

Council of Ontario Universities'  
Position Paper on Ancillary Fees and  
Digital Learning Resources

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### Introduction

Digital resources are changing the ways students engage in learning and provide increased opportunities for student success. New technologies also provide improved assessment tools for measuring learning outcomes and student engagement. These benefits come without an additional cost burden to students.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges, and University's (MTCU) recently released *Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines for Publicly-Assisted Universities* (December, 2013) indicates support for the use of digital learning materials, including materials used in assessment. The new framework reflects a change in the Ministry policy concerning ancillary fees and enables the use of digital learning resources. This position paper explains Ontario universities' support of MTCU's new guidelines.

The benefits of technology-enabled resources for students and faculty are numerous:

- Students demonstrate greater engagement in course materials and improved learning outcomes;
- Benefits to students can be realized without higher costs to students; and
- Faculty have a greater range of pedagogical tools with which to connect course materials and assessment.

### Improved learning outcomes

Students, faculty and the Ministry all agree that digital resources support improved learning outcomes. Materials available to students and faculty are increasing and improving rapidly. Perhaps the most innovative element of digital learning resources is the ability to tailor the materials to individual student skills. For example, quizzes provided through digital learning systems can help students recognize specific areas for improvement. Digital resources direct students to review materials that are adapted to correspond to those needs, and students benefit from immediate feedback.

Instructors are able to tailor their in-class discussions or lectures based on the needs of their students as well. Professors can gauge the extent to which students are engaged in the materials by reviewing course statistics compiled by the digital learning system.

Learning outcomes are also enhanced with e-resources. A recent project by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) focused on two chemistry courses and their associated digital learning tools, confirmed the value of digital learning resources. In particular, a homework management system (sold with the textbook) had the most significant impact on student outcomes in both courses. The homework management system encouraged students to spend time with the materials, solve problems, and interact with the course content and their peers. All of this positively influenced students' grades. The authors note, "It is the opinion of the research team that instructors should explore

integrating HMS [homework management systems] ...into the set of resources that they provide to students.”<sup>1</sup> Ontario faculty who use digital resources reported similar outcomes and support for using e-learning tools.<sup>2</sup> Faculty recognize digital learning resources as one set of tools which can be used to improve student experiences and outcomes.

### **Costs to students**

One concern in the development of online and e-learning experiences is that costs to students should not be higher than in traditional courses. However, a move to digital resources does not necessarily mean higher costs. In fact, digital resources are often cheaper than paper-based textbooks because they are published without the added costs of paper, printing, binding and shipping. According to the Canadian Publishers' Council, costs to students will likely decrease by up to 50 per cent as innovations occur.<sup>3</sup> Students have also long been required to purchase textbooks and accompanying materials, such as study guides and supplementary materials. Digital learning materials will offer more services and opportunities for students, but will not represent a significant additional cost burden. The benefits to students from the radical improvements in functionality of digital learning resources should not be held back by adherence to an old cost model based on paper resources.

Students' concerns about costs have also focused on the use of digital learning resources in assessment. In particular, their concerns are based on a principle that students have until now paid for learning materials, and have paid for assessment only through tuition. While this has historically been the case, this model is based more in a convenient way to divide costs rather than a clear distinction between learning and assessment; these activities are inextricably linked. In addition, access to learning resources (including textbooks) has always been necessary to the completion of a program of study. Universities themselves contribute over \$300 million each year to maintain and build collections of learning resources in libraries.

### **Connecting course materials and assessment opportunities**

Many digital resources provide course content connected to student assessment. As described above, student assessment and presentation of material can occur simultaneously, and can also be continuous and personalized. Traditional models of

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *The Impact of Multiple Learning Resources on Student Academic Performance* (R. Burk, P. Lyons, A. Noriega, and D. Polovina), 2013, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with faculty at Ontario Universities, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://insidehighered.com/news/2012/01/18/universities-look-get-discounts-e-textbooks-students>. In addition, in 2012, COU staff conducted a sample comparison of prices for paper-based textbooks and the same resources in digital format; this study confirmed that prices for digital resources were lower.

classroom instruction separate course materials and assessment processes. This model is anachronistic given technological innovations. For many faculty, the traditional model is also challenging because of rising enrollments. Faculty should have the flexibility to choose a model that suits their classrooms and content areas.

Digital components provide one means of assessing students' work, but it will not be the only tool faculty and instructors utilize. As technology improves learning resources, faculty in all universities are improving their skills in promoting deep learning through interactive and enquiry-based learning. The ongoing development of digital resources will continue to improve postsecondary teaching and learning and will require a broad variety of approaches to assessment and evaluation.

Assessment opportunities may also be helpful beyond individual classrooms. Postsecondary leaders, faculty, researchers and the public are increasingly interested in learning outcomes and assessment tools. Providing evidence of student learning and success is a challenge, particularly with respect to critical thinking and problem solving skills. Assessments that are built into digital learning resources may help advance discussions related to student learning outcomes, and may also help advance the use of data analytics to identify effective teaching strategies.<sup>4</sup>

The Ministry's new guidelines regarding digital learning resources will result in new activities and responsibilities, and different costs and benefits. While students will be required to purchase some learning resources, Ontario universities believe strongly that this will not be a significant shift in costs to students, since students have always been asked to buy learning resources. This will also result in much higher benefits, both the direct benefits of better learning resources, and the indirect benefits of greater efficiency for faculty that, in turn, will support more engagement with students in active teaching and learning activities.

### Conclusion

Technology is changing teaching and learning experiences in dramatic ways, and innovations that enhance student learning opportunities should be embraced. Ontario universities are sensitive to student concerns related to costs, and will ensure that policies concerning assignment of digital learning materials are consistent with university academic policies and values. Contemporary learning tools are essential as Ontario works to retain its competitiveness in the technology-driven, global educational marketplace, and to deliver better learning outcomes for students. MTCU's new guidelines regarding technology-enabled learning resources are an important step in strengthening postsecondary education in Ontario and ensuring student success.

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<sup>4</sup> Cathy Sandeen, "Assessment's place in the new MOOC world," *Research & Practice in Assessment* (volume 8) pp. 5-12, 2013.

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