

How to Take Ontario Online Learning to the Next Level

Lessons From the US, Australia and
British Columbia

2012

Context

The Government of Ontario has made clear its strategic intent with respect to online learning. It is seeking to:

- Increase the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training so that Ontario can secure 70% of its working population having achieved some post-secondary qualification – a key component of its creative knowledge economy strategy.
- Lower the unit costs of expanding access to post-secondary education by expanding the use of online learning – online learning is seen as a “lower cost” alternative for programs and student services to significantly expand campus based programs. While some additional on-campus capacity will be developed, new investments will be made in online learning to spur development and quickly increase access, especially to college and university programs in high demand across the province.
- Provide an opportunity to leverage the significant achievements in online learning – Ontario’s post-secondary education sector currently boasts over 450,000 registrations, over 20,000 courses and over 720 programs online as options for Ontarians. These developments are supported by a significant investment in infrastructure – e.g. OntarioLearn, OCULL, ILC, ORION, Contact North | Contact Nord.
- Support innovative, quality learning which maximizes the potential of emerging technologies, including those mobile technologies and applications developed in Ontario by Research in Motion and Desire2Learn as well as others.
- Enhance the degree and credential granting opportunities associated with online learning through transfer credit coordination and new program development.

Online Learning in Ontario

Ontario has been very successful in the development of online learning. In part because of the commitment of dedicated faculty who secured the support of their college and university administrations and in part because of the foresight of post-secondary leaders, Ontario leads Canada in the provision of online learning at the college and university level.

It has:

- 20,388 post-secondary courses online, with the number growing each year.
- 762 post-secondary programs (including 25 graduate programs).
- 485,619 registrations in 2010/11 – equivalent to 48,562 FTE students¹.
- Support for online student services, especially library services for university students.
- Deployment and delivery infrastructure through 24 publicly-funded colleges and 20 universities, OntarioLearn, OCULL, ILC, ORION and Contact North | Contact Nord.
- The willing support of faculty. Some are to be convinced of the efficacy, efficiency and quality of online learning. It is estimated that some 25-30% of college faculty and fewer university faculty (between 7-10%)² have offered or been involved with online learning.

Possible Futures

When searching for specific models of how online learning in Ontario could move from these significant achievements to the next level, we tend to focus on a number of jurisdictions outside of Ontario including:

- Western Governors University
- Open Universities Australia
- BCcampus

Each of these has significant strengths and weaknesses with respect to the strategic intent of the Government of Ontario outlined above (see page 1). In this section we look at each in turn and examine the “fit” of the model to the strategic intent.

Western Governors University (WGU)

This institution was established in 1996/97 at a time when few colleges or universities in the western US States were engaged in online learning and by innovators who saw significant potential in the development of this emerging field, especially given that many of the innovations in technology were coming from western US States. Its founding was met with significant resistance and it “drifted” for a number of years before finding its place in the complex post-secondary systems of these states. It appears now to have done so.

Strengths

- Entirely online learning – no residency requirements.
- Low cost - For example, an online bachelor's degree in business from for-profit DeVry University will cost \$68,906 including fees. The same degree from the University of Phoenix, taking five courses per semester for eight semesters, will cost \$72,200. At WGU this degree will cost \$15,000. It uses a flat fee per six months, irrespective of how many courses are taken in that time.
- Competency based, not time based – students are assessed on whether or not they can demonstrate competence against a set of learning outcomes for a course, rather than time served + assessment.
- Not course based, but outcome based. WGU buys teaching materials from independent publishers and employs “mentors” to guide students. Students are signing up for outcomes assessment, not courses³.
- Driven by partnership with industry and services in high demand – a focus on meeting known employment demand.

Weaknesses

- The time between start-up (Charter issued in 1996) and first student to graduate was 4 years. Fully accredited by DTEC in 2001 and by North West Commission on Colleges and Universities in 2003 – seven years from start-up.
- Despite substantial investment (current budget \$111 million) it has a small student population – 25,000 students (not all are FTE), with most in education and business.
- Low rate of graduation – app. 2,350 annually.
- Poor rates of graduation for 18-24 year olds – graduation rates for full time younger students are at 16%⁴.
- Learning design is content driven, often taken from professional bodies (e.g. certification for IT professionals, HR professionals) and is not engaging students in dialogue or peer work. While all of WGU's students have access to a learning community based on the program in which they are enrolled, participation is not required.
- Academic credibility – WGU has a business model which essentially contracts out a great many academic services – course writing, competency assessment development, student assessment⁵. This has given rise to concerns around academic credibility and quality, though it should be emphasised that WGU is a fully accredited university.

