

# The Online Student Life Cycle

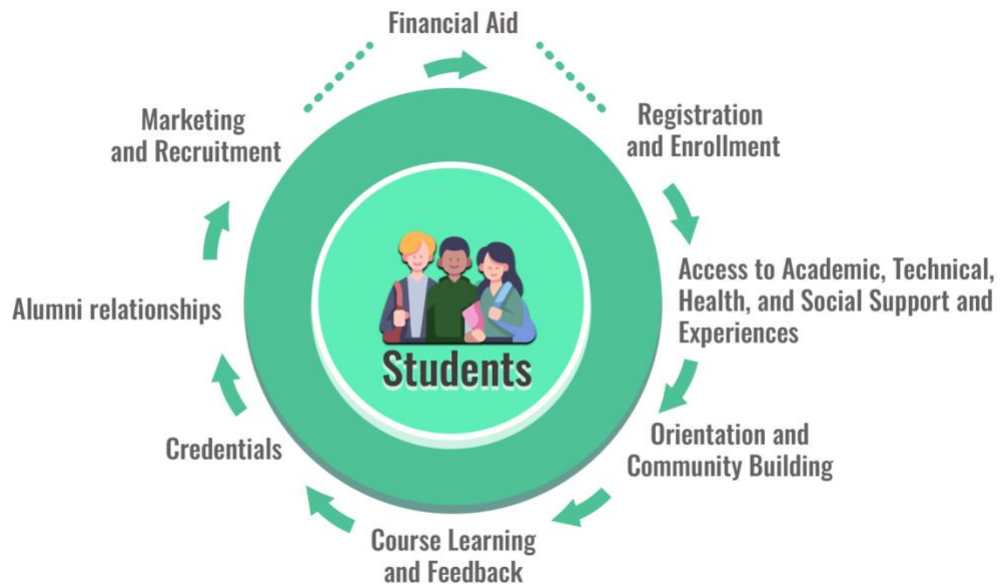


Figure 1: A Graphic Representation of the Online Student Life Cycle

## Marketing & Recruitment

An online student's first interaction with a program generally happens when they realize they have a desire to improve their knowledge or skills in some way. While learners may take many different pathways to enroll in an online program, most encounter some sort of marketing or recruitment process before making a final decision. For many learners, their first interaction with a program may be through a Google search or learning portal as they begin exploring programs of interest. Others may hear of programs through word of mouth from family or colleagues, or they may begin their search with a specific institution because they know it has a good reputation or offers a particular pathway into or through the program that matches their needs. Unless you offer the only online program of its kind (for now!), online learners tend to have more choice of where they will study because they are not bound to a specific catchment area. Potential students must be able to easily identify programs that they think may suit their needs, and then easily seek out and get satisfactory answers to questions about financial, workload, and social implications. In this sense, recruitment goes beyond simply what the degree offers and includes ensuring that students feel comfortable with any institutional and program-related interactions and incentives that may help them decide to enrol. This becomes particularly important when we consider that many online learners are looking for new or more flexible program options, because these learners may not reflect the typical learning demographic of more traditional post-secondary programs.

"The Online Program Ecosystem" was developed by Fanshawe College, Western University, and Queen's University for "[Creating and Implementing High-Quality, Sustainable Online Programs](#)," funded by The Government of Ontario and eCampus Ontario. [Creative Commons License BY-NC-SA](#)

## Financial Aid, Registration, and Enrolment

Once a learner has decided that they want to study in your program, they must register with the institution and enroll in their courses. At this point, they may also need to navigate the financial aid process. The types of financial aid made available to students in your program may be what informs their decision to enroll.

## Access to Academic, Technical, Health and Wellness, and Co-Curricular Social Support and Experiences

With enrolment in the program comes the need to access the various student support services directly related to learning program content and experiencing a positive, healthy progression through their program. High-quality online programs look beyond the learning classroom to ensure that online students have access to the same types of resources as students physically on campus.

## Orientation and Sense of Community

As any student who attends an in-person program can attest, experiences with the institution go beyond what happens in the classroom to a sense of belonging to a wider community with access to opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. A lack of community and connection is one of the main reasons that online learners don't complete programs. And while some online students may be looking to simply complete their course work and move on (as is also the case with some in-person students), many will choose your institution or program because they want to be part of your community and meet others who share their interests.

## Course Learning and Feedback

Once students have enrolled and have the information they need to access their courses and any resources or supports available to them, they're ready to begin course work. Designing, teaching, and collecting feedback to ensure that students have access to high-quality, student-centred learning is a collaborative process that can involve roles from across the institution, such as faculty, instructional designers, librarians, and technology specialists. Course learning and feedback can involve collaborations with various units, such as those that support teaching and learning, equity, indigenization, technology, and continuous improvement and sustainability.

## Credentials

Depending on the program, students may acquire credentials either at the end of the program or throughout, and they may need those credentials to apply for jobs and promotions, future studies, or accreditation. For example, a student in your program may acquire a master's degree as their sole credential and need to provide a transcript to apply for a PhD program. Or they may acquire a series of micro-credentials throughout their program as well as a certificate and a diploma—any of which might be shared for promotion within their current workplace, in the search for employment, or for demonstrating their knowledge and understanding to a more general audience.

## Alumni Relationships

Online students who complete your program and who can positively reflect on their experiences are future ambassadors for your program and institution. *All* students who experience the program, however, can share valuable information about their experiences that can help with continuous improvement and sustainability of the program. This includes, among other items, how the program prepared them to meet their future goals, how relevant the material is after a while, and any challenges or particularly helpful supports they encountered concerning issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.