



**WESTERN NETWORK FOR DIGITAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH (WNDER):
THOUGHTS ON WESTERN'S STRATEGIC PLAN
AND THE REPORT OF THE E-LEARNING TASK FORCE**

Preamble

This document represents the response of the membership of the *Western Network for Digital Education and Research* (WNDER) to Western University's proposed Strategic Plan, *Going Global: Achieving Excellence on the World Stage*. The focus of this response is upon Western's proposed E-Learning strategy, as this is articulated in the Report of the E-Learning Task Force.

The *Western Network for Digital Education and Research* (WNDER) is comprised of researchers, staff, graduate students, instructors, post-doctoral students, archivists, and librarians at Western who seek to better understand the impacts of new technologies upon education. Our research encompasses all forms of educational technology, within the classroom and in online settings. We are interested in exploring new ways to deliver education to increasingly diverse communities of learners and in measuring the impact and outcomes of such technologies. Through eLearning, we seek to nurture innovation in education and to evaluate the efficacy and influence of instructional technology. More information on the group, including its current membership, can be found at our [web site](#).

This response does not attempt to present a unitary or consensus response to the Strategic Plan and E-Learning Task Force Report; rather, it is a compilation of the thoughts, concerns, and ideas expressed by a diverse range of our membership. This is entirely appropriate to the nature and function of WNDER, for the strength and (we believe) value of the group lie in its diversity of experience and expertise. Somewhat over one third of our membership responded to a request for the comments that have gone into this document, or added input to a draft that was circulated electronically among members; these contributions, along with other comments delivered in face-to-face discussions on this subject, have been gathered together here in the conviction that they represent some of the best informed and most carefully considered thoughts upon the university's proposed E-Learning Strategy available at this institution.

We are aware, of course, that the future of E-Learning at our institution represents but one piece in the much larger puzzle that is the new Strategic Plan for Western University, but we believe – and are sure that you share this conviction – that it is a particularly important piece. We hope for that reason that you will accept the comments, questions, and occasional disagreements that follow below in the collegial spirit in which they were composed and are now delivered. As practitioners and researchers of

all forms of E-Learning, we are anxious to assume our share of the inevitably arduous but rewarding work that the development and implementation of a really comprehensive, effective, and innovative E-Learning strategy will of necessity entail. We, no less than you, wish to see the best decisions made, and the most effective systems and approaches put into place. It is in that spirit that we offer our own experience, expertise, and passion for innovative approaches to research, teaching, and learning with educational technologies. We look forward to working with the university’s administration in the future, assisting in the development of a dynamic, engaging, and effective model for E-Learning at Western.

Vision for E-Learning at Western

We wish to begin by applauding Western, and the E-Learning Task Force in particular, for the work that has been put into considering a strategy for E-Learning at our institution. That E-Learning will serve an absolutely vital function in the universities of the future is a well-established truism, and the members of WNDER are delighted to acknowledge the care and seriousness the Task Force has devoted to exploring this issue.

Those members of WNDER who responded to the group’s solicitations for comment on the Report of the E-Learning Task Force often acknowledged with some relief the Report’s recognition that a serious allocation of resources will be required to effect the sort of significant development in our capacity for online learning that this report envisages. Many respondents were pleased, as well, to note the emphasis placed upon quality of online learning experience. There was some concern, however, that sufficient resources for the long-term sustainability of E-Learning might not be dedicated to this project. A number of WNDER respondents also stressed the importance of extending the university’s commitment to the development of this framework beyond the indicated three-year time frame; three years, it was noted, can hardly be said to constitute a longitudinal commitment to such a complicated and important undertaking.

