

2025 report for post-secondary leaders

Navigating online learning's next chapter in Canada

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The past year has brought substantial changes to the Canadian post-secondary landscape.

Restrictions on international students have had a massive financial impact on many institutions. As institutions make cuts to programs and personnel, one of the conversations happening is about whether developing or expanding online programs is a viable solution for reversing declining enrolments while providing more Canadians with access to post-secondary education.

At the same time, economic changes and uncertainty, most notably Canada's trading relationship with the United States, have prompted institutional and business sector leaders to consider the role of post-secondary education in future-proofing and strengthening our economic prosperity!

The expansion of online offerings (whether through online programs, courses, or microcredentials) provides a pathway to give more Canadians access to education, preparing them to contribute to our changing economy.

With online learning being placed in the spotlight as a potential means to grow enrolments and improve access to education, the purpose of this report is to present research findings to support decision-making in the post-secondary sector. The report shares findings specific to online learning from the 2025 Digital Learning Trends Survey conducted by the [Canadian Digital Learning Research Association](#) (CDLRA). Wherever possible, the 2025 findings are compared to findings from past years to identify changes over time. For more information about the survey, please refer to the methodology section of this report.

Tracking the growth of online learning

Prior to the pandemic, the CDLRA worked to gather online enrolment numbers from Canadian post-secondary institutions. Significant year-to-year inconsistencies in enrolment numbers from many institutions led to the finding that there are varying definitions (among and within institutions) for online learning, as well as different ways of coding enrolments by modality.

As a result, tracking growth by asking for online enrolment numbers proved to be a difficult, if not an impossible, task due to the ongoing unreliability of the data.

Instead, the CDLRA developed a set of survey questions related to perspectives and observations to explore modality trends in the sector. Along with an overview of these survey responses, this report also provides concluding thoughts with guidance for leaders in the post-secondary sector.

Important note: In some of the data tables, the percentages listed equal 99 or 101. This is due to rounding to the nearest whole number. In these instances, the totals are 100% when decimals are taken into account.

Key findings

Throughout the report, the survey findings continually demonstrate that online courses and programs are essential for meeting the needs of some students. Online offerings are needed in addition to in-person offerings (not instead of) to attract and better serve a broader demographic of students.

The following key findings are based on the observations and opinions of respondents who hold various roles in the post-secondary sector, including senior administrators, deans and directors, teaching and learning leaders (e.g., directors of teaching and learning centres), educational developers, instructional designers, institutional researchers, and faculty members. Some respondents had recent experience teaching online; others did not. The range of perspectives included in the findings helps provide a well-rounded understanding of online learning trends within the Canadian post-secondary sector.

Five Key Findings:

01

Online growth expectations remain steady

The anticipated growth of online learning has remained consistent over time. Half of the respondents stated that demand for online courses and programs at their institution was increasing.

02

Financial pressures impact modality decisions

The financial and logistical challenges facing institutions and students are influencing decisions about modality. Institutions need to maintain and grow enrolments during a time of budget, staffing and program cuts. According to respondents, students are struggling with the cost of living and need courses and programs that enable them to complete their studies, while earning an income and while reducing housing and transportation costs. Respondents identified the need to manage competing priorities as the primary driver of students' preferences for online and hybrid learning.

Key findings

03

Faculty report confidence in their online teaching skills

The vast majority of respondents who taught over the past 12 months (regardless of modality) believed that they, personally, possessed the skills and know-how to teach online. Yet, when respondents were asked about the online teaching capabilities of faculty at their institution, the majority reported that only some faculty (not all or most) had the skills and know-how.

50%

of the respondents stated that demand for online courses and programs at their institution was increasing

04

Faculty interest in online teaching is rising

The proportion of respondents who have taught in the past year and who would prefer to teach entirely online if given the choice has steadily increased since 2023. There is a substantial difference between the perceived interest in teaching online among faculty and the actual interest reported by those who have taught in the last 12 months, with the actual interest being greater than the perceived interest.

