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Developing a strategy for lifelong learners in Canadian universities and colleges (and its implications for online learning)

AUGUST 29, 2012 BY **TONY BATES**   **2 COMMENTS**

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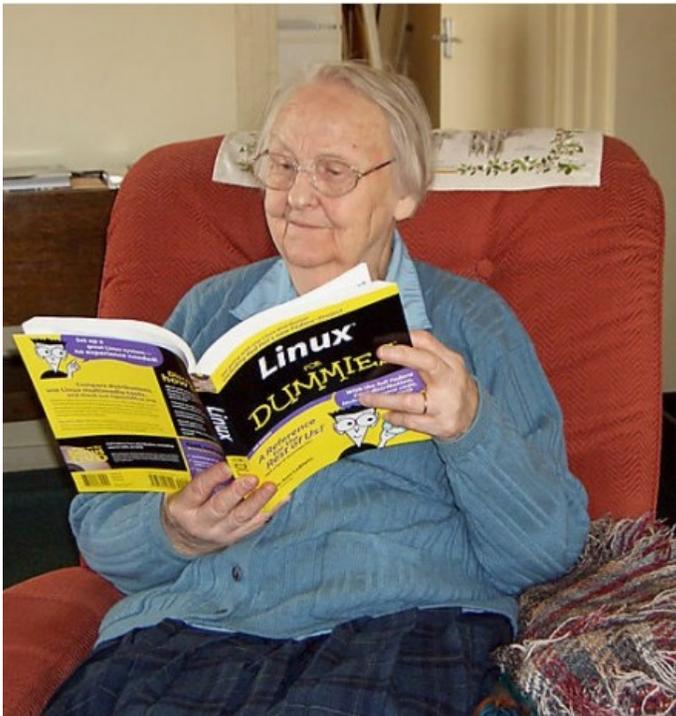
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Council of Ontario Universities (2012) **Increased numbers of students heading to Ontario universities** Toronto ON: COU

Changing demographics

This press release from the Council of Ontario Universities shows that students NOT coming direct from high school now constitute 24% of all new admissions, and enrollments from this sector are increasing faster than those from students coming direct from high schools.

This trend is likely to continue and grow, given the demographics of Canada. Birth rates are low (the City of Vancouver has 60,000 less k-12 students than it did 10 years ago, although some of this is due to families migrating to Surrey and other cities/suburbs, where house prices are more affordable), whereas the demands of the workplace and in particular the growth of knowledge-based industries is requiring continuous and lifelong learning.

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Also, many two-year colleges and particularly Canadian Institutes of Technology are now seeing a large proportion of university graduates applying for admission. (BCIT once claimed that 50% of all new enrollments were university graduates).

Canada relies heavily on immigration (over 260,000 new immigrants a year) and most of the adults among these immigrants will need to spend at least some time upgrading their qualifications to meet Canadian professional and vocational requirements.

It is then just a matter of time before lifelong learners outnumber high school leavers in Canadian college and undergraduate programs (I suspect that this is already the case in some inner city two year colleges). But our systems are still designed to cater primarily for 18-21 year old, full-time, campus-based students. It is no surprise then that in some colleges and universities in Canada, enrollments are actually dropping, despite governments pushing for and even providing funding for more enrollments.

A strategy for lifelong learning

In a **recent report by the Canadian Virtual University** the report notes:

> *Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, and Australia, have recognized and seized upon the importance of lifelong learning in improving skills and innovation and are devising ambitious strategies to help their citizens become lifelong learners. Canada does not have a lifelong learning system in place, nor a plan to transform the rhetoric of lifelong learning into a coherent vision and a plan for action.*

In **my review of the report**, I commented that the current Conservative Federal government is unlikely to develop a lifelong learning strategy for Canada. Education is a provincial responsibility, and this federal government believes in less rather than more intervention in provincial matters. It would make sense for a provincial government to develop a strategy for lifelong learning but this means working across several ministerial silos, such as economic development, education, immigration, and social services, and working collaboratively with the educational institutions. It would also require a vision and commitment rarely found in Canadian provincial politics.

More importantly, I see lifelong learning as a responsibility mainly of the institutions themselves. Their mandate is to provide post-secondary education to all students who can benefit from it. There should be no discrimination on the grounds of age. If the target population is getting older, then institutions need to adapt their policies and strategies to meet the needs of that changing demographic.

This means of course more flexible delivery and a greater focus on online learning. However, it means much more than that. Here are some strategic considerations resulting from a change in the demographics of university and college students.

Pedagogy

Many lifelong learners have already been through the public post-secondary education system. Many will already have diplomas or degrees. They also usually have life experiences that are highly relevant to the topic or subject area under study. This means developing methods of teaching that both engage and involve learners (yes, it means treating students as adults).

Fortunately, there are already well developed methods for teaching adults (with the ugly name of andragogy), but this of course will require systematic training of faculty.

