

# CRISIS, ALIGNMENT, AND CONTROL: REFRAMING OPEN EDUCATION IN ONTARIO'S VIRTUAL LEARNING STRATEGY

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## Abstract

This study examines how open education, including open educational resources and practices, was reframed within Ontario's *Virtual Learning Strategy* during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative case study informed by the multiple streams framework and the concept of discursive agency, it analyzes how eCampusOntario leveraged the pandemic as a policy window to elevate open education on the provincial agenda. The findings show that open education, historically associated with equity, access, and participatory pedagogy, was recast as a cost-effective, scalable, and system-compatible solution aligned with performance metrics and digital governance priorities. While this reframing enabled rapid institutional uptake and centralized investment, it also narrowed open education's social justice ambitions. This study highlights how crisis-driven policy alignment can legitimize innovation while constraining its transformative potential, offering insights for policy makers and educators navigating equity-oriented reforms in performance-driven post-secondary systems.

**Keywords:** open education, discursive agency, multiple streams framework, COVID-19 pandemic, eCampusOntario, higher education policy

## Résumé

Cette étude examine comment l'éducation ouverte, y compris les ressources et les pratiques éducatives ouvertes, a été redéfinie dans le cadre de la Stratégie d'apprentissage virtuel de l'Ontario pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. À l'aide d'une étude de cas qualitative s'appuyant sur le cadre Multiple Streams Framework et le concept d'agentivité discursive, elle analyse comment eCampusOntario a tiré parti de la pandémie comme une occasion politique pour inscrire l'éducation ouverte à l'ordre du jour provincial. Les résultats montrent que l'éducation ouverte, historiquement associée à l'équité, à l'accès et à la pédagogie participative, a été redéfinie comme une solution rentable, évolutive et compatible avec le système, alignée sur les mesures de performance et les priorités de la gouvernance numérique. Si cette redéfinition a permis une adoption rapide par les institutions et un investissement centralisé, elle a

également réduit les ambitions de l'éducation ouverte en matière de justice sociale. Cette étude met en évidence la manière dont un alignement des politiques induit par la crise peut légitimer l'innovation tout en limitant son potentiel transformateur, offrant ainsi des perspectives aux décideurs politiques et aux éducateurs qui mènent des réformes axées sur l'équité dans des systèmes d'enseignement postsecondaire axés sur la performance.

**Mots-clés:** éducation ouverte, agentivité discursive, Multiple Streams Framework, pandémie de Covid-19, eCampusOntario, politique de l'enseignement supérieur

## INTRODUCTION

Open education refers broadly to approaches in teaching and learning that reduce barriers to access through the use of openly licensed materials, collaborative knowledge production, and pedagogical practices that emphasize sharing and participation (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2007; Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, n.d.). It encompasses both open educational resources (OER), defined as freely available “learning, teaching and research materials” released under open licenses permitting “re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 5), and open educational practices (OEP), which include the pedagogical, collaborative, and institutional practices that support the creation, adaptation, and use of those resources (Cronin & MacLaren, 2018). Historically, open education has been anchored in ideals of educational equity, knowledge democratization, and participatory pedagogy. In this study, open education is understood through a social justice-aligned definition that emphasizes redistributive, recognitive, and representation justice, and frames openness as the development of free, digitally enabled learning materials and practices oriented “primarily by and for the benefit and empowerment of non-privileged learners” (Lambert, 2018, p. 239). Yet in recent years, particularly during systemic disruption, it has been reframed in policy discourse less as a vehicle for social justice and more as a lever for economic utility, institutional efficiency, and digital scalability. This reorientation is especially evident in Ontario’s post-secondary education

policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where crisis conditions enabled the strategic repositioning of open education within a centralized virtual learning agenda.

In December 2020, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU)<sup>1</sup> launched the eCampusOntario-led *Virtual Learning Strategy* (VLS) as an urgent response to pandemic-induced instructional disruptions. While the strategy addressed immediate access and continuity needs, it also formalized a longer-term vision for digital transformation across Ontario’s public post-secondary education system. This moment was not simply about plugging gaps in delivery; rather, it marked a shift in how open education was positioned: from a socially driven innovation to a fiscally responsible, innovation-oriented instrument of system reform. eCampusOntario acted as a central policy entrepreneur, leveraging its existing authority and infrastructure to reframe open education as both urgent and compatible with Ontario’s governance logics. In doing so, the emancipatory roots of open education were reinterpreted through the lens of performance metrics, market rationalities, and technocratic governance.

