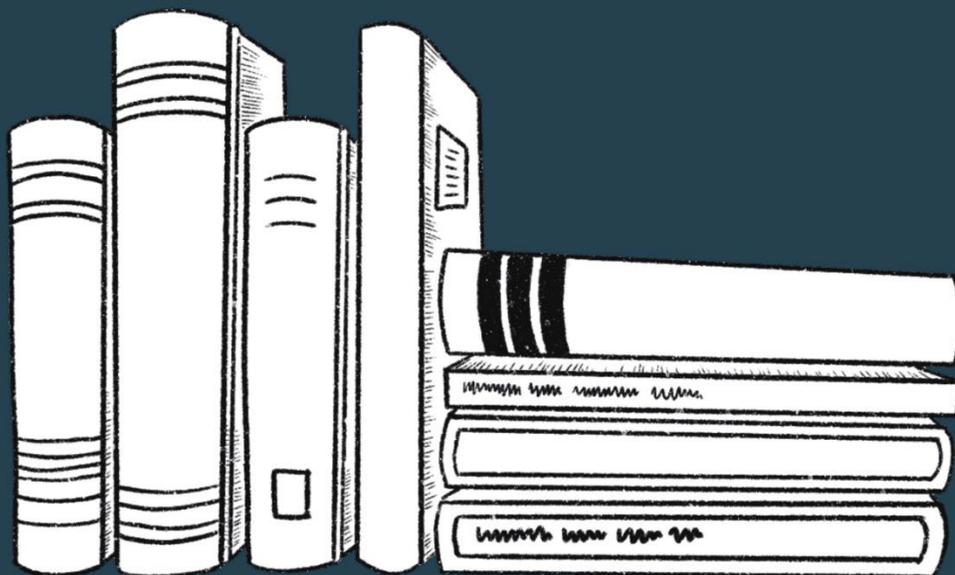


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What's Driving Student Decisions? Analyzing 2022 Ontario College Application Data

Hagar Effah, Sarah Brumwell,
Margaret de Leon & Jackie Pichette

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88 Queens Quay West, Suite 2500

Toronto, ON

Canada, M5J 0B8

Phone: (416) 212-3893

Fax: (416) 212-3899

Web: www.heqco.ca

E-mail: info@heqco.ca

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a trend towards online learning that was well underway in Ontario postsecondary education (PSE) since the early 2000s. Online learning opportunities and student interest in accessing them have steadily increased for decades, as measured by increasing online course registrations ([Lanthier et al., 2023](#)). Despite this, many feared that the pivot to a fully remote learning environment would deter prospective students from pursuing PSE ([Trick, 2020](#)). This was the scenario in the U.S., where colleges saw dramatic drops in enrolment in 2020 and 2021 relative to 2019 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023).

Ontario did not have the same experience. College enrolments decreased only marginally in 2020-21, consistent with patterns seen in previous years, and Ontario universities saw a marginal increase in enrolments (Statistics Canada, 2022d). Indeed, there were signs that, despite reported challenges of emergency remote learning (Statistics Canada, 2020), many Ontario students had become increasingly open to online and/or hybrid learning since school closures (Pizarro Milian, 2023; [Napierala et al., 2022](#); [Pichette et al., 2022](#)).

In 2021, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) and OCAS¹ partnered to analyze the pandemic's impacts on college applications — exploring who applied, and their motivations for doing so — using OCAS's 2021 Applicant Experience and Intention Survey (AEIS). Our report, [Remote Opportunities for Adult Learners](#), revealed that mature learners accessed college programs at higher rates due to a confluence of COVID-related factors, including labour market disruptions, remote work arrangements and the flexibility of online learning. We encouraged Ontario postsecondary educators to pause before returning to a pre-pandemic distribution of program and course offerings, and reconsider how to optimize in-person and online options to suit the province's changing applicant demographics.

In this brief, HEQCO uses responses from the 2022 AEIS to continue examining college applicants' evolving attitudes towards online learning: how openness to and preferences for online, hybrid and in-person learning formats varied by student demographic characteristics, including age, location, gender and employment status, prior to the pandemic, in 2022 and moving forward. We also explore student-reported concerns (e.g., location, finances, etc.) and decision-making factors (e.g., program selection, delivery format, employment opportunities, etc.) motivating their applications. Together, the findings can provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the factors influencing applicants' decisions and the evolving acceptance of online course delivery in the wake of the pandemic: information colleges can use to support lifelong learning and student success.

