

Ontario

International case study

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|---|--|
| Generic skills description | Transferable skills Essential Employability Skills |
| Generic skills in the academic and vocational curriculum | Skills are integrated and embedded in both the academic and vocational curricula. Not taught as a separate subject or curriculum. |
| Skills teaching and learning approaches | There are specific specialist teachers for transferable skills. Combination of teacher directed and experiential learning including project work. |
| Generic skills assessment | Assessed within other subjects and as part of Ontario Secondary School Diploma. |
| Teacher autonomy | Teachers have some autonomy to include skills and about how they include them. |

This is a case study of generic skills in 14-19 education in **Ontario** in Canada developed through a desk review of selected, mostly official documents. It is intended to be read alongside another 9 international case studies and an overarching summary report of the research *Sheffield Institute of Education* undertook in collaboration with *Centre for Education Systems* with funding from *The Charitable Foundation for Educational Development*. The project investigated how ‘generic skills’ are characterised, understood, and implemented across 10 jurisdictions, with particular reference to the relevance for England.

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Summary

Known as transferable skills in Ontario, generic skills are seen as essential skills and qualities that enable students to thrive in the workplace and succeed in the contemporary world. The Ontario Ministry of Education identified seven categories of transferable skills, based on international research, employer input, and collaboration with other Canadian provinces. These categories are:

- critical thinking and problem solving
- innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship
- self-directed learning
- collaboration
- communication
- global citizenship and sustainability
- digital literacy

The curriculum gives students opportunities to acquire transferable skills at different ages and grade levels throughout their academic or vocational journey. These skills are integrated into all subjects, rather than developed in isolation, and there are a range of programme options in secondary education designed to help students develop and apply generic skills in real-world contexts. In addition, to transferable skills, Ontario also identified related Essential Employability Skills.

Embedding transferable skills through all years of schooling, not simply for some students who receive employability support at ages 14-19, means that these generic skills are not seen as an add-on to education. Generic skills development is also supported by two wider contextual factors: economic growth and a successful education system with its well-qualified teaching workforce with professional autonomy. The overall approach to curriculum and teaching in schools combines teacher-directed learning and experiential learning, so teaching and learning in academic and vocational courses have common features. The policy context is one where the provincial government has responsibility for education and democratic processes of stakeholder engagement including in policy development.

1. Contextual factors

This section provides an overview of the country of Ontario, beginning with its social and economic context and its educational context in section 1.1. Section 1.2 explores the key systems and structures of the education system. Section 1.3 covers the education workforce and professional status. Finally, section 1.4 describes how policy relating to skills is formed and enacted in Ontario. These are all discussed particularly in relation to generic skills.

1.1 Economic, social, and educational context

Ontario, Canada, is a relatively stable province in economic, social and political terms. As Canada's most populous province, it has an increasingly diverse and multicultural society, reflecting sustained immigration.¹ Currently its population represents about 40% of Canada's people² and on current projections it will increase by around another 6.6 million) over the next 24 years, reaching over 20 million by 2046. Net migration is expected to contribute 86% of the growth.³ In response to the changing demographics there is a political consensus on the importance of inclusivity and equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their class or ethnicity.

Ontario hosts a significant portion of Canada's Indigenous population, comprising 23% of the total. Spread across the province are 133 First Nations communities, representing at least 7 distinct cultural and linguistic groups. These communities stretch from Windsor in the south to the northern shores of Hudson Bay. Among them, five of Canada's 20 largest bands are situated in Ontario, with the Mohawks of Six Nations being the largest. Additionally, over 30 First Nations in Ontario are categorised as remote, accessible primarily by air year-round or by ice road for much of the year, surpassing the number in any other region.⁴

Ontario has a diverse economy where manufacturing, finance, technology, healthcare, and education are the dominant sectors. The province has witnessed a shift from traditional industries to a greater emphasis on innovation, technology, and knowledge-based sectors, with associated growing demand for high-skilled workers. Province-level initiatives are in place to tackle the skills gap and promote economic growth.

Educational overview

Ontario offers a diverse range of educational pathways (including both academic and vocational routes) to meet the different needs and aspirations of its students. Policy discourse focuses on a quality curriculum, inclusive practices, and a commitment to lifelong learning.

1 World Population Review, 2023 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/canadian-provinces>

2 Statistics Canada, 2021 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-215-x/2021001/sec1-eng.htm>

3 Government of Ontario, 2023 <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-population-projections>

4 Government of Canada, 2021 <https://sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1603371542837/1603371807037>

1.2 Key educational systems and structures

Curricula, assessment and qualifications

The Ministry of Education in Ontario provides a standardized curriculum framework which outlines the learning expectations, content, and skills for each subject and grade level. The curriculum serves as a guideline to ensure consistency and alignment of education provision across schools and districts.

