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# E-Learning in Canada

*Before applying a U.S.-based online training program to Canadian higher learning faculty, a review of the status of e-learning in Canada was conducted. The review finds Canada as among the world's most developed and industrialized countries. Yet, in a ranking by the International Telecommunication Union, Canada slipped downward causing concern, dispute, and mixed interpretation. Existing national and provincial policies are relevant to the progress or perception of failure thereof of e-Learning in the country. The principle features of the e-learning programs are Internet –based technologies, and thus this form of education need not be dependent upon one's country of residence, or the location of any particular institution of higher learning. The null hypothesis with its logical extension was simple- There are not enough differences between the US and Canada's e-learning environments to warrant major modification of the US originated faculty development program for Canadian use. The conclusion drawn after the review is that while there are differences between Canada and the US, the functions and purposes of their e-learning programs are similar enough to apply a well-developed US faculty training program for current and prospective online faculty in Canada.*

In preparing for a presentation to the faculty of a higher education institution in Ontario, Canada, a brief review of the research and documentation of the current state of e-learning in Canada was conducted. The purpose of the search was to estimate the differences and similarities between the Canadian distance learning situation and that which is found in the US and elsewhere, toward the end that such unique characteristics might drive specific recommendations and encouragements. Although certain differences exist, there are many common grounds. There are global economic uncertainties underlying any and every national and institutional financial picture. Higher education everywhere employs technologies that are changing dramatically on very short development cycles. E-learning, in particular, enjoys a stable, if not growing demand

throughout the education and training sectors[1]. In the face of a growing diversity and supply of information the need for a flexible and adaptable workforce is present in every sector, every economy, and every industry. E-learning represents an opportunity for transformation in how teaching and learning is done. The issue for the inquiry at present is how Canada as a nation and specific institutions there will proceed.

There is something of a paradox at work in this situation. Canada is among the best-suited countries in the world for effective implementation of e-learning technologies, with a world-class telecommunications infrastructure and one of the most educated populations in the world. Yet, Canada is considered to be falling in its International Telecommunication Union (the UN agency for information and communication technologies) rankings. Canada was ranked 17$^{th}$ in the world in the 2007 survey but fell to 21$^{st}$ in the 2008 survey, the most recent years available in the ICT Development Index[2]. Coincidentally, the US ranked only slightly higher than Canada on the IDI in 2007 and fell in 2008, but less so.

The complexity of the ranking warrants more explanation. Why would there be a perceived failure to lead in e-learning for a country that is internationally recognized for its leadership in the ICT (Information Communication Technology) industry? The ranking in the ICT Development index is a composite index comprised of eleven indicators of ICT development. The indicators include five access variables (phone lines, mobile subscriptions, computers, Internet bandwidth); three related to ICT usage (Internet users, Internet subscribers, mobile broadband subscriptions); and another three related to ICT skills (adult literacy skills, secondary enrollments, and higher education/tertiary enrollments). The failure perception stems from a slip in global rankings of 4 places. The fact that there would be any movement in rankings at all springs from the reality that the ICT industry is volatile and the sources and provisions for the multiple indicators are dependent upon additional volatile factors.

Explanations have been proposed by e-learning experts for the slip in ITU ranking, with no small degree of disagreement over whom and what is/are to blame. As the focus on the issue varies from local to national, suggestions for the future vary greatly. In the rankings discussed

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[1] I.E. Allen, J. Seaman, *Class differences: online education in the United States*, Babson Survey Research Group, Babson Park 2010, http://sloanconsortium.org/sites/default/files/class_differences.pdf, [22.11.2010].

[2] International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society: The ICT Development Index*, 2009, http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/backgrounders/general/pdf/5.pdf, [29.10.2010].

above, the top 10 countries are northern European and Asian[3], most of which are noted for their heavy involvement and investment by the central national governments in a variety of services and resources. As the IDI rankings depend heavily upon national infrastructure components, this comes as no surprise. Notable in the Canadian picture is the absence of a national structure for providing, supporting, advising, or creating distance learning opportunities[4]. Each Canadian province provides significant resources toward efforts within its borders but there is an absence of a national structure. The ITU panel observed that the countries with the cheapest fixed broadband prices are the countries at the top of the IDI ratings.

Universities, Colleges, Community Technical Colleges, and private concerns are involved in implementing e-learning. Yet, there is no national distance education authority in Canada. Among the farthest-reaching recommendations by Anderson, Bates, and others in speaking to the future of e-learning in Canada are the recommendations for the creation of a national Open University, a national open content consortium and a national center for digital learning[5].