05

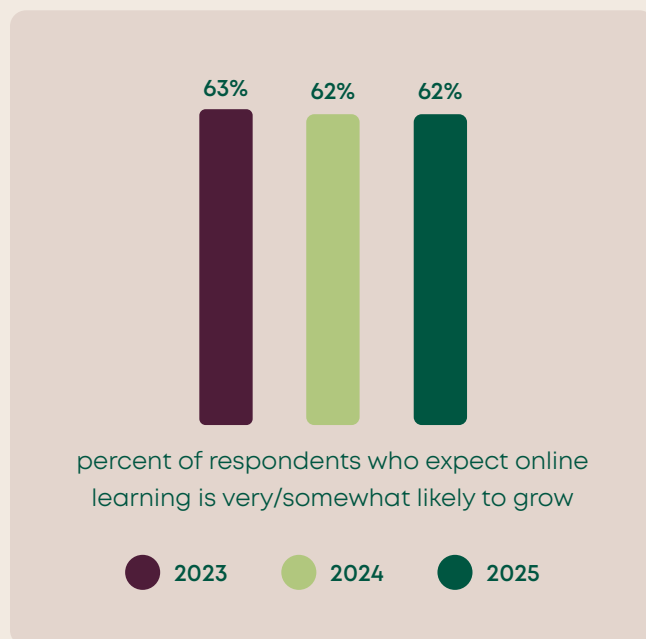
Workforce outcomes need tracking by modality

More research is needed to compare the impact of online learning to in-person learning on workforce preparedness and outcomes.

Online learning: anticipated growth

Overall, expectations surrounding the growth of fully online offerings have remained consistent over the past three years, with no significant year-to-year differences.

Each year, the survey asked respondents about the likelihood of more courses and programs being offered in an online format over the next 24 months, compared to the present state. Continually, the majority of respondents expect online learning to grow.



A further analysis examining responses by institutional role revealed that, for 2025, faculty who had taught online in the past 12 months were more likely to anticipate growth in online courses or programs than those who had not taught online in the same period.

The 2025 survey also asked respondents whether demand for online courses and programs at their institution was increasing, staying the same, or decreasing (“don’t know” and “other”^{*} were also listed as response options). Half of the respondents reported that demand was increasing, while a quarter reported that it remained the same. Very few respondents reported a decrease in demand for online offerings.

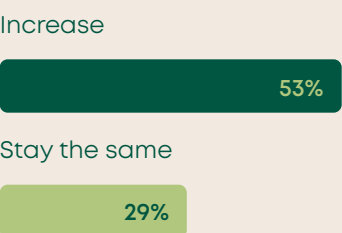
^{*}The five comments related to “other” do not necessarily reflect another stance, but describe barriers to online learning (such as institutional or faculty resistance) or mention that demand varies depending on the program or stakeholders involved.

Online learning: anticipated growth

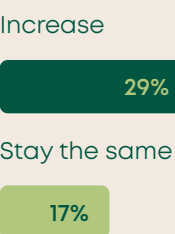
Whether a respondent had taught online over the past year also appeared to influence their response. Most faculty who had taught online in the past 12 months expected the demand for online courses and programs at their institution to increase (53%) or stay the same (29%). Of the faculty respondents who had not taught online, considerably fewer expected growth (29%) or stagnation (17%), and the most common response for this group was “don’t know” (43%).

Faculty expectations for the demand for online courses to increase or stay the same:

Faculty who had taught online in the past 12 months:



Faculty who had *not* taught online in the past 12 months:



Respondent perspectives

To explore why respondents perceived the demand for online offerings as increasing (or not) at their institution, the survey included an optional open-ended question that asked respondents to provide context for their responses about growth and demand related to modality.

Within the responses (n=94), two main themes emerged: 43% of respondents who left a comment mentioned *student needs, demands, and preferences*, while 28% mentioned *financial pressures, enrolment, and market opportunity*.

43%

of respondents who left a comment focused on *student needs*

28%

focused on *institutional needs*

For example, regarding student demands, one faculty respondent who observed an increased demand for online programs and courses at their institution wrote,

“We have many more requests for students who want to learn online so they don’t have to commute.”

An administrator who viewed the demand for online learning as staying the same remarked,

“Students still appear to prefer in-person (and some hybrid) courses over fully online courses. While the institution is considering adding more online courses, student demand will be the ultimate arbiter.”

Comments related to financial pressures, enrolments, and market opportunities centred on the business aspects of operating a post-secondary institution, with most respondents envisioning financial and enrolment challenges as a catalyst for an expansion in online offerings. One administrator noted their institution had,

“A significant interest in programs with revenue-generating potential, including online master’s programs (to reach broader audiences, including international), professional master’s [programs], and micro credentials.”

