

**ETEC 520**  
**Planning and Managing Technologies in Higher Education**

**Assignment 1:** Analysis and Comparison of Rationales for E-learning by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the University of Glasgow

Submitted by: R. S. Rusyniak

I chose to look at the e-learning strategies of two very different entities – the province of Ontario and the University of Glasgow. The Ontario Ministry of Education seems to be attempting to roll out a unified set of tools for use by K-12 schools across the whole province; the focus seems to be on ensuring consistency and clarity when it comes to administrative and policy details. In contrast to this, the University of Glasgow is a much smaller organization. Because the context here is much smaller (fewer people and organizations involved), the university is able to be much more flexible and agile, and to ‘dream bigger’.

The Ontario Ministry of Education appears to be concerned with bringing all of its K-12 schools up to the same level in terms of e-learning. Its rationale for the use of e-learning is summarised in the following ‘high-level pitch’:

“It is guided by a vision of an Ontario where students have unlimited opportunities to learn and achieve at a high level within a digital and ever-changing world.” (Ministry of Education, 2013)

In a nutshell, what this means is that the Ministry wants to give all Ontario students access to courses and quality learning materials (regardless of their location – urban vs rural, scheduled travel, etc) that are acceptable to all schoolboards. They plan to do this by providing a teaching platform (LMS) across all of Ontario (initially a few schools in a pilot program), ensuring access to quality learning materials through an educational resource bank. They also plan to support this vision by providing a unified system for dealing with administrative details like access to registration in online courses and credit transfer, as well as a single location for the creation of a community of practice for teachers and their professional development.

I think the place where the implementation of this strategy could (and is likely meant to) have the biggest impact is in smaller communities and schools, where offering some courses locally may not be an option due to a low numbers of interested students or qualified teachers for a particular subject. An online set of courses would give those students options that would not be otherwise available.

Some of the rationale that is not as clear from the above high-level pitch, has to do with standardization. The document seems to focus on two main things.

1. Control over content quality, uniformity of the message, and minimization of intellectual property issues.
2. Spelling out rules for dealing with administrative issues and policies relevant to employment, credit transfer, fees, single-sign-on (SSO), roles and responsibilities, and ethics.

According to the document, Ministry-approved materials will be available province-wide, while teacher-created or board-level content is only available locally. The Ministry may allow some teacher-created content to be shared province-wide, but only after ‘consultation’.

On a provincial level, in the age of provincial standardised tests, it makes sense to try to standardize the education that is being delivered to all students in the province. Great teachers will still be able to make a difference, but the standardisation may help ensure that a minimum level of content knowledge is obtained by all.

Additionally, the proposed online resource bank would provide quality materials for teachers to use and modify to meet their needs. This frees the teachers from having to generate materials 'from scratch' and also helps to minimize resistance to the use of online tools in a blended classroom as well (if a good tool is already available then why not use it – witness the success of sites like [teacherspayteachers.com](http://teacherspayteachers.com)).

The e-learning strategy document also makes it clear that any teacher-generated content must adhere to the curriculum, and conform to various policies, accessibility and copyright laws. Additionally, teacher-generated content can't use the same branding and style-sheets as ministry-provided content – ie. it must visually appear different, making it clear that it's not directly approved by the Ministry of Education.

This attempt to distinguish teacher/schoolboard-generated content from Ministry-approved content may be an attempt to minimize the Ministry's exposure to litigation if one particular teacher uses copyrighted materials inappropriately.

In Addition to the above, the document puts a lot of emphasis on specifying a uniform set of rules and policies in regards to teacher workload, roles and responsibilities, IP ownership, and ethics. It ensures that everyone knows what the rules are regardless of the schoolboard/region. Also, by standardising the LMS for all provincial schools, and providing SSO, the Ministry is acknowledging that students and teachers may change their locations throughout their lives, and this strategy allows them to continue studying or working with minimal disruption (having to learn new ways of doing things, policies, etc).

The e-learning strategy also deals with teacher mobility through its provision of a digital professional learning platform. In a video presented in unit 2, Dr. Bullen discussed the drawbacks of using institutional LMS-s. One of the things he pointed out that the use of these closed systems eliminated the possibility maintaining a community of learning/practice – it was one drawback I hadn't considered until then, but now seems a significant one. This is why I feel that the creation of a province-wide online community of practice for teachers is an important component of Ontario's e-learning strategy. While it is still closed (one of the criticisms of LMS-s made by Dr. Bullen), it is province-wide and thus potentially much more persistent.