¹ OCAS is a not-for-profit organization delivering shared technology and centralized application services for Ontario's public colleges.

Research Questions and Methodology

We sought to answer the following questions:

- How has the pandemic affected college applicants' learning preferences, specifically relating to online and/or hybrid learning?²
- What are college applicants' preferred learning formats for the future? How do attitudes toward online and hybrid learning vary by student characteristics (e.g., age, gender, employment status and so forth)?
- What considerations drove students' decisions about applying to college in fall 2022?

Each year, OCAS carries out the AEIS to survey the needs and motivations of college applicants in an effort to help colleges improve program offerings and support services. This is a voluntary survey, available in French or English, that is sent online via SurveyMonkey to all consenting Canadians who apply to fall-term college programs. OCAS administered the 2022 survey in June 2022, and included new questions, developed in partnership with HEQCO, relating to learning preferences at three distinct points in time (prior to the pandemic, at the time of the survey and moving forward) and relating to applicants' intentions to access supports and services.

OCAS received responses from approximately 14,000 applicants (16% of the approximately 90,000 participants it was sent to). OCAS linked responses to demographic application data, including information about gender, age, Indigenous identity, whether a student is first in their family to attend postsecondary, and postal code. In total, HEQCO received anonymized data for 14,288 respondents.

HEQCO conducted descriptive statistics using STATA 17. Proxy variables were created for some student characteristics based on the college services that respondents indicated they intended to access (i.e., accessibility services; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) services; LGBTQ+ services; and Indigenous student services). The proxy variables were cross-checked against related demographic variables from the survey, which provided a good indication of reliability. Postal code data was used to create an urban-rural variable, capturing whether applicants were based in rural or urban locations at the time of application using the Statistics Canada Postal Code Conversion File (Statistics Canada, 2022c).³ A random sample of 832 qualitative survey responses were coded in NVivo, drawn with attention to the demographic characteristics of the overall survey sample to ensure representativeness.

Table A1 in the Appendix displays key characteristics of the sample used in our analysis. The majority of respondents (62%) were between the ages of 16 and 24.

² While some of our survey questions ask students about the effects of COVID-19 on their learning preferences specifically, we note that these data represent student perceptions measured at one point in time.

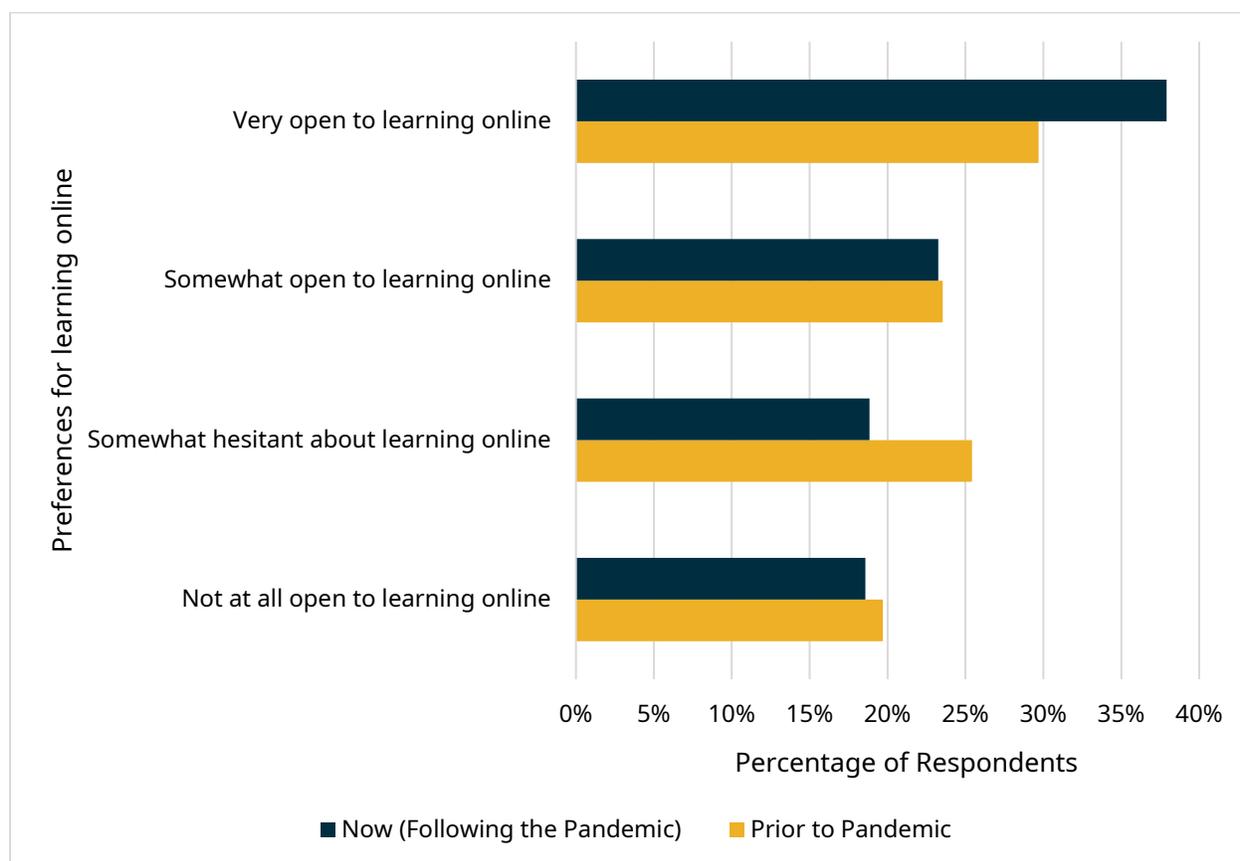
³ HEQCO's urban-rural variable is derived from Statistics Canada's Population Centre and Rural Area Classification, but it includes an additional level: rural – not otherwise specified. This reflects postal codes that could not be matched to the conversion file but have '0' as the second character, which indicates a rural forward sorting area (Statistics Canada, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2022c).