Respondent perspectives

Among the minority of respondents who mentioned business aspects but did not foresee online offerings growing, important insights can be gleaned from their remarks. Two teaching and learning leaders (one who expected online offerings to decrease and one who did not know) spoke to the impact of budget and program cuts, with one of these respondents stating,

“The demand might be there, but with the closing of programs that is expected, growth is not going to happen.”

One educational developer/instructional designer who perceived demand would stay the same said,

“Given the current financial pressures at our institution, we do not anticipate expanding offerings in any modality at this time.”

Other themes that emerged in the open-ended responses included:

- **Resistance and logistical challenges:** Comments mentioned faculty and institutional resistance, as well as resource constraints.
- **Leadership, initiatives, and institutional culture:** Comments included remarks about strategic planning, administrator support (or lack thereof) for online courses, and a general sense of institutional identity pertaining to modality (e.g., the institutional brand is associated with an in-person experience or providing flexible offerings).
- **Microcredentials and continuing education:** Comments tended to position them as part of an online growth strategy for which there was an identified demand.
- **Academic rigour and integrity:** Responses highlighted concerns that an online modality would make cheating more likely or negatively impact the quality of the learning experience.

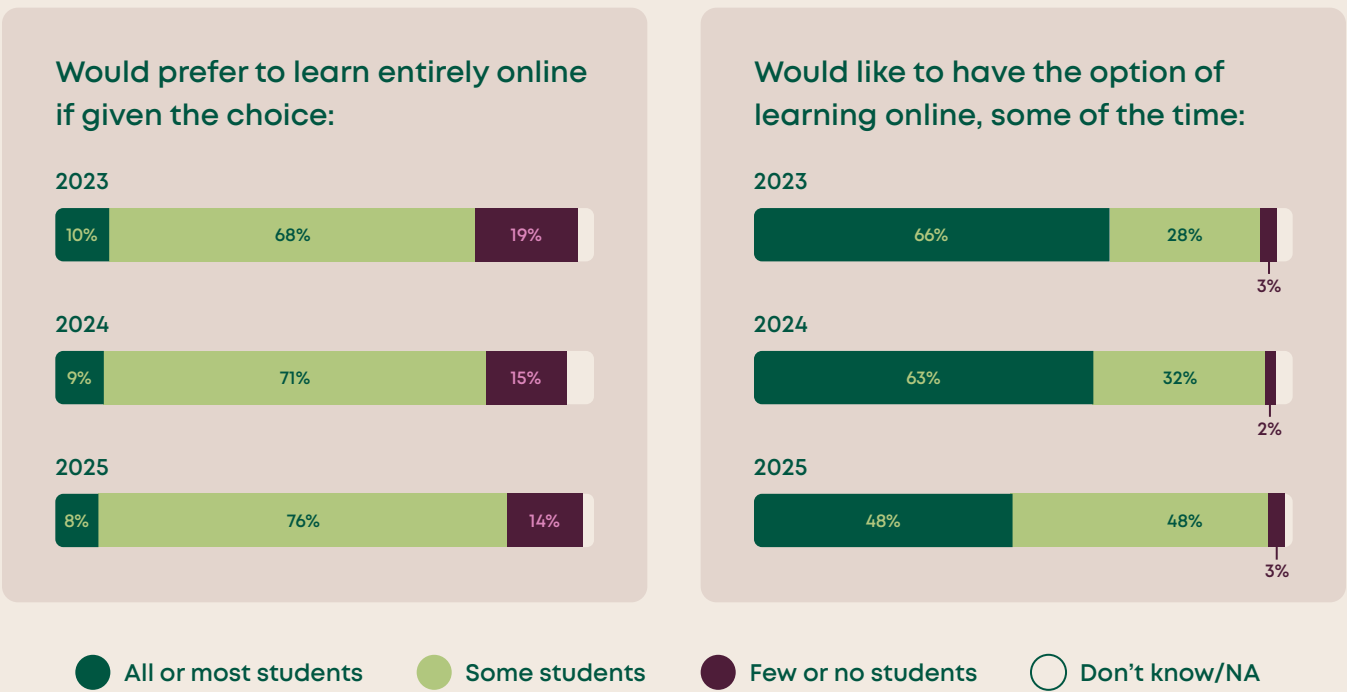
Student modality preferences

Although the CDLRA surveys do not collect data directly from students, the survey findings provide important insights into how perceptions of student preferences for online learning are changing over time.

Overall, there is a strong and increasing consensus that some students within the post-secondary system would prefer to learn entirely online if given the choice.

