

# The Online Program Ecosystem

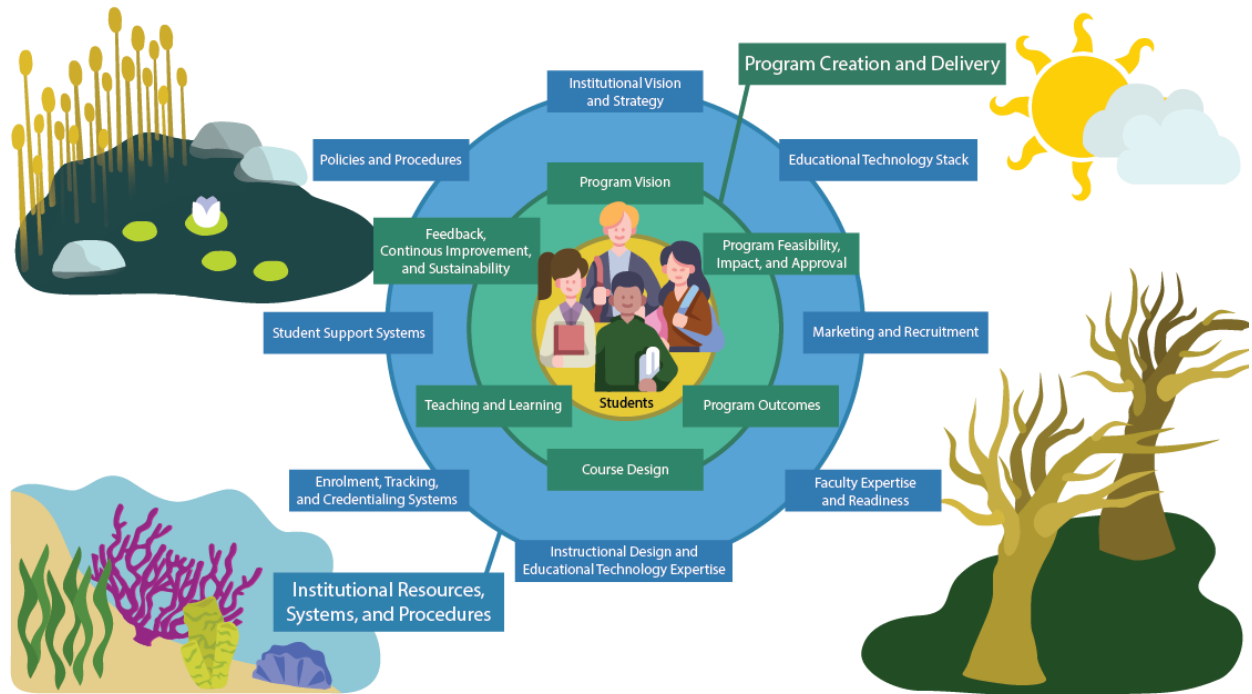


Figure 1: A Graphic Representation of the Online Program Ecosystem

While we tend to think of students experiencing online programs as engaging in a cyclical process, it is more useful to think of the environment in which they learn as an ecosystem—in other words, as a network of connected systems that rely on each other for healthy, effective, and sustainable functioning.

In the representation of the online program ecosystem above, the online student life cycle is at the centre. Around it are the people, resources, infrastructure, and policies that support the healthy functioning of the students, staff, and faculty, as well as program continuous improvement and sustainability.

In the first circle out from the student life cycle, we see those elements directly related to specific program creation and delivery—these are elements that are most often administered or developed at the departmental, faculty, or unit level as a cyclical system of continuous improvement that supports the academic elements of the online program:

- Ideally, program creation and delivery begin with a **strong vision** for the program that reflects the needs of all stakeholders, including those of students, faculty, the institution, future employers, and societal change-makers.
- From there, we can engage in initial and ongoing assessments of the **program feasibility and impact** to gain **program approval** according to criteria set by the institution, government, and any related regulatory or accrediting bodies.

