


Contact North | Contact Nord

Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network
Le réseau d'éducation et de formation à distance de l'Ontario



ACCESS, QUALITY AND INNOVATION: Three Key Drivers for Online Learning

A Canadian Perspective

Speaking Notes

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This keynote address was delivered by Contact North | Contact Nord President – CEO, Maxim Jean-Louis at the request of Open Universities Australia (OUA) at their Partners Moving Forward Conference in Melbourne, Australia, April 19-20, 2012. Other invited presenters included Google, Pearson and Smarthinking.

The conference was attended by representatives from 20 universities that either operate and/or act as providers to the OUA including Curtin University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University, University of South Australia, Australian Catholic University, Australian Computer Society, Charles Darwin University, La Trobe University, Learning Network QLD, Metropolitan South Institute of TAFE, Murdoch University, Polytechnic West, TAFE SA, University of New England, and the University of Western Australia.

This is my first time in Australia and I am struck by two things.

First, when an Australian university, or group of universities, decides to do something, they do it very well. The OUA is a role model for collaboration, innovation and effective partnership. Canada can learn a lot from how you have designed and developed this organization. I will say more about this shortly.

Second, the Australians I have met always know how to work hard and have a good time. In Canada, we either work hard or have a good time – rarely is this combined!

So thank you for the hospitality and warmth you have shown me since my arrival on Monday.

In August of this year, the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth will meet in Mauritius. Their focus will be on access, innovation and quality:

- How educational services can be provided at a low cost to millions of individuals who otherwise would be denied access;
- How the experience of learning can be a quality experience, such that individuals want to be perpetual learners; and
- How technology and innovation can make both access and innovation happen.

They will have a lot to talk about.

What is interesting is that this same policy triangle of access, quality and innovation that informs the work of the OUA was the driving force that led to the creation of Contact North | Contact Nord some 25 years ago.

Let me set some context for my comments. When we look at the challenges facing post-secondary education they are clear:

1. We have to increase the number of people in every community who hold a post-secondary qualification.

This is essential to obtain and sustain work in a global, knowledge-based economy. It is also essential for the future of communities, culture and social well-being. The war for talent is real. In Canada by 2020, we expect to have a labour shortage of skilled professional workers in excess of 1.5 million people and this number could rise to over 2 million.

We are missing skilled tradespeople, semi-professionals, especially in health, and skilled professionals. This economic driver is linked to our demographics. Canada will be reliant on immigration for its social and economic future as our baby boomers retire. We are also a small country population-wise with just 35 million people occupying the second largest land area in the world.

Our access problem and challenge is complicated. It's not just about guaranteeing access to education and training, the pre-occupation of many, but of enabling continuous access to *and success in* education for groups that are socially disadvantaged. These groups include Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, those with disabilities, people in rural Canada and people in the far North.

Every individual will need access to continuous learning.

2. We have to ensure that the learning is of the highest quality in terms of the learning experience.

Quality is a challenge for a number of us in academia. For some of us, we "*know it when we see it*" and for some of us, it is defined by acceptance by peers. Most quality assurance systems, in Canada at least, are focused on content and purpose, with some attention to process. I am familiar with this first-hand as I spent three years as a member of Ontario's quality assurance organization, the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board.

Quality in post-secondary education has to focus on student engagement and the ability to develop knowledge and understanding in a way that makes the learning transferable. As we move from a highly controlled learning environment - the classroom, the lab, the workshop - to more and more self-directed learning, we will need to rethink our notions of quality.

This will also require us to rethink our notions of assessment. Too often, assessment is a simple grade and a short comment delivered by the professor. Students rightly expect expert feedback and focused advice on how to improve their knowledge and understanding. Quality is not just about the course and its delivery but also about feedback and support.

3. We need to embrace innovations which enable excellence in engaged learning and terrific teaching.

There is a lot of “buzz” about technology transforming post-secondary education – something I will say more about in a moment – and there are developments occurring which will change our post-secondary systems for the better.

The key to such innovation is that it should lower the barriers between student and teacher and enable the student to connect with teachers and fellow students in more profound ways than they have done hitherto.

It's not access to content that will drive the system change many of us are seeking, but it is a change in the relationship between the student, his or her peers and those who provide instructional coaching, guiding and mentoring that will drive change.

4. We have to achieve system change and transformation so that education is affordable, continuous and fast.

When I left Canada, students in our second largest province where the majority of French-speaking Canadians live, Québec, were protesting a proposed rise in tuition.

Student debt is a major issue in Canada. Managing debt through working slows time to completion – a four-year degree now takes close to six years to complete. Student debt is also a major factor in national household debt in Canada which, in turn, is the most significant threat to our economy. Currently, household debt is running at 151% of income.