Qualifications and diplomas are awarded to students upon the completion of specific educational pathways. For instance, the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) is obtained by students who fulfil the credit requirements, including subject-specific courses and compulsory units.⁵ While the OSSD does not have explicit credentials solely dedicated to generic skills, students' development of these skills is integral to the work required to achieve the overall diploma. The diploma acknowledges a student's mastery of subject-specific knowledge and their ability to apply generic skills within the broader context of their education.

School/college organisation

Publicly funded education in Ontario is organised into three distinct stages: early childhood education, catering to children from birth to age 6; elementary school, accommodating students from kindergarten to grade 8; and secondary school, serving students from grade 9 to 12.⁶ **Figure 1** (on the next page) depicts the education system in Ontario.

The Ministry of Education oversees Ontario's public and early childhood education system, which consists of 72 school boards including English public, English Catholic, French public, and French Catholic boards, as well as other school authorities. Trustees, elected during municipal elections, serve as the local representatives of the public and parents, while student trustees advocate for students' interests. The Director of Education, appointed by the trustees, manages the school board's operations. Superintendents oversee groups of schools within each board. Parent Involvement Committees work to enhance collaboration between school boards and parents. Principals lead individual schools, supported by vice-principals. School councils, comprising parents, the principal, a teacher, a student, a non-teaching staff member, and a community representative, offer advice.⁷

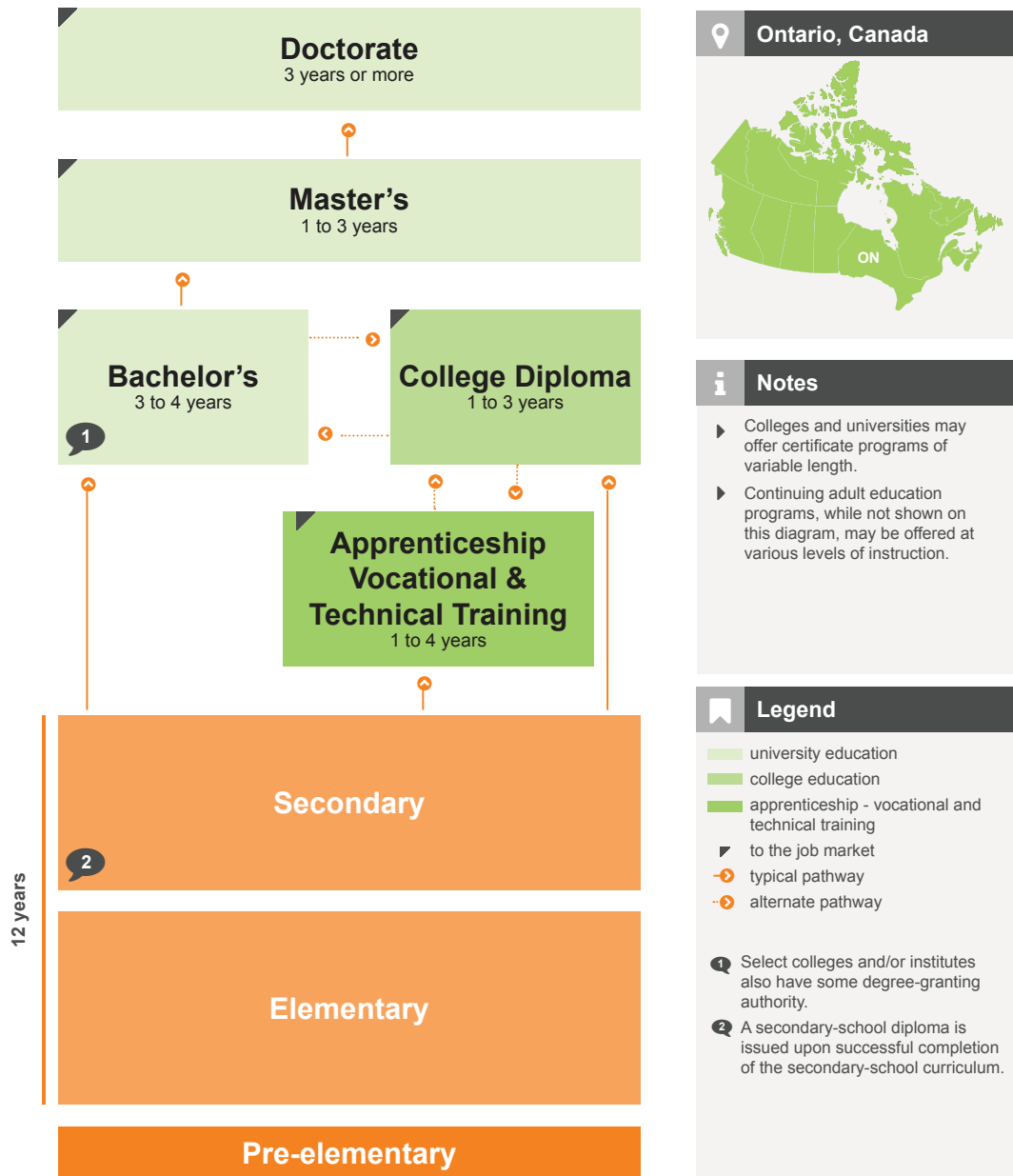
In secondary school, students choose to pursue either an academic or vocational pathway, based on their interests and career goals. Academic programs focus on preparing students for post-secondary education, while vocational programs provide more hands-on training and skills development for specific trades and careers, alongside their general education towards their OSSD.