Findings and Discussion

Applicants were asked to indicate their openness to online learning at the time of the survey and prior to the pandemic. At the time of the survey, approximately 38% of respondents said they were “very open” to online learning, whereas 30% of respondents recalled being “very open” prior to the pandemic (see Figure 1). This was true regardless of gender, employment status, whether the respondent was the first in their family to attend PSE, whether their presumed location was urban or rural,⁴ or if they indicated having service needs regarding diversity, sexuality or accessibility.

Figure 1

Applicant Openness to Learning Online, Prior to and After the Pandemic



Note: This figure shows responses to the question, “How has the pandemic affected your learning preference?” sorted by four choices: ‘very open to learning online,’ ‘somewhat open,’ ‘somewhat hesitant,’ and ‘not open at all.’

These findings are consistent with those from the 2021 survey ([Pichette et al., 2022](#)). Other research conducted prior to the pandemic suggests that student interest in online learning options grew in part due to the flexibility these options afford (Johnson et al., 2019; Harrison, 2016). Across most demographic characteristics, there were relatively consistent changes in

⁴ Location was based on our proxy variables.

preferences (a growth in preference for online learning by about 8 percentage points). Age, gender and employment status were the exceptions.

When broken down by age, results show particular growth in openness to online learning among mature applicants, also consistent with data from the 2021 AEIS. For all age categories over 25, there was at least a 14 percentage point increase in respondents who considered themselves “very open” to online learning compared to before the pandemic. For respondents aged 16 to 24, there was a three percentage point increase.

Learning preferences also varied by gender: women had a larger growth in openness to online learning than men. There was a nine percentage point increase in the number of women who considered themselves “very open” to online learning since the start of the pandemic contrasted with a three percentage point increase among men. Prior research suggests that women tend to be more engaged in online environments, participating in more virtual discussions, for example (Morante et al., 2017). As media reporting suggested, women — and in particular, those balancing work and family responsibilities — were already beginning to capitalize on the flexibility afforded by online learning opportunities before the pandemic (Lewington, 2018).

Openness to online learning varied across job statuses as well. Respondents who identified as NEET (not in employment, education or training) showed the largest increase at 15 percentage points; 50% of respondents in this category considered themselves “very open” to online learning now, compared with 35% prior to the pandemic. Employed respondents (i.e., those not in school) showed a 12 percentage point increase. Even in times of unemployment, Canadian adults have tended not to pursue further education; this is despite evidence that doing so would lead to more stable, higher-paying careers ([Pichette et al., 2019](#)). The rapid shift to online learning and coincident change in attitudes towards it may be creating opportunities for more adults to pursue postsecondary programs ([Pichette et al., 2022](#)).

