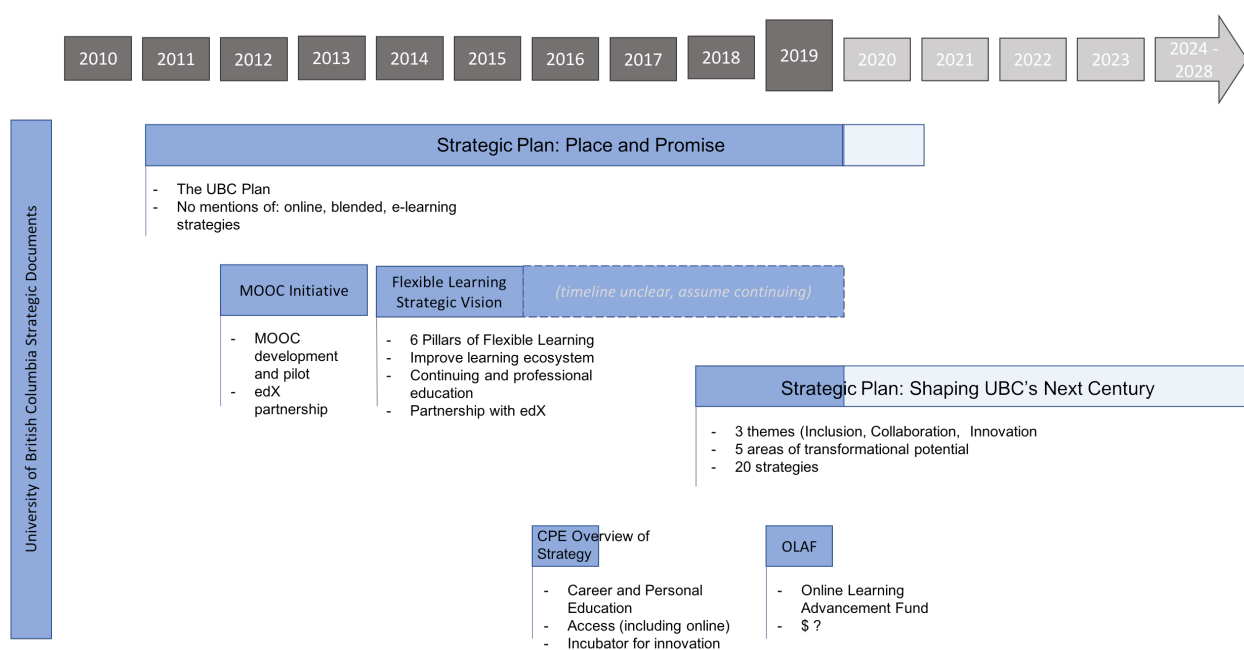
The Strategic Framework emphasizes greater opportunities for experiential learning, and for global opportunities for traditional domestic students. In addition to existing opportunities available to traditional students the Online Education Planning Report (2018) suggests that traditional students may want to embrace online learning in order to continue their studies while taking part in these experiences which likely take place at a distance (p. 6). Online learning is offered as valuable for the traditional student because it is a) what the students want and b) it is consistent with the strategic framework goals of increasing opportunities for students that are off campus by not requiring them to completely disengage with their academic curriculum.

University of British Columbia (UBC)

The University of British Columbia (UBC) released its 10-year strategic plan "Shaping UBC's Next Century – Strategic Plan 2018-2028" (Strategic Plan) in 2018. The strategic plan includes three themes: inclusion, collaboration, and innovation. Under the theme of inclusion, UBC references the use of open textbooks, the recognition of open education resources for faculty merit decisions, and the launch of online offerings of massive open online courses (MOOCs). The Strategic Plan (2018) indicates e-learning as part of its strategy theme: "there are

gains to be had in supplementing the traditional classroom experience and opening access to education through online learning” (p. 32). They also propose 20 strategies, 6 of which relate to e-learning, these include strategies related to: people (including affordability and growth of open source resources), spaces (including virtual and digital environments), systems renewal (including learning management systems), education renewal (online and blended education for changing learner segments), and practical learning (which includes UBC’s Extended Learning which will expand online offerings for lifelong learners).

The Flexible Learning Strategy (2014) came well before the Strategic Plan (2018), and there seems to be a change in how e-learning is discussed in the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is less specific than the Flexible Learning Strategy, but I will assume that the Flexible Learning Strategy is still intended as UBC’s main e-learning strategy as there is no evidence to suggest otherwise. In addition, the Flexible Learning Strategy is relevant to the Strategic Plan and mentioned in many places, which indicates its continued relevance.



UBC's most recent approach to e-learning is more aligned with a continuum view of e-learning. The approach comes from Flexible Learning – Charting a Strategic Vision for UBC (Vancouver Campus) (2014) (referred to further as Flexible Learning Strategy). The approach includes reference to three modalities of flexible learning: blended, and online. Blended learning and flipped refers to delivery of content online that supports classroom instruction and more specifically allowing students to engage with materials online (videos, reading) so that the classroom can be used for activity-based learning, respectively. Online learning refers to the more traditional definition of distance learning where courses are completely online.

Overall, UBC's rationale for e-learning strategy seems to be that there is an opportunity to benefit from a changing landscape.