⁵ Government of Ontario, 2023b <https://www.ontario.ca/page/high-school-graduation-requirements>

⁶ People for Education, 2024 <https://peopleforeducation.ca/public-education-in-ontario/>

⁷ People for Education, 2024

Figure 1. The education system of Ontario.⁸



1.3 Education workforce and professional status

Ontario’s teacher education programs lead to a teaching certificate from the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) and recognition that the trainee has met specific qualification standards. The OCT is a professional membership body with considerable independence from the provincial government. To become a certified teacher in Ontario, individuals are generally expected to meet the following requirements:⁹

- an undergraduate degree for teachers entering general education;
- an acceptable certificate (including certificate of apprenticeship), diploma or advanced diploma and work experience for teachers entering technological education;
- a completed initial teacher education program.
- While a graduate degree in education is commonly pursued by aspiring teachers, it is not a strict requirement for entering the profession.

There are differences between vocational and academic teacher qualifications in Ontario. Academic teachers typically specialise in specific subject areas, such as English, mathematics, or science, and they are required to hold qualifications in their respective subjects. Vocational teachers focus on delivering instruction in vocational or trade-related subjects, and they are expected to have relevant expertise and experience in their vocational fields. Their qualifications may involve a combination of academic credentials and relevant industry experience or certifications.

In Ontario, there are teachers who specialise in delivering generic skills, such as career and life skills or transferable skills. These teachers are often referred to as “specialist high skills majors” or “cooperative education teachers”.¹⁰ While their particular focus is on developing generic skills, they are still certified and recognised as teachers within the education system. They typically have the same professional status as other teachers and are subject to the same professional standards and requirements.

Professional status and autonomy

In Ontario, teachers have some degree of autonomy in terms of how they implement curriculum content and make instructional decisions, provided they adhere to the prescribed curriculum set by the Ministry of Education. The balance between adherence and discretion varies depending on the subject, grade level, and specific educational context.

Within the prescribed curriculum, teachers have considerable flexibility to use their professional judgement to determine how best to meet the needs of their students. They can select appropriate instructional strategies, teaching resources, and learning activities to enhance student engagement and understanding. Differentiated instruction is encouraged.

⁹ Government of Ontario, 2022a <https://www.ontario.ca/page/qualifications-teaching-ontario>

¹⁰ Ministry of Education, 2018, pp. 13-14 <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/cooperative-education-2018.pdf>

Teachers in Ontario are expected to engage in professional collaboration within their schools and across the education system. They work with colleagues to share best practices, develop instructional resources, and align teaching strategies. This collaborative approach functions as an aspect of professional development, intending to help teachers enhance their practices and skills to implement the curriculum effectively and consistently.¹¹ Generally, Ontario puts strong emphasis on continuous professional development for teachers.

1.4 Policy formation and implementation

In Ontario, the overall approach to policy formation is consensual and consultation with opportunities for a wide range of actors to influence policy. This potentially benefits Ontario's policy implementation as it supports considerable 'buy in' from stakeholders. Conversely, a potential drawback of the approach is that there is some policy confusion in relation to generic skills. Thus, in policy documents reference is made to 21st Century Global Competencies¹², transferable skills¹³ and Essential Employability Skills (EES)¹⁴.