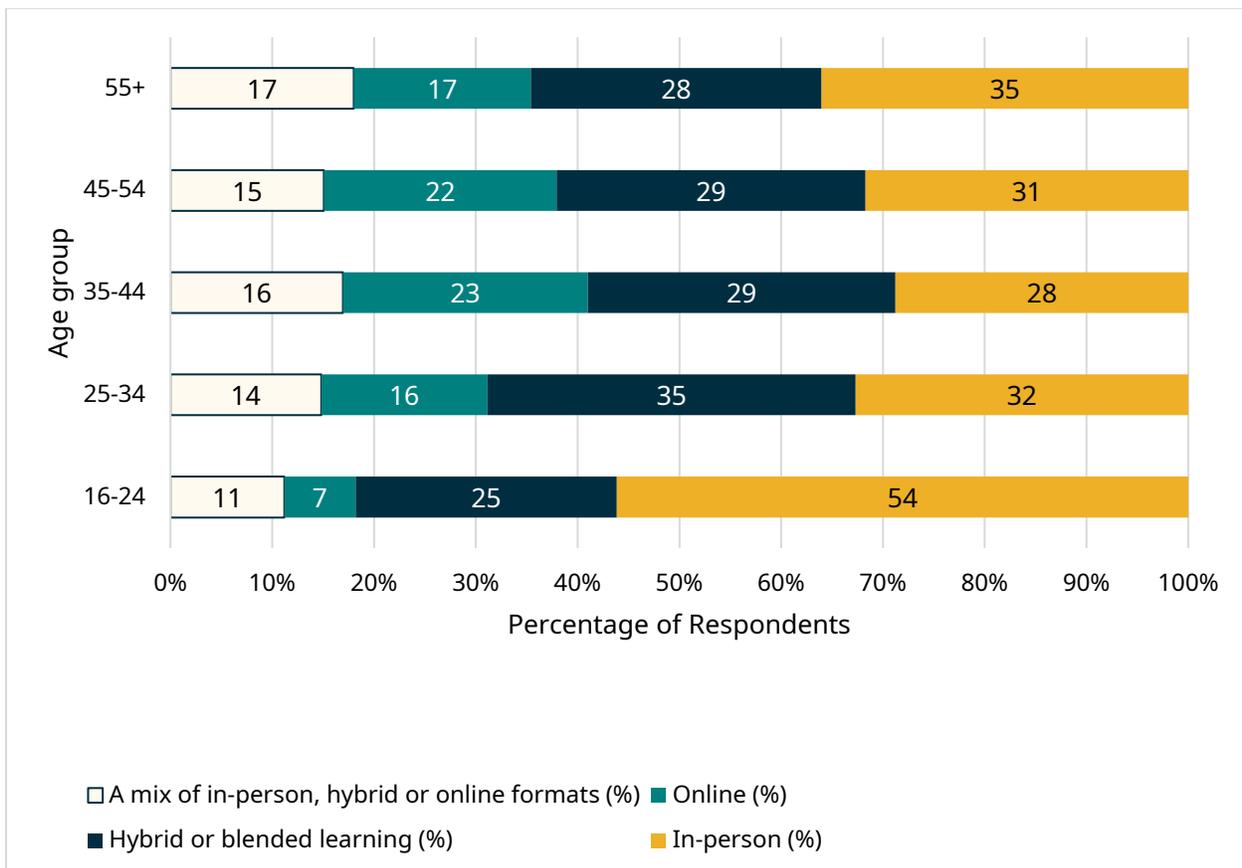
We also asked applicants to select what their preferred learning format would be in the future (see Figure 2 and Appendix Figure A2). Almost half (45%) of respondents indicated a preference for in-person classes, and almost a third (28%) would prefer hybrid or blended learning.⁵ These findings align with another Canadian post-pandemic study, which found a “surge” in applicant demand for hybrid learning alongside an ongoing desire for in-person engagement. The authors explain that “students are increasingly demanding simultaneous in-person and virtual access to the classroom ... they want a student-centred environment where they are in control of when and where they learn” (Pizarro Milian & Janzen, 2023).⁶

⁵ Hybrid or blended learning is defined as courses with some portions held in person and some held online (e.g., one out of three scheduled classes taking place online) (Johnson, 2021).