At the same time, the sentiment that all or most students would like to have the option of learning online some of the time has dropped substantially since 2024, while the proportion of respondents selecting “some students” has risen.

Perceptions of student preferences



Student modality preferences

The findings on online growth, specifically the expectation that online programs and courses will expand over the next two years, highlighted student demand, needs, and preferences as a key reason for this growth. In 2024 and 2025, the CDLRA surveys asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that certain factors were drivers of student needs and preferences.

In both years, respondents identified the need to accommodate competing priorities and the inability to access housing on or near campus as the top reasons why students want an online or hybrid learning experience.

Perceived drivers of student needs and preferences for online and hybrid learning in 2025 (agree/strongly agree)

To accommodate competing priorities (e.g., work, family, varsity sports, etc.)

95%

Inability to access housing on or near campus

79%

Inability to access affordable and reliable transportation to/from campus

74%

To accommodate a disability

74%

Cost savings

53%

Lack of in-person options for courses students want or need

51%

Students perceive that the course will be easier to pass

46%

Students perceive that they learn best in an online or hybrid modality

25%

Students perceive that the quality of instruction is better

9%

Observations about student needs and preferences

The survey also posed an open-ended question to respondents (to which 58 responded), asking them if they had observed anything else that drives student needs or preferences for online, hybrid, or in-person learning.

Nearly half of the respondents who left a comment (47%) reiterated that students who prefer online or hybrid modalities hold these preferences due to their need to accommodate competing priorities and logistics. Several comments below illustrate the various demands on students' time outside of school as well as the logistics that make online or hybrid learning an appealing option.

“The in-person course I taught was late afternoon into evening, and by that point, many students were tired from a full day and then, after class, had a long commute home and I know that many would have preferred that it be offered online so that they could be at home and then not have to commute afterwards.”

— Faculty/Instructor

“There are a lot of factors that may influence learner decisions about what modality to choose for learning. They may prefer in-person for year 1 or 2, or a multi-year program to get to know faculty and peers. They may choose online courses for summer sessions to balance work and learning. More mature learners may prefer part-time and online learning to balance work and family needs. Providing diversity in delivery is ideal, but not always possible.”

— Educational Developer/Instructional Designer

47% of respondents commented that students who prefer online or hybrid modalities do so because of the flexibility to accommodate competing priorities

Observations about student needs and preferences

“Cost of living — the more it costs to live, the more students want to study online in a format they believe allows them to study when they can fit it in. Post-secondary education has taken a back seat to working. Students who may have come to post-secondary right from high school WITHOUT considering they need to work simultaneously, have declined. Most of my students find a job first (usually PT work) and then seek a post-secondary program they can fit in around their work (especially my international students).”

— Faculty/Instructor

“Perhaps a student needs to defer a semester, and then that same course they would have taken previously isn’t available for an in-person intake until the next year. If an online option is available and they don’t have to wait so long to take the course, they would most likely prefer to take it online.”

— Institutional researcher

Interaction was another common theme that emerged in the open-ended comments. Multiple respondents (26%) noted that students’ desire (or lack thereof) for in-person interactions influenced their modality preferences. Although most discussions about interaction centred on a desire for on-campus, in-person interaction, several respondents noted that some students preferred the lack of these interactions.

For example, one faculty respondent wrote,

“For a few students, the online environment is very supportive and allows them to meet their needs, in particular those who find campus loud and overwhelming.”

An educational developer/instructional designer commented that,

“Students who have experienced trauma (particularly complex trauma) may feel psychologically safer in an online learning environment, particularly when asynchronous. (There is emerging research to support this.)”

26% of respondents noted students’ desire (or lack thereof) for in-person interactions influenced their modality preferences

Observations about student needs and preferences

The remaining comments touched on various topics. One topic that emerged was a desire for options and the freedom to learn in the modality that suits them best.

An administrator wrote,

“Students like having options, regardless of whether they are likely to make use of them.”

Other topics included the impact of past experiences learning in a modality (a poor online experience may drive a preference for in-person learning) and external influences, like when “educators speak negatively of online options.”

Lastly, several respondents noted that the subject matter itself influenced modality preferences among students.

One teaching and learning leader stated that,

“Requirements for hands-on learning (equipment, tools, practical activities, etc.) drives in-person learning.”

Conversely, an educational developer/instructional designer remarked,

“In some courses, there is little incentive to attend in person (e.g., when teaching is heavily lecture-based with a low degree of in-person interaction).”

