Open Educational Resources in Canadian Post-Secondary Education

2022 Special Topics Research Brief

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA) conducted a *Spring National Survey of Online and Digital Learning* to gather data on digital learning and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at publicly funded post-secondary institutions across Canada.

This special report discusses the use of open educational resources (OER), which are "freely accessible, openly licensed text, media, and other assets that are useful for teaching and learning"[1] (Donovan et al., 2018, p.28).

This report highlights the following issues related to OER use:
- Support and encouragement in OER use
- Faculty familiarity with OER
- Changes over time

A summary of the findings and implications can be found at the end of the report.

Further details about the research methods used for the 2022 Spring National Survey are available in the methodology section of this report.

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[1] http://www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2018_national_en.pdf

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ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT IN OER USE

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements about support and resources for faculty at their institution. Regarding open educational resources, 62% of participants agreed that their institution encourages faculty use of OER.

My institution encourages faculty use of Open Educational Resources (OER).

- Agree — 62%
- Neutral — 21%
- Disagree — 12%
- Dont know — 5%
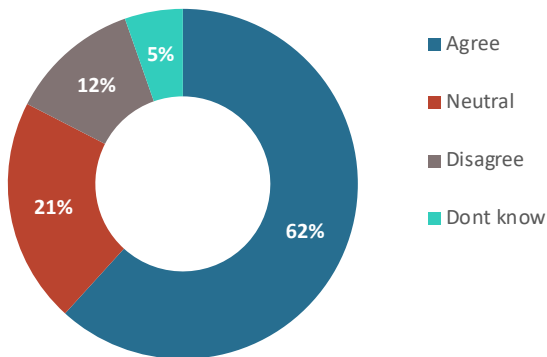
To examine the possible long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey asked participants to think ahead two years (2024) to anticipate trends related to future supports at their institution. The respondents were asked about the likelihood of support for the use of OER in the next 24 months. Nearly 90% of participants think support in the use of OER will remain the same or increase.

Likelihood over next 24 months- Support for the use of Open Educational Resources (OER)

- More likely — 53%
- About the same — 36%
- Less likely — 6%
- Dont know — 4%
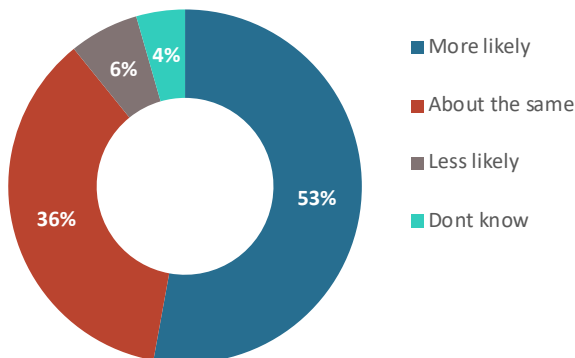
FACULTY FAMILIARITY WITH OER

The 2022 Spring National Survey asked respondents about their perceptions of faculty experiences. The vast majority (80%) of respondents agreed that faculty are increasing their use of digital resources and technology in their courses.

Faculty are increasing their use of digital resources and technology in their courses

- Agree — 80%
- Neutral — 20%
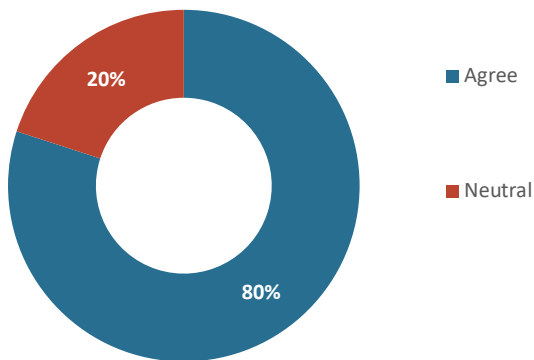
However, regarding OER, roughly two thirds (68%) of participants disagreed that faculty are familiar with the OER available to them.

Faculty are familiar with the Open Educational Resources (OER) available to them

- Agree — 23%
- Neutral — 10%
- Disagree — 68%
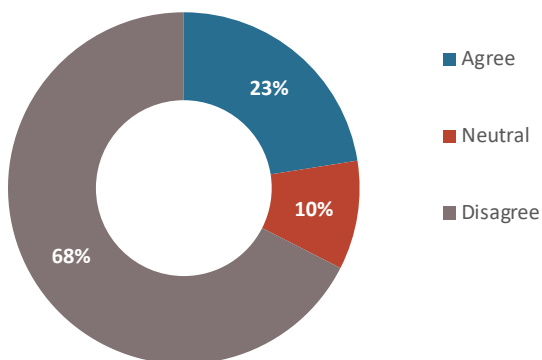
Lower faculty familiarly with the resources available to them may be related to the amount of training or guidance offered by institutions regarding quality OER and their uses. Although the majority of participants agreed that their institution encourages faculty use of OER, it is important to note that the meaning of "encouragement" was not defined. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that encouragement means training. Future research is needed to explore whether faculty are receiving professional development or training on how to find and use OER.