⁶ These findings are based on data from an annual survey administered by Academica Group, a Canadian market research firm, distributed to Canadian university and college applicants to study the motivations, marketing initiatives and other key decision factors influencing the application process.

Figure 2

Preferred Learning Formats Moving Forward, by Age



Note: This figure shows responses by age to the question, “What is your preferred format for learning going forward?” with available options being a mix of in-person, hybrid or online formats; hybrid or blended learning; online; and in-person.

Mature applicants showed more enthusiasm for digital learning opportunities moving forward, with generally similar levels of interest across in-person and hybrid learning. About 30% of respondents aged 25+ preferred in person, about 30% preferred hybrid and about 20% preferred online.⁷ Meanwhile, respondents in the 16-to-24 age group showed a more consistent preference for in-person learning (54%). Women between 25 and 34 were particularly enthusiastic about hybrid learning, tending to prefer that option to in person by a wide margin.⁸

There were considerable differences in preferences across employment statuses when age was considered. For younger learners aged 16 to 24, responses varied according to whether the student was in high school at the time of application. A majority (61%) of younger respondents who were in high school at the time of the survey selected in-person learning as their preferred format, followed by hybrid (20%); only 5% preferred fully online. Respondents aged 16 to 24 who identified with another job status (for example, as working full- or part-time, or NEET)

⁷ About 16% preferred a mix of modalities, and the remainder were unsure.

⁸ Thirty-eight percent of women aged 25 to 34 preferred hybrid and 27% preferred in person; 31% of women aged 35 to 44 preferred hybrid and 25% preferred in person. For more information, see Figure A1 in the Appendix.

tended to be slightly more open to online or hybrid learning. As an example, 32% of students in the same age group who were working part-time preferred hybrid learning.

Accounting for variations in preference by characteristics like age and job status requires further research, but it is fair to assume that some applicants' relative openness to online and hybrid learning reflects wider trends in the world of work. Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 4% of Canadian employees were working from home (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021a). But as of August 2022, that percentage was roughly 17% (down from a pandemic high of about 40%), with an additional 8.6% working in a hybrid arrangement (Statistics Canada, 2022b; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021b). As the future of work becomes more digitally enabled (Leblanc et al., 2021) and applicants continue to acquire technological skills (and digital labour interactions are further normalized), openness to online learning may continue to grow.

It is possible that younger learners' preferences may similarly evolve as they encounter improved online courses in high school. Many Ontario secondary students experienced online learning for the first time in the context of multiple cycles of pandemic-related school closures (Wong, 2021). The legislated requirement for secondary students to complete at least two online credits before graduating only came into effect well into the pandemic (Ministry of Education, 2022; CBC News, 2019). School closures forced educators to replicate in-person classroom experiences, remotely, with little planning or preparation (Newton, 2020), which likely resulted in sub-par learning opportunities. This may help explain why younger applicants expressed a preference for in-person learning. High school students may also not have had the skills, nor the technology or conducive spaces, to be successful in these emergency environments ([Gallagher-Mackay & Brown, 2021](#)). Indeed, online learning requires some maturity in the form of strong time management and organizational skills ([Pichette et al., 2020](#)). The fact that some 16- to 24-year-olds, not in high school, may be more open to learning that integrates online components (i.e., hybrid formats) may be because they honed these essential skills through personal and work experiences outside of high school.

Regardless of their preference, most respondents indicated format was important to them. Among the 80% of respondents who indicated that their decision to pursue their college program was not affected by the pandemic, the top drivers for their program selection were the class delivery format and/or a longstanding interest in their chosen program or field. Among the 20% of applicants who indicated that the pandemic *did* affect their decision-making, most reported that it was COVID-19's impact on class delivery format that mattered most. One applicant described their issue as such: "I am still concerned about how the online courses are delivered. I am really hoping that there will be a variety of learning methods and I am not just expected to read all the course material."

