

---

## Council of Ontario Universities 290<sup>th</sup> Council Meeting

Held on Thursday October 21<sup>st</sup> and Friday October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 in Toronto

---

### ACADEMIC COLLEAGUE'S REPORT TO SENATE

---

As is usual the overall meeting involved an Executive Heads' Round Table, two Academic Colleagues Meetings, and the Council Meeting. Among the main topics discussed at these meetings were:

**University Operating Funding:** In Budget 2010, the government of Ontario announced an investment of \$310 million to add 20,000 spaces to colleges and universities. Of the \$310 million announced in Budget 2010, \$248 million is allocated to universities. The \$248 million covers full enrolment funding in 2009-10 and funding required in 2010-11 to cover projected 1<sup>st</sup> year enrolment increases as well as increases in retention in upper years. The \$248 million will be allocated as follows:

- \$101 million to fund 2009-10 enrolment growth
- \$102 million to fund 2010-11 enrolment growth
- \$5 million for growth in undergrad nursing programs
- \$40 million for special purpose grants

**Teacher Education Funding:** An adjustment to Teacher Education Funding was announced as part of Budget 2010. This was motivated by the current oversupply of teachers and MTCU is in the process of developing a plan to reduce funding for teacher education spaces by approximately \$7.5 million. As part of the development of this plan, MTCU has collected information on institutional enrolment and types of programs offered at each institution with a faculty of education in Ontario. The Ministry has worked with a representative from each institution to verify the data collected is correct. MTCU staff have indicated that a decision regarding the enrolment reductions will be made by the end of October 2010. Funding adjustments will take place over two years with an initial \$5 million reduction in 2011-12 and the remaining \$2.5 million in 2012-13. The choice of reducing enrolments in specific teacher education programs within the university will be left to individual institutions provided a reduction in total teacher education (concurrent and/or consecutive) is achieved.

**The Ontario Universities' Fair:** The Ontario Universities' Fair (OUF) was held on September 24-26, 2010 at The Metro Toronto Convention Centre. The Fair continues to grow in size and popularity, providing an exceptional forum for prospective students, their teachers and their families to explore the opportunities provided by Ontario's public universities. The 2010 OUF had record-breaking attendance, with over 130,000 visitors. The highest volume of the three days was recorded on Saturday with 47,900 visitors. This reflects the very positive trend of more parents attending with their children, attendance of the Friday being mainly arranged through the schools.

**Student Mobility and Pathways:** The provincial government would like student mobility and pathways enhanced at the postsecondary level. COU continues to consult with MTCU, Colleges Ontario, and stakeholder groups on ways to facilitate student mobility and pathways across the province. Progress has been made on developing a set of core principles to guide student mobility. The Ministry has established a Steering Committee with representatives from COU, Colleges Ontario, CUCC and student associations to develop options for a credit transfer system for Ontario. In addition, COU's Credit Transfer Resource

Group continues to advise the COU members of the Steering Committee and Working Group on strategies and challenges.

**Teaching and Learning:** Ontario universities are collaborating to share ideas and information on teaching and learning innovations to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. COU is developing strategies to help universities take initiative to meet their teaching and learning objectives. A Teaching & Learning Task force has been established under the aegis of OCAV. The Task Force will address a range of teaching and learning issues, including recommending effective practices to improve instruction, student engagement, and learning outcomes. A communications strategy is being developed to showcase innovative teaching and learning practices at Ontario universities.

**Online Institute:** The provincial government has announced that an online institute for the postsecondary sector will be established. Consultation with senior provincial officials following the Budget announcement on March 24 indicated that the government had not yet crystallized its thinking on the form that the Institute should take. Accordingly, in April, COU established an Online Learning Working Group to develop a proposal for the government, which was submitted in July. The brief recommends that the Institute not be a separate degree-granting body but rather a COU-led collaborative of participating institutions. COU asked for funding to conduct an initial consultation and prepare a five-year plan. MTCU has expressed appreciation for the suggestions but has not yet formally responded.

**International:** The Throne Speech announced and the Ontario Budget in March confirmed the government's goal to increase international student recruitment by 50% over the next five years. COU officially submitted its proposal to government in July in a document called Open Ontario Strategy for Internationalization. Many of the concepts in this document had been shared with officials and political staff in MTCU and the Premier's Office, to favourable review. In the middle of August, we were asked by the Premier's office to work with Colleges Ontario on a joint submission that captured the initiatives suggested by both sectors. A first draft by Colleges Ontario did not reflect the university position and a subsequent draft by our working group, which included much of the College position but took issue with the need and expediency of establishing an independent agency to promote Ontario institutions was rejected by the Colleges. We notified the Premier's Office that we were not able to collaborate on a submission but took some of the material that discussed the diversity of the sector into a revised version of our original submission.