WGU was founded in part because of the reluctance of existing post-secondary educational institutions to engage on a significant scale in online learning in 1995-6. But there are now many US institutions fully engaged and committed. For example, Brigham Young University in Idaho has decided that focusing on teaching undergraduates is the way forward. It has done away with expensive activities, such as the athletics and PhD programmes, and introduced year-round courses. Cornell teaches 10,000 students online every year, most of them working adults. Southern New Hampshire University has five satellite colleges that make it easier for students to live at home while studying. The University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education has formed a partnership with a private company, 2tor, to design courses for students in 45 states and over 25 countries.

Perhaps the most innovative is the Kentucky Community and Technical College System – the largest post-secondary providers in the State. It has developed an “on demand” online learning program available to anyone with a High School Diploma or GED. Courses start at the beginning of any week and, while each has a minimum time to complete (with some this can be just 3 weeks), there is no maximum course completion time. Courses are broken down into modules (a sub-set of a normal 3-credit course) and students can accumulate credits at their own pace. Student support is available 24/7 and tutorial support is available by appointment. On-demand learning is offered in addition to Learn by Term, giving students a choice of their use of time. Degree and credential production has increased 84 percent since 2001, while the percentage of undergraduates meeting Kentucky's college readiness standards increased 11 percentage points from 2002-03 to 2008-09, according to the Council on Post-secondary Education (CPE)⁶.

Open Universities Australia (OUA)

In 1993, with the goal of providing greater access to university the Commonwealth Government of Australia launched the Open Learning Agency. For the first two years students were only able to study individual units rather than whole degrees. In 1996 the first degree program was launched which gave students the ability to complete an entire degree through Open Learning, yet wholly awarded by Monash University the original shareholder. In 2005 there was a significant shift in the company's approach and a rebranding to Open Universities Australia as it is today. OUA is owned and operated by seven leading universities in Australia – Curtin, Griffith, Macquarie, Monash, RMIT, Swinburne and the University of South Australia. It is board governed, with one representative for each of the founding universities and up to five non-academic and non-executive board appointments. It is staffed by a small core of five key staff together with supporting administrative staff.

They have developed over 1,400 courses (known as units) and 170 qualifications online; all taught by 20 leading universities and other tertiary education providers around Australia⁷. Since OUA began it has graduated some 144,000 students. The majority of students are based in Australia; however, the courses are available to the rest of the world. Undergraduate courses offered have no first year entry requirements, and there are no quotas for most courses, hence the 'open' aspect. OUA also practices credit transfer (both course by course and block)

and prior learning assessment.

According to federal statistics there were 190,945 students enrolled in online education in Australia in 2010 – OUA's market share during this period was 23% - making it the national leader in online learning. It is important to note that this market share is larger than that of the second and third place providers combined within this industry.

OUA has partnerships with several Australian public and private companies such as National Australia Bank and recently established relationships with sporting organisations such as the AFL Players Association and Football Federation Australia.

Its programs and courses range from non-credit, through TAFE¹ to undergraduate and post graduate programs in the arts and humanities, education, business, science, information technology and law and justice. Fees are competitive, with the OUA seeking a modest profit from each unit taken. Budget in 2008 was \$60 million, secured mainly from revenues. Its marketing budget is now close to \$8 million annually.

¹ TAFE is an acronym for Technical and Further Education or college level educational programming. TAFE colleges generally award qualifications up to the level of advanced diploma, which is below that of Bachelor degree within the Australian Qualifications Framework. In many instances TAFE study can be used as partial credit towards Bachelor degree-level university programs using block credit.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National “brokering” organisation– brokering programs and courses from a range of post-secondary institutions in Australia at non-credit through to post graduate level. A degree completed through OUA leads the student to graduate from the university offering the course and the qualification is identical to that awarded to an on-campus student. It is like OntarioLearn but for all levels of post-secondary education. • Automatic credit transfer across its Providers • Provides funding and expertise to develop online courses and programs. • Infrastructure Institution – OUA supports its partner institutions through the provision of infrastructure (enrolment, marketing, exam services, delivery platforms and systems). • Fee for service funding – the OUA operates as a for-profit business on behalf of its not for profit shareholder partners. It is essentially a market based operation. It is therefore nimble, market sensitive and focused on a small core staff based operation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency and quality – a challenge for a brokerage university like OUA is that not all units and programs have the same quality standards and service standards. This is being addressed with the recent introduction of the Centre for Online Learning Excellence working across all Provider institutions to ensure high quality online learning experiences. • Innovation – one opportunity for the brokerage is to invest in innovative programming. Yet the fact that OUA is not itself able to offer its own programs and courses inhibits this: it is reliant on its partners to be innovative. • Open Universities Australia is not an academic organization – it does not award degrees but provides access to degrees through its providers. It is essentially a brokerage, marketing, infrastructure organization. • Open Universities Australia does not involve all post-secondary institutions in Australia – while twenty seven are engaged, some are not.