This study employs discourse analysis, drawing on discursive agency (Winkel & Leipold, 2016) as an analytical lens to examine how open education was reframed within Ontario’s *Virtual Learning Strategy*, while using the

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1 As of 2025, renamed as the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES); see [ontario.ca](http://ontario.ca) for the current official name.

multiple streams framework (MSF; Kingdon, 2011) heuristically to map the conditions under which these discursive constructions gained policy traction, particularly through crisis-induced stream coupling and entrepreneurial activity during the pandemic. My study addresses the following research questions: *How did open education gain agenda status within Ontario's virtual learning policy during the COVID-19 pandemic? and what effect does eCampusOntario, in its role as a central policy entrepreneur, have on how open education is framed within the virtual learning policy agenda?*

## **NEO-LIBERAL GOVERNANCE, CRISIS, AND THE DISCURSIVE REFRAMING OF OPEN EDUCATION**

Open education reflects a “new paradigm of social production” and a participatory knowledge economy (Peters, 2008, p. 10) which democratizes access, reduces student costs, and advances pedagogical innovation (Atenas et al., 2024; Katz & Van Allen, 2022). Yet the realization of these emancipatory and social justice-aligned ambitions depends on the institutional contexts in which open education becomes embedded. Higher education policy has increasingly been shaped by neo-liberal governance logics that prioritize market responsiveness, performance measurement, and institutional accountability over collegial autonomy or public good mandates (Brown, 2015; Busch, 2017). When institutionalized within such systems, open education may be reframed toward efficiency, visibility, and competitiveness rather than structural transformation.

Critical scholarship illustrates how this reframing occurs. Educators’ “gift” of “social labor” becomes vulnerable to exploitation and extraction by commercial actors and publishers (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023, p. 36), while they are reframed less as co-creators than as implementers of externally defined innovation strategies (Cronin, 2020; Winn, 2015). Institutional open policies often privilege licensing and ac-

cess, aligning with visibility metrics and compliance targets rather than reflective practice or pedagogical transformation (Cronin, 2017). Almeida (2017) warns that openness is susceptible to techno-solutionist narratives that reduce it to a buzzword, while Amiel et al. (2020) argue that global digital commons, structured by corporate interests, often fail to reflect local educational needs, reinforcing exclusion rather than dismantling it. Farrow (2017) describes “open washing,” where institutions adopt the rhetoric of openness to legitimize market-driven reforms while neglecting democratic aims. In affordability-driven contexts, OER is frequently cast as a budget-saving tool (McCoy-Simmons, 2022), even as textbook affordability is framed as a social justice issue emphasizing equity and access (Jenkins et al., 2020), a framing that may be taken up within institutional cost-efficiency and accountability agendas. Taken together, this literature suggests that the institutionalization of open education can narrow its scope: rather than advancing redistributive and cognitive aims, it may be rearticulated as a tool for cost-efficiency framing and managerial accountability. My study builds on this scholarship to examine how such reframing unfolds within a specific provincial policy context.

Ontario provides a case through which the friction between social justice-aligned open education and neo-liberal governance becomes legible, as emancipatory aspirations are advanced within systems organized around accountability, efficiency, and market responsiveness. Ontario is home to Canada’s largest publicly assisted post-secondary education system, comprising 24 colleges, 23 universities, and nine Indigenous institutes (Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, 2025). As in all Canadian provinces, education falls under provincial jurisdiction, producing a decentralized national landscape in which funding models, accountability structures, and policy priorities vary regionally. Over the past decade, however, the sector has increasingly converged around performance-based funding, labour market alignment, and measurable outcomes, with Ontario positioned at the forefront of this shift.

Since the mid-2010s, these governance logics have been institutionalized through Ontario's Strategic Mandate Agreements and performance-based funding, reflecting a broader neo-liberal shift toward labour market alignment, quantitative metrics, and institutional accountability (Dougherty & Natow, 2019; Kariwo, 2023). Ontario's online education policies similarly prioritize efficiency and workforce preparation over pedagogical or equity goals (Farhadi & Winton, 2024). At the same time, prior investments in digital learning infrastructure, including Contact North (est. 1986), eCampusOntario (est. 2015), OntarioLearn, and the Shared Online Course Fund (2013–2016), normalized coordinated digital delivery models across the province (Lanthier et al., 2023). Within this policy environment, I argue that open education becomes entangled with online expansion agendas and reframed as a scalable and cost-effective solution.