Faculty skills and know-how for teaching online

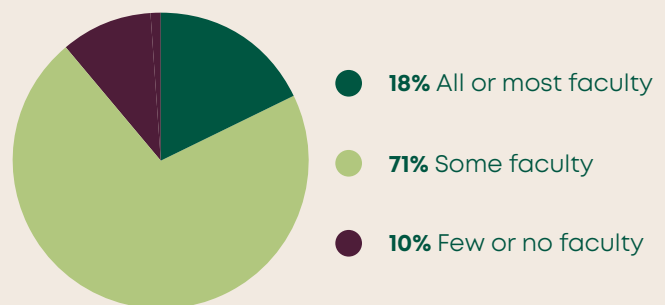
The survey findings on faculty skills and know-how, including perceptions of others and self-perceptions, present a paradox.

Respondents, regardless of their role and teaching experience, believed that some faculty members at their institution possessed the skills and know-how to teach online, but certainly not all or most. In contrast, when respondents who had taught (any modality) over the past year were asked whether they had the skills and know-how to teach online, the overwhelming majority said yes, regardless of whether they had taught online in the last 12 months.

The respondents' high assessment of their online teaching abilities could be somewhat explained by self-selection bias: those with an existing interest and background knowledge related to online and digital learning may be more likely to participate in a survey on digital learning. At the same time, these findings suggest that further research is needed that investigates faculty teaching skills by modality more broadly, in comparison to their perceptions.

Such research would help determine whether there is a sense of overconfidence among faculty about their ability to teach online or an underestimation of faculty skills by others.

Faculty at my institution have the skills and know-how to teach online (2025)*



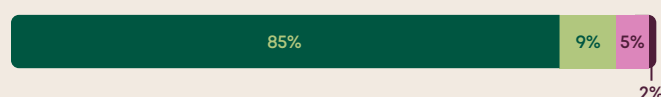
*In 2023 and 2024, this question was only asked of respondents who had not taught in the past 12 months, whereas all respondents were asked the question in 2025. The findings from 2023 and 2024 showed the same general pattern, with the majority of respondents reporting that some faculty (but not all or most) had the skills and know-how to teach online.

Faculty skills and know-how for teaching online

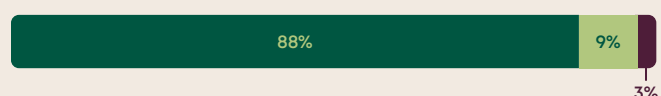
Responses from those who have taught in the past 12 months

I have the skills and know-how to teach online courses

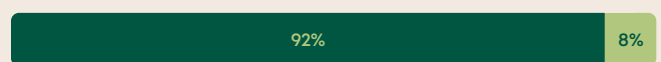
2023*



2024



2025



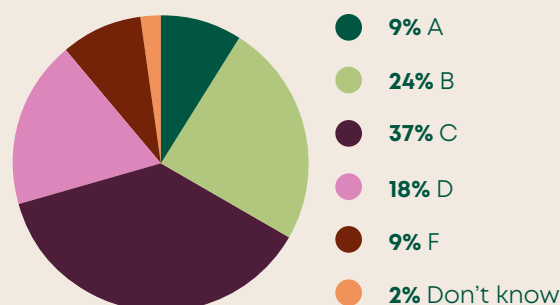
Yes No Unsure Does not apply

*In 2023, participants were asked the same question about their skills and know-how for teaching online, but given an additional response option of "unsure."

In past years, the CDLRA's surveys have examined professional development at Canadian post-secondary institutions to understand whether and how faculty are being trained to teach online. Previous findings have clearly shown that most professional development tends to be voluntary, not required, and it does not differ by the modality in which a faculty member teaches (or is expected to teach).

In 2025, the survey took a different approach to assessing professional development, asking respondents to rate their institution on a letter-grade scale based on how well it prepares faculty to teach online. Most respondents gave their institutions a grade of "C" or "B," while over a quarter of respondents gave their institution a grade of "D" or "F." These marks suggest that there is still considerable room for improvement in online instructor training and professional development.

My institution prepares faculty to teach online



Faculty preferences

A prevailing assumption held by many within the post-secondary sector is that faculty are mostly resistant to teaching online and hold a strong preference for on-campus learning.