A number of WNDER respondents made note of a vitally important omission from the Task Force’s Report: there is no mention made of the role of ongoing and adequately supported research into E-Learning. (Indeed, the word “research” does not appear at all in the Report.) The proposed framework for E-Learning at Western offers, of course, new and rich opportunities for research into the many and varied facets of E-Learning. More importantly, research and teaching go hand-in-hand, and Western-based studies into the effects, efficacy, and evolution of E-Learning would provide invaluable support for the university’s efforts to implement truly innovative new approaches to digital scholarship and learning. As one respondent noted, work by Western scholars on this subject would also help establish a “baseline” for best practices in our online and hybrid courses. As another WNDER member suggests, “if we wish to move beyond ‘best-practice’ to evidenced-based education in concert with best-practice, it will require recognition, investment, and support of educators to not only practice what they preach but study what they preach too.” The publication of such research in reputable scholarly venues would, of course, have the additional effect of raising the profile of our E-Learning programs, and would also attract external research funding. We therefore strongly urge Western to consider supplementing this strategic plan with clearly articulated and defined support for research into online learning and the uses of other instructional technologies.

There was some question about what precisely the “unique operational and policy context at Western” (p. 1) is, and some wish that this had been spelled out more clearly so as to show how this document responds to that unique context. Similarly, it was noted by some that such terms as “student experience” and “innovation” are vague and rather unhelpful in establishing actual criteria for the success of E-Learning, particularly given the existing variety of learning strategies. A number of respondents suggested that, in general, it would be valuable and worthwhile to see clearer definitions and terms than seem to be available in this report as it now stands; the occasional vagueness makes it more difficult to assess goals, and the means needed to achieve them.

In another instance, the Report seems to define “E-Learning” broadly and in a way that would include instructional technologies and digital approaches for on-site learning, such as blended classes and flipped classrooms, but the body of the Report is focused almost exclusively upon online learning and, apparently, distance learning. We would urge the university to pay more attention to hybrid learning and to the full scope of opportunities offered by instructional technologies, as in-class technologies and approaches to learning and teaching can be greatly informed by online practices, and vice-versa. A truly effective E-Learning strategy must comprehend and support digital pedagogies for on-campus students as well as for distance learners, and in so doing enhance Western’s already well-established reputation for excellence in teaching in all learning contexts.

Related to this concern was the agreement among many that the report might be more “forward looking.” Its discussion of E-Learning sometimes seems to be framed with reference to existing technologies and practices here at Western, rather than looking to new approaches of the sort that the [New Media Consortium](#) and other E-Learning groups and institutions are beginning to explore. A vision for E-Learning built too narrowly from existing institutional models for online courses and instructional technologies cannot hope to keep stride with innovations and developments elsewhere.

Possibly the apparent lack of attention to both “blended learning” models and new approaches to online learning is, in part, the result of an insufficient focus upon the variety of ways in which students learn. An underlying assumption of this document, and of approaches to the “digital turn” in education in general, is that students today are homogeneously more “mobile,” flexible, and digitally literate than in the past. Research has indicated that this is not necessarily so, and that, while there are students who will benefit from the particular methodologies of online learning, there are others who will not so benefit, or who may actually find them detrimental. Some of the respondents to this document indicated that caution must be exercised in making assumptions about the efficacy of E-Learning, and the needs of online learners, in this context.

The report speaks of implementing “an increased engagement in e-learning,” and of a system of incentives to encourage this, but what processes will be put in place to ensure that E-Learning is adopted intelligently and organically, rather than in contexts and within systems for which it may not be best suited? Does the imperative to increase e-learning not run the risk of encouraging it in areas for which it is not well suited?

Respondents drew attention to the difference between increased E-Learning and increased engagement with E-Learning; the latter brings a focus to ensuring that the quality and mode of delivery of E-Learning is appropriate to the desired levels of participation and engagement from students. A mandate for more engagement with E-Learning will require an attendant pedagogical and andragogical framework that can both establish and evaluate desired levels of engagement.

At least three respondents noted, with slightly different emphasis, that Western’s E-Learning strategy should connect with, and take advantage of, off-campus communities. In particular, outreach through E-Learning should connect with local communities (i.e., within Southwestern Ontario), and other communities that we might identify as being particularly appropriate beneficiaries of an online approach to learning (as, for instance, First Nations communities). The sense is that E-Learning represents an opportunity to broaden the university’s reach and horizons while building its international reputation upon the strength that comes from an engagement with local communities.