Crisis conditions intensify this reframing. Pandemic-era digital policy emphasized scalability, platformization, and performance metrics over inclusion and epistemic diversity (Williamson et al., 2020), while Ontario's crisis response sought to restore "business as usual" despite weak provincial coordination and fragmented institutional planning (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020, p. 323). Discourses of "safety/security" and "the return to normal" further reinforced governance logics (Bordignon et al., 2024). These observations matter for this study because they illustrate how crisis discourse stabilizes, rather than disrupts, governance logics. Policy entrepreneurs leverage these moments "to promote major change" by framing particular policy responses as necessary, urgent, and inevitable (Mintrom & Norman, 2009, p. 650). During the pandemic, eCampusOntario leveraged its institutional authority to position open education as a solution, an intervention I argue was instrumental in reframing the role of open education in Ontario's post-secondary education system.

The alignment of crisis-driven discourse, institutionalized digital governance, and the strategic actions of policy entrepreneurs demonstrate how the framing of open education was consolidated in Ontario's policy landscape. As

Winkel and Leipold (2016) argue, discursive agency involves the strategic and intentional deployment of discourse to frame problems and solutions in ways that stabilize or redirect policy trajectories, an emphasis aligned with my critical constructivist lens. Ontario's case reflects a central paradox: Although open education is presented as democratizing, its social justice-aligned ambitions—especially in crisis—may entrench neo-liberal governance. This paradox underpins my study's focus on how policy entrepreneurs mobilize crisis conditions to advance particular policy framings of open education, and why those framings merit critical examination.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a qualitative case study to examine the agenda-setting process behind Ontario's VLS, with focus on how open education was discursively constructed and elevated within provincial policy discourse. The study's design draws on a critical policy analysis orientation (Young & Diem, 2016), which interrogates the discursive construction of policy problems and solutions and examines how these constructions reflect and reproduce particular power relations and institutional priorities. This analytic orientation is underpinned by a critical constructivist epistemological lens, which views policy realities as socially constructed rather than objective, emerging through language, institutional norms, actor positioning, and interpretive practices (van Hulst et al., 2024). This lens foregrounds how discourse actively shapes social reality rather than merely reflecting it, highlighting the constitutive power of narratives in directing policy trajectories.

The multiple streams framework views policy change as the temporary alignment of three streams—problems, policies, and politics—during a critical window of opportunity (DeLeo et al., 2024; Herweg et al., 2018; Kingdon, 2011; Zahariadis et al., 2023). Crises can trigger these windows, allowing policy entrepreneurs "an op-

portunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems” (Kingdon, 2011, p. 165). However, MSF has been critiqued for under-theorizing the discursive and ideational mechanisms through which policy meanings are constructed and circulated (Cairney, 2018, 2024; Zahariadis et al., 2023). To address this, I integrate discursive agency, which examines how actors strategically frame problems, construct subject positions, and navigate competing narratives (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). In this integration, discourse analysis complements MSF by addressing how problems and solutions are discursively constructed through rhetorical and ideational processes, while MSF functions as a heuristic for explaining *when* and under *what* conditions these constructions gain policy traction, such as during crises or through entrepreneurial actions (Cairney, 2024). It is discourse analysis (discursive agency as an interpretive mechanism) that renders the overall approach interpretive, emphasizing the role of meaning-making and power in policy processes, whereas MSF is positioned not as a theory of meaning or power, but as a framework for timing and stream alignment (Zahariadis et al., 2023). This study traces how open education was rendered a viable solution during institutional disruption, with eCampusOntario analyzed as a key policy entrepreneur and discursive agent.

## Case Selection and Context

Ontario’s *Virtual Learning Strategy* provides a rich case due to its unique timing, centralized implementation, and strong sector coordination. As the province’s first coordinated policy supporting OER/P in virtual post-secondary education, it offers a compelling lens to examine how policy windows, institutional actors, and ideational shifts intersect. Document analysis serves as the primary empirical method, allowing systematic examination of how meanings are negotiated, stabilized, and mobilized over time. The case includes a purposive sample of 63 publicly available English-language documents, published from 2002 to 2024, covering both pre-pandemic infrastructure development and the intense policy activity surrounding the

*Virtual Learning Strategy*. Documents include provincial government policy reports and strategic documents related to virtual learning, institutional and intermediary agency publications (e.g., eCampusOntario, The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO]), advocacy and sector reports, media coverage, and relevant academic research. Document selection was guided by Kingdon’s (2011) MSF, with an initial broad scan oriented to identifying materials corresponding to stream-specific mechanisms, including indicators, focusing events, and feedback in the problem stream; political priorities and stakeholder activity in the politics stream; and policy entrepreneurs, communities, and windows in the policy stream.