Ontario's Ministry of Education makes a clear distinction between 'e-learning' and 'blended learning' in their e-learning strategy.

"E-learning refers to the use of the tools of the Provincial vLE/LMS when there is a scheduled distance between the e-learning teacher and students and/or students and each other. Distance may be related to location (i.e. students from different locations enrol in one e-learning course) or time (i.e. students from one location enrol in one course but access it during different periods of the day)." (Ministry of Education, 2013)

Interestingly, the tools the Ministry is proposing to develop for 'e-learning' will also be available for 'blended-learning', so its definition when it comes to tools seems to be different from the formally stated definition. This is likely because of the differences in rules/policies that are being proposed in each of the above cases.

A much more all-encompassing definition of e-learning is provided by the e-learning strategy of the University of Glasgow. According to this document:

“E-Learning is seen to encompass a wide range of possibilities from technological interventions in the classroom to the provision of an educational experience via distance learning. It is this range of activity that is covered...” (University of Glasgow, 2013)

The writers of this strategy acknowledge that there are many different definitions of e-learning but choose one that seems the most wide-ranging. This may be because the reasoning behind their strategy is a little different from that of Ontario. It has a little more to do with expanding their reach.

The University’s stated rationale is as follows:

“the learning experience will be enhanced by physical and virtual infrastructure of the highest quality and excellent learning resources that are targeted to address our diverse learning community’s needs and to provide them with flexibility in what, how, when and where they learn”. (University of Glasgow, 2013)

Like most such documents, the enhancement of learning seems to be at the forefront. The document elaborates on the above statement to describe a vision where the learning experience is enriched through personalization of learning materials, the production and provision of rich educational content, and a focus on making it easily accessible on mobile devices. It goes on to make it clear that this would be made possible through the provision of the necessary tools, training and support for faculty.

The other reason for embracing this e-learning strategy, that was clearly stated in the document, was the university’s desire to enhance its global reach and reputation. This would be something that could be accomplished through the provision of high quality distance education (and would align their definition of e-learning a little more closely to that of Ontario’s Ministry of Education).

It seems that one of the reasons for investing more into e-learning may be access to international students as well as professionals seeking development opportunities or retraining. One of the appendices made it clear that the university wished to develop more online Master’s programmes that could be offered to a much wider audience.

While it is not clearly stated, the university’s IT infrastructure appears to be in need of an update. Thus the need to upgrade the infrastructure, ostensibly to better deal with increasing mobile usage and a wish to benefit from learning analytics are some of the other reasons for the promoting the e-learning strategy.

The university seems to also be interested in offloading some of the grading onto computers. The rationale had something to do with increased enrolment by international students who struggled with the language, with the implication that written assessments might be replaced with online assessment (likely to reduce grading workload).

It was interesting to see just how different the documents were. The Ontario strategy is very focused on making clear the rules and regulations. It was spelled out in a document aimed at administrators – the links provided to ‘students’ and ‘parents’ simply linked to the

tools themselves, or gave a very brief summary of the relevant sections in the document aimed at administrators. In contrast, the document produced by the University of Glasgow outlines a vision and goes to great lengths to provide a rationale and context. It seems to be meant to inspire support and excitement about the future possibilities.

The other thing I noticed was how far 'behind' the Ontario strategy was, even though the two documents are from the same time period - they were both produced in the Fall of 2013. The Ontario e-learning Strategy seems to be focusing on the large-scale provision of tools like an LMS (apparently it's D2L), a learning resource library, a dedicated professional development tool, and an online registration system. These are things that most (if not all) universities have had for at least a decade. The University of Glasgow seems to be more interested in staying more up-to-date with the latest developments, like leveraging mobile devices, gamification and introducing video conferencing into their LMS.

## **References:**

Ministry of Education (2013). Master User Agreement 2013: Provincial E-learning Strategy. Retrieved from: [www.edu.gov.on.ca/elearning/MasterUserAgreement.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/elearning/MasterUserAgreement.pdf) accessed on Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017.

University of Glasgow (2013). E-Learning Strategy 2013-2020. Retrieved from: [www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_297622\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_297622_en.pdf) accessed on Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017.