On a more practical note, it was noted that one barrier facing students who wish to take online courses is the difficulty in locating them on Western’s web site, which are variously administered by individual Faculties, departments, schools, and programs. It would be of enormous benefit both to existing students as well to potential students in other communities to create a well-designed and maintained central online hub that lists all such courses available. We need also to evaluate the best ways to reach underserved and remote communities where access to technology may be restricted.

It was felt that the discussion of an exploration of possible “partnerships” would have benefited from a more detailed explanation of the kinds of possible partnership envisaged. With whom might Western “partner,” and how will such partnerships be implemented and supported? What consultation process would be involved in establishing such partnerships, and can we ensure that instructors remain free to employ those pedagogical tools that most suit their individual needs, rather than being mandated by a partnership agreement to use only those provided by said “partners”?

Some Questions:

- What provisions are being considered for continued support for E-Learning beyond this limited 3-year time frame?
- What are the financial and staff resources committed to implementing this 3-year plan?
- What sorts of targeted support will Western offer to those of its scholars who support the development of an E-Learning framework through the research and publication of studies on E-Learning?
- What is the "unique operational and policy context at Western," and how is this reflected in the Task Force report?
- What provision will be made for instructional technologies to support on-campus learning?
- What sorts of students and communities comprise the target "audience" for E-Learning at Western?
- To what degree might online learning be available as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, in-class learning (e.g., through "blended learning")?
- Has the E-Learning Task Force explored newer technologies not currently available at Western?
- How should this strategy deal with students who may not respond well to an online learning environment?
- Has the Task Force considered the particular disciplinary contexts that might impact upon the delivery and effectiveness of online learning and instructional technologies?
- Has Western considered the importance of connecting with off-campus communities as part of its E-Learning Strategy?
- What sorts of partnerships is Western likely to investigate for the delivery of online teaching?
- How might such partnerships impact upon individual instructors and learners?

Faculty Engagement

In general, WNDER respondents to the Report were pleased that attention was paid to the issue of Faculty Engagement. While the members of WNDER are, by virtue of their professional and intellectual work in this field, already “engaged,” we agree entirely with the Report that “[o]ne of the important challenges for e-learning at Western will be to engage faculty” (p. 3). This is important not merely to bring about “compliance” with new modes of teaching and policies surrounding E-Learning, but, more importantly, to ensure a dynamic and positive engagement with it. Without such willing and even enthusiastic engagement on the part of those teaching with this technology, E-Learning cannot hope to succeed.

It was noted by one respondent that, while five areas of faculty “concern” are listed (p. 3), only four are addressed in the subsequent recommendations, and those not always entirely or directly. It was felt that there should be a greater focus upon developing good online pedagogy, and assisting instructors not merely with a functional ability to handle the technology, but with proven and effective pedagogical practices for online learning. Care to develop and encourage good online pedagogy will, of course, improve the online “student experience,” but it will also give instructors the confidence, and tools, that they need to fully engage with these new modes of teaching.

There was, unsurprisingly, a fair degree of concern from WNDER members about the implications of online teaching for workload. Even the provision of additional support for course development, and instructor training and consultation, will likely not make online course design less work-intensive and time-consuming than is currently the case (and in fact, they may even add to workload issues). Current contracts do not reflect the differential in work required for the design and delivery of online courses, and traditional face-to-face ones. The Letter of Understanding on this issue in the faculty Collective Bargaining Agreement is, it is felt, ambiguous and in need of significant revision.

The future development of E-Learning at Western will, as the E-Learning Task Force itself notes, require close consultation with UWOFA. We are pleased that this necessity has been acknowledged, but there were some expressions of concern that the particular challenges faced by adjunct and contract faculty in particular, who are often those designing and delivering online course, be acknowledged and addressed by the university.

It is suggested that Western look to certain precedents and instruments regarding the responsibilities and rights of online course designers and instructors that have been either overlooked or discontinued here, such as course authoring agreements and supplemental compensation that recognizes the unique and onerous challenges involved in the successful design and implementation of online courses. This is particularly an issue for limited duties instructors, from whom a significant amount of work is often required before the term, and their contracts, actually begin.