## Analytical Method

In the first stage of analysis, documents were deductively organized by MSF stream and analytically reviewed to map agenda-setting conditions surrounding the emergence of the *Virtual Learning Strategy*. Particular attention was given to how COVID-19 was framed as a crisis, how open education emerged as OER/P solutions, and how political and institutional alignment facilitated policy movement. Key documents that highlighted eCampusOntario’s discursive role were selected for deeper analysis.

Second, deeper analysis examined how eCampusOntario exercised discursive agency to render open education both fundable and politically legitimate. Drawing on Winkel and Leipold’s (2016) concept of “an actor’s ability to make him/herself a relevant agent in a particular discourse,” the study analyzed how eCampusOntario constructed and performed subject positions of innovation broker, sector steward, and policy facilitator (p. 112). Recurring discursive elements—such as student savings, scalability, and digital transformation—were traced across documents to determine how they displaced or rearticulated open social justice-aligned narratives. Consistent with qualitative case study research emphasizing transferability over statistical generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), the analysis aims to produce a context-rich account of open education’s discursive repositioning.

## FINDINGS

### **Problem Stream: Pandemic Disruption, Digital Inequity, and Affordability Gaps**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was widely framed across Ontario's post-secondary education policy landscape as an acute systemic disruption. In March 2020, the then–Ministry of Colleges and Universities described the shift to online delivery as a means to maintain “academic continuity” (MCU, 2020a). It provided \$25 million in emergency support for “online learning supports” to help students “complete their school year while studying remotely” and ensure the academic year was “not put in jeopardy” (MCU, 2020b). A year later, an additional \$106 million was allocated, reinforcing the persistence of systemic challenges (MCU, 2021a, 2021b). Funding was framed as necessary to “address the financial impacts of COVID-19,” maintain Ontario’s “position as a global leader in higher education,” and alleviate “expenses associated with online learning” (MCU, 2021b). Together, these responses positioned digital learning not as a temporary fix but as a strategic solution, effectively opening a policy window for systemic transformation.

Indicators in the problem stream had long signalled weaknesses in Ontario’s digital infrastructure. A 2015 Global Affairs Canada survey noted online learning was growing at 8.75%, yet concluded Canada could “not be considered a leader in this field” (Martel, 2015, p. 3). Subsequent studies challenged this assessment and produced more robust data (Bates & Sangra, 2011; Jean-Louis, 2015), including annual surveys by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA). The CDLRA 2017 survey found 83% of institutions nationally cited a lack of “adequate resources for online learning” as a key barrier, with 16% of Ontario institutions citing insufficient government support (Bates et al., 2017, pp. 38–39). Although Ontario had invested early in course development through eCampusOntario, CDLRA reports consistently highlighted structural gaps. In 2018, 85% of institutions cited the “additional faculty effort required to

develop or deliver online courses” (Donovan et al., 2019, p. 55) as a major barrier. By 2019, “inadequate training for faculty” (Johnson, 2019, p. 32) had emerged as the most significant digital challenge in Ontario. The 2020 CDLRA report anticipated a “new normal” that would be “distinctly more digital than the pre-pandemic status quo” even as infrastructure and training gaps worsened (Johnson, 2021, p. 27). Notably, all CDLRA reports were partially sponsored by eCampusOntario, signalling its role in shaping the problem narrative and directing attention to digital capacity and OER visibility as policy-relevant challenges.

In parallel, open education was increasingly positioned as a response to affordability and digital scalability. Pre-pandemic CDLRA survey data show gradual growth: In 2017, only 5% of institutions using “OER extensively” (Bates et al., 2017, p. 32), but by 2019, 67% of Ontario institutions reported using open textbooks, “with an additional 19% exploring their use” (Johnson, 2019, p. 19)—outpacing national trends. Despite this growth, only 20% of OER-adopting institutions tracked “cost savings” (Donovan et al., 2019, p. 38). As the pandemic progressed, cost-efficiency and adaptability became dominant frames. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2020) reported that eCampusOntario had invested \$2.8 million in “open-resource development since 2016” (p. 14), generating \$5.8 million in student savings by 2019.

