

AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE LEARNING IN CANADA

Canada as a Hot Spot for Creative and Imaginative Developments in Open Distance Learning and Open Educational Resources

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To

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April 14, 2015
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A HOT SPOT FOR CREATIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Canada is a hot spot for creative and imaginative developments in open distance learning (ODL) and open educational resources (OER):

- [Athabasca University](#) began in 1970 as an open and distance education institution and the Télé-Université in Québec (now known as [TÉLUQ](#)), was founded in 1972.
- [Contact North](#) | [Contact Nord](#) was created 28 years ago as a network hub for online and distance education in Ontario.
- [The Commonwealth of Learning](#), which promotes ODL and OER through the developing regions of the Commonwealth, was established in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1987.
- [MOOCs began in Canada in 2008](#) at the University of Manitoba – Stephen Downes and George Siemens.
- [Blackboard – WebCT](#) was created at the University of British Columbia, and [Desire2Learn](#) is a Canadian product from Ontario.
- Canada has a national [Canadian Virtual University \(CVU\)](#), which acts essentially as a recruitment tool for programs offered by each of the eleven participating university institutions.
- Some of the **significant figures** in online and distance learning have Canadian roots:
 - Sir John Daniel, former Vice Chancellor of the UK Open University and President and CEO of Commonwealth of Learning, is Canadian.
 - Leading world researchers and practitioners, including:
 - Dr. Dominique Abrioux
 - Dr. Terry Anderson
 - Dr. Joanne Basque
 - Dr. Tony Bates
 - Dr. Marie Bountrogianni
 - Dr. Marti Cleveland Innes
 - Dr. Alex Couros
 - Stephen Downes
 - Robert Martellaci
 - Dr. Rory McGreal
 - Dr. Susan Moisey
 - Dr. Stephen Murgatroyd
 - Dr. Ron Owston
 - Dr. Gilbert Paquette
 - Dr. Michael Power
 - Dr. George Siemens

What I want to focus on is the current state of open distance learning (ODL) and Open Educational Resources (OER) in Canada. I will be brief and encourage you to ask questions.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF CANADA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education in Canada is not a matter for our federal or national government. Each province has a direct and clear responsibility for education, including higher education. Where the federal government is involved is in making investments in research and development, supporting skills based education and in providing financial support for students through loans, grants and scholarships.

Each province has designed their higher education systems uniquely, but all are involved directly in online and distance education for undergraduate, graduate and skills related work.

Canada has:

- A predominantly public sector education system, with only a minor role for private players in relation to college-based skills education and partnerships with public institutions for co-operative programs. While there are some private for profit and non-profit institutions accredited to offer undergraduate and graduate degrees, these represent a small percentage of Canada's overall post-secondary market.
- A significant distinction between various kinds of institutions. We can think of six layers:
 - Research Universities – University of British Columbia, University of Toronto and McGill University all feature in the leading 100 universities in the world rankings.
 - Predominantly Teaching Universities – offering undergraduate and graduate programs.
 - Undergraduate Only Universities
 - Community Colleges, which offer a range of certificates, diplomas, applied undergraduate degrees and (in restricted cases) specialist Master's degrees.
 - Polytechnic Institutions, which range from trades programs through to graduate work.
 - Skills Colleges, which are predominantly private sector and offer para-professional and trades programs, such as registered nursing qualifications, heavy vehicle training and secretarial/technology based certification.
- A predominantly blended learning system, with the widespread use of ICT in support of more traditional forms of instruction.
- No national quality assurance or accreditation system for its institutions – we do not have the equivalent of the European Qualifications Framework and Provincial or regional accrediting bodies. Each province, or group of provinces in the case of the Maritime provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island), has its own quality assurance regimes and these do not have full reciprocity (except in specific fields such as medicine, engineering and certain trades). Just because a program has secured quality assurance approval in Ontario, it does not mean to say it will receive it in Alberta or British Columbia, with some exceptions. This may change in the near future as existing quality assurance agencies seek to become accreditation bodies – Ontario is leading the way.
- We also do not have a national system of credit transfer – such transfer arrangements do not exist between the Provinces.