**Quality Assurance:** The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance has been established. Membership was confirmed for the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (Quality Council) in June and the new Quality Council held its first meeting in July. The Quality Council has oversight responsibility for quality assurance in publicly assisted universities in Ontario as outlined in the recently approved Quality Assurance Framework. Under this framework, each university develops its Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) in conformity with the requirements of the Quality Assurance Framework which is submitted for approval to the new Quality Council. The new Quality Council has now received several institutional IQAPs and is in process of reviewing them for approval. The final deadline for submission of the IQAPs to the Quality Council is December 31, 2010. Following approval of institutional IQAPs, universities will submit proposals for new undergraduate and graduate programs to the Quality Council for approval. Under the Quality Assurance Framework, the universities will be responsible for the periodic appraisal of all undergraduate and graduate programs. The Quality Council will audit all publicly assisted universities on a periodic cycle to ensure that their program reviews are in conformity with the approved IQAP. During this transition year, the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies continues its mandate of approving new graduate programs and concludes the periodic appraisals of graduate programs that were initiated in the past year or two. The Undergraduate Program Review Committee (UPRAC) concludes its audit function this year with audits scheduled for the remaining two universities (Algoma University and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT)).

**Academic Colleagues Discussion Paper *Online Learning*:** A draft of the Academic Colleagues' Paper was discussed. The draft paper is attached to this report. Comments on the paper would be most welcome and should be sent by e-mail to one of the authors.

**Recommendation of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts Related to Space Management and Space Utilization:** The 2007 Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario, *Universities-Management of Facilities*, includes two recommendations from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts that MTCU must respond to that are related to space management. The first recommendation (#7 in the AG report) is the requirement of a report providing data on space utilization rates at universities; the second (#8 in the AG report) is a report on what MTCU is doing to ensure that Ontario universities review and improve their space utilization practices. Executive Heads agreed to a recommendation for the formation of a new, broad-based Space Management Committee to provide advice to MTCU in order to address the recommendations of the Standing Committee. Universities have collected and submitted data on space utilization that will allow for utilization rates to be presented based on room size and common number of scheduling hours per week. A draft report including classroom utilization rates, as well as challenges and best practices for space utilization in the sector will be presented to the Space Management Committee for review on October 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Ontario College of Art and Design University:** The *Ontario College of Art and Design* has long been an Associate Member of COU. However with the proclamation of Bill 43 on June 7, 2010, the *Ontario College of Art & Design Act* was amended to add the word "University" to OCAD's name and make changes in the institution's governance. The President of what has consequently become OCAD University therefore requested that the university be considered for full membership in COU. At its meeting on September 10, 2010, the COU Executive Committee considered this request and agreed that it was an appropriate development to admit OCAD University as a full member of COU. However the COU constitution specifies that for an institution to be a Full Member of COU its programming should include:

“...undergraduate degree programs characterized by breadth and depth in the liberal arts and sciences, and first professional degree programs (such as medicine, law, teacher education, business, engineering) that have a significant liberal arts and/or sciences component. (Section 3 (2) c).”

The COU Executive Committee therefore recommended that the following motion be taken to Council:

**“Notwithstanding the above criteria, OCAD University is granted full membership in COU in view of the institution's long-standing status as an associate member of COU and as a direct recipient of university operating grants from the province of Ontario, and in view of the June 7, 2010 amendments to its Act to add the word “university” to its name, establish a Senate, and establish the position of Chancellor.”**

This motion was unanimously approved by COU and OCAD U was admitted to full membership of COU.

Patrick H. Oosthuizen  
Academic Colleague  
Queen's University

**Discussion Paper**  
**Online Education: Academic Considerations**

By  
Linda Garcia, Ph.D.  
(COU Academic Colleague, University of Ottawa)  
and  
Sylvie Albert, DBA  
(COU Academic Colleague, Laurentian University)

with contributions from COU Academic Colleagues  
John Logan, Eric Nay, Marilyn Rose and Leslie Sanders

October 2010

## **Online Education – More than meets the eye**

### **Introduction**

In the Throne Speech of March 2010, the Province of Ontario announced its intention to encourage online education as part of its overall plan to reach out to any student who wishes to complete a college or university degree. It was hoped that the online environment could provide opportunities to meet the growing demand for space within universities while also providing a higher level of flexibility for students and a greater accessibility to international students. But as with any plan or solution, there are also constraints and the need to select the best possible model for an *Online Institute* further complicates the issue. The Council of Ontario Universities has embraced online education, underlining its benefits and offering a plan for its implementation (<http://www.cou.on.ca/Issues-Resources/Student-Resources/Government-Submissions/PDFs/COU-OnlineInstituteSubmission.aspx>). As Ontario prepares itself to meet the challenges of a system that develops life-long learning goals through the use of technologies, the objective of this discussion paper is to raise issues related to these delivery systems from an academic perspective.

