

Stakeholder Summary

Large classes: Size matters but teaching skill and course design matter more

The jury's still out on the impact of large classes on student learning, but they're a fact of life in higher education, prompting postsecondary institutions to explore new strategies to maintain or improve quality -- from building community through social media to initiating peer mentorships. But if size matters, a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario finds that skill and competency of the instructor, teaching methods and course design probably matter more.

Project Description

Teaching and Learning in Large Classes at Ontario Universities: An Exploratory Study highlights the challenges and opportunities that are unique to teaching large classes, and some of the strategies being employed to address them. The report includes a literature review and consultations with innovative faculty and teaching/learning support staff at Brock, Carleton, Lakehead, McMaster, Queen's, Guelph, UOIT, Ottawa, Toronto, Waterloo, Windsor, Wilfrid Laurier and York universities. All individuals were recommended by their institutional academic vice president or director of their teaching and learning center as practicing innovative approaches to teaching large classes.

Findings

While there are few studies assessing the impact of class size on learning in postsecondary education, teaching approaches and class size are "almost inextricably intertwined," says the report. Large classes can prompt student feelings of isolation and anonymity, resulting in less personal responsibility and motivation for learning, while instructors may have less opportunity for interaction with students. Increased student diversity can make it more difficult for instructors in knowing at what level to "pitch" material and in identifying students at risk, although many instructors viewed increased diversity as an opportunity to explore different perspectives on course content and made use of it as a teaching tool.

A number of the large-enrolment courses have undergone a substantial curriculum or course re-design, requiring an up-front, major investment of time and resources. Many instructors note that large classes require more time initially for class preparation, and that they have to be much more organized and structured in teaching such classes. In almost all cases, instructors identify a need for additional funding and human resources. All agree that high student numbers and constrained resources limit the assessment methods available to them – often resulting in the use of multiple-choice tests.

Particularly for large classes, institutional support for teaching influences both the challenges and opportunities. Many of the institutions (and in several cases their faculty unions) are described as valuing research over innovation in teaching. A willingness to explore innovation in large classes is more likely to occur at institutions where there are teaching stream faculty, investments in institutional teaching and learning centers or teams, and where teaching excellence is included in the promotion and tenure process.

Among large-class strategies: a move away from the traditional lecture to blended learning that includes web-based modules, interactive demonstrations and other electronic tools, which require students to be familiar with the content before attending the lecture. Social media is becoming a virtual gathering place for students and teaching staff, a strategy born of “we may as well join them if they are there already.” Other strategies range from peer mentorship programs to small-group tutorials and labs, from circulating among students during the lecture to being available before and after the class for informal interaction. Several of the very large courses assemble a diverse educational team to share the work, with the lead instructor supported by senior teaching assistants, lab coordinators, technologists, educational assistants and administrative assistants.

Policy Implications

Given the projected demand for PSE in Ontario, it is likely that large university classes and the challenges in large-class teaching are here to stay. And although financial constraint may be the catalyst for large classes, effective teaching approaches are not necessarily less costly. Using technology and exploring new teaching strategies require significant investments of time and money as well as rigorous evaluation. A change in mindset is required on the part of students, who must become more responsible for their own learning in this new environment.

Overall, greater institutional support for teaching is critical, says the report. “Without incentives for change, clear definitions of faculty roles and institutional support, the risks involved for faculty may outweigh the benefits...The challenges involved in teaching large university classes can be overcome with appropriate vision, support and cooperation of institutions, faculty and students. Exploring ways to enhance these conditions is the next challenge.”

Teaching and Learning in Large Classes at Ontario Universities: An Exploratory Study was written by Angelika Kerr, former research analyst at HEQCO and now senior policy advisor with the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.