It also suggests to me that web 2.0 technologies in particular will be appropriate for this type of learner, enabling them to draw on their work and life experiences, take responsibility for their learning, develop multimedia projects, learn collaboratively, and use these tools in the way that they will often do in the workplace.

Curriculum

In any class, students are likely to be increasingly diverse, with some students straight from high school weak on the basics, some older students needing revision but not wanting to start from scratch, and other students secure in the basics but more interested in recent developments in the subject, or the application of their basic knowledge to new topic areas. This will require much more individualization of the curriculum.

Again, the technology can be really useful here. All content can be digitized, loaded on the web and indexed or tagged, activities can be set that require knowledge and application of the content, students can be placed in groups for collaborative learning around topic based or inquiry based curricula, and students can work in collaboration with the instructor to develop their own learning goals, outcomes and path through the materials.

One area where online learning can be particularly valuable is providing coherent qualifications for newly emerging areas of knowledge through inter-institutional collaboration. There may be only one specialist in a newly emerging area such as nanotechnology in one institution, but by combining expertise on this area from two or three universities, it would be possible to develop a full masters degree, and sufficient mass of students internationally for such a topic.

Organizational structures

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The reconsideration of the strict division of credit from non-credit programs is now much overdue. Post-secondary institutions have ghettoized non-credit learning into Divisions of Continuing Education or Extension, whose main mandate for the last 25 years has been to make a profit from non-credit programs to help cross-subsidize the credit programs. Many institutions refuse to recognize even their own non-credit courses for credit. The main effect of MOOCs will be to destroy the for-profit continuing education programs. Why pay Hicksville State University for a non-credit course on advanced web design when you can get one free from MIT? More importantly, though, continuing education programs are often run completely independently of the credit programs in terms of curriculum content.

Academic departments in particular need to see post-secondary education as a continuous and ongoing process that will engage their students throughout their lifetime. As Martha Piper, a former President of UBC, once said: "Once a UBC student, always a UBC student" (a frightening thought in some cases). Thus there should be a smooth integration of undergraduate and post-graduate programming, with careful consideration given to the role and purposes of non-credit, certificate, and applied masters programs.

For instance, it should be possible to transfer individual non-credit courses, and certificates, from the same institution, into a masters program. Certificates can have a more open admission policy, but students can transfer into a masters program by demonstrating competence in the certificate program. Also, in many Canadian jurisdictions, inter-institutional transfer of credits will become increasingly important to support lifelong learning.

Admission policies

Admission policies and course requirements designed for 18 year olds leaving high school are not likely to suit a 35 year old immigrant with a degree in engineering. Institutions in Canada vary considerably in their recognition of international qualifications. Lifelong learners provide an equal challenge to admission policies. However, institutions run the risk of missing out on brilliant 'rounded' students because they don't fit the square holes needed to get into an institution. Even elite institutions will need to look at more flexible admission policies for lifelong learners.

Funding models

Whereas I believe that everyone should have a chance of a state-subsidized post-secondary education, how long should this commitment last? For one degree? Two degrees? Should people in the workforce with university degrees and the means to pay full cost be subsidized by other taxpayers who may not even have been able to take a university education?

One way to expand lifelong learning would be through developing full cost-recovery applied masters programs. This would allow institutions to increase enrollments and hire additional research faculty from the tuition revenues alone. However in such cases, once a charge for general university overheads are paid off, the funds should be controlled by the academic department(s) offering the program. This would provide incentives for departments to treat lifelong learning seriously. There are already some successful online examples of this strategy (see the Masters in Educational Technology and the Masters in Rehab Science at UBC).

And perhaps our public institutions can then also return to the old UK Workers' Educational Association model of free adult education for those just interested in learning (as in the graphic). It will remind us that lifelong learning covers a wide range of different learning needs, and different models of funding will need to be developed.

Conclusions

This is a big topic and I've hardly scratched the surface. Also, there are others better qualified to sound off about lifelong learning. However, both demographics and economic development require post-secondary educational institutions to focus more seriously on lifelong learning and the implications for the institution. Online learning can be – indeed has to be – an important part of the solution, but as always, there are many other important factors as well to be considered.

In essence, this is an institutional strategic planning issue and should be tackled as such. Data needs to be collected on demographic and enrollment trends as part of a broader environmental scan. A SWOT analysis will also be needed. But as with all strategic planning, what matters most is strategic vision, thinking and and commitment. But the earlier institutions start to address this issue, the better.

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Comments

Pat Cegan says:

[August 29, 2012 at 4:54 pm](#)

Thanks for the reblog from Source of Inspiration. I am fast approaching 70 and still an avid student . I am learning more than 500 songs in Portuguese…a language I started learning at 58… and on the piano for our church, studying the Kaballah, and am studying a computer program to help me write sheet music. I am amazed when someone tells me they are bored. Thanks for encouraging people to continue learning their whole life. Learning keeps life fun and interesting. Hugs, pat

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[September 17, 2013 at 6:47 pm](#)

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