There are longstanding trends in distance learning[6] that suggest that while there are unique features in Canadian distance learning, there are also similarities and commonalities with the world-wide distance learning community. They include increasing interest in re-usable learning objects, open educational resources including open source applications, and evolving the use of social networking applications and learning management systems. There is also a growing interest in the utilization of blended/hybrid learning models in higher education, mobile-based learning opportunities, and the online, Open University approach to delivering and facilitating learning. Of particular value in promoting learning is the finding by Abrami et al[7] that student

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[3] Sweden, Luxembourg, the Republic of Korea, Denmark, the Netherlands, Iceland, Switzerland, Japan, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

[4] M.K. Barbour, R. Stewart, *A snapshot state of the nation study: K-12 Online learning in Canada*, North American Council for Online Learning, Vienna 2008.

[5] A. Bates, *Six Priorities for Canadian e-Learning*, 2009, http://www.tonybates.ca/2009/12/20/six-priorities-for-canadian-e-learning-in-2010/, [29.10.2010].

[6] R. McGreal, T. Anderson, *Research and practice of elearning in Canada 2008*, [in:] M.R. Syed (Ed.), *Methods and Applications for Advancing Distance Education Technologies: International Issues and Solutions (Vol. 3 Advances in Distance Education Technologies Book Series)*, IGI Global, Hershey 2009.

[7] P.C. Abrami, R.M. Bernard, C.A. Wade, R.F. Schmid, & E. Borokhovski, R. Tamim, M. Surkes, G. Lowerison, D. Zhang, I. Nicolaidou, S. Newman, L. Wozney, A. Peretiatkowicz, *A review of elearning in canada: a rough sketch of the evidence, gaps, and promising directions*, Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance, Montreal 2006.

engagement with the e-learning technology is more important than teacher manipulation of that technology.

An illustration of the value e-learning promises is a summary of the purposes outlined in a survey of Primary and Secondary School Success in Ontario[8]. E-learning is recognized for providing access and diverse curricula to small, rural, and isolated schools; providing flexibility and choice in diploma requirement fulfillment; credit recovery options (opportunity to remain in the student status in a drop-out risk situation); and to promote college level academic and technology skills toward tertiary e-learning pursuits. The demand for superior e-learning opportunities exists in several fields throughout all of North America, with Business and Health fields perhaps at the front of the field. Additional areas of study well suited to e-learning include Liberal Arts, Professional Continuing Education, Interdisciplinary studies, the ITC field itself, and many components of Education, including teacher training. Some Canadian institutions are world renowned for their efforts in e-learning; Athabasca University is perhaps the leader[9]. Other institutions are coming aboard vigorously.

National scale initiatives may provide some needed incentives for growth and development of e-learning programs. Individual institutions remain the key players in deciding and acting upon their own initiatives to promote and deliver e-learning. With scores of class journals, industry associations, and professional networking options available, there is no shortage of information or potential partners as Canadian e-learning continues to grow past 2010.

Among the areas of growth and promise for e-learning in Canada are the emerging interest in open content/open educational resources, a related interest in reusable learning objects and repositories thereof, and the expansion of the collective library of high quality learning materials, which includes materials accessible to individuals with disabilities[10]. An illustration of an open educational resource initiative is the BCcampus, in British Columbia. The BCcampus involves all 26 public postsecondary institutions in the province of British Columbia. The BC campus secondary institutions and distinguishes itself by a offering a choice of two different licensing

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[8] Ontario Ministry of Education, *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario's Schools, First Edition Covering Grades 1 to 12*, Ontario, 2010, http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html, [29.10.2010].

[9] K. Edmonds, *Trends in Distance Learning in Canada*, 2009, http://edmusings.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/trends-in-distance-education-in-canada/.

[10] Canadian Council on Learning, *State of E-learning in Canada*, Ottawa 2009, http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/E-learning/E-Learning_Report_FINAL-E.PDF, Ottawa 2009, [29.10.2010].

options, though 90% of the authors prefer the BC Commons license which limits sharing to the provincial level rather than the creative Commons license which is global[11].

**Conclusions**

The comparison of the development of e-learning in the US and Canada shows that some differences can be observed but they are primarily in the national policy and political realms. Contemporary time is a challenging economic era and finding resources for initiatives at the national level may be more difficult for Canadian institutions who must overcome a lack of national policy infrastructure. As far as practitioner-level interests and behaviors are concerned, it appears that Canadian distance learning educators and advocates are „on the same page" with their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere. On the other hand, some of North America's most vigorous proponents and practitioners of online/distance learning operate in Canada. This affirms and encourages efforts to apply U.S.-based faculty training in distance learning techniques and strategies to a Canadian higher education population.

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