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Emerging Technologies Brief: Imagining the Future



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Imagining the Future of Post-Secondary Education in Canada

Post-secondary education in Canada is in a state of upheaval. International student restrictions, student demands for flexible offerings, and ongoing tensions surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) use, have resulted in discussions about whether there is a need for systemic change. The findings from the 2025 Emerging Technologies Survey, conducted by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA), show that many within the sector anticipate some sort of change to the post-secondary system in the near future.

The survey asked respondents a series of questions about their expectations for the future (and how they think post-secondary education may change), whether they feel prepared for change, and whether they feel optimistic or pessimistic about the changes they are anticipating.

This research brief provides an overview of the survey findings related to feelings about the future from the 2025 Emerging Technologies Survey.

Since 2023, the CDLRA surveys have asked respondents to answer three questions related to the future of post-secondary education in Canada:

1. How different do you think post-secondary education will be from the present state in 5 years' time?
2. Do you feel ready for the changes that the future might bring to your institution?
3. Considering the current situation, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the overall future of higher education over the next 5 years?

Consistent with previous years, nearly all survey respondents shared that they expect post-secondary education in five years to be different to some extent from the present. Almost one-third of respondents expect post-secondary education to be very different.

How different do you think post-secondary education will be from the present state in five years' time?

Year	Very Different	Somewhat Different	Slightly Different	The Same as Now	Don't Know
2025*	30%	52%	16%	2%	1%
2024*	28%	54%	16%	1%	0%
2023	28%	53%	16%	1%	2%

**The numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number for the purposes of this report, making the sum 99%; however, when rounded to the nearest tenth, they add to 100%.*

The survey invited respondents to leave an open-ended response sharing how they thought post-secondary education would change over the next five years.

The two most common themes that emerged in the open-ended responses were AI use and assessment. Respondents wrote that they held the expectation that AI would play a large role in shaping: the type of competencies students would need to develop for the workforce, the way students engage with content (e.g., developing critical thinking skills and the ability to discern the accuracy of AI-generated information), and the overall educational experience. The expectation for changing assessment practices was connected to the growth and evolution of AI technologies, with respondents acknowledging that traditional assessment methods (e.g., tests) are going to become increasingly difficult as a result of AI advancements.

Some respondents also commented that they anticipated a shift toward competency-based learning within the next five years, especially as it relates to workforce readiness. Increased flexibility and opportunities for personalization within the post-secondary experience, including courses offered in multiple modalities and alternative pathways to credentials (like microcredentials and stackable credits), were mentioned by respondents as well.

The findings also showed that most respondents continue to feel prepared or somewhat prepared for the changes they are anticipating.

Do you feel ready for the changes that the future might bring to your institution?

Year	Yes	Somewhat	No	Don't Know
2025	27%	55%	14%	4%
2024	30%	57%	11%	2%
2023	29%	58%	12%	1%

Additionally, feelings of optimism appear to be declining over the years, with a minority of respondents expressing optimism, compared to a majority in past years.

Considering the current situation, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the overall future of higher education over the next 5 years?

Year	Very Optimistic	Optimistic	Neutral	Pessimistic	Very Pessimistic
2025	6%	39%	29%	22%	3%
2024	11%	43%	22%	20%	4%
2023	12%	54%	26%	7%	1%

When asked why they felt optimistic, pessimistic or neutral, respondents touched upon issues like technology integration (including AI use), the openness and responsiveness to change at their institution, and issues related to funding and resources. These issues were connected to both feelings of optimism and pessimism (and neutrality), depending on whether a respondent perceived that these factors were having a positive or negative impact. Respondents also shared that government decision-making, the socio-political climate, and opinions about the changing purpose of post-secondary education contributed to their optimistic or pessimistic view of the future.



Closing Thought:

For the past three years, respondents have been expecting and preparing for change in the post-secondary sector, and continue to do so. Over time, the proportion of respondents who feel optimistic about the future has declined. Respondents anticipate that AI and other technologies will play a significant role in reshaping post-secondary education, and, for many, this drives their feelings of hope or disillusionment.

“I think many people are doing their best to meet the challenges that emerge, often far beyond our control. Lots of faculty, staff and students really care about effective teaching and learning, and I think we’ll find ways to continue to meet challenges, though it won’t be easy. Seeing so many care so much gives me great hope!” (Teaching and Learning Leader)

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The CDLRA recognizes that, as a remote team, we live and work in many different locations on lands taken from Indigenous peoples. As a team, we seek to better understand the ongoing impacts of colonial systems and structures, particularly within the Canadian post-secondary education sector.

We thank the many individuals who have met with our team to discuss potential survey topics, provide feedback on our findings, and share insights from the field. These perspectives have been critical in shaping our research initiatives.

We also thank the CDLRA team members and contractors who perform the tasks that support our day-to-day operations and enable us to conduct our research studies.

Most importantly, we thank our survey respondents.

Sponsors and Partners

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Methodology

Information for this report comes from the 2025 Emerging Technologies Survey, which is part of the CDLRA's Pan-Canadian Digital Learning Survey Project. The project is longitudinal and includes gathering data from two annual surveys. More details about the project and the methodology can be found here:

<https://cdlra-acrfi.ca/methodology-for-the-pan-canadian-digital-learning-survey-project/>

Specific to the 2025 Emerging Technologies Survey:

- The survey was open from August 18 to October 17, 2025.
- 178 participants from 91 unique institutions responded to the survey, representing all provinces and one territory.
- Participant roles included administrators (e.g., senior administrators, deans, and directors), teaching and learning leaders, instructional designers and educational developers, institutional researchers, library services staff, student support staff, and educational technology specialists.

Through this research brief, we have compared some of the 2025 findings with those from previous years. More information about past surveys can be found in the respective annual reports on the publications page of the CDLRA website:

www.cdlra-acrfi.ca/publications

Copies of the survey instruments for each year are available upon request.

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