### **I. Environment**

There is no question that Ontario universities are once again on the brink of a transformation. Students are increasingly busy with part-time jobs, volunteer work or other interests, more mature students are returning to school, large amounts of information are available to anyone at the click of a mouse, and more mobile students and professors make up an increasingly culturally diverse educational environment. Despite this, university courses are still largely based on traditional modes of delivery where face-to-face lectures are routinely offered and where the “sage on the stage” transmits knowledge to a more or less passive audience. Having grown to expect fast access to information, and with multiple distractions, and increasing demands on their time, students today are seeking quicker and more flexible ways to learn.

### **II. Background**

As post-secondary educators, we have identified a number of excellent examples where online education, sometimes referred to as distance education, e-learning or tele-education, has worked well and in various modes of delivery: synchronous (real-time), asynchronous (often text-based or less time sensitive), web-based, video-conferencing, and combinations of these alternatives. We have also found examples leading some to believe that the online solution is sub-par in comparison to what can be provided face-to-face. Yet can we say that in-class environments are always optimal? Is it optimal to crowd hundreds of students into a classroom?

Distance education is too often thought of as it used to be, a mode of delivery relying on self-study units and print material. It is now clear that online or distance learning is not

the same as taking a “correspondance course”. There is a continuum of quality for online delivery that some would argue make face-to-face learning suboptimal to many online practices. Some current best practices minimize the challenges of online courses by combining the older paper-based modes with the use of new networking tools to encourage discussions, develop student skills and offer a better group environment.

Certainly there are many different methods being used for distance education as evidenced by a recent survey conducted by the Council of Ontario Universities. For example,

- All universities have access to learning management systems that enable some online component to their courses (e.g., Blackboard) and many professors and students use these systems for communication and discussion of course material outside of the traditional classroom.
- Other universities have gone so far as to offer entire degrees online both at the undergraduate and graduate levels in fields such as Administration, Nursing, or Education. Students in these environments are invited to work in groups on weekly assignments using discussion boards and/or teleconferencing systems. Online videos can be used to explain key concepts and some instructors utilize Skype, or other teleconferencing solutions to hold discussions with their class.
- Still others, such as Carleton University, offer courses through a television system (CUTV) where classes are tape-recorded live and aired on a local television cable system.
- Despite lagging behind other provinces in terms of integrated course offerings, credit transfers and course recognition, Ontario universities have already started partnering to allow students to take courses at several institutions online and some are offered across university and college boundaries.

As the Government of Ontario moves forward in this exercise, there will be a need for clarity as to what the *online institute* could offer. Are the proponents referring to a blended model of delivery where online materials are offered within the context of more traditional face-to-face courses, a practice which is quite widespread in Ontario universities? Are we suggesting a central administrative body to guide the pedagogy for online courses rather than this remaining the responsibility of the professor? Is the plan to create a degree granting institution or a network for distributed learning? Would this be available to students in different time zones?

Whichever model is adopted, quality control will be of utmost importance as universities recommend the ideal blend of teaching modalities (face-to-face, asynchronuous, synchronous, or both) for a given program, discipline and for a given context.

### **III. The quest for quality online education**

There is a breadth of evidence indicating that students who pursue online courses succeed and obtain comparable scores to students who follow face-to-face courses (Lehmann &

Chamberlin, 2009, Means et al 2009, Russell, 2001) but education is more than obtaining scores.

Students need to be assured of the quality of their online choice of courses and programs through review processes which are held to the same quality standards and go through the same evaluation processes as those offered on-site at Ontario post-secondary institutions. In addition, the development of these courses should be guided by pedagogical experts and implemented in discipline-specific ways. Strategies need to be devised to ensure proper design, development and implementation. Students who complete online courses must have appropriate feedback mechanisms for providing an evaluation of the course and the instructor. Even a well-designed course can have an ineffective instructor. Course/program administrators should have an opportunity to evaluate the successes and challenges of each course so that pedagogy or systems can be amended to improve delivery. Faculty members need this feedback in order to gauge how students perceive their ability to help students gain the knowledge required in the course.