5. The only way in which can meet the demands of affordable access, quality and innovation is through collaboration.

Collaboration is the DNA of the knowledge economy:

- It is a basis on which more can be done faster and at a lower cost;
- It is a way in which we can leverage investments in technology and open educational resources so that our systems transform; and
- It is the only way in which we will deal with the challenge of labour shortages for universities and colleges.

Collaboration is no longer “a good idea”; it is essential.

OPEN UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

When I look at what has been achieved by the OUA and how its work relates to these five critical drivers for our future, I am impressed by:

- The scale and depth of the collaboration. Seven shareholders and fourteen partner providers. 21 institutions partnering over development, delivery and, increasingly, over design. *Impressive.*
- The focus on service to the market and the need to be outstanding in the provision not just of courses, but also of support. The strong focus on service to students and support is evident in all that you do, including such activities as online career advice and assistance. This service orientation is the primary reason for the profitability of the OUA. *Impressive.*
- The emphasis on quality as exemplified by the online professional development program and the recently created Centre for Online Learning Excellence where best practices are shared and new insights gained. *Impressive.*
- The creative use of technology. Having looked at courses and programs offered by the OUA, I am impressed by the smart use of technology to enhance student engagement. We could learn a lot from this aspect of your work and from your willingness to explore the boundaries of technology for online learning. *Impressive.*
- Willingness to push boundaries in terms of what is offered online. The range of choice and flexibility of study is what is attracting students in such large numbers. *Impressive.*

These are the reasons that I am encouraging my colleagues in Canada look to the OUA as a role model for our own future.

William Gibson once said that “the future is here, it is just not widely distributed.” For us, the future is here at the OUA and we need to collaborate to distribute this thinking about the future together.

CONTRAST WITH CANADA

Now let me offer some insights from a Canadian perspective.

I mentioned that Canada is a large country with a population of 35 million people, with most of us living relatively close to the United States border. The population is ageing and not replacing itself, which creates real challenges for education, work and skills. We currently welcome some 260,000 immigrants a year, but this will likely increase as more and more of the baby boomers retire.

In terms of online learning, we have some significant history. You need to keep in mind that Canada does not have a national educational strategy or a national Minister of Education. With the exception of funding for research and the transfer of dollars for post-secondary education, all educational issues are the sole responsibility of our ten provinces and three territories. This makes education flexible locally, subject to local political influence, and patchwork from a national perspective.

But here is the current state of play:

- The most use of technology in our colleges and universities is for blended learning. Best estimates are that some 75% of all post-secondary courses, other than apprenticeship, will involve some modest or advanced use of technology enhanced learning.
- Nationally, approximately 1 million course registrations are for fully online learning in a typical year. 500,000 of these registrations are in Ontario.
- We have some institutions which are dedicated to online learning. Athabasca University in Alberta is the most well-known.
- Most online learning courses and programs come from dual purpose universities like Royal Roads University, University of British Columbia, Thompson Rivers University, University of Manitoba, Nipissing University, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, and Memorial University.
- More and more colleges and universities are seeing online learning as “mission critical” for their future. In part, this is in response to some basic facts.

According to the Sloan Consortium in the United States, demand for “conventional” classroom-based teaching is flat or declining while demand for online courses and programs is rising at 20% or higher. In part, this kind of growth is in response to the fiscal austerity imposed on the post-secondary system by the fiscal challenges of many provincial governments.

If we take Ontario as a specific case, we can see these developments:

- 24 colleges and 20 universities serving a population of some 13.5 million, including a French speaking population of around 500,000. This is possibly the most concentrated grouping of post-secondary institutions on earth.
- We have about 500,000 registrations in fully online courses annually, which is equivalent to about 52,600 full-time students.
- 18,000 online courses are listed in the searchable Contact North | Contact Nord portal, studyonline.ca.
- 900 different programs from college certificates to PhDs are available fully online including:
 - 600+ college programs;
 - 160+ undergraduate programs; and
 - 25 graduate programs.
- A range of different learning management systems are being used including Desire2Learn, an Ontario company; Blackboard; Moodle and some others.
- Synchronous learning, using Contact North | Contact Nord's Saba Centra web conferencing platform, remains a strong component of delivery in Ontario.
- Online learning is alive and well in Canada and Ontario leads the way in provision. It also leads the way in collaboration.
- All of the province's community colleges participate in OntarioLearn, a consortium which coordinates the delivery of online learning on behalf of the college system.
- All of the post-secondary institutions are partners with Contact North | Contact Nord in the delivery of synchronous and online learning.
- All of the institutions participate in a number of different organizations within Ontario focused on supports, such as library services and continuing education, for online learning.