By emphasizing affordability, reuse, and measurable value, eCampusOntario exercised discursive agency by framing open education as a fiscally responsible, scalable solution tailored to institutional pressures. Sponsored publications foregrounded student cost savings and aligned open education with system performance goals. For example, Hayman (2018) found that while 70% of educators assigned learner-purchased resources like “coursepacks, hard-copy textbooks, and digital textbooks,” most agreed that OER had the “potential to lower the cost of post-secondary resources,” and were “willing to experiment,” even though materials were often “not easy to find in their discipline” (pp. 17–18). Similarly, Skidmore and

Provida (2019) observed that although student cost savings motivated faculty, OER's impact on "student success and access to learning" offered "more convincing arguments" for institutional support (p. 15). These framings recast open education's social justice appeal in terms compatible with institutional logics of cost efficiency and performance.

By 2021, CDLRA surveys showed rising faculty support for digital and open resources, while key barriers persisted. Although 96% of Ontario educators favoured digital materials, only 39% adopted them due to lack of training (Johnson, 2022a). Nationally, 94% of institutions reported increased use of digital teaching materials, yet only 49% saw increased OER adoption, citing the need for "more OER awareness initiatives" (Johnson, 2022b, p. 9) and ongoing training. In 2022, 68% of Canadian educators still lacked awareness of OER (Ferlatte, 2022), alongside expanded professional development efforts in Ontario (Johnson, 2023b). By 2023, 76% supported OER use, while 98% cited cost as a major barrier for students (Johnson, 2023a). These patterns reinforced a dominant policy narrative positioning open education as an economically legible response to worsening affordability and access gaps.

Together, these developments indicate that eCampusOntario was not merely responding to a policy window but was actively shaping the framing of the problem itself. By sponsoring research, promoting affordability narratives, and emphasizing digital learning gaps, it exercised discursive agency to align open education with existing policy concerns while simultaneously redefining those concerns to advance an agenda-setting strategy.

## Policy Stream: Open Education as a Technocratic and Scalable Solution

By the time the *Virtual Learning Strategy* was announced in December 2020 (MCU, 2020d, 2020e), foundational infrastructure for OE had already been established through prior eCampusOntario initiatives (Ministry of Training, Col-

leges and Universities, 2015a, 2015b). The Ministry of Colleges and Universities stated that the *Virtual Learning Strategy* would "build on and leverage Ontario's existing digital learning organizations—Contact North and eCampusOntario—that improve access and drive innovation in virtual teaching and learning" (MCU, 2020e). Infrastructure such as the Open Library and H5P Studio (eCampusOntario, n.d.-a) positioned OE as "policy ready": available, scalable, and fundable. The *Virtual Learning Strategy* team noted that "the work of eCampusOntario increased capacity in powerful ways and sped the process... by a decade in our estimation" (eCampusOntario, 2021b, p. 2). As pandemic pressures intensified, this pre-existing solution became increasingly attractive.

The MCU described the VLS as a "historic investment" to "drive growth and advancement in virtual learning" across Ontario's post-secondary education institutions (eCampusOntario, n.d.-c). eCampusOntario committed to "support the post-secondary sector" by offering "technical briefings," leveraging Virtual Learning Advisory Committee expertise to ensure a "transparent funding distribution process," aiding "project work" and helping "communicate systemic *Virtual Learning Strategy* impact" based on sector progress (eCampusOntario, n.d.-c). These commitments expanded eCampusOntario's institutional role beyond coordination and innovation broker, discursively authorizing it as both policy facilitator and sector steward. These subject positions conferred discursive authority, enabling the organization to frame priorities, mobilize legitimacy, and steer the narrative of digital transformation.

This authority materialized through institution-facing project calls that operationalized OE as a strategic priority. Between December 2020 and January 2021, 860 proposals were submitted, with 395 funded by March 2021 (eCampusOntario, 2021a, p. 2). Projects were evaluated against core pillars: "being the future," "being a lifelong learner," and "being a global leader" (eCampusOntario, 2021a, p. 1). The Virtual Learning Advisory Committee reviewed the entire project portfolio to ensure alignment with those pillars and with principles

of “equity, collaboration, and impact” (eCampusOntario, 2021a, p. 2). The initial \$50 million supported projects in digital content, capacity, delivery, and fluency (eCampusOntario, 2021a), followed by a second \$7 million round in November 2021 funding 62 additional projects (eCampusOntario, 2022a). Outputs included “sharing digital-by-design materials” (eCampusOntario, 2021b, p. 2) that were open, reusable, and adaptable, as well as “honorariums or team grants” for educators “to adopt and adapt OER” and “integrate” OERs into curricula (eCampusOntario, 2023a, p. 4). Through this centralized strategy, eCampusOntario shaped funding priorities, incentivized specific educator behaviours, and embedded OE within a broader innovation and performance framework, positioning it as a system-aligned policy instrument rather than a pedagogical alternative.