Irrespective of the model Ontario eventually adopts with respect to an *online institute*, administrators, professors, students and the public must be assured that the quality of education will not be compromised and that the investment will, on the contrary, enhance quality in addition to rendering education accessible. In April 2010, the Council of Ontario Universities approved the Ontario Universities Quality Assurance Framework which is being used to approve all university programs, both undergraduate and graduate. The following discussion uses each of the criteria from this framework to explore the challenges and opportunities of online education.

1. ***Depth and breadth of knowledge:*** In Ontario, undergraduate and graduate programs are expected to offer students access to a large body of information as well as the necessary skills to analyse, synthesize and criticize this information. At the graduate level, students must also learn to identify what is at the forefront of knowledge in their disciplines. Online education offers unparalleled opportunities for access to knowledge around the world. Since online activities can attract students of all ages who need flexibility in course delivery, this may stimulate greater critical discussions as well as opportunities for analyses and syntheses.
2. ***Knowledge of methodologies/ Research and scholarship:*** Students in undergraduate programs are expected to be able to identify and evaluate the appropriateness of methodological techniques used in their respective disciplines and graduate students are further expected to devise original applications of these methodologies. Online education uses multi-modal approaches such as video, online conferences, webinars to introduce students to the available methodologies and their importance in particular fields of study. Communities of practice can be developed where graduate students can reflect on their choice of methodologies, present their rationale to users and fine-tune their research designs.

3. **Application of knowledge:** In depth knowledge of a discipline as well as its commonly used methodological techniques is not enough. Students from Ontario universities are also expected to be able to apply this knowledge and contribute to the development of new methodologies (especially graduate students). A well designed online course with communication elements which permit exchanges with the users of the knowledge (e.g., communities of practice, front line workers, industry, policy makers, other students, other researchers) is an excellent model to help students understand how knowledge and different methodologies can be applied. Access to a larger student body and an international forum will also help students apply these methodologies within a more multinational and multicultural context. The one caveat is the limited ability of online courses to offer opportunities for learning laboratory techniques commonly used in the sciences. Although some suggest that technology is sufficiently advanced that such applications of knowledge are possible (such as through simulations), it is absolutely necessary that, at some point, the student be able to manipulate the equipment and learn in vivo. At best, such online courses offer a blended method of delivery where students would be required to practice their skills in a supervised laboratory environment.
4. **Communication skills:** All students graduating from Ontario universities are expected to be able to communicate orally and in writing to a range of audiences (undergraduate). Graduate students must also be able to communicate complex and ambiguous ideas clearly and defend these in public. Since much of the communication online is done through writing, there is an opportunity to help students develop their writing skills, although the challenge would be adding to the complexity of offering programs online. Oral communication may also prove to be difficult in online education. Although video conferencing (and inexpensive public options such as Skype) is clearly an option, it does not give the same level of feedback from the audience that a face-to-face communication might offer. It is more difficult to manage a classroom with dozens online and the technology may not give the quality needed (especially in using VoiP). The student cannot be evaluated on his/her abilities in managing habitual interruptions and the give-and-take of live conversations. With large classes, oral communication is de-emphasized and as a result, it is difficult to measure the true impact of a largely text-based online system. If online class sizes were kept small and the mediums varied, one could conceive of a more interactive and satisfying experience for students.
5. **Awareness of limits of knowledge:** Undergraduate students are expected to understand how the limits of their own knowledge might influence their interpretation of general and disciplinary knowledge while graduate students need to additionally know how their own contributions add to this complexity. Nowhere is it more obvious than on the Internet just how much information actually exists and students must learn how to filter this information for quality. Since students taking online courses are required to interact with each other, this offers additional options for learning about one's own limits to knowledge. In disciplines where critiquing is required at the undergraduate level from day one (e.g., Humanities), sufficient face-to-face opportunities for dialogue may be difficult to create and shared in an online

environment. There may be some hurdles in online learning that requires some major pedagogical changes and whether these changes are positive remains to be seen.

6. **Autonomy and professional capacity** : While undergraduate students should show evidence of social responsibility and an ability to work well with others, graduates students should, in addition, be capable of making scholarly decisions, of behaving ethically in research and showing, at the doctoral level, independence in research. Online courses inherently require students to be more autonomous than face-to-face classes. Blogs, wikis, simulations, podcasts can all be used to foster active learning (Lehmann & Chamberlin 2009). Scaffolding for learning from less complex tasks to tasks requiring more autonomy and complexity is also possible and can be done more systematically online. Students can work at their pace in an asynchronous model of delivery and take time to reflect on their responses.