In this context, two respondents who have had experience in the annual process of hiring limited duties instructors noted that university hiring processes (often involving a number of departments, Faculties, SGPS, IT, and Human Resources) are not as efficient as they might be, and can cause delays that severely inhibit course preparation time. It is therefore additionally suggested that Western should commit to evaluating its hiring policies and procedures in an effort to expedite the hiring of online instructors.

Intellectual Property

A related area that seems to have been overlooked in the Task Force Report is the issue of intellectual property (IP) rights. It was felt that IP issues need to be discussed in detail, as they are likely to be a vitally important issue for any instructors who may wish to engage with this plan for a more extensive E-Learning component at Western. If instructors are to be expected to devote themselves to the creation of truly innovative and pedagogically excellent online and hybrid courses, they must feel some sense of “ownership” over what they produce. One impact of this, of course, is that the liberty of instructors to adopt existing courses in a wholesale fashion will be curtailed, a fact that will also necessitate the ongoing provision of resources for the planning and design of replacement courses and course materials.

Some Questions:

- What provision will Western make to assist instructors in employing the best approaches to online teaching?
- How will the university take into account, and compensate, the increased workload associated with the design and implementation of online courses and other instructional technologies?
- What are the mechanisms by which Western plans to consult with UWOPA concerning the implementation of E-Learning?
- What policies will Western put into place to safeguard the intellectual property rights of instructors and the designers of online courses?

Student Experience

The focus of the Report of the E-Learning Task Force pays significant attention to the “student experience,” and expresses its conviction that the same high standards be applied to the online learning experience has have, historically, been applied to in-class teaching at Western. WNDER is delighted to fully endorse this view.

There was, however, some question from respondents to the report as to the mechanisms proposed to both establish a high-quality learning experience, and evaluate it. Such mechanisms as the Report does offer tend, we might argue, to make online courses a better experience for teachers, but do not provide sufficiently rich ways to obtain feedback from students to ensure that they are receiving the best online education possible. A redesigned instructor/course evaluation for online students is, for example, certainly worthwhile and important, but evaluations exist perhaps primarily for the sake of instructors and administrators, rather than for students themselves. Other measures, both formal and informal, should therefore also be considered in an effort to gather student feedback.

While WNDER members were pleased that the Task Force made use of a 2013 Media Usage Survey, the general feeling among respondents was that more could be done to seek and document student input. As one commenter expressed it, “students have strong opinions about their learning experiences at Western and are eager to share information that could help us to improve it for them.” This was a point reiterated in different ways by a number of respondents: an effective plan for implementing E-Learning requires student input. One respondent suggested workshops to which students were invited, or

participation in a symposium session by students communicating tips on how to best manage learning through an online course.

On a more particular level, it was felt by some that the issue of student engagement during the delivery of online courses is not addressed very clearly in the Report. Online courses by their very nature often result in a loss or reduction of direct faculty-student contact. Does the university’s vision for excellence in online teaching recognize the importance of this pedagogically vital, and will its implementation of online courses build the necessity for this contact into its designs?

One perceived omission in this report that was noted by a few respondents is an acknowledgment of, and allowance for, the fact that online learning tends to favour self-direct learners, and may not be appropriate for all students. This well-documented fact should introduce a note of caution into the plans to expand E-Learning: it is simply not a very effective learning approach for many students, who have tended, when polled, to state a preference for face-to-face learning. A reliance upon online learning as a sort of “magic bullet” may have some serious implications for the overall “student experience” at Western. One practical suggestion offered was that orientation materials for students learning online include guidelines and suggestions for time management, taking ownership of education, and active engagement practices. Another related suggestion was for a university-wide Code for Online Conduct, drawing from the language of the university’s existing student Code of Conduct.

WNDER respondents were very pleased to see an acknowledgement of the fact that online courses tend to produce lower teacher and course evaluations (although there was at least one respondent who did not feel that this was always the case), as well as a lower response rate than traditional face-to-face courses. One respondent suggested that the development of a new evaluation instrument be conducted with reference to recent studies in teacher evaluation, including (for example) the report, “[Student Course Evaluations: Research, Models and Trends](#),” prepared for HECQO by Drs. Pamela Gravestock and Emily Gregor-Greenleaf.

