



Turning challenge into opportunity

Empowering faculty to adopt innovative approaches to integrating technology into courses offered remotely

When the COVID-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions around the world to switch to remote learning, the University of Guelph was well-prepared with a mature approach to effectively integrate technology to provide meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Using D2L's Brightspace platform, the University rapidly adapted to alternative methods of course delivery, supporting effective transitions for students and faculty.

At a glance

Client: University of Guelph

Learners: 36,117

Industry: Higher education

Website: uoguelph.ca

Platform/Features:

- D2L's Brightspace platform
- Pulse mobile app
- Competency-Based Education

Interviewees:

- Michelle Fach, Executive Director of Open Learning and Educational Support
- Lena Paulo Kushnir, Associate Director, Educational Technologies, Open Learning and Educational Support
- Natalie Green, Associate Director, Distance and Continuing Education, Open Learning and Educational Support

Highlights:

- A leader in online learning poised to support students and faculty in making effective transitions to remote learning
- Optimizes the use of available resources to deliver exceptional education even during pandemic conditions
- Boosts enrolment by 125% in summer distance learning offerings
- Empowers students with new, relevant skills to support economic recovery from COVID-19



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*Michelle Fach, Executive Director of Open Learning and Educational Support,
University of Guelph*

Challenge

Reaching every kind of learner

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown many organizations' plans into chaos, leading to a “new normal” where social distancing and travel restrictions are fundamentally changing the way society works.

For many higher education institutions, the crisis has shone a spotlight on the gaps in their remote learning capabilities. But for the University of Guelph, offering a broad range of educational content via multiple channels has been a long-term strategic approach, and its fully online learning pathways are well-established.

Michelle Fach, Executive Director, Open Learning and Educational Support (OpenEd) at the University of Guelph, explains: “More than two decades ago, we decided to make our courses accessible to learners from all backgrounds—from traditional undergraduates who require more flexibility to students who can't attend classes in person, including professionals wanting to gain new skills. So, we looked to incorporate online learning into our continuum of teaching.”

Fast-forward to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the University realized that it would have to go a step further. It needed to find a way to offer all its traditional campus-based undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree courses remotely for the upcoming fall semester.

Michelle Fach says: “To attract and retain students, we want to offer them a full, engaging university experience even if they can't be on campus. This can be especially challenging for some international students who have not had a Canadian post-secondary experience and very little experience in learning remotely.”

She continues: “We needed a flexible and facilitated approach to help faculty transform their teaching strategies for a remote delivery format. We leveraged our expertise across the continuum of course delivery methods to create a scalable and sustainable solution.”



Solution

Rising to the occasion

Throughout the years since the initial launch of its online learning program, the University of Guelph partnered with D2L and harnessed the Brightspace platform to design, develop, and deliver high-quality learning experiences. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the University has built on these solid foundations and effectively utilized the various tools within Brightspace to create engaging and authentic courses.

“We were actually D2L’s first customer, and we’ve worked collaboratively with them over the past 20 years on the design of the Brightspace platform,” recalls Michelle Fach. “Members of our team sit on various working groups to help refine and evolve the platform’s capabilities, so we enjoy a very strong, two-way collaboration that helps us transform teaching and learning.”

The University uses the Brightspace platform to underpin its CourseLink website, which allows students to access remote and online learning opportunities. For example, they can view course content, participate in discussions, submit assignments, and create videos, take quizzes, view their grades and so much more.

OpenEd has developed a remote teaching and learning website that provides instructors with resources, best practices, videos, instructional sessions, and access to one-to-one consultation in transitioning teaching strategies to remote learning. OpenEd also provides instructional design and technical expertise for courses that are intentionally developed for a fully online delivery. Using the Brightspace Pulse mobile app, OpenEd also gives faculty and students access to these tools and resources on the go, enabling learning anytime, anywhere.

The University is constantly exploring ways to utilize the platform in innovative ways. Natalie Green, Associate Director, Distance and Continuing Education at the University of Guelph, comments: “Right now, we’re partnering with D2L on a competency-based learning project that’s exploring how we help students develop skills via the Brightspace platform. We’re learning together, and I anticipate that the resulting insights will have a long-term impact on our approaches to online course design and delivery for the University.”



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Natalie Green, Associate Director, Distance and Continuing Education, Open Learning and Educational Support, University of Guelph

Result

Embracing change

Using the D2L Brightspace platform, the University of Guelph is successfully navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and continuing to make learning accessible to as many people as possible.

As a leader in online learning, the University of Guelph has been able to provide students with a variety of course options including courses that have been designed specifically for the online environment.

In addition, at a time when employment is precarious, many individuals will seek to upgrade their skills.

“As a result, the popularity of the university’s degree and non-degree courses has significantly increased. We have realized a 125% increase in some of our fully online non-degree programs over the Summer and Fall semesters. Our high-quality online offerings continue to set us apart from other universities, and the Brightspace platform is a key component in delivering them,” says Michelle Fach.

Faculty also continue to be enthusiastic adopters of the platform’s latest capabilities. The OpenEd support desk is constantly busy with inquiries from instructors who are exploring new ways of delivering remote learning. The University is using Brightspace community resources to bolster its internal expertise and provide effective support.

“We’re engaging faculty at a deeper level than ever before. Using the Brightspace community pages, we have curated and created additional resources tailored to our faculty that support the transition to remote delivery. Faculty are exploring innovative technology-supported teaching strategies to engage with students whether it is a small class of 100 or a large class of 1500. It’s exciting to observe.”

Lena Paulo Kushnir, Associate Director, Educational Technologies, Open Learning and Educational Support, University of Guelph