HOT POINTS

The hot points for online and distance learning and OER in Canada are now these five things:

1. OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER)

The development of a systematic approach to OER in Western Canada. The three western provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan have agreed to “cooperate on the development of common OER”. This includes facilitating cooperation among the provinces in sharing and developing OER; identifying, sharing and encouraging the use of OER; and by using technology, fostering an understanding of OER issues.

2. FRENCH LANGUAGE

The rapid development of more online learning resources in French – Canada is a bilingual country. In addition to the work of TÉLUQ and University of Laval in Quebec, Ontario has developed over 88 fully online programs and 820 online courses in French. We have been working with our French-language universities and institutions in Ontario to significantly increase this number in the next 2-3 years. This is also the goal of [L'association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne](#).

3. FIRST NATIONS

Canada has some 1,400,685 Aboriginal, Métis and Inuit people (known collectively as First Nations) representing just under 5% of Canada's population. There is a growing number of innovative projects using ODL and OER focused on increasing learning success for learners in these communities – the fastest growing youth population in Canada.

4. INNOVATION

Canada's history of innovation in ODL and OER continues. The National Research Council supports an innovation program in ODL (Stephen Downes) and Contact North | Contact Nord's [Online Learning Portal for Faculty & Instructors](#) documents 125 [significant innovations](#) from 24 public colleges and 22 public universities in Ontario. Significant innovations are emerging in the field of machine intelligence supported assessment and adaptive learning. For example, the work of the [Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation](#) at the University of Alberta is pioneering new approaches to assessment.

5. AUSTERITY

Governments are reducing per capita funding for universities and colleges across Canada in response to economic conditions. Several institutions, including Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, are vulnerable as budget cuts on top of operating deficits and ongoing debt. Indeed, as the burden of costs is transferred more to students, universities are actively seeking new sources of revenue. This is leading many institutions to significantly increase enrolment from international students and to open off-shore campuses to attract students to their programs. It is also encouraging some innovation – for example, Algonquin College in Ontario has produced 100 courses as e-texts, which they will make available globally.

KEY TRENDS

Canada does not collect systematic data about the growth and development of online and distance learning. Nor is it possible to readily capture what developments are occurring nationally – one of the defects of having a devolved and distributed higher education system.

Three key trends can be discerned:

1. Growth – 1.3 million online course registrations

As our student demography changes (more mature students, more students balancing work and learning, more single parents), students seek greater flexibility in accessing and completing higher education. ODL is one response to this. When Ontario last did a census of online learning some four years ago, we had over 500,000 course registrations in a single year (approximately 25,000 full-time equivalents) in some 25,000 college and university courses.

Our best guess is that, in any semester, Canada has over 1.3 million online course registrations. This is growing year-by-year as the number of available programs grows.

2. Collaboration

There are many examples of collaboration in ODL and OER with Canadian connections. Whether we are looking at the University of the Arctic (Canada helped to create this institution), provincial collaborative networks ([BC Campus](#), [e-campus Alberta](#), [e-Campus Manitoba](#), [OntarioLearn](#), Ontario Online Learning Consortium, [Contact North | Contact Nord](#)), collaborative programs (e.g. [Collaborative Nurse Practitioner Program \(CNPP\)](#) is an online graduate level program offered through a joint partnership between the Saskatchewan Polytechnic and the University of Regina) or [the joint PhD in Educational Studies at three Ontario universities](#), some of which can be taken online).

3. Quality

The various quality assurance agencies across Canada have or are developing a systematic approach to quality assurance for ODL, with the [Maritimes Provinces Higher Education Commission](#) and [Campus Alberta Quality Council](#) leading the way. Programs using ODL are subjected to additional scrutiny with QA rubrics developed by ODL practitioners.