Respondent Remarks:

Benefits of OER Use

The 2022 National Survey asked respondents to provide examples of how faculty OER use benefits their institution. Out of the 172 survey participants, only 4 responded with examples:

> *"Use of OER is not systematic or concentrated in any specific programs yet, so the benefit is more at the individual course section level (different sections might use completely different resources) than at the institutional level. Some faculty have created multiple open textbooks now and shifted practice away from commercial publishers, but it is a small number."*

> *"More equitable access to education for learners, greater pedagogical flexibility, more localized resources, greater course enrolment, persistence, and performance."*

> *"Several faculty have opted to use OERs (even writing their own open textbooks) to assist students with the high cost of education. By using OERs, they are creating new resources that truly match the content of their courses."*

> *"Little. But [the previous] question asks if they are familiar with them, which they are, but they don't adopt them for various reasons."*

Support for OER Use

To provide context to their response regarding the likelihood of support for the use of OER in the next 24 months, several participants provided explanatory comments:

> *"There is a big push for OER across institutions […]"*

> *"We are heavy users of OER and faculty engagement continues to rise. Senior leadership of tech infrastructure issues has increased the last few years and I anticipate they will continue to support financial commitment to improvement in this area. This lack of infrastructure along with faculty tech skills limits our ability to move in the direction of hyflex or multi modal learning. In addition, we prioritize consistent student learning experience which is difficult to attain with current faculty delivery skills"*

> *"We're already offering supports for ID and OER. There appears to be little budget for commercial resources […]"*

Although a little over half of the respondents reported that increase support for OER is likely over the next 24 months, the few participant remarks on the benefits and the findings on faculty familiarity of OER suggests that OER adoption varies among institutions across Canada.

The low number of responses to the open-ended questions regarding the benefits of OER may be related to unfamiliarity or a lack of experience with OER. It might also imply that institutions had to shift their focus towards overcoming the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and that OER-related initiatives have been given less priority while managing other, more pressing issues. The paradox between the support and encouragement for OER and faculty familiarity indicates that additional research is needed to investigate the use of OER at post-secondary institutions.

YEAR-TO-YEAR COMPARISONS

In the 2018, 2019 and 2021 National Surveys, the participants were asked to respond to various questions regarding the use of OER at their Canadian post-secondary institution.

In the 2018 National Survey, just over half of the participants reported that they were using open textbooks and a fifth were exploring their use. However, it was determined that only a small portion of all institutions were offering OER training. Additionally, institutions were exploring the idea that OER could be implemented to overcome the cost of course materials that may be a barrier for students. Yet, three quarters of respondents reported that they did not track savings from adopting OER materials.

A year later, the participants responses to the same survey questions remain practically identical. A little more than half of the participants responded that they currently use open textbooks and a little less than a fifth are exploring their use. It was also indicated in the 2019 National Survey that close to half of the respondents reported that there was no formal policy or strategy for OER at their institution.

In March of 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. The 2020 National Survey was postponed and replaced by the Canadian Pulse Project. The purpose of this new research project was to gain a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state of digital learning in Canada. As a result, the investigation in the use of OER was also put on hold.

The 2021 National Survey revisited the use of OER. The respondents of the participating institutions were asked about the likelihood of increase support for the use of open educational resources by the 2022 Winter semester. It was reported that the majority of institutions anticipated having increased support for the use of OER.

The year-to-year comparison suggests that the adoption of OER remains in an exploratory stage. The participants responses over the years imply that there is a desire to support and encourage the use of OER; however, there is a need for further research to be conducted regarding faculty training and professional development in the use of OER, formal policy and strategy for OER, and the possible cost-saving opportunities from the implementation of OER.

SUMMARY

The findings from the *2022 National Survey of Online and Digital Learning* show that there is a gap when it comes to institution's support and encouragement in the use of OER and faculty's familiarity with the available resources.

The majority of the survey respondents reported that their institution encourages its faculty in the use OER and a little over half believe there will be increased support in the use of OER in the next 24 months. The vast majority of participants also agreed that faculty are increasing their use of digital resources and technology in their courses. However, most respondents believe that faculty are not familiar with OER available to them.

The year-to-year comparison brings together the National Survey results related to OER. Over the past four years, the adoption of OER has been explored and the willingness to provide support and encouragement in the use of OER use at institutions is still exploratory.

In closing, additional groundwork needs to be laid for further development of OER policy, strategies for OER use, and faculty training. Therefore, additional research on faculty needs regarding the implementation of OER should be given priority going forward.

METHODOLOGY

Information for this report comes from the 2022 Spring National Survey of Online and Digital Learning. From May 17 through June 30, 2022, the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA) research team surveyed post-secondary institutions across Canada to explore the learning scenarios they anticipated for fall.

The universe of interest for the 2022 Spring National Survey consists of all publicly-funded post-secondary institutions in Canada. Almost all universities in Canada are funded provincially. Institutions that are not included in the roster include Canadian private for-profit universities, most of which are very small and fully private career colleges and institutes.

The 2022 roster includes:
- 82 universities (including Francophone colleges of Anglophone universities)
- 80 colleges outside Québec
- 51 CEGEPs
- 21 private subsidized colleges in Québec

Respondents included 172 respondents from higher education institutions from across Canada with most of the responses coming from Ontario and British Columbia.

National Survey

The CDLRA research team designed the questionnaire based on prior CDLRA surveys from 2017 to 2021. Potential respondents on the roster received an email invitation to participate in the National Survey. Each survey invitation included a link to the online survey form. The outreach email and questionnaire content were identical in both the English and French versions.

The survey included twelve questions, one of which was displayed only if the respondent was a senior administrator and one which was displayed only for teaching and learning leaders. Several questions had a potential follow-up, which were only displayed if the respondent made specific choices to the primary question. The survey also included three optional open-ended questions, where respondents were invited to provide an in-depth response.

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