In conclusion, online education can potentially offer some very stimulating opportunities and, if properly designed, online degrees can address the criteria for quality education in Ontario. There remain, however some reservations about students' abilities to learn the methodologies specific to science labs as well as develop real-time oral communication skills in an online environment.

The standardization that occurs with many online courses ensures that the learning approaches fit the learning criteria. Nonetheless, it is important that there be some leeway for professors (or teams of designers) to create courses which more fully challenge their students. Standardization of courses offered online may come at the expense of innovation. Rather, a set of guiding principles would help to ensure quality across institutions without standardizing courses. It would be difficult to benchmark a standard across disciplines or courses and it would not be welcomed by independent institutions.

#### **IV. The advantage - The students**

By far the greatest advantage of online education for students is flexibility. Online courses allow students to undertake a program of study regardless of location, providing accessibility to individuals where there are no local universities and a greater variety when programs of study are not available locally. In asynchronous courses, working students report that they can perform the work required at any time of day, thereby avoiding scheduling problems, and giving parents flexibility in organizing their schedule.

If properly designed, (i.e., if enough online courses exist to give breadth of choice to students) and if agreements are in place for institutions to recognize each other's courses more easily (i.e., ease of credit transfer) there is more potential and choice for students in an online environment. The "pooling" of academic resources from different institutions will offer more options to meet students' learning needs. In an online environment, the approach can be personalized with different technologies catering to different learning styles (e.g., video, audio, written, visual, etc.) and students having more control over when and how they learn.

### Disadvantages

Some disadvantages include feelings of being physically disconnected from other learners and professors. Furthermore, the anonymity of online learning may also mean that cultural differences may not be recognized in course design. The reduced face-to-face interactions can be partially answered through synchronous meeting times where students and professors meet online using video or audio conferencing technologies. However, when students are spread out across Canada or the world, time zones make synchronous meetings difficult, requiring some students to take time away from work, or attend meetings late into the night. Another option is to use pre-recorded videos. These can be made available via a private network or placed online through services such as YouTube. Students who use these tools tend to like them because they can view videos over and over again.

A poorly designed online course can be disastrous when online learning, for instance, does not consider participatory approaches to learning or is devised with few networking opportunities or scheduled too loosely. In these circumstances, the student can feel disconnected and procrastinate in completing assignments which leads to attrition. Keeping a focus on good principles of teaching and learning adapted to the learners and the discipline should continue to be the goal of education. Creating learning communities through online courses can be achieved through proper course design, well supported and trained faculty and availability of appropriate technology.

### Younger students

Some academics believe that younger students tend to be less motivated and therefore would not thrive in an online environment. Self-discipline and independent learning are attributes of successful online students and they may be less dominant in younger age groups. Strategies around retention are as applicable online as they are in-class. A first-year introductory course should be student-centered requiring some independent work, but mainly focused on engaging and stimulating activities. Students must be provided with weekly goals/objectives to make sure that they keep up with the course and need constant feedback and support.

It may be necessary to make provisions for regular face-to-face meetings on a regional basis or campus site basis for students who need tutoring or more personal interactions, or to gain commitment. Some universities have provided the services of teaching assistants to off-site students on a scheduled basis in order to provide a more human perspective. The development of study guides, strategies, and best practices may be developed as reference tools for younger students as well as for new professors initiated into the online environment.

Plagiarism may be more difficult to control online and this may affect the appeal for earlier years of study where class sizes and the types of knowledge disseminated may be more prone to abuse.

### Mature students

Mature/working students have the most to gain from online education as it enables them to pursue their studies while balancing work and family. Because they are more often motivated by career advancement, have a greater need to build their network of peers, and are more likely to have employer financial support, retention rates tend to be higher than with younger students.

Although, as with any student population, individual differences and needs exist, these courses might not require weekly goals/objectives but rather ample opportunities for discussion with virtual communities. There may be different or additional strategies needed for mature students who return to school either from high school or completion of a partial degree/diploma many years before.

In conclusion, in order for an online course to be of good quality, it must take into account the learning population. Tools have been developed to help identify those students who would be most likely to complete online degrees (Holder 2007; Pillary et al 2007). For instance, some students might be sophisticated users of technology while others might struggle to send an email. There may be differing expectations about what a university education should deliver and the thought of leaving their notebooks behind may be de-stabilizing to some students. Furthermore, students from different countries will need to deal with time zones and intermittent access to internet. There are as many techniques to keep students motivated and working online as there are in the classroom. As in a face-to-face environment, the student has the choice to be engaged or not and a part of this is outside the control of any instructor. Recognizing these needs and building courses that address them, will help to ensure that students successfully complete their online courses and ultimately, earn a degree.

