

## **TEN EMERGING DEVELOPMENTS ARE SHAPING A DIFFERENT FUTURE FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

**As they Seek to “Build Back Better”  
Post-COVID-19**

We will not return to college or university in Fall 2021 as if nothing happened in 2020-2021. The pandemic is one of those rare moments when we all recognize the world changed and we cannot go back to pre-pandemic times.

As the novelist, Karen Slaughter observed, “Forever never lasts as long as we had hoped”.

Here are some reflections by [Contact North | Contact Nord](#) on the Future of Learning in Colleges and Universities.

They are speculative and offered to generate an open dialogue as we all know *“The future is rarely a straight line from the past.”*

## THE FUTURE IS WHEN THE PAST CHANGES

During the last year, 10 cracks in social and economic structures were exposed, including (not listed in any particular order):

1. Inequality is deeper and much more significant in its impact on certain groups within our communities in terms of access, success and supports for learning.
2. Racism and the lack of diversity in many areas of life have a profound impact on our communities and on what we study and how.
3. Social trust, especially in sources of information and understanding of science, is a challenge. We now question sources of truth and knowledge more than ever before.
4. Far more people have limited or no access to affordable broadband than we realized.
5. Some do not have access to appropriate technologies for learning or must compete with others in the family for the use of devices. Some do not have a suitable space at home to study.
6. Some colleges and universities are so dependent on international students that their non-appearance could threaten their financial futures.
7. While some individuals can thrive in these difficult times, many found them challenging to the point their mental health was significantly impacted.
8. Many jobs we thought were attractive and secure, no longer are and the idea of “career” is changing, especially in hospitality and tourism.
9. Many jobs that seemed mundane are essential to our well-being and many occupations that previously could be delivered without risk are dangerous in a pandemic world.
10. Climate change continues to impact all of us, no matter what is happening in terms of our health and well-being – it remains a background challenge even more profound than the pandemic.

So, the future will not be a straight line from the past. Indeed, as the futurist Heike suggested, “the future happens when the past changes”.

## IMAGINING A DIFFERENT FUTURE

What kind of future can we imagine for colleges or universities?

- How will technology-enabled virtual learning change the norms and assumptions about ‘classroom’ and ‘campus’ experience?
- How will part-time education and flexible programming help more people looking at second careers or a major job change?
- How will micro-credentials impact or supplement traditional degrees and curriculum structures?
- How will the increasing financial constraints faced by colleges and universities force us to reconsider funding and offering curricula responsive to what it means to be human in a digital life and work environment? What programs and courses should colleges and universities offer in the service of human flourishing and how will these programs and courses be funded?
- How will education and training respond to an increasingly volatile societal and workforce context with a need for just-in-time competencies, 24x7x365 days?

A great many are writing and exploring these questions. But there is a need to recognize that there are five features of the landscape of the future that will determine the future pathways for these important institutions:

- **Money**  
Governments face a time of financial reckoning, as they must navigate their way to a sound fiscal future. Debts and deficits are high, at both the provincial and federal levels, and budgets will need to be adjusted. Health and eldercare will receive priority attention, but it is already the case that some jurisdictions are cutting education budgets in real terms. Further, colleges and universities were increasingly reliant on international students for a key component of their funding. If these students do not return in sufficient numbers in Fall 2021, then some programs, services and courses may be cut.
- **Demand**  
There will be a growing number of people seeking to reskill or upskill to secure work. Others will need to rethink their careers and engage in the learning needed for a second career. Short courses, new forms of credentials, assessment on demand for skills and competencies will all be part of the emerging mix.
- **Technology**  
Many experienced online and virtual learning for the first time. For some, it was eye-opening. Others found themselves “teetering on the

edge of chaos”. But it was game changing. Pedagogy was explored and examined in new ways as was how we assess and evaluate learning. In the emerging future, blended and hybrid forms of learning will be more common, and more programs will be offered through online learning. The question is, how will technology-enabled learning change human resources, pedagogy, assessment, and access to learning?