Another respondent, highlighting again the necessity for a carefully designed course and instructor evaluation instrument, suggested that this be designed in consultation with faculty who have taught a minimum of three online courses.

Some Questions:

- How might Western better obtain input and feedback from students about the best way of achieving a quality online learning experience?
- What are the ways in which this proposed E-Learning strategy might work to ensure a high quality of student engagement with online learning?
- How might the university best guide and direct students in the best ways to benefit from online learning?
- What are the mechanisms by which Western plans to construct new instructor/course evaluation instruments for online courses?

Pedagogical Support

The general feeling among many who commented echoed the E-Learning Task Force’s conclusion that an expansion of Western’s presence in the sphere of online education will require a significant development of human and technological support. There was some concern that this document acknowledges, but does not perhaps fully comprehend, the enormity of the requirements for such support.

Another area of concern in this area was with regard to the structures for support. At the moment, support for E-Learning on campus is scattered across campus, in the ITRC, the Teaching Support Centre, and within individual faculties or even departments. While all of these currently provide excellent support, their collective efforts would benefit greatly from a higher degree of collaboration, communication, and shared reflection. It was felt therefore that a more coordinated approach to the delivery of support would be both more effective, and more efficient.

There was a great deal of support for the provisions of workshops and an “E-Learning forum.” The overall sense, however, is that the latter should be organized and run by the “grassroots” of the E-Learning community here, rather than institutionalized in a way that reflects administrative priorities policies instead of the actual issues and challenges facing those working in the field on a daily basis. One respondent suggested that a biannual forum may, given people’s many commitments during the school year, be too ambitious.

A number of respondents specifically mentioned last year’s TIES@Western symposium as an excellent model for such a forum; as one respondent expressed it, such a forum “would be an ideal way to galvanize ongoing discussion about not just the implementation but the pedagogical viability and diversity of e-learning. . . . Something like this would function also as a kind of internal bellwether about e-learning at Western, not as watchdog but as a way of taking the campus temperature about where e-learning is or should go, which would also mean acting as a kind of information gatherer and disseminator about trends and future developments in e-learning. This would serve as the intellectual ‘conscience’ of e-learning, provide its intellectual capital.”

Another suggestion that has been floated around generally by WNDER members, and mentioned specifically by one respondent, is the establishment of an online E-Learning journal that might publish some of the proceedings of such a forum, gathering together examples of the some of the innovative practices and theoretical approaches to the subject, and in so doing both highlighting Western’s growing leadership in this area, and making connections with the broader range of communities that our online offerings are intended to serve.

Workshops and other resources must be particularly designed and run with limited duties faculty in mind. As such faculty generally have less access to on-campus support and initiatives due to the relatively short length of their contracts or the timing of their hirings, special efforts need to be made to ensure that they too are able to benefit from these resources.

Some Questions:

- How can Western best coordinate efforts between the various divisions, departments, centres, and faculties that are currently engaged with planning and implementing online courses?

- What will the proposed "E-Learning Forum" look like, and how will it be planned and implemented?
- Would Western consider the creation of an "E-Learning Journal" to support and publicize its endeavours and innovations in this field?

IT Infrastructure

Western’s institutional LMS, Sakai, is not currently at anything like the level of development required to host an enriched and sophisticated E-Learning environment, according to several respondents. It is hoped that such improvements to the platform as are absolutely necessary for its future role in E-Learning will be undertaken with somewhat more care and forethought than some thought to be in evidence over the course of its initial introduction to faculty. One respondent suggested that it was vital that future development of Sakai be implemented in consultation with a representative selection of those faculty using it.

Somewhat more radically, one respondent suggested that Sakai itself is already out-of-date, and represents “Web 1.0,” rather than the more dynamically connected world of “Web 2.0” (exemplified most dramatically by social media). While the fact that Sakai is open-source and capable of modular expansion and development is a very good thing, is it, in fact, really adequate to help lead Western to the forefront of E-Learning in post-secondary education?