- You will also need to develop clear **program outcomes** that embody the vision of the program and communicate what successful learners in the program will do, know, and value once they complete the program.
- The program learning outcomes guide the creation of high-quality, student-centred learning experiences through effective and collaborative online **course design**.
- Well-designed courses are paired with effective **teaching** of those courses so that students can **learn and demonstrate** program outcomes.
- And lastly, the program should include a plan to collect **feedback** on the entire creation and delivery process to formulate and carry out plans for **continuous improvement**. This includes any required regulatory quality assurance processes and plans for **program sustainability** and growth.

In the outer circle of the online program ecosystem are those elements of the online learning ecosystem that are often, but not always, located centrally at the institutional level. In many institutions, these elements function most efficiently and effectively as shared expertise and resources because they affect all students, faculty, and staff regardless of discipline or program outcomes, so situating them at the institutional level can provide equitable access to important resources for any unit seeking to develop an online program. It may also prevent redundancies across the institution.

Depending on the context of the institution, some units may choose to develop this expertise “in house” in one or more areas—either due to an absence of these elements at the institutional level or to work in partnership with existing institutional elements while meeting a specific vision or need of the unit that requires more unit or discipline-specific expertise or vision. In some cases, departments or institutions use external companies or services to support the element where developing in-house capacity is not possible or desirable in their context.

At this outer circle of the ecosystem, processes tend to be less cyclical, so we present them here as major areas of focus that intersect at multiple points with all the other elements in the ecosystem. Because many of them are led by institutional **vision and strategy**, we’ll begin there.

- Institutional **vision and strategy** encompass the institutional planning process and structures necessary to ensure a quality online program ecosystem that encompasses all aspects of program design and student experience, not just those that relate to direct instruction. Ideally, the online ecosystem exists in relation to an institutional vision that guides the development of policies, resources, infrastructure, and program purpose. A strong institutional vision will guide the effective planning and resource allocation that supports online program development across the ecosystem. It enables program leaders to align their work to institutional strategy.
- The introduction of online programs may affect **policy and procedures** across the institution. Online programs require considerations that are not always the same as those of face-to-face or even blended programs. They may affect policy and processes around everything from quality assurance to program completion times and assessment practices, to faculty workload, to technology adoption, to student appeals.
- **Marketing and Recruitment:** A common barrier to designing any sustainable online program is determining the expected demand and enrolment in the program as well as raising awareness of a program to potential students who may live far from the “bricks and mortar” institution. Once potential learners know about the program, institutions also need tools in place to follow up

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with interested learners to ensure they have positive first experiences finding out more about the program and how it fits their interests.

- **Enrolment, Tracking, and Credentialing Systems** are just that: the infrastructure and processes that enable institutions to efficiently guide and track online students through the administrative processes of beginning, navigating, and completing a program as well as receiving credit for it.
- Designing and teaching fully online courses require **Faculty Expertise and Readiness**, not just in their subject matter areas, but also in understanding highly effective online teaching practices. Institutions need to consider how they will support faculty in gaining this expertise and consider which resources are available to assist the work of designing online courses.
- **Instructional Design and Educational Technology Expertise** greatly assist the development of quality learning experiences. Because online teaching requires expertise in the subject matter, online pedagogy, *and* the selection and use of digital technologies, working with online design teams that include instructional designers and educational technologists alongside the faculty member—as well as any other relevant roles, such as Librarians, Community Engaged Learning Coordinators, or Indigenous Curriculum Advisors—ensures that courses are designed to be engaging, student-centred, and meet the learning outcomes and vision of the program.
- Also vital to the entire online learning ecosystem is the **Educational Technology Stack**. These are the eLearning Tools and software that will enable students to learn online, for example, the Learning Management System and any plug-in tools—such as audience response systems, Web Conferencing software, and Assessment software—as well as the hardware required for the stack to operate.
- **Student Support Systems** are those systems that students turn to for information or help and could include, among other things, orientation; academic and career counselling; units that support equity, diversity, and accessibility; technical support; and health and wellness.