A relatively small group of respondents who said the pandemic affected their program choice indicated they were considering its impact on employment opportunities. It will be revealing to see, in future iterations of the survey, if more students indicate being motivated by specific pandemic-related or other labour shortages — especially as these shortages receive government and media attention and highlight the need for highly skilled college-trained workers (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022). The Government of Ontario recently announced the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant, which will help fund college programs in nursing

and paramedicine, for example, and may attract more applicants to eligible programs (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2023; Cook, 2023).

Respondents expressed several concerns about applying to college; in particular, employed applicants voiced concerns⁹ involving readjusting to school, commuting or relocating, or finances, with the latter being the most prevalent. For many students, the return to college is an opportunity to upskill or reskill for a new or existing career, but for some, this means missing out on potential earnings from work. Rising costs of living were another financial concern that repeatedly emerged in our qualitative analyses. For example, a mature respondent (in the 25 to 34 age group) voiced the following worry:

I will likely use about half my savings to attend this program, especially since I need to live in residence. OSAP may help with up-front costs, but also contributes to long-term costs. I am willing to take out loans for education, but funding is still a concern when cost of living is so high.

Applicants who indicated that they intended to access college financial aid services expressed apprehensions about applying to college in greater proportion (+34%) than students who did not intend to access financial services. While cost is a perennial issue for learners in higher education, COVID-19 lockdowns saw rising unemployment rates and layoffs, with young Canadians and visible minority groups experiencing higher levels of unemployment, higher levels of financial difficulty and higher representation in low-wage jobs (Statistics Canada, 2021). Employment levels recovered to pre-pandemic numbers in 2022, though other stressors, such as inflation and rising costs of living, continue to impact Canadian households, especially for younger age groups and lower-income households (Statistics Canada, 2022a; Statistics Canada, 2023). Statistics Canada reported that almost half of Canadians were concerned about their household's ability to afford housing or rent, with young adults among those most concerned about their finances (Statistics Canada, 2023). As inflation pushes costs upward in Ontario, more students may consider online or hybrid options as a cost-saving strategy.

Conclusion

The pandemic triggered an unprecedented shift online for school, work and social events. As Ontarians gained more exposure to online tools and developed the skills needed to succeed online (through work, for example), their openness to learning online grew. Though initially a necessity, the widespread adoption of online learning also proved more convenient for many students, demonstrated in both the 2021 and 2022 OCAS AEIS. The most recent survey revealed a general increase in openness to online learning across demographics and a similar appetite for both in-person and hybrid formats among mature students moving forward. The continued, general preference for in-person learning among younger students, particularly those applying directly from high school, in part likely reflected negative experiences with emergency remote learning during the pandemic. Younger learners may want opportunities to develop in-

⁹ Applicants who were working full or part time when they applied expressed general concerns about applying in higher proportions (35% and 34% respectively) than applicants from high school (27%). Applicants who were currently enrolled in postsecondary and working either part time or full time (28%) expressed concerns about applying in greater proportions than full-time postsecondary applicants who were not working (24%).

person social connections, or they may need more time to hone skills for success in virtual learning environments.

Regardless of age, class delivery format was a key driver in the applicant decision-making process. Ontario colleges should continue monitoring applicant and student preferences and strive to optimize the distribution of program and course offerings between online, in-person and hybrid formats. Colleges should consider opportunities to develop skills necessary to learn online effectively, particularly for younger students, with curricular and co-curricular programming ([Napierala et al., 2022](#)).

As online learning continues to normalize, and as Ontarians continue to encounter opportunities to engage online in high school and in their personal and professional lives, their preferences will continue to evolve. Considering the financial concerns students voiced, more students may gravitate towards flexible programs that allow them to balance both work and school. If these factors translate to increased demand for online or hybrid programming in PSE, colleges will need to employ quality-control measures to ensure those programs are engaging and accessible to a wide demographic of students ([Courts et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, it is important to note that online and hybrid environments are not limited to the education space but are increasingly common in the world of work. It is vital that institutions design classroom environments that prepare students for the realities they will encounter post-graduation. The quality of college-based online and hybrid learning experiences, as well as skill development opportunities, will set the stage for students' ability to succeed in virtual environments in the labour market.