Australia’s system is state-based with some roles for federal organizations – for example, in quality assessment. In this context, the OUA has provided a national and international presence for state based institutions. Since its survival depends on volumes, part of its future will be to grow its international presence.

BCcampus

BCcampus is a publicly funded organization founded in 2002² that uses information technology to connect the

expertise, programs, and resources of all B.C. post-secondary institutions (public and private) under a collaborative service delivery framework. More specifically, the organization identifies, acquires, develops and implements innovative technologies and services that facilitate system-wide connection points for student services and provide collaborative educational models for faculty and instructors. As a business-to-business organization, its commitment is to the post-secondary institutions, working closely with them as partners in this process to define and then deliver the best educational technology and distance learning services possible.

It is focused on three key tasks:

1. Student Services and Data Exchange – services include admissions applications, course directory, course record and transferability guide, and transcript exchange, -using a secure connector system that accesses real-time student data. This data exchange system also allows institutions to generate up-to-date reports regarding recruitment, applications, learning resources and more. The systems BCcampus builds work by moving student information, such as admissions applications and academic records, between B.C.'s public post-secondary institutions. Because the systems are digital, secure and accessible to all institutions both cost and time are saved. Both institutions and students benefit with the streamlining of student transfers between institutions from the beginning of that relationship, when the student applies, to the online classroom and later when course records are needed.

² The BC Ministry of Advanced Education established BCcampus in 2002 in response to the need for a provincial strategy for on-line learning. Its mission was to “bring together the expertise and resources of all of British Columbia’s Public Post-Secondary Institutions into a new collaborative model for distance education.”

2. Curriculum Development and Academic Growth - the annual Online Program Development Fund (OPDF) funds development of curriculum in the form of credit-based academic, online courses and resources and professional learning resources. The OPDF is supported by annual funding provided to BCcampus by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development. Since 2003 the OPDF has made 144 grants worth \$9 million. All online learning developed through the OPDF generates Open Educational Resources (OERs) that are licensed for sharing and reuse. This innovation has led to the formation of regional, national and international partnerships that further the development and improvement of those resources at no additional cost and leverage the initial investment many times over through reuse. Adopting open licenses is a significant trend around the world and doing so has established BCcampus as an OER leader internationally. In addition to curriculum development BCcampus supports BC's Educational Technology Users Group and provides professional development opportunities for staff and faculty through online communities of practice. By supporting system wide professional development BCcampus plays a significant role in ensuring faculty and staff acquire knowledge and skills related to online learning pedagogies and exemplary use of educational technologies.
3. Collaborative Programs and Shared Services - through collaborative programs, students may take online programs and courses from many institutions (home or teaching institutions) even though they receive a credential from a single institution (their "home," or credentialing institution). The shared virtual learning space for students and the means for connecting the participating institutions in the collaborative online program is hosted and supported by BCcampus. BCcampus works with vendors, open source providers and institution partners to provide educational shared services for online teaching and learning. By gathering needs and requirements, BCcampus hosts and supports learning technologies for the benefit of B.C.'s post-secondary system. Shared services typically reduce software and infrastructure costs by pooling demand and negotiating system-wide licenses and services. For most shared services BCcampus underwrites a base portion of the costs associated with their provision, with a balance struck between incentives for participation and contributions from institutions for operations.

BCcampus collaborates with the BC Council of Admissions & Transfer, for example, by working in partnership to develop MyCreditsBC.ca, which will provide a mechanism for BC post-secondary students to easily retrieve unofficial course transcripts from institutions they have attended, and then determine course-by-course transferability options to other BC post-secondary institutions, based on Transfer Agreements maintained by the BC Council of Admissions & Transfer. The role of BCcampus was to facilitate the development of this infrastructure.

Strengths

- Service organization – given the three clear challenges which BCcampus is committed to, it is a system service provider for colleges and universities. As a service organization, it does not have academic roles or degree granting abilities, but seeks to facilitate the intentions of stakeholders and government.
- Collaborative and Partnership Driven – to be successful, BCcampus is a collaborative, partnership driven organization focused on enabling stakeholders to achieve their intended outcomes efficiently and effectively.
- Cost Savings Through Shared Infrastructure and Common Platforms – by creating a shared services platform, both for student services and for program and course delivery, system wide costs (mainly in duplication and lack of leverage of volumes for discount buying) can be reduced.
- Small, nimble, focused organization – eleven key people, plus a help desk and IT support unit.