“Taken together there is a clear imperative and opportunity for UBC to focus institutional leadership, capability and investment in Flexible Learning as the higher education landscape is reshaped. Emerging from the above-described changes in demographics, economics and learner expectations, profound shifts in the sector are already apparent.” (p. 6)

UBC's Flexible Learning Strategy (2014) outlines four “forces for change” that act as the basis for its strategy. As reported, there is a greater expectation for quality in education as it is emphasized that education is an investment (p. 3). The student demographic is changing: students want blended learning options, so e-learning is a response to demand. There is some government response to changes in higher education (and government support for Flexible Learning initiatives). Finally, emerging and disruptive technology enables and creates a need for innovation in education.

Student Preferences and Experience

The UBC Strategic Plan (2018) indicates that transformative learning is one of three core areas, and the Flexible Learning projects support this core area. In addition, the Strategic Plan indicates that transformative learning initiatives go hand-in-hand with initiatives that will help respond to a changing student demographic:

“Universities must extend their traditional offerings, based on pedagogical research, to serve their populations better and must rethink programs, spaces and facilities to enable new ways of learning. Faculty and staff are working hard to deliver technological advances. Universities need to support them in this effort.” (pp. 55-56)

This also demonstrates that the Flexible Learning Strategy at UBC is relevant to more current and broader strategies. UBC, like Queen’s, identifies a changing student demographic where e-learning is expected from the students and parts of the strategy comes from student preferences in addition to supporting a transformative learning experience. The Flexible Learning Strategy (2014) states that “65% of them [learners] prefer blended learning options over entirely online or entirely face-to-face modalities” (p. 4). Some students prefer flexibility in “time, place, pace, and content” (p. 5). In Career and Personal Education (CPE): Overview of Strategy (2016), UBC indicates that the changing student population also includes those who would be interested in CPE opportunities, but would expect modular, flexible and high quality educational opportunities. An implicit rationale for e-learning related to students is that e-learning can support this kind of programming. This would also relate to a following rationale of remaining competitive.

E-learning As Innovation

There are two avenues that UBC takes regarding innovation. Innovation is a key theme in the UBC Strategic Plan which indicates that the university is “renowned for our long-standing commitment to innovation in teaching and learning” (p. 33). The Flexible Learning Strategy indicates that UBC has strong learning technology foundation, has experience in Flexible Learning, and can be seen as a leader and innovator in the field. So, one reason behind the Flexible Learning Strategy seems to be because it is an opportunity for continued growth and innovation. Second, there is opportunity to innovate in the field of learning analytics, which has seen developments as universities adopt e-learning (Flexible Learning Strategy, p. 6). A critical restatement of the above is that UBC has decided to pursue e-learning because it has already begun to pursue it, and thinks that it can be a leader in the field. However, innovation is also related to having a competitive advantage, which leads to the third identified rationale: remaining competitive.

Remain Competitive

UBC has adopted its e-learning strategy to remain competitive in a changing higher education market. The Flexible Learning Strategy identifies students that value education for career or personal development, where price may be a more important factor than credentials. MOOCs are seen as opportunities to act as bridge for such students as it may act as a recruiting method. MOOCs are also seen as an opportunity to grow academic partnerships with previous rivals like Harvard (Flexible Learning Strategy, 2014) which may be a competitive advantage to the institution.

Comparison and Further Analysis

Queen's recent strategy specifically references online learning which they define as fully (or almost fully) online courses and programs. UBC presents its e-learning strategy as a Flexible Learning initiative, which is more aligned with a continuum perspective of e-learning where Flexible Learning encompasses technology-enabled environments within courses up to fully-online courses and programs.

UBC and Queen's both provide evidence of e-learning strategies at the institution level within a strategic plan or framework released within the past 5 years and current up to or past 2019. Both institutions offer specific details regarding their e-learning strategy from older (2013/2014) documents with evidence that universities have changed their conception of e-learning. Where the e-learning strategies in the past encompassed a broader scope, as technology and e-learning was adopted, it may be that it has become ubiquitous and no longer requires specific strategic plans. If we consider e-learning from the perspective of Zemsky and Massy (2004), then e-learning as software and e-learning as mediated learning has become a part of the culture of the institution rather than the strategy. Especially in the case of Queen's, whose e-learning strategy is focused on fully online courses and programs.

Queen's overall strategic plan and relationship between levels of this plan are more clearly laid out (they can all be found under <https://www.queensu.ca/strategicplanning>). In addition, the documents clearly state that they are indeed intended to be related to each other and it was simpler to make a connection between e-learning strategies and the overall institution strategic plan. The UBC strategies do not state as clearly their relationships between each other.

UBC and Queen's both implement e-learning strategies to accommodate the lifestyle and academic choices made by a changing learner population. UBC and Queen's both recognize e-learning as a driver and opportunity in higher education spaces that focus on non-traditional learners, and as part of their Extended Learning and Online Learning initiatives. Queen's is explicit in the relationship between the changing learner population and the need to diversify revenue by expanding beyond the 'traditional' learner. Queen's and UBC both recognize a growing demand and opportunity from adult and professional learners, and identify these learners as requiring e-learning for enhanced flexibility. Queen's and UBC indicate part of the reason for e-learning in their institutions is to support their initiatives that focus on adult or professional learners, or credential/career programs in their professional and continuing education programming. These are seen as opportunities to support missions of student experience, but also as opportunities for diversified revenue (Queen's) and to remain competitive in higher education (UBC).

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