KEY CHALLENGES

I can identify three key challenges:

1. Strategic Intentions

ODL is at a tipping point in many institutions. It either moves from an offering by some departments (especially continuing education) to mainstream or remains marginalized. Institutions, which see ODL as critical and central to their strategic future, make necessary investments to enable quality, expansion and success. While some universities – for example, Royal Roads, Thompson Rivers, Athabasca, Laval, Memorial – see ODL as central to their future, others do not, although this is changing. It is “... and also ..”. Online learning developments in Canada will be constrained accordingly, despite the various pockets of innovation.

2. Faculty Preparedness for a New Pedagogy

The capacity of faculty to engage in learning design and fully integrate both ICT and OER into their work is limited by their experience, the conditions of practice and available resources. Significant investments in both faculty preparation and ongoing professional development will be needed to get us “past” the content driven models for learning to

which they are accustomed. Our best guess, informed by a number of small-scale studies, is that we are at about the 35% rate on the Roger's adoption curve for faculty members using ICT and ODL. It is too early to look at an evidence base for the use of OER.

3. Austerity

All provinces are increasing the cost to students while at the same time reducing per capita expenditure and promoting increased accessibility. To give just one example, Alberta is reducing its post-secondary institutional budget by 4% over the next two years, starting with a 1.4% cut in the current 2015-16 fiscal year and a 2.7% cut the next. This not only puts real resource pressure on institutions, but also has a dampening effect on risk-taking and innovation. As the potential for ODL and OER grows, the adaptive capacity of institutions and their willingness to take risks declines. While innovative approaches are required to respond to these challenges, faculty is reluctant to take risks when jobs are at stake. Some are responding to the challenge of this situation; others are not.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

In these circumstances what do I see as opportunities? I see three:

1. Expanding Collaboration

“Collaboration is the DNA of the innovation economy” and I see more impetus to collaborate both within Canada and globally than ever before. As Canada looks to complete the Canada: EU Trade Agreement before a national election due by

October 19, 2015, the potential for collaboration (especially in professional education) will grow. Just today, more resources for online assessment for medicine and engineering for international students to qualify for Canadian professional recognition have been announced. The EU agreement, if ratified, seeks to ease labour mobility between Canada and the EU for professions like engineers, doctors, nurses and teachers – this bodes well for international collaboration in the development of these professional qualifications. In addition, we will see an expansion of university: college collaboration – something already well underway in Ontario, as you can see [here](#). There will also be a growth of international partnerships, such as those just announced with India by Algonquin College and Canadore College in Ontario.

2. Unbundling

Canada has yet to embrace unbundling – offering credit for MOOCs, undertaking skills and competency-based assessment separately from the work of course delivery, expanding work-based learning accreditation, using competency-based assessments for prior learning – but more elements of unbundling are emerging. McGill is now offering MOOCs for credit; the University of Alberta has created a design and development team for new online courses, which will be different from those who deliver the courses and assess students. We can see the next stage of online learning development in Canada moving us closer to more unbundled services.

3. A Focus on Skills

In the college sector in particular, but also in universities, there is a strong focus on “market ready” and job relevant skills. The Conference Board of Canada, in co-operation with the Government of Canada and several provincial governments created the [Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education \(SPSE\)](#), which seeks to coordinate and challenge post-secondary education institutions and systems in Canada to respond to the perceived “skills gap” in Canada. ODL and OER provide opportunities to make more of these skills and competencies made available more often to more people in more flexible ways. We can expect a significant expansion of online programs and courses and online assessment for skills linked to both existing and emerging employment markets.

ONLY A SNAPSHOT

At 9,984,670 square kilometres, Canada is the second largest country on the planet in terms of geography and 26 times the size of Norway at 385,252 square kilometres– its size tells you many things will be happening that cannot be simply captured here. This is my snapshot and overview.

I hope it has been helpful.

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