## **V. The buy-in - The professors**

While students should have a much easier transition from classroom to online learning due to their daily exposure to technology, the transition would be much more resource-intensive for professors.

Success in online education will be impossible without support from the professors, which is reported to be quite low (Lehmann & Chamberlin 2009). There is overwhelming evidence that it takes special skills to offer online courses. Success of online education depends to a large extent on the experience and training of the faculty member involved and the course design. Professors must be provided with the right teaching tools and knowledge to facilitate student-centered online courses and a community of professors, whether virtual or through other means is critical in providing arenas for professors to share their experiences, mentor others and ask questions. They should first and foremost be self-critical, able to adapt, flexible and open to change their courses to suit the needs of the students. They must be:

- Knowledgeable/experts in their field of study

- Personable and approachable
- Able to communicate efficiently and effectively
- Available and able to provide prompt feedback
- Able to facilitate online groups
- Patient and tactful
- Able to provide students with positive reinforcement
- Able to resolve conflicts

Achieving quality online education is impossible without appropriate administrative and support staff. Staff must be able to provide professors with technical assistance (i.e., setting up synchronous sessions) and provide them with the skills and knowledge to develop successful collaborative strategies and use the technology in a pedagogically sound way.

The difficulty here will be that professors are accustomed to designing their own courses with little if any outside interference. Team-based course design may best be approached with interested faculty rather than forcing older practitioners to change their practices. Attendance at yearly showcases (such as the Symposium on Teaching and Technology) may encourage more reticent faculty to engage and over time grow the pool of online instructors.

One of the biggest concerns for many faculty members is time. The transition is viewed both as a substantial investment of time at the onset as well as being a source of flexibility, allowing them to balance the needs of research and academic travel. While the online nature of the course means professors can log on anytime, anywhere, the students often expect an immediate level of service. Professors are worried that this could mean answering emails or inquiry boards 7 days a week if the course is not well designed, institutional policies are not clear and it is difficult to set boundaries.

Another source of concern is the time needed to change academic programming to fit the requirements of a dispersed population. Without appropriate support, it means that the administrative burden of coordinating papers, grading, changing the structure of examinations, providing support for laboratories, supervising examination sites and managing the special needs of students who are in different geographical locations will fall on the professor.

There are existing methods for removing these obstacles but they involve added costs related to additional support and technical services. For instance, a central body could aggregate and coordinate the needs of post-secondary institutions in many communities where examinations, laboratories, tutoring and other interpersonal services could be provided, thereby decreasing the burden on individual institutions and professors.

In conclusion, faculty will need substantial support in conceptualizing, developing, administering and facilitating online courses. The decision to adopt this approach is one that must be undertaken at an institutional level.

Even willing faculty need to be mentored and have the opportunity to share skills and experiences. Faculty learn best when they are paired with a well respected colleague or have an opportunity to participate in a forum where they can share their experience and gain knowledge from others in similar circumstances. An online community would be ideal in this case.

*What is needed for faculty commitment?*

- **Support:** Faculty generally resist developing online courses when asked to do this without guarantees of IT support, new infrastructure and stipends to cover the massive front-end work required of them.
- **Financial compensation:** Professors who have experience with online education already believe that teaching online is more intensive than teaching face-to-face because of the increased use of communication tools (i.e., bulletin board postings and emails and student expectation of constant feedback and interaction) notwithstanding the time needed to develop such courses. Teaching an online course should count towards the teaching load of the faculty member rather than existing only as an overload option. Also, some standards in stipends should be developed as well as separate contracts for various portions of activities needed (e.g., course development, consulting/training other faculty members). Financial rewards and recognition for providing mentoring opportunities to new professors should be made available.
- **Recognition** in tenure and promotion: Creating content for online courses should be considered a publication, especially if the content is peer-reviewed. Likewise, a professor's commitment to increasing his/her knowledge base and skills by teaching online should be considered a scholarly activity. If developing online courses becomes recognized as valid academic output, this would legitimize time spent on this type of work. Currently every university follows a different policy. Fundamental faculty concerns about developing courses for online delivery that then become the property of the university that can be taught by anyone also create massive disincentives for developing online courses as products.
- Involvement in institutional/ program **decision-making**;
- Development of a **sense of community** and belonging: as quickly as possible, professors should be included in a community of peers in order to reduce the feeling of isolation.