We do have some structural challenges:

- Transfer of credit between institutions is well established in Western Canada and the Maritime provinces in Eastern Canada, but not nearly as well advanced in Ontario.
- Quality assurance is a provincial matter. An institution seeking to offer programs nationally is legally required to secure approvals from each provincial quality assurance agency and all provincial governments now have such requirements.
- There are significant tuition fee differences and access policy differences between provinces. For example, Québec has substantially lower tuition fees than Ontario or Alberta.

But, we have a robust, innovative system that is able to build on one of the best K-12 school systems in the world, according to the OECD Program for International Student Assessment results.

One thing that is very different relates to the private sector provision of education. While this is strong in terms of skills training, at the university level, we have had failure after failure of private university level degree granting institutions.

The University of Phoenix, for example, opened facilities in a number of locations across Canada and closed them. The Apollo Group, who owns Phoenix, then opened Meritus University with a base operating budget of \$50 million, only to close it two years later.

While we do have some small private universities and degree-granting institutions across Canada, they are not seen as significant in defining the future or in challenging the dominance of the public sector in post-secondary education.

This is different from the United States and I encourage you not think of Canada as being like the US at any time!

THE FUTURE

What is clear is that the future is unlikely to be a straight line from the past.

There are five areas where I see change occurring during the next decade and these five areas will provide the basis for a conversation between the OUA and ourselves as areas of potential collaboration.

These five areas are:

1. The use of time.

Several colleges and universities have moved from time-based learning where a credit = x hours of study to “on demand, outcome-based” learning. Under this scenario, students start their courses at anytime, finish them when they are ready and then seek a formal assessment of their learning.

This is the basis of the OER University, the People’s University and the more recent massive open online courses initiative. It is also the basis of the Kentucky Technical and College system in the United States’ “on demand” initiative, undertaken in collaboration with Pearson.

2. Student engaged learning.

Many of the initial courses developed for online learning were based either on “distance education course packages online” or “taking the classroom and putting it in a box.” These kinds of courses got us in the game but won’t keep us there.

We need to rethink design from a student experience and not from a content-teaching point of view and do so with flexibility and differentiated learning in mind.

The future is less about content and more about project-based learning and learning outcomes, with the student doing more content navigation, discovery and learning than through instruction.

3. Mobile learning.

We do not know where learners will be – they could be anywhere. The power of tablet devices, smartphones and dedicated learning devices is growing, both in terms of quality and functionality.

We need to leverage these devices to make learning accessible. We cannot design and develop learning for “assumed” environments.

This requires us to look at partnerships with device makers, applications developers and content providers. It is worth noting here that, of the 560,000 apps available for the iPhone/iPad, around 8% were developed by students in college, school or university. We should harness this potential.

4. Rich learning environments.

Gaming, simulation, and “wicked problem-based” learning are all opportunities for rich and immersive learning environments. We are now getting better at building such environments faster and we are seeing research connecting student engagement to the appropriate and focused use of such environments. This too requires us to look at public:private partnerships for the future of these rich content sources.

We know that the “web is what you make it.” We have to decide together what it is we want to make.

5. Re-thinking pedagogy.

When we put the story of the future together, we can echo baseball great Yogi Berra’s notion that “the future isn’t what it used to be.” At the heart of this different future is a changed relationship between students, knowledge, skills and the teacher – a whole new pedagogy.

Many see such an agenda as challenging. I do not. I see it as an opportunity to make a difference and to balance affordable access, quality and innovation - the triangle that should always be at the forefront of our thinking.

So why am I here?

Canada, especially Ontario, and Australia are jurisdictions that recognize that they are at a tipping point for the future of post-secondary education. Doing what we have always done and expecting different results just doesn’t cut it.

We are in the process of change. The OUA is leading several aspects of this change through collaboration, partnership, innovation and a focus on quality. The business focused approach you have taken is especially interesting and clearly successful.

Contact North | Contact Nord, now in its 25th year, is a thought leader in Canada for online learning and has a track record of collaboration – it is our *raison d’être*.

So I am interested in our collaboration as a basis for leading the future and making the future more widely distributed. In particular, I think we can collaborate in relation to:

- **Access.** We can share strategies, experience and ideas about securing access and flexibility for learners and addressing the issues of time, credit and opportunity.
- **Quality.** We can share best practices in the design, development and deployment of online learning as well as pedagogy and assessment.
- **Innovation.** We can collaborate with our partners on innovative development that enhances the learning experience, increases affordable access or ensures higher completion rates and learning outcomes from the experience of online learning.

I have probably said more than you expected and less than my colleagues in Canada would like me to say.

We have provided a cross-Canada check-up for you. This is the first time this has been done for a considerable time and I hope it will give you a clearer picture of where we are on our journey.

But it is a journey, actually, more like an expedition.

We are at a base camp here in Melbourne and I have just given you sight of some mountains we may want to climb. My hope is that we can climb these together.

Thank you.