To better understand the assumptions and actualities of faculty modality preferences, the CDLRA has asked a series of questions over the past three years. Specific to online learning, the survey has asked respondents about their perceptions of faculty preferences and respondents who have taught over the past 12 months have been asked about their personal preferences.

In 2023 and 2024, only respondents who had not taught in the past 12 months were asked about faculty preferences. Although all survey respondents were asked about faculty preferences in 2025, only the responses of those who had not taught in the past 12 months are included in the graph below to provide an accurate year-to-year comparison.

The longitudinal findings show a steady increase in the proportion of respondents (who have not taught in the past year) who believe that few or no faculty would prefer to teach online if given the choice. Similarly, the proportion of these respondents who say that all or most faculty would like to have the option to teach online sometimes is decreasing over time.

Perceptions from those who have not taught in the past 12 months

Would prefer to teach entirely online if given the choice:

2023



2024



2025



Would like to have the option of teaching online, some of the time:

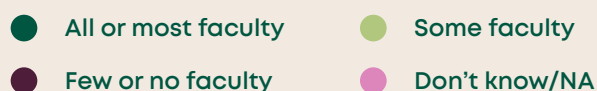
2023



2024



2025



Faculty preferences

The CDLRA also performed an analysis of the 2025 data, including the responses from those who had taught (any modality), and found that respondents who had taught in the past 12 months were more likely to report that “some faculty” would prefer to teach entirely online (63%) or online some of the time (76%). *This is a significant finding, as it reveals a substantial difference in perceptions between those who have recently taught and those who have not.*

Another critical finding emerged when analyzing the personal preferences of those who taught in the past year. Contrary to the decreasing trend seen in the data related to perceived faculty preference, the trend among faculty who have recently taught shows an increase in the proportion who would prefer to teach entirely online. The proportion of those who have taught who would like to have the option of teaching online sometimes has remained relatively unchanged over time. These findings suggest that there may be misconceptions about what faculty want, particularly among those who have not taught recently.

Preferences of those who have taught in the last 12 months

Would prefer to teach entirely online if given the choice:

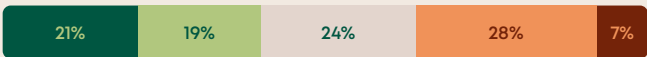
2023



2024

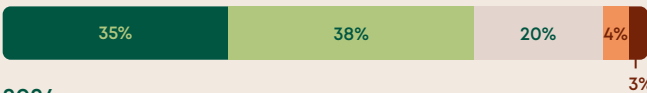


2025

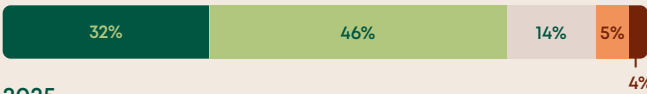


Would like to have the option of teaching online, some of the time:

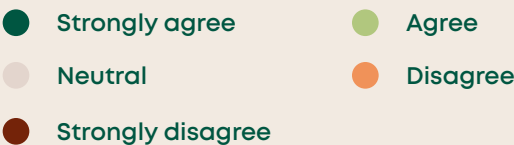
2023



2024



2025



Faculty preferences

With these findings related to faculty preferences (both the assumptions and the actualities), it is important to note that aggregate findings such as these do not show differences among institutions or departments within an institution. As mentioned above, those with recent teaching experience were more likely to hold the perception that some faculty members at their institution would prefer teaching in online contexts.

Similarly, factors such as institutional culture, institutional and individual experience with online learning, and support for faculty teaching online are also likely to impact perceptions and preferences associated with different modalities. Further research that pinpoints influencing factors related to faculty preferences would be beneficial.

63%

who had taught in the past 12 months reported that “some faculty” would prefer to teach **entirely online**