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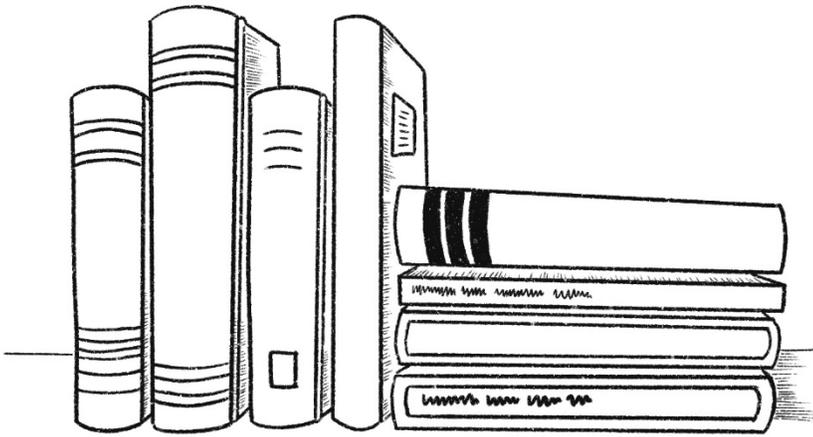
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What's Driving Student Decisions? Analyzing 2022 Ontario College Application Data

Appendix

Table A1

Key Characteristics of the Sample

Demographic Characteristics	%
Gender (N=14288)	
Female	67
Male	32
Age Group (N=14288)	
16–24	62
25–34	19
35–44	12
45–54	5
55+	1
Status at Time of Application (N=11395)	
Currently not working and not a student	9
Fifth-year/Victory lap HS student	4
PSE student — not working	5
PSE student — working PT	6
PSE student — working FT	4
Grade 12 HS	33
In an apprenticeship program	0.3
Part-time PSE student — not working	0.6
Part-time PSE student — working PT	1
Working FT	24
Working PT	10
Other	3
Education Status (N=11395)	
Completed an undergraduate degree at a university	12
Completed community college	11
Completed high school	43
Completed high school as a mature student or through adult education	7
Completed some community college, vocational school, and/or trade school	5
No HS	1
Postgraduate degree / Professional school (such as a master's degree or PhD)	4
Some HS / did not complete HS	6
Started but did not complete an undergraduate degree at university	5
Other (please specify)	5
Indigenous Status (N=14288)	
Not Indigenous	94.5
Indigenous	5.5
First-generation Status (N=14288)	
Not first-generation	69

Demographic Characteristics	%
First-generation	31
Rural/Urban Applicants (N=13477)	
Rural n.o.s	9
Rural area	6
Small population centre (1,000–29,999)	7
Medium population centre (30,000–99,999)	10
Large urban population centre (>=100,000)	68
Intention to Access Support Services (N=14288)	
Intend to access accessibility services	16
Intend to access LGBTQ+ services	11
Intend to access DEI services	18