Public-facing documents further reinforced this alignment. The *Virtual Learning Strategy* envisioned an “open Ontario” that “shares resources to enhance equity and access” (eCampusOntario, 2021b, p. 1), structured around content, fluency, and capacity. The three content areas are (1) virtual educational resources (e.g., textbooks), (2) simulations and XR experiences, and (3) online courses and micro-credentials, of which only 84%, 51%, and 37%, respectively, apply a global open license that enables conversion into “distinct, globally available Open Educational Resources (OER)” (eCampusOntario, 2021b, p. 2) such as test banks, syllabi, and assignments. These areas were tied to impacts such as “collaboration across institutions,” “supporting learner experiences,” “sharing Ontario-made digital resources,” “reducing barriers to postsecondary education (e.g., cost saving),” and “increasing efficient use of institutional resources (e.g., human & financial)” (eCampusOntario, 2021a, p. 3). This echoes similar framings of OE as “fair and just access to education,” OERs as “free or low-cost materials,” and educators’ use of OER to shape “learning experiences that support inclusive and accessible institutional policies for digital learning” (eCampusOntario, 2023a, p. 1). While gesturing toward equity, the language prioritized adaptable, scalable, and measur-

able outputs aligned with performance-oriented governance. Collectively, these documents constructed open education not as a disruptive pedagogy, but as a system-compatible modernization tool.

eCampusOntario’s role as a digital intermediary illustrates discursive agency in positioning OE as a technocratic solution aligned with sector-wide goals. Defining itself as a collaborative innovator because it “supports innovation, collaboration and digital-by-design education” (eCampusOntario, n.d.-b), the organization was identified to play a “vital role facilitating the development of policy alternatives” (Skidmore & Provida, 2019, p. 25) in Ontario post-secondary education. The role was later reinforced in the *Virtual Learning Strategy* publication *One-Year Impact Report*, which affirmed the “increased availability of high-quality open resources to enhance teaching and learning” (eCampusOntario, 2022d, p. 4), enabling broader system adoption and resource sharing. Together, these framings tied open education to both immediate pandemic recovery and long-term system modernization.

## Politics Stream: Institutional Alignment and Strategic Legitimacy

The politics stream highlights how discursive agency shaped the political conditions enabling the VLS. Prior to the pandemic, UNESCO’s OER declarations (UNESCO, 2012, 2017), guidelines (Miao et al., 2016, 2019; UNESCO, 2019), and Canada’s open access policy (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2015) contributed to a climate in which open education acquired “normative power” (Winkel & Leipold, 2016, p. 123), softening resistance to openness despite having no direct influence on the *Virtual Learning Strategy*.

During the pandemic, Ontario’s policy discourse framed cross-institutional alignment as necessary for responding to systemic disruption. The *Ontario Onwards* action plan promoted the crisis-driven “modernization efforts” and public service “transformational change,” ex-

PLICITLY prioritizing digital learning (Government of Ontario, 2020, p. 19). Among its initiatives, the *Virtual Learning Strategy* aimed to “improve access to high-quality” post-secondary education by enhancing the sector’s capacity for “high-quality, accessible online learning experiences” in domestic and “global markets” (Government of Ontario, 2020, p. 8), positioning virtual learning at the intersection of student-centred accessibility and economic competitiveness.

eCampusOntario emerged as a policy entrepreneur by addressing the demand for centralized coordination in open education innovation. Before its establishment, a 2013 HEQCO report highlighted the demand for converting high-demand programs into quality online equivalents, emphasizing “high-quality open textbooks” to support this transition (Carey & Trick, 2013, p. 25). The push toward centralization was reinforced through 2018 consultations proposing collaborative educational technology strategies, which promoted shared platforms to streamline resources, improve efficiency, and expand access to advanced tools across post-secondary education institutions (Forsmann et al., 2018; Forssman & Wolf, 2018). In 2019, the MCU tasked HEQCO with producing digital learning recommendations that identified eCampusOntario’s “high priority activity” in OER “production and promotion” to “provide savings to students,” citing BCcampus as a model (HEQCO, 2020, p. 14). These developments positioned eCampusOntario as a sector steward advancing collaborative, cost-effective solutions.