76%

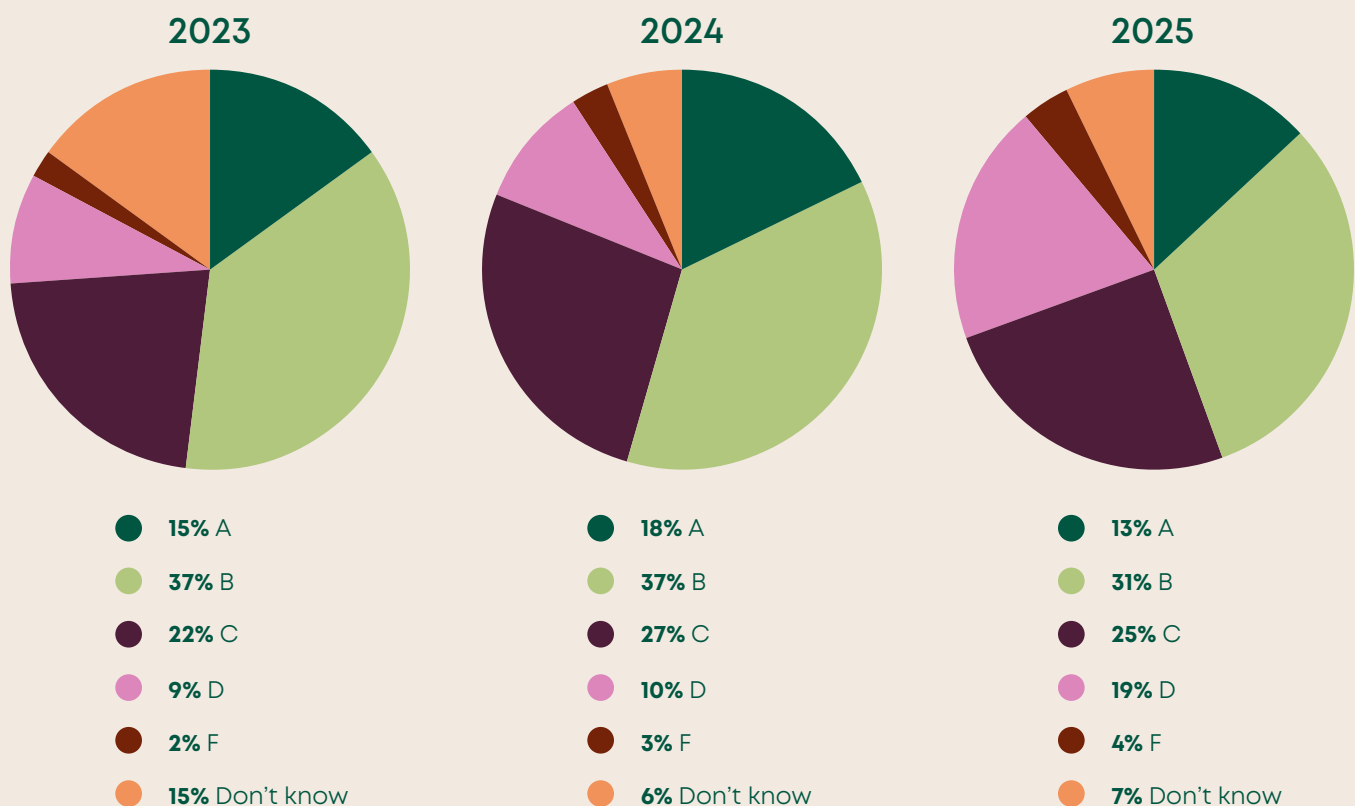
who had taught in the past 12 months reported that “some faculty” would prefer to teach online **some of the time**

Support for online students

For the past three years, the CDLRA surveys have asked respondents to assign their institution a letter grade based on the wrap-around supports that the institution provides for online students.

The majority of respondents consistently give their institution a “B” or “C” rating; however, the proportion of respondents giving their institution a “B” rating decreased slightly in 2025, while the proportion of “D” ratings rose.

My institution provides wrap-around supports for students who learn ONLINE

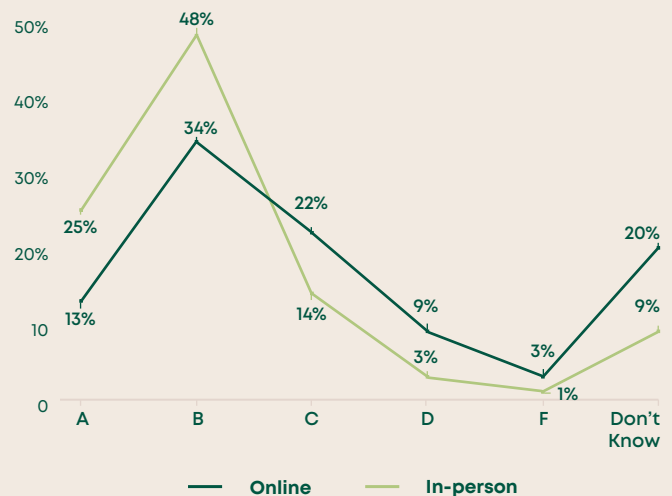


Workforce preparation

Reliably tracking online enrolments across institutions has proven nearly impossible, making the investigation of workforce outcomes associated with online courses a challenging task, to say the least.

