“COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL MODELS OF OPEN LEARNING AND DISTANCE EDUCATION”

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SUMMARY

Student mobility is often restricted by legitimate institutional barriers that can be circumvented through collaborative networks or consortia. The article describes two Canadian examples and will derive “lessons learned” to guide and enrich future experiences. The “lessons learned” fall under five categories: 1- Leadership, 2- Consultative and Participatory Management, 3- Clarity and Transparency, 4- Funding, and 5- Policy and Technology.

Introduction

How Legitimate Access Barriers Develop and How to Circumvent Them

In Canada, education is a provincial jurisdiction and a governance system exists on a province by province basis. The province of British Columbia for example has its own Ministry of Advanced Education and has over 25 diverse publicly-funded postsecondary institutions from institutes, to colleges, to community colleges, to universities, to “special purpose” universities, serving a population of about 4.5 million individuals. I will describe today how British Columbia institutions formed collaborative networks to mitigate problems students had in accessing postsecondary education.

Legitimate Barriers to Access

a. Admission Requirements

Higher education institutions are characterized by a commitment to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge and this commitment comes hand in hand with fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, freedom to teach, and freedom to learn. The protection of this value system requires that universities operate at arms length from funding agencies and government and that universities remain, by nature, self-governing institutions. Governments fund universities to fulfill a number of services (technical training, continuing education, applied

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research, etc.) while respecting this core principle of institutional self-
determination. Given the nature and the ongoing complexity of financial arrange-
ments between government and universities, it is inevitable that educational
capacity challenges occur, forcing universities to strike a difficult balance
between competing educational commitments (e.g., balancing the teaching and
research agendas). In order to protect their commitment to knowledge and excel-
lence, universities have seen fit to implement selective admission requirements to
ensure that the educational mandate of the institution is protected without compro-
mising quality (for example, the GPA entrance requirement in North American
institutions).

b. Residency Requirements

The second legitimate access barrier arises from what I call knowledge differ-
entiation. Most educational institutions have a regional mandate and attempt to
adjust curriculum delivery to suit local or regional needs. Differentiation may
occur at the programming level (technology, career, professional, graduate vs
undergraduate, etc…) or at the organizational level (traditional, dual mode, dis-
tance, or corporate vs private, or college, university college, university, etc.)
While strengthening in an educational system, differentiation comes with a price.
Differentiated institutions tend to increase residency requirements to ensure the
integrity of their programs’ graduate outcomes; fewer credit equivalencies are
granted and student opportunities to transfer from institution to institution are
reduced.

How to Circumvent Barriers to Access

Diverse autonomous institutions lead to a strong educational system but can
yield uneven educational opportunities throughout a jurisdiction. The key to
mobilize regional programming strength on behalf of students is to find palliative
measures to surmount barriers to the movement of credits or the movement of stu-
dents from institution to institution. The British Columbia approach to this access
problem took the form of consortium networks. Forty years ago the British
Columbia government perceived that students living in small towns and adjacent
rural areas were disenfranchised with respect to university education (Layton
1984). There were two basic ways to address this remote access problem: Build
universities or university satellite campuses in all or most small towns in the prov-
ine of British Columbia, or establish collaborative networks to provide links to
university educational opportunities in order to mitigate the university access
problem for non-metropolitan students. Given that universities had been coping
with severe financial cuts for some time, “inter-institutional cooperation and col-
laboration were considered a necessary alternative to individual curtailing meas-
ures which might have led to a very substantial reduction of services at a systemic
level” (Layton 1992). British Columbia established two types of networks to
address the non-metropolitan access problem:
1. **Consortium Certification Model: BC Council on Admissions and Transfer**

A network of institutions that recognize each other’s lower-level credit (1st and 2nd year of university) so students may start their education at a local college and transfer later to a more comprehensive institute, college or university located in a metropolitan area (occasionally a college can be in a metropolitan area or a University may be in a small town).

2. **Consortium Service Model: BC Open University Consortium**

A network of universities that establish 3rd and 4th year university distance education courses that complement college lower-level course offerings, so students may start their education in a local college and complete basic university degree program by distance (with the possibility that the whole degree program might be taken at a distance).

The former consortium is 36 years old and the latter 25.

### Two Canadian Examples

1. **BC Council on Admissions and Transfer: A Consortium Certification Model**

I wish to acknowledge that the following paragraph draws extensively [and sometimes verbatim] on the account published by Dennison (2002).

In a nutshell, British Columbia students from colleges needed greater assurance that the courses they completed would be accepted by universities with full transfer credit. In 1968, a meeting of university and college representatives was convened where it was proposed that “articulation” committees be constituted for each academic discipline. These committees were to meet on a regular basis, share information, debate curriculum changes as well as transfer issues, and report to a Post-Secondary Articulation Coordinating Committee (PSACC) established by the Ministry of Advanced Education. PSACC membership included one senior academic officer from each public college and university, plus the registrar from each of the universities. PSACC developed a set of principles and guidelines for transfer (see Appendix 1) which were subsequently adopted by all college councils and university senates. Later on the government established the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT), a formal but non-legislated agency that took over from PSACC and assumed responsibility for every aspect of the transfer process.

### Keys to Success for BCCAT Consortium Certification Model

[Modified from Dennison (2002), Gaber (2003), Andres and Dawson (1998)]

— Government funded Council while remaining directly uninvolved in its affairs.
— The Council assumed responsibility for coordinating, assisting and monitoring the work of the articulation committees but it remained a nonaligned agency that respected the autonomy of all institutions over curriculum matters.