Public sentiment further shaped political legitimacy. A 2017 Ipsos survey commissioned by eCampusOntario found strong familiarity with online learning (75% of Ontarians), alongside quality concerns addressed through branding and outreach (eCampusOntario, 2017, p. 8). Post-pandemic, Ontario student and faculty associations raised concerns about the quality of emergency remote instruction, calling for improved accessibility and digital pedagogy (Abou-Rabia et al., 2021; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2020). At the same time, accountability pressures in-

intensified with the new 2020–2025 Strategic Mandate Agreements linking institutional funding to performance metrics (MCU, 2020c, 2022; Weingarten et al., 2019).

Within this context, eCampusOntario’s alignment with Strategic Mandate Agreement priorities were strategic. As a government-funded intermediary, it supported institutions in meeting mandate targets, ensuring the *Virtual Learning Strategy* initiatives remained fundable and policy compliant. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2020) reinforced this, stating that “government funding provided through eCampusOntario...should be tied more explicitly to the government’s goals of enhanced institutional collaboration and expanded credit transfer” (p. 2). This alignment was reflected in *Virtual Learning Strategy* reports and flexibility briefs, which stated that meeting “changing expectations requires increased flexibility in all areas—practice, infrastructure, and policy” (eCampusOntario, 2023b, p. 1) and emphasized efficient allocation of human and financial resources (eCampusOntario, 2021b, 2022b). Investments “over \$2.5 million in 31 projects” (eCampusOntario, 2022c, p. 5) supported experiential learning content, fluency, and delivery, while credentialing initiatives “supported job readiness through alternative, stackable credentialing and unbundled learning journeys” (eCampusOntario, 2022d, p. 4). Collectively, these discursive shifts signal a move toward a more neo-liberal policy orientation, grounded in accountability, labour market utility, and system-wide optimization.

As a policy entrepreneur, eCampusOntario thus played a dual role: managing *Virtual Learning Strategy* implementation and scripting open education’s political meaning. Through selective framing and metric-based reporting, open education was positioned as contributing to student savings, institutional collaboration, and post-pandemic agility, while being depoliticized through its alignment with affordability and efficiency rather than pedagogical contestation.

## DISCUSSION

### Stream Coupling: Constructing Open Education's Policy Ascent

The COVID-19 pandemic opened a rare policy window in Ontario's post-secondary education system. Long-standing structural pressures—from rising student costs to digital infrastructure gaps—converged with political willingness to invest in system transformation. Within this alignment, open education emerged as a ready-made solution, framed by eCampusOntario to match both crisis urgency and provincial priorities. It was reframed simultaneously as a technical and economic solution. Technically, it promised institutional efficiency and to “enhance digital fluency” (eCampusOntario, 2021b, pp. 2–3). Economically, it was presented as “reducing barriers to postsecondary education (e.g., cost saving)” and promoting “sharing Ontario-made digital resources throughout the Canadian postsecondary education system and beyond” (eCampusOntario, 2021b, p. 3). This open sharing ethos also supported efforts to “strengthen Ontario's leadership domestically and globally, by expanding access for Ontario's institutions to the global marketplace for virtual learning” (MCU, 2020d, Be a Global Leader section), reframing openness less as emancipation and more as a marketing tool for international competitiveness.

This narrative control enabled strategic alignment of the problem (affordability and institutional disruption), policy (scalable, fundable digital solutions), and politics (institutional alignment and performance governance) streams. eCampusOntario performed this coupling through discursive agency by adopting multiple subject positions: innovation broker (defining open education's value in economic and institutional terms), sector steward (managing its circulation across stakeholder groups), and policy facilitator (aligning it with *Virtual Learning Strategy* pillars). In doing so, it acted as a discursive agent that structured meaning across streams, actively linking institutional goals to the urgency of pandemic reform. It deployed “discursive strategies” of storylines (e.g., cost savings) and rationalization (e.g., performance metrics), de-