- **Structures**

Canada has many institutions offering certificates, diplomas, degrees, and other qualifications. Not all will survive. Some may merge or find new public or private partners to continue. Others will seek to restructure the way they work to secure both efficiencies and focus. One university has already reorganized from eighteen faculties to three schools. Other jurisdictions are looking at governance models that are very different from those that existed before the pandemic.

- **Skills**

As the economy begins to build back, governments are signalling that reducing unemployment and getting people back to work is their priority as vaccines are rolled out. This will require a strong focus on skills development and the speed of learning. Two-year diplomas or five-year apprenticeships are not going to meet the demands of the new skills agenda post-COVID-19. What pace and outcomes will be acceptable?

## 10 FEATURES FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

What might be the dominant features of a different future for colleges and universities as they seek to “build back better”? These 10 developments are likely to emerge as shaping the future of learning beyond school.

1. **Modular, stackable learning** – more short courses and partial credit courses dealing with a specific body of knowledge, capability, or competency, including greater ability to “stack” short courses or modules into a 3 or 6 credit bundle. Less distinction between “for credit” and “continuing education” and an emphasis on teaching and learning for skills.
2. **365 Admission** – more courses are available on demand, accessible anywhere and at any time. Some courses remain with fewer start dates since they require lab or studio time, group work or a high level of student: student interaction or placement. But a great many can be accessed when the student is ready.
3. **Mode Choice** – in the emerging hybrid system, students can choose online or face-to-face delivery.
4. **Access to Technology** – more locations across the country where students can access high-quality broadband,

appropriate technologies (e.g. augmented and virtual reality), quiet spaces and learner supports. National 24x7 helpdesk for technology and a strong focus on enabling learners to use technology effectively.

5. Learner mobility – as individuals move within and between provinces to secure employment and livelihoods, they want to take their learning with them and that learning to count towards a credential. Transfer credit, still not comprehensive or instant, will become a key feature of our post-secondary system.
6. Assessment on demand – assessment of learning separate from having to take a program or course will become common, building on the success of assessment only credentials elsewhere in the world. An individual will be able to have their knowledge, capabilities and skills assessed and be able to use this assessment towards a certificate, diploma, or degree anywhere. This will also be a way to fast-track the recognition of foreign credentials, work-based learning, and prior learning.
7. Competency-based learning for skills – apprenticeship and skills-based learning in fields like social care, health care, and technology will be less about courses or supervised practice and more about being able to demonstrate, in legally defensible ways, capabilities and competency. New approaches to skills assessment and validation will dramatically reduce the time it takes to master the skills needed for effective practice.
8. Collaborative programming – governments, as part of their rationalization of finances and restructuring of systems, will seek to reduce duplication and increase collaboration and co-operation. Collaborative program development, already a part of the post-secondary education system, will dramatically increase. We will also see more public-private partnerships for programs and more private colleges and universities offering certificates, diplomas and degrees readily accepted in the credit transfer system and in post-secondary education generally.
9. Strong focus on Indigenous education and learning – in building back better, governments will want to see not just greater access to higher education for Indigenous learners, but greater success. This means colleges and universities will need to develop not just better supports and services to enable student success, but also, need to rethink curriculum to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and working. Strengthening the role of institutions led and controlled by Indigenous communities and programs focused on indigeneity will be a key component of the future.
10. Enabling the green transition – while the pandemic preoccupied many, our CO<sup>2</sup> emissions continued to rise, and extreme weather events became more intense. Responding to climate change and enabling the shift to renewable energy, smart agriculture and smart

buildings will all require skill development. Redirecting funds to the green transition will be a part of this new future.

These developments require focused, courageous, and compassionate leadership at all levels in our governments, colleges, and universities.

To build back better requires the spirit of collaboration and a genuine engagement in seeking a different future.

As Gandhi observed, “The future depends on what you do today”.