The education system is primarily a provincial responsibility, where the Ministry of Education takes the lead in policymaking, developing the curriculum and setting educational standards. While the policy decisions that shape education in Ontario are made principally at the provincial level, Canada's federal government has a role in providing funding and support to provinces and territories through its system of transfer payments for education.¹⁵ It also may develop policies and initiatives related to areas such as Indigenous education, bilingualism, and educational research which have implications across the country.¹⁶

The process of education policymaking in Ontario combines top-down decision-making and bottom-up input through consultations with stakeholders who are affected by the policies. These stakeholder groups include educators, parents, students, school administrators, and community members. Curriculum development is informed by research evidence and also draws on extensive consultations with stakeholders who include experts and Indigenous partners. Published curricula undergo rigorous fact-checking by academics and experts before release.¹⁷ In Ontario, the school boards – and the schools themselves – manage the implementation of the curriculum, assessment and standards and other policies set by the Ministry of Education.

11 Boyd, 2021

12 Ontario Directors, 2015 http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/CODE-TLF/docs/tel/21_century_appendixC_only.pdf

13 Government of Ontario, 2020a <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/transferable-skills/introduction>

14 Government of Ontario, 2023c <https://www.ontario.ca/page/essential-employability-skills#communication>

15 People for Education, 2024

16 Government of Ontario, 2022b <https://www.ontario.ca/page/responsibility-publicly-funded-elementary-and-secondary-education>

17 Government of Ontario, 2020b <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/what-is-curriculum/curriculum-development-and-implementation>

2. Generic skills

As noted, Ontario describes more than one set of generic skills, with previous reference to 21st Century Competencies appearing to have evolved into ‘transferable skills’ referring skills and qualities that are viewed as important to enable students to succeed in the contemporary world. Drawing on international research, employer input, and collaboration with other Canadian provinces, the Ontario Ministry of Education identifies seven key categories of transferable skills which are seen as vital. These transferable skills are:¹⁸

- critical thinking and problem solving
- innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship
- self-directed learning
- collaboration
- communication
- global citizenship and sustainability
- digital literacy

In the Ontario education system, generic skills are typically embedded within other qualifications or broader “wrap-around” secondary school programmes (outlined in section 4). For example, transferable skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork are cultivated and assessed as part of the curriculum across different subjects and disciplines. Skills are woven into subjects not developed in isolation as discrete units or topics. Teachers are expected to explicitly foster students’ development of the desired skills using diverse teaching and learning and assessment methods.¹⁹ Additionally, experiential learning opportunities, cooperative education, and Project-Based Learning (see section 4) are in place to help students develop and apply generic skills in real-world contexts. The overall curriculum is designed to give students opportunities to acquire generic skills in this integrated way at different ages and grades in their academic/vocational journeys.

Given the integrative approach to generic skills teaching in Ontario schools, there are no standalone assessments or qualifications for these skills. Instead, they feed into subject assessments and the overall secondary certifications and awards for students.²⁰

College-level awards, which secondary students can obtain on dual-credit routes in tandem with the OSSD, make the generic skills requirements more clearcut. Individuals graduating with an Ontario College Certificate, Diploma, Advanced Diploma, or Graduate Certificate (or their French-language counterparts) are required to exhibit the Essential Employability Skills (EES) demanded in the six skill categories shown in **Figure 2** on the next page.

¹⁸ Government of Ontario, 2020a

¹⁹ Government of Ontario, 2020a

²⁰ Government of Ontario, 2023d <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-qualifications-framework>

Figure 2. Essential Employability Skills (EES) categories, their defining skills and learning outcomes.²¹

| Skill categories | Defining skills | Learning outcomes |
|--|--|---|
| Communication | Reading; writing; speaking; listening; presenting; visual literacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ communicate clearly, concisely and correctly in the written, spoken, and visual form that fulfills the purpose and meets the needs of the audience ▶ respond to written, spoken, or visual messages in a manner that ensures effective communication |
| Numeracy | Understanding and applying mathematical concepts and reasoning; analyzing and using numerical data; conceptualizing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ execute mathematical operations accurately |
| Critical thinking & problem solving | Analyzing; synthesizing; evaluating; decision making; creative and innovative thinking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ apply a systematic approach to solve problems ▶ use a variety of thinking skills to anticipate and solve problems |
| Information management | Gathering and managing information; selecting and using appropriate tools and technology for a task or a project; computer literacy; Internet skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ locate, select, organize, and document information using appropriate technology and information systems ▶ analyze, evaluate, and apply relevant information from a variety of sources |
| Interpersonal | Teamwork; relationship management; conflict resolution; leadership; networking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ show respect for the diverse opinions, values, belief systems, and contributions of others ▶ interact with others in groups or teams in ways that contribute to effective working relationships and the achievement of goals |
| Personal | Managing self; managing change and being flexible and adaptable; engaging in reflective practices; demonstrating personal responsibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ manage the use of time and other resources to complete projects ▶ take responsibility for one's own actions, decisions, and consequences |