defined as “all language and symbol-bound activities that aim to create (or prevent the creation of) necessities for (specific) policy intervention,” to re-code open education as a technocratic instrument (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 526). In this capacity as a discursive agent, it also functioned as what Knaggård (2015) conceptualizes as a “problem broker,” whereby actors that are persistent, credible, and “have access to policy makers” make an impact by knowing “who to talk to, how and when” (p. 462). eCampusOntario illustrates this role through its consortium status, representing all of Ontario's publicly funded colleges, Indigenous institutes, and universities, as well as its quasi-governmental positioning, endorsed by provincial agencies such as MCU and HEQCO. Ultimately, open education was absorbed into Ontario's neo-liberal governance regime, not as a radical transformation, but as a competitive instrument aligned with performance metrics, modernization, and market expansion.

### Framing, Discursive Agency, and Neo-Liberal Governance

In Ontario, the pandemic catalyzed long-standing issues of affordability and digital readiness, creating conditions for open education's adoption. Yet its uptake was not driven by its socially transformative goals. Instead, eCampusOntario leveraged the crisis to reframe open education as cost-effective, modular, and system-compatible. This transformation highlights framing as persuasion in which a policy entrepreneur can “persuade policymakers that a technically and politically feasible solution already exists” (Cairney, 2024, p. 6). This analysis captures not only the structural alignment of streams but also the rhetorical work through which actors construct this alignment and render it persuasive.

Drawing on the notion of “situated openness” (Albornoz et al., 2017, p. 294), the VLS reframed open education around flexibility, affordability, and competitiveness, downplaying redistributive and recognitive justice-oriented knowledge practices. By situating open education within the *Virtual Learning Strategy*, equity and efficiency are rhetorically presented as

co-existing, but in practice, the strategy prioritizes performance goals over equitable access and inclusive knowledge sharing. Rather than disrupt neo-liberal policy trends, the *Virtual Learning Strategy* reinforced them. Open education was absorbed into policy discourses of modernization that stress scalability, employability, and sector alignment, consistent with Marginson's (2013) account of the regulated quasi-markets and New Public Management practices that have reshaped higher education governance.

While governance logics shaped the broader discursive terrain, their translation into policy outcomes hinged on how actors mobilized them. eCampusOntario's influence extended beyond stream coupling. Through sponsorship of CDLRA reports, prioritization of OER visibility, and defining institutional needs and readiness, it also helped construct the problem narrative itself. As a problem broker, it leveraged knowledge, values, and emotions to amplify the salience of digital and affordability issues (Knaggård, 2015). The discursive power it exercised shaped both the problem and solution, ensuring that open education's meaning aligned with Ontario's governance logic. eCampusOntario exhibited discursive agency by not only framing open education as a feasible solution but also curating the discursive conditions that rendered it both necessary and urgent.

Open education was not adopted for its intrinsic pedagogical merits but made legible to policy makers as a fiscally rational, system-compatible solution during institutional crisis. This suggests even equity-rooted innovations like open education can be re-coded through technocratic lenses when taken up in performance-driven policy environments. Far from neutral, such framings reflect the values and governance priorities of those controlling funding, discourse, and legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

eCampusOntario capitalized on the COVID-19 crisis to frame open education as a scalable, fiscally responsible solution, aligning it with neo-liberal imperatives such as institutional flexibility, efficiency, and workforce development. This strategic reframing allowed open education to gain legitimacy within the *Virtual Learning Strategy* while muting its social justice roots. Despite the market-oriented framing, the *Virtual Learning Strategy* substantially advanced open education by centralizing its infrastructure, increasing its visibility, and funding its development. The policy window enabled open education to become part of Ontario's digital learning architecture, but its radical potential was tamed in the process.

These findings raise important questions: What is lost when open education is stripped of its social justice-aligned ethos and repackaged as institutional cost savings? Can policy actors maintain fidelity to open education's social justice aims while securing institutional support through technocratic frames? Future research should explore how open education is framed across jurisdictions, how resistance to instrumentalization emerges, and how educators navigate the tension between compliance and commitment. While this analysis is situated in Ontario, similar governance conditions—such as intermediary-led coordination (British Columbia's BCcampus), performance-based funding, and provincial digital learning initiatives—are present across the Canadian post-secondary education field. Understanding these dynamics is essential to sustaining open education as not just a policy, but as a values-based movement for equity and educational transformation. This study invites policy makers and researchers to reflect critically on how discursive strategies—not just evidence or urgency—shape the direction and meaning of innovation in higher education policy.

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