**VI. The challenge - operational concerns**

A model where a student would pursue a degree based on the policies and standards of a home institution with courses taken online at other Ontario institutions presents numerous fundamental advising, funding and policy problems. Each institution in Ontario is unique with policies and practices regarding prior learning assessment, points of entry (portfolios, marks, letters of intent), transfer of credit, letters of permission, residency

requirements and even minimum grade point averages all creating challenges that would need to be met before establishing a shared online institute. Navigating through twenty-one different universities with twenty-one different sets of policies might be better managed through a staged approach as suggested in the COU recommendations. Construction of an online institute using existing institutions and degree programs is a much larger project than putting a course online administratively.

Of particular concern to academic colleagues are the support mechanisms and services for achieving the educational missions of the courses:

- Who and how will the support systems be managed? If the expectation is, as suggested by the COU, that students will enroll in and take courses offered at various post-secondary institutions then the support systems should also be established at the *Online Institute*. Support systems would include:
  - technical support for both students and professors,
  - a course development/revision team (instructional designer, web developer, peer reviewers),
  - support staff for course delivery for both students and faculty (coordinators, exam schedulers, assignments clerks, programmers, graphic artists, video production specialists, project management, permissions specialists),
  - academic advisors and managers.
- Which mechanisms would be in place to monitor student engagement and academic progress and how would students be contacted at key points while enrolled in a course (e.g., after assignments have not been submitted)? If courses are taken from different institutions, then support staff at the online university would need to monitor a student's progress by looking at courses attempted and completed.
- How could different options and flexibility be offered in order to address time constraints, time zones, accessibility, disabilities, geographical and cultural considerations?
- What needs to be in place to minimize plagiarism, ensure that the student is the one taking the course, and safeguarding confidentiality?

### Existing models

There are various examples of operationalization of online education elsewhere in the world covered in part in the portal by Contact North/elearnnetwork.ca – “Ontario Online Learning Portal” - <http://www.click4onlinelearning.ca/>. In an article written by the editorial board of *the Sacramento Bee* in July 2010, the board discusses the realistic prospects of a University of California shared course based online institute. The goals were to increase student numbers, to cut budgets and to deliver UC quality courses without burdening UC facilities. The intention was to save money and increase access to

education at the highest level. The courses targeted in the pilot were the ones with the highest enrolments, the ones most in demand by community college students seeking to transfer into a UC school, the most oversubscribed courses and (of course) the ones faculty least like to teach. Pedagogically these courses became even more clearly “requirements to get out of the way” as online rather than face-to-face courses according to the editorial board.

In contrast to the university system in Ontario, which is not as standardized, the California online model may work institutionally because the UC, California State University and Community College system in California is based on historically practiced systemic course standardization and planned mobility. The California system was designed for sharing courses across institutions from the beginning to empower community colleges to meet the same standards of lower level UC courses. This is an exceptional advantageous feature that we simply do not have in Ontario that supports interuniversity course sharing online.

Other examples of recent and similar initiatives are readily available, both good and bad. The University of Illinois’ “Global Campus” crashed and burned in an attempt to use online education to capture a global audience of tuition paying students from the hypothetically conceived far corners of the earth. The University of Texas experienced a failed “Telecampus” project that similarly assumed too much for its online classes. The University of Massachusetts’ version of an online campus, “UMassOnline” has had better success since it has not set unrealistic goals for itself and the academic and fiscal planning for the initiative is based on the simple premise that, “Not all success is financial”.

In each of these cases the idea that online courses will generate revenue as a goal rarely comes true and the added work involved and infrastructure spending is also never without great cost. Some institutions utilize online courses merely as a way of staying in touch with alumni, to be active members of a larger community and even the *New York Times* provides sample mini courses from campuses across the United States online with great success. Online education is great, but it is an addition to ways of offering instruction rather than a profit making alternative.

Current research in generating online courses using varied forms of social networking and disability-focused intentions are proving to be very useful in addressing current AODA legislation and desires for inclusive design and universal access to education. The results in many of these cases are applicable to all students and do tend to create courses that are not fully online, but rather hybrid courses that may include some face-to-face contact and some digitized work and interfacing. The goal, again, in these examples are not simply fiscal, but pedagogical in nature and therefore they work and faculty care about developing and teaching them as a result. An exhaustive investigation into the administrative mechanics and contractual agreements with the Open University in the UK, the Erasmus program in Europe and The European Graduate School could produce budgetary and managerial models to work with and would provide a window into faculty incentives and compensation as well.