3. Subject and vocational skills

In Ontario schools, there are programs designed to support students to explore diverse career options, with a particular focus on opportunities in skilled trades and apprenticeships. Secondary schools offer a range of job skills-oriented pathways (see section 4 below) which enable students to gain experience and credits in a field aligned with their skills and interests, all while working towards their high school diploma. For example, the Specialist High Skills Majors programs are available in 19 sectors including:²²

- agriculture
- aviation/aerospace
- construction
- energy
- environment
- food processing
- forestry
- horticulture and landscaping
- hospitality and tourism
- information and communications technology
- manufacturing
- mining
- transportation

Additionally, Ontario has a diverse set of programme routes for secondary students wanting to acquire vocational skills as part of their education. These programmes involve different vehicles for skills acquisition encompassing various generic skills.²³

The Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) program enables students in Grades 11 and 12 to align their education with a specific career path that suits their skills and interests, all while working towards their OSSD. Students can specialise their learning in a particular sector and acquire on-the-job skills through employers, skills training centres, and school. Industry certifications are also an option.

Dual credit programs are designed to ease students' transition from secondary school to formal vocational training. Students enrol in college or apprenticeship courses that contribute to both their OSSD and a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree.

Cooperative (co-op) education combines classroom or online learning with work placements in the community. Placements are arranged by the secondary school and follow Ministry of Education guidelines. Co-op programs give students opportunities to gain hands-on experience, understand the practical relevance of their classroom learning, develop essential workplace skills, and explore different career paths. Students earn credits for this work and can build CVs that support their postsecondary plans and employment prospects.

The Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) is a school-to-work initiative for students to participate in skilled trade apprenticeships during Grade 11 or 12 through cooperative education. Students earn their secondary school diplomas concurrently with their practical experience towards certification in the trade.

²² Government of Ontario, 2023e <https://www.ontario.ca/page/skilled-trades-ontario-schools>

²³ Ibid

4. Teaching and learning approaches

This section addresses the approaches to skills teaching and learning prescribed or promoted by policy or frameworks in Ontario, the various programmes which scaffold that learning, and the role of specialist and other teachers. The overall approach to curriculum, teaching and learning in schools combines teacher-directed learning and experiential learning.

In general, Ontario educators use cross-curricular learning to integrate overarching perspectives, themes and skills into teaching and learning across all subjects. This approach encompasses areas such as environmental education, Indigenous education, financial literacy, social-emotional learning, critical literacy, mathematical literacy, and STEM education. Another approach, known as integrated learning, combines curriculum expectations from different subjects into a single lesson, enabling students to demonstrate achievement in each respective subject.²⁴

Project-Based Learning emphasises the process of learning, engaging students in real-world challenges for which they strive to find innovative solutions. While the model is already in place, the Ontario Ministry of Education recognises its increasing importance in the future for both academic and vocational pathways.²⁵

With a vocational focus, experiential learning concerns hands-on, real-world learning opportunities for students of all grades to explore careers beyond the classroom while developing skills for future employment. These opportunities include career fairs, classroom visits by skilled professionals, job shadowing, workplace tours, and mentorship. Leaders of experiential learning (LELs), employed by school boards, collaborate with industry partners and the community to create these opportunities and job skills programs, with a particular emphasis on skilled trades, technological education, and apprenticeships.²⁶

As reported in section 1, specialist teachers known as ‘specialist high skills majors’ and ‘cooperative education teachers’ operate in Ontario secondary schools. They have expertise in supporting students to develop transferable and work-related skills in the programmes described above.

Other teachers are expected to embed relevant generic skills in their subject teaching, to support students’ acquisition of these skills alongside subject-specific knowledge and skills. Teachers have significant autonomy and discretion in deciding how to do this, underpinned by a robust CPD culture, provided they adhere to the requirements for their subject area in the Ontario curriculum. Within that framework, they have freedom to select and use the teaching approaches, methods, resources and materials that best meet the learning needs of their classes and individual students.

²⁴ Government of Ontario, 2020c <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/cross-curricular-and-integrated-learning>

²⁵ Baird, 2019

²⁶ Government of Ontario, 2023e



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