To gain a sense of how respondents viewed the impact of online offerings at their institution compared to in-person offerings, the survey again asked respondents to rate their institution on a letter grade scale. The findings clearly showed that respondents held the perception that in-person offerings better prepare students for the workforce than online offerings. More research is needed to determine whether this perception has merit, whether it is a misconception, or whether the impact of modality on outcomes is context-dependent.

Courses and programs at my institution effectively prepare students for the workforce



Concluding thoughts

The Canadian post-secondary system has reached an inflection point.

The traditional educational model, which prioritized on-campus learning, is feeling the strain of financial pressures while acknowledging the reality that there is a subset of learners for whom online learning is the preferable, if not the only, choice for completing their studies. Understandably, given the current financial state of most institutions, there is also a need to ensure that any strategic decisions and investments related to developing or expanding online offerings are evidence-based.

It is crucial to note that the findings of this report do not suggest that online offerings are preferable or the best option for all students or fields of study. The survey results indicate that there is a demographic of learners who prefer in-person interactions as part of their educational experiences, and it is undeniable that certain skills are best learned in a hands-on environment. At the same time, the data is equally clear that the implicit culture within the post-secondary sector, which views in-person learning as the best option for all students and subjects, must be challenged. Both on-campus and online options are needed.

The findings also show that faculty may be more willing to teach online than institutional leadership realizes, but they may also be overestimating their skills. Figuring out how to assess faculty capabilities and provide training for teaching online, while respecting the boundaries outlined in collective agreements, will be a challenge for institutions seeking to expand their online offerings. More work is needed to explore approaches for equipping faculty to teach online effectively.

Finally, with our system at an inflection point, the opportunity for meaningful change is here. Post-secondary and sector leaders should consider how they can leverage technology to develop high-quality online offerings that will make post-secondary education more accessible for more Canadians. The previous status quo of post-secondary education is beginning to crumble; however, the requests students are making for change have revealed a new foundation for rebuilding a better, stronger system.

Methodology

The survey findings included in this report were gathered through annual surveys that are part of the CDLRA's Pan-Canadian Digital Learning Project, which tracks digital learning trends at publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Canada. As a longitudinal project, our research approaches have evolved over time, and a detailed overview of our project methodology, including our survey methodology, can be found here:

<https://cdlra-acrfl.ca/methodology-for-the-pan-canadian-digital-learning-survey-project/>

This report primarily draws on the findings from the CDLRA's 2025 Digital Learning Trends Survey. The data collection for this survey was from April 7 to May 30, 2025.

Information about the data collection period and participants for the 2023 and 2024 findings shared in this report can be found by accessing the Pan-Canadian Report for each respective year on the CDLRA's publication page: www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/publications

The CDLRA's survey instruments are open-access and available upon request. Please contact nicole.johnson@cdlra-acrfl.ca for more information.

To join the CDLRA's survey roster to receive survey invitations (and notifications when our reports are released), please scan the QR code below.



Participants:

- 234 individuals from 92 unique institutions responded to the CDLRA's 2025 Digital Learning Trends Survey, with all provinces and two territories represented.
- Participant roles included administrators (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, provosts, deans, and directors), teaching and learning leaders, instructional designers and educational developers, institutional researchers, library services staff, student support staff, and educational technology specialists. These roles are all represented in the findings featured in this report.

About the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA)

The Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA) is a non-profit organization that conducts applied research to advance knowledge about digital learning strategies, policies, and practices in close collaboration with Canadian post-secondary institutions and affiliated organizations. Since 2017, the CDLRA has been Canada's top research body for tracking the development of online and digital learning in public post-secondary institutions. The CDLRA's research findings help inform planning, strategy, and policy within the Canadian post-secondary sector. Learn more at cdlra-acrfl.ca.

About Risepoint

Risepoint is an education technology company that provides world-class support and trusted expertise to more than 100 universities and colleges. We primarily work with regional universities, helping them develop and grow their high-ROI, workforce-focused online degree programs in critical areas such as nursing, teaching, business and public service. Risepoint is dedicated to increasing access to affordable education so that more students, especially working adults, can improve their careers and meet employer and community needs. Learn more at risepoint.com.

References

1. <https://bher.ca/assets-documents/resource/Summit-Key-Takeaways-Spread.pdf>