Allowing each institution to claim a subject area to contribute to a "clearinghouse" of courses might be one of the methods to put forward to streamline who does what, but pedagogically the results would be the elimination of key areas of breadth and depth needed in any comprehensive institution. This could create a bizarre world where disciplines and subject areas would be virtually "owned" by specific campuses and become absent on others. The resulting potential homogeneity of student bodies and faculty at institutions would create a very bleak postsecondary landscape that would counter much of the work in diversity and inclusiveness that every contemporary university campus strives for in its mission statement. Rather, student bodies and faculty would best be served by a consortium where member universities are permitted to offer and design a comprehensive palette of online courses which are then centrally shared. This sharing of online courses would pave the way, as suggested by the COU recommendations to an effective credit transfer system.

### Financial Considerations

The cost of developing online courses can be prohibitive if attempted by individual schools, especially since there are no set industry standards for compensation. Some kind of cost sharing and/or agreements to minimize duplication among institutions may make more efficient use of resources. If the COU recommendations are accepted and the institute becomes a "portal" for students to complete online degrees and programs through the use of courses at different institutions, then government needs to make an investment in the "online university" for administrative, research and marketing expenses. This funding would be used to enhance existing courses and technology where the online participation institutions deem it necessary to develop courses at a central level, remuneration for developers and/or pedagogical experts, as well as finance the administration and support of the online courses.

As with face-to-face courses, there is a risk of having to cancel courses at the last minute because of low numbers in registration. This is further complicated in an online institute as not all students are registered at the same university. In fact, they may not be in the same province or country. In order to ensure financial viability, the *Online Institute* would need to redirect students to courses where registrations are still being accepted and able to provide recognized credits.

## **VII. Conclusions**

An online environment shifts the traditional learning design from teacher-centred and lecture-driven to learner-centred designs that promote engagement, working with others and drawing from past experience. All of these benefits enhance the learning outcomes. It will take time to learn how to move from a 'sage on the stage' to a more supportive role as well as from an old text-based model of online courses to a more modern dynamic model where communication is orally based. Such a transition has obvious potential. The

following are issues that should be brought to the attention of the proponents of an *online institute* for Ontario universities.

1. The obvious advantage of an online education system rests with mature students who need the flexibility to manage their studies while balancing work and family;
2. Online education is becoming increasingly viable for graduate education and may, in fact, be easier to offer than undergraduate education. Despite having the technical skills to follow online courses, younger students may not be as independent and may be lacking in the basic learning skills for autonomous higher education although it has been argued earlier that 1st year, large foundation courses if properly offered could provide a substantial benefit;
3. Online courses should not be placed in opposition to face-to-face models. This mode of delivery is simply an alternative method to education and it may not cater to all learning styles;
4. Sustained financial and human resources are absolutely necessary for ensured success and to support professors and students alike;
5. Professors need to be trained, mentored and recognized for the time and effort spent in transforming from a traditional to an online professor;
6. Blended, hybrid courses may be the best to response to the quality framework. These might best address the concerns around applicability to science labs and the development of oral communication skills;
7. The decision to embark on such an initiative as the *online institute* should not be motivated by a desire to save money. Start up funds required to set up these courses and engage students and professors are costly.

#### Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the significant input to the ideas expressed and to the text from Julie Henri and Bettina Brockerhoff-Macdonald (Laurentian University), and to Christian Blanchette, Alain Erdmer and Richard Pinet (University of Ottawa) as well as to Frank Nicholson (formerly of COU) for his resourcefulness.

#### **References**

1. Council of Ontario Universities (2010) The Ontario Online Institute: Achieving the Transformation, COU No. 834.
2. Hampson, R. (2010) Organizational Factors in Online Higher Ed, Presentation given to COU Academic Colleagues, May 27.

3. Holder, B. (2007) An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online programs, *Internet and Higher Education*, 10, 245–260.
4. Lehmann, K. & Chamberlin, L. (2009) *Making the move to eLearning: Putting your course online* (268pp). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
5. Lynch, G. (2010) *Postsecondary Online Learning: Open Universities Australia*. Presentation given in August.
6. Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., Jones, K. (2009) *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*. Report for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service.
7. Pillay, H., Irving, K. and Tones, M. (2007) Validation of the diagnostic tool for assessing *Tertiary students' readiness for online learning*, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26 (2), 217–234.
8. Russell, T. L. (2001), *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon: A Comparative Research Annotated Bibliography on Technology for Distance Education*, Consulted online, <http://nosignificantdifference.wcet.info/about.asp>