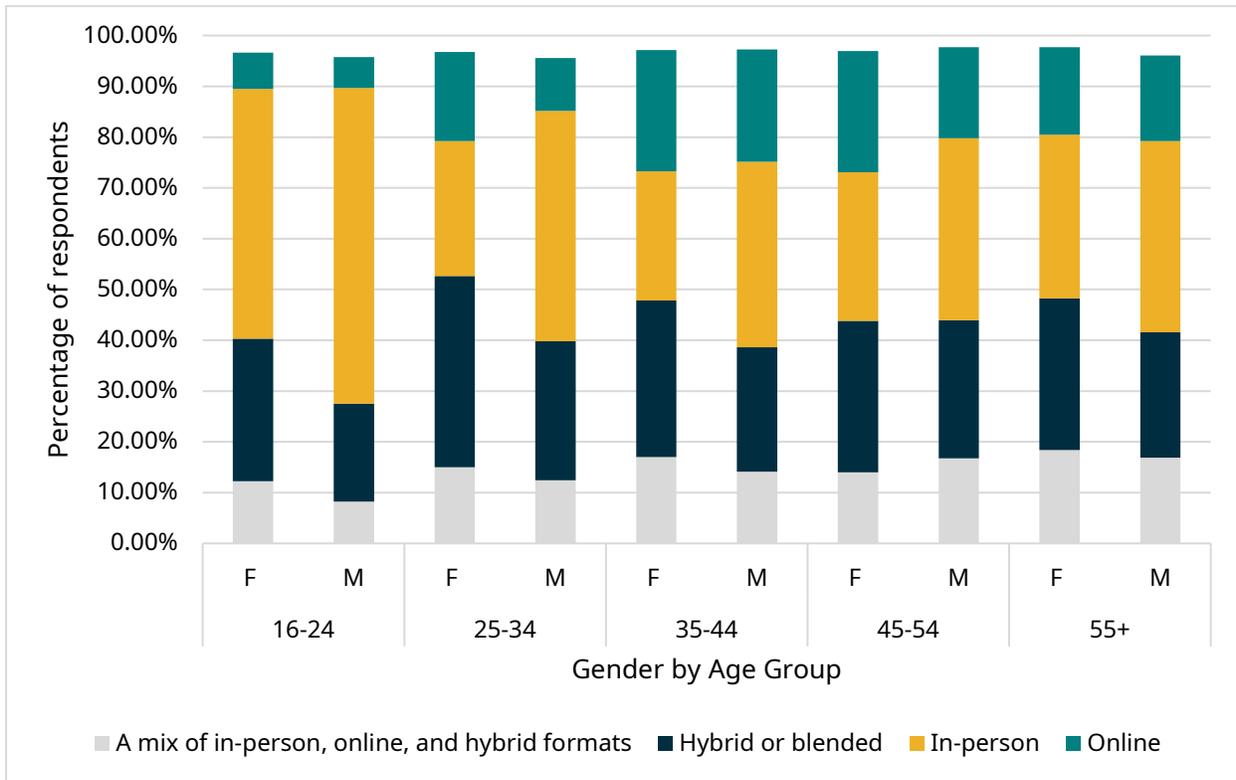
Table A2

Openness to Learning Online Prior and After the Pandemic, with Percentage Change

Level of Openness	Prior to Pandemic	Time of survey (2022)	Percentage change
Not at all open to learning online	19.70%	18.57%	-1.6%
Somewhat hesitant about learning online	25.43%	18.84%	-7.1%
Somewhat open to learning online	23.54%	23.26%	-0.9%
Very open to learning online	29.69%	37.92%	7.2%
n/a	1.64%	1.42%	-0.3%

Figure A1

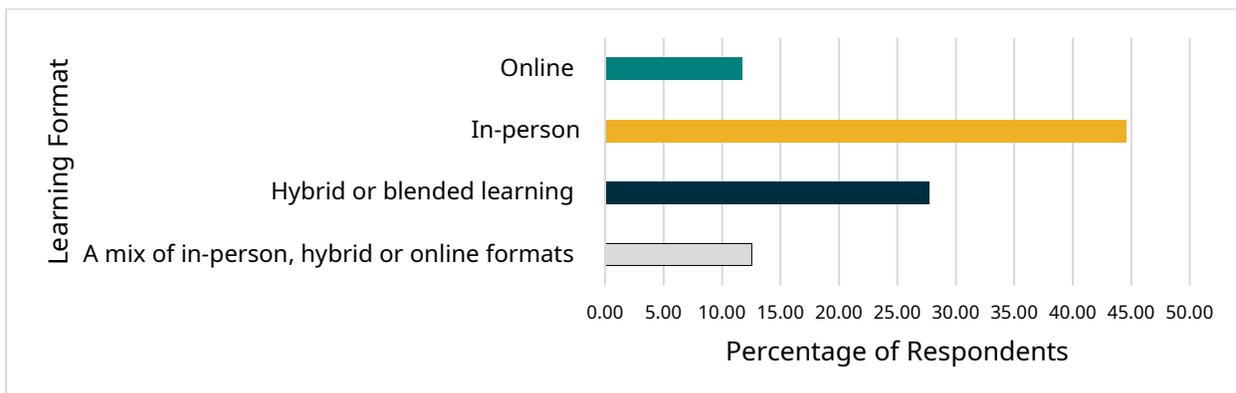
Preferred Learning Formats Moving Forward, by Gender and Age



Note: This figure shows responses to the question, “What is your preferred format for learning going forward?” with the response options of ‘a mix of in-person, online and hybrid formats’; ‘hybrid or blended’; ‘in-person’; or ‘online.’

Figure A2

Preferred Learning Formats Moving Forward, Overall



Note: This figure shows responses to the question, “What is your preferred format for learning going forward?” with the response options of ‘a mix of in-person, online and hybrid formats’; ‘hybrid or blended’; ‘in-person’; or ‘online.’