



BC Post-Secondary Education Sector Partners

April 11, 2023

Ms. Nicola Lemmer
Assistant Deputy Minister, Post-Secondary Policy and Programs
Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills (PSFS)
Via Email: Nicola.Lemmer@gov.bc.ca

RE: Provincial Digital Learning Strategy

Dear Ms. Lemmer,

Thank you again for meeting with us Wednesday, March 29 to discuss the province's Digital Learning Strategy. Our group found it a productive dialogue and we would like to continue to engage with you as the strategy is rolled out. To that end we thought it would be useful to summarize some of the feedback in writing as well as some of the next steps discussed in the meeting.

As noted in the meeting, the composition of the committee and the individuals consulted was impressive but leaving our organizations, and the 40,000 members we represent, out of the process was a serious oversight in the drafting and preparation of the report. Though we appreciate that the government is engaged on these issues, we were to put it diplomatically, surprised to have found out about this work by accident on the cusp of its rollout. Simply put, it is hard to imagine this strategy being successfully implemented without the buy-in of our members. In addition, while we applaud the inclusion of some Indigenous administrators on the committee and the consistent references to meaningful reconciliation the voice of Indigenous staff and faculty are notably not present in this report.

We also noted that the Funding Formula Review, which all of our groups have been engaged with, was taking place in parallel with the Digital Learning Strategy but in apparent isolation. As we outline below, we are skeptical that the vision set out in the Digital Learning Strategy can be realistically achieved in a cost neutral manner so it would make sense for the two processes to be in communication.

At times in the document, there is a conflation between digital equity and social, economic and racial justice. For example, the ambitious claim that digital learning can "narrow socio-economic gaps and ultimately build stronger relationships between post-secondary studies and career pathways (6)." That is a bold claim that would require a more comprehensive approach to social and economic policy than is envisioned in this document. While we agree that broadband internet access and other forms of digital equity are critical to expanding access for Indigenous British Columbians and other equity deserving groups, we are skeptical that the digital reforms the document suggest will have any meaningful impact without broad based, ambitious social and economic reforms. Reforms that address the root causes of economic inequality and the persistent barriers faced by Indigenous peoples.

For example, though we believe that distributed/digital learning is an important option for British Columbians the reality is that face to face learning remains central to our institutions and there is a robust body of literature that suggests that students from equity deserving, and underrepresented groups often require robust support services best offered in person. The report acknowledges the mental health challenges of students and the need for a trauma-based approach in expanding access for Indigenous students and others from equity deserving groups, but we believe more thought needs to be devoted to how to deliver that support under the rubric of a digital learning strategy. The report properly points to the need to “consider remote learners, educators, and staff in the promotion of a healthy, safe, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate educational environment for all.” However, there is very little discussion of the unique challenges and costs of delivering on that goal in a digital or hybrid environment.

Another important area that we are happy to share feedback on was the lack of acknowledgment in the document of need for any province wide Digital Learning Strategy to respect both collective agreement provisions and the role of Education Council and/or Senates over academic matters as established through governing legislation. In terms of the relevant collective agreement provisions, we flagged issues of workload and intellectual property and copyright as especially critical and largely absent from the report. The report seems inspired by the work done to move to remote teaching during the pandemic. And while there were many lessons learned and successful experiments during that period our members also reported that a lack of institutional support, including the availability of support from technicians and teaching assistants, contributed to high levels of burnout and pedagogical challenges with the move to remote learning. Indeed, one of the lessons learned from the pandemic is that effective distributed learning is often as expensive and resource heavy as in-person learning. In addition, the exigent circumstances of the pandemic led to the collegial governance processes being bypassed at our institutions. Our members would demand that these processes be respected in the roll out of this strategy. Any provincial Digital Learning Strategy should take those challenges into account and, to be candid, we did not see that in the report.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we were pleased that you clarified that the report’s recommendations are voluntary. We would encourage you to strengthen that language in the document, and to build the framework around voluntary participation at the implementation stage. We would be remiss, however, if we did not reiterate our ongoing concerns about the degree of direct control the Ministry exercises over our supposedly independent, autonomous post-secondary institutions. This direct control of our institutions goes against the autonomy rights enshrined in legislation. Furthermore, it corrodes trust between the parties, and often undermines innovative, local solutions to the challenges facing our institutions. Ensuring that these recommendations remain voluntary would be a step in the right direction.

Having summarized our concerns, we are happy to turn to the next steps for engaging with this process. In terms of follow up from this meeting, our group heard:

1. There was a commitment to considering an addendum to the report to make it explicit that the recommendations were voluntary and that institutions would have to engage with stakeholders on campus and abide by existing collective agreements and collegial governance models.
2. A commitment to proactively engage our sector group in the roll out of the strategy in the coming weeks and months.
3. A commitment to meet as a group again as the strategy enters its implementation phase across the province.

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Thank you again for taking the time to meet with us and hear our concerns. We believe we are well positioned to participate in the dialogue moving forward.

Yours Sincerely,

Brent Calvert, President & Michael Conlon, Executive Director
Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC (FPSE)

Ken Christie, President, Annabree Fairweather, Executive Director
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CC: Tony Loughran; Assistant Deputy Minister, Governance and Corporate Planning
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