Weaknesses

- Reliance on Partnership and Collaboration – system wide innovation moves as quickly as stakeholders permit. While this has been a strong feature for BCcampus, it is also a weakness in that it can create high transaction costs for innovation. It also means that the skill sets of the core team within BCcampus need to be strongly focused on alliance building, networking and collaboration.
- Unpredictable funding (especially with respect to OPDF) – core funding for BCcampus is determined annually rather than on a three-year cycle, with annual review. Resources for OPDF have often depended on separate and last minute allocations from the Ministry, sometimes leading to challenges⁸.
- Focusing – the core team at BCcampus is very focused and committed to the three core tasks and the strategic plans associated with each. But during the last nine years, there have been several attempts, both by government and partners, to shift the focus and some aspects of the work of BCcampus to meet short-term and immediate “political” needs. While the organization has done a good job of managing these “shifting sands”, this speaks to the challenge of staying focused when funding comes directly from government but all partners have different expectations of the opportunities this funding represents.

Conclusion

When we look at each of these opportunities, the following observations can be made:

1. Ontario starts at a different place from the Western Governors University when it began in 1996. We already have close to 500,000 registrations, 762 programs and over 20,000 courses – far more than WGU has after over a decade of operations⁹.
2. WGU is a cost rich example of provision. For over \$100 million annually, WGU has a low completion rate for the 18-24 year old college and university student and is an expensive way of securing little more than 10,000 graduates annually. Our own systems in Ontario secure online learning as a part of the pattern of provision for all students.
3. Ontario already has a significant online infrastructure – all of its 44 post-secondary institutions are offering online courses and many are offering online programs. Through OntarioLearn, ILC and Contact North | Contact Nord, there are significant opportunities to market and promote these programs and courses. We can build upon this through a single portal for online learning in Ontario, which is basically what OUA has done, and which we have the infrastructure to do.
4. In terms of program development, Ontario needs to make significant focused investments in “filling the gaps” between demand and supply for online programs and courses. The lesson of BCcampus is that focused, consistent investment can make a significant difference. The OPDF has led to the development of 47 different credentialed programs that are unlikely to have existed without such central funding. All the public sector post-secondary institutions have participated in OPDF funding, and often institutions have partnered with up to 20 other provincial partners. Many partners are not just post-secondary institutions, but school boards, NGOs and private sector organizations. Central funding with conditions enables the development of a wide range of sharable open educational resources. All institutions receiving OPDF funding have the option of either a province-wide or Creative Commons license. In other words, once created these materials can be used by any public institution in the province, and increasingly proposals are coming forward to build on such resources. This is the kind of opportunity Ontario needs to create.
5. Transfer credit is a key challenge. While WGU and the OUA both accept transfer credit, the WGU does so on the basis of challenge credits – demonstrating competency on competency assessments – with OUA facilitating automatic credit transfer between the partner institutions. BCcampus is not involved in transfer credit, which is more properly the concern of the BC Council of Admissions & Transfer. The transfer credit issue is an institutional issue with system wide implications. We need to move from the course-by-course transfer assessment system, to outcomes based assessment and block transfer. Staying focused on the work of building online learning capacities, supporting innovative faculty and enabling institutions to achieve their intentions is how we could characterise the work of both OUA and BCcampus – this is the lesson for Ontario.

Ontario needs to take the lessons from the brokerage work of OUA for a single portal for accessing all online learning in Ontario and the lessons of BCcampus in supporting the strategic intentions of the post-secondary institutions and stakeholders in Ontario.

Our online learning success in Ontario has been built by dedicated faculty, taking risks and innovating with emerging technologies. They have been supported by dedicated instructional designers, support staff and committed technology expertise within institutions and in support organizations dedicated to making online learning happen. For modest investments, Ontario has emerged as a major online provider – leading Canada in this field and achieving recognition as a significant innovator in North America.

Our next stage of development requires us to leverage the insights, skills and commitments of faculty and students and to enable them to reach to the next level for new programs, better programs and courses focused on engaged students and authentic learning.

Endnotes

1. Calculated using the formulae of dividing the total registrations by 10: the expected average two-term course load of a full-time student.
2. Based on the fact that there are 15,595 courses offered online in the college sector - app. 23% of the total courses offered across all colleges; 4,743 courses at the university level - app. 7% of all courses offered by universities. Given that the instructional design assumption is that the faculty member responsible develops and teaches their course, this is an estimate.
3. See summary at <http://www.economist.com/node/21541398>
4. According to the federal Education Department's Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the graduation rate for first-time, full-time students (i.e., typical college students) who began their studies in 2004-05 was only 16 percent.
5. See an account at <http://collegemisery.blogspot.com/2011/02/wth-wgu.html>
6. See http://cpe.ky.gov/news/mediaroom/releases/nr_072811.htm
7. See <http://www.open.edu.au/public/about-us/our-providers/other-providers-for-a-listing-of-unit-and-program-providers>.
8. Amounts have varied year by year, down from \$1.5 million in the early years to \$750,000 in 2010.
9. It has approximately 60 programs and fewer than 4,000 courses.