One respondent, calling upon personal experience, suggested that in-house pedagogical and technical support is necessary within each faculty or school engaged in E-Learning. It was noted that those faculties with the most developed online learning strategies are also those with instructional designers in-house.

There was some concern too about the mechanisms that will guide the development of “smart classrooms” on campus. At least two respondents noted that, just as faculty input into the future development of Sakai is imperative, so too should there be consultations with interested and impacted faculty about the development of “smart classrooms.”

One suggestion made (and with reference to remarks by Tony Bates during his talk here at Western) was that instructional designers should be full-time faculty and not short term contract positions. Full-time faculty have an investment in their work that contract employees, with little job security, may not be able to “afford”; at the same time, full-time faculty generally have access to greater resources, support, and opportunities for research into the field.

Some Questions:

- How will Sakai be developed to support a richer and more engaging learning environment?
- How will consultations about the future development of Sakai be managed?
- Would Western be willing to explore other, more advanced options for online course delivery?
- Will the university help support in-house instructional designers within individual schools and faculties?
- How will "smart classrooms" be planned and developed, and what sorts of consultations might we expect to see regarding the design of these?

Policy Context

There has been some concern expressed by some WNDER members that the university has perhaps been too quick to respond to public policy directives that aim to encourage E-Learning, and not willing enough to address and critique those policies with informed comment. Government policy on this issue seems here in Ontario, as elsewhere in North America, to have been too often driven by an ill-informed or misleading understanding of the capabilities and nature of E-Learning. Even as we respond to government pressure to initiate more E-Learning in our institutions, we may be setting ourselves up for failure by asking the technology to do more than it is really capable of performing.

“Innovation” in particular, one WNDER member suggested, is a slippery term and often associated with a “business-model” approach to university governance that effectively substitutes considerations of “cost effectiveness” for the more appropriate criteria of pedagogy and engagement. WNDER respondents seemed generally, and genuinely, pleased that the Report articulates a commitment to maintaining a high standard of teaching and learning, but some expressed worries about the inclusion of the term “innovation,” a term so often used to reflect neoliberal assaults upon Academy. The institutional and disciplinary implications this kind of approach to “innovation” are too many and complicated to list fully here, and have in any case been well documented elsewhere, but they include such elements as a growing dependency upon poorly-paid adjunct instructors, a degradation of physical infrastructure, and an overall tendency to sacrifice quality of educational experience in the name of “efficiency.”

A Question:

- Is Western engaging (possibly with other institutional partners) in dialogues with government about the function, capabilities, and potential of online teaching?

Management, Planning, and Budgeting

This was, some members of WNDER felt, one of the weaker parts of the E-Learning Task Force’s Report, as it seems a little short on detail. Some respondents were unclear as to the exact meaning of the recommendation that Faculties will be provided “with enrolment and revenue data for online courses and request comment in the annual planning process.” How does this differ from the current model, exactly?

One respondent, noting that any incentive plan for online course development will require offsetting revenue and a change in budgetary models regarding administrative claw-backs, suggested that “any incentive plan take a broader and longer view whereby funds be allocated on more than just immediate enrollment figures, and take into account not only the up-front costs but also realistic projections for future enrollment. If administration is eager in pursuing this e-learning plan, it may have to consider the creation of new funding envelopes to provide support to Faculties.”

Some Questions:

- What sorts of enrolment and revenue data will be provided to Faculties?
- What is the revenue model that will be employed to ensure that Faculties have an incentive to explore the provision of online learning?

Conclusion

We believe that Western has produced, in its draft Strategic Plan and the Report of the E-Learning Task Force, the foundations for a strong, dynamic, and exciting E-Learning strategy. The suggestions and comments included here are the contributions to that strategy of the teachers, researchers, staff, and librarians who are currently working “on the ground” in this field: we believe that they add depth and detail to what is already a promising plan. We are excited by the prospect of working together with the university and its administration to put into practice what we believe can be the most innovative and well-conceived E-Learning strategy anywhere.

If you have any questions about this document, or about the *Western Network for Digital Education and Research*, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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