— The Council adopted a voluntary participation approach and insisted on inclusiveness at all organizational levels.

— Institutional self-determination was protected through three organizational levels:
  - Board or Executive level.
  - An overarching Transfer and Articulation Committee consisting of institutional representatives to support and coordinate.
  - Articulation Committees operating at the academic department and discipline levels to determine course and program equivalency. The Articulation Committees meet yearly in each discipline and each programming institution sends representatives. These committees support relationships among institutions at the program level, establish trust, and ensure credibility.

— Roles and responsibilities were clearly mandated through Terms of Reference documents. Voluntary principles and guidelines were developed (Appendix 1) and all documentation was widely shared in the public domain.

— Council published a single provincial transfer guide that recorded each inter-institutional transfer agreement. It evolved to become a Web-based tool.

The success of the Council is attested through extensive publications (see Andres and Dawson, 1998, Giguère 2002). The following quote provides an excellent summary:

“In particular, Macdonald’s recommendation that universities and colleges function as autonomously as possible has meant that the need for significant and ongoing effort in ensuring coordination and articulation among the many institutions within the system has been considerable. To a great extent the effort has been successful, and a high degree of integration has been attained, especially considering the key role that diversity and self-government have played within the system.” Andres and Dawson (1998)

2. The BC Open University Consortium: A Consortium Service Model

The following was drawn from the documentation submitted to the Board of Directors of the BC Open University Consortium (then know as University Consortium of British Columbia), as well as the following: Yerbury (1985), Mugridge (1992), OUPC (1993), OUPC (1994), OUPC (1995), Petter (1997). I thank Dr.
Colin Yerbury from Simon Fraser University for loaning me some documentation.

In 1984, a meeting of university representatives was convened to develop a plan that would allow British Columbians to combine courses from any accredited institutions in British Columbia with the distance education offerings of four British Columbia universities, so that that every person in British Columbia, regardless of place of residence, had an opportunity to complete recognized university degrees. Each institution was represented on the Consortium Board and the BC Open University established an Academic Council to oversee the offering of the degree programs. The Academic Council was composed of representatives from each of the participating institutions and it had the following mandate: (a) To advise on the formulation of academic standards and policies with respect to admission to, and graduation from, degree programs; (b) To advise on academic standards and policies in respect of validation of degree course credits and transferability of course credit earned at other institutions; (c) To advise on academic considerations regarding future development of the credit bank concept; and (d) To advise the Board of Directors of the BC Open University Consortium, as requested, on academic matters pertaining to program planning and coordination.

The BC Open University was entrusted with the provision of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of General Studies degrees on the basis of credits obtained for courses taken from the offerings of any accredited institutions by removing existing limits on course transfers. Participating universities provided distance education courses that focused primarily on upper-level curriculum (3rd and 4th year). Three committees were formed and all participating universities were represented on each committee. The BC Open University Registrar assumed the role of Consortium Registrar. A Course Offerings list and a BC Open University Calendar were published to outline the course and programs available through the Consortium.

**Keys to Success for BC Open University Consortium Service Model**

Government funded the BC Open University Consortium while remaining directly uninvolved in its affairs.

The Consortium Board assumed responsibility for coordinating, assisting and monitoring the work of the institutions delivering distance courses but it did not get involved in course delivery matters.

The Consortium adopted a voluntary participation approach and insisted on inclusiveness at all organizational levels. Participating universities benefited from increased course enrolment and obtained greater visibility and greater reach for their courses and programs.

Institutional self-determination was protected through three organizational levels:

— Board or Executive level.
— Delivery, Management, and Planning & Development Committees to support Registrar and administrative services.
— Delivering institutions.
Roles and responsibilities were clearly mandated through Terms of Reference documents. Voluntary principles and guidelines were developed (Appendix 2) and all documentation was widely shared in the public domain.

The Consortium published a Calendar describing the courses and programs offered by Consortium members and how students can gain access to them. A Course Offerings list was updated every two months. Currently the Consortium has an ongoing Web presence (including web self-registration).

The success of the Consortium is attested by the fact that it offers over 500 distance education courses and draws about 20,000 enrolment each year.

Conclusions

Let me go over the salient “lessons learned” that are common to both the Consortium Certification and the Consortium Service models I just described.

The first lesson is about leadership. Both Consortia were government initiatives that respected the institutions’ right to self-determination.

The second lesson is about values. All institutions were consulted and invited to participate, and decision-making was delegated to appropriate levels (departments for course transfer decisions and course delivery for example). Participation was voluntary and both individual and institutional relationships played a large part in building the trust necessary to establish the consortia on solid foundations.

The third lesson is about clarity and transparency. Roles and responsibilities were clearly mandated through Terms of Reference documents, and the consortium’s Visions, Principles and Guidelines were well articulated, well published, and widely distributed (Appendices 1 and 2). The consortium outcomes were also embodied in substantive documents (BCCAT Transfer Guide and BC Open University Consortium Calendar.)

The fourth lesson is about funding. A modest amount of funding was provided to sustain Consortium agendas and participating institutions made “in kind” contributions through voluntary staff contributions. The financial commitment was not large but the human commitment achieved through consultative and participatory management was extremely large.

The fifth feature is about policy and technology. Policy change and policy development play a major role in breaking down access barriers this requires inter-institutional consultation and participation at various levels. Technology *per se* plays a supporting role.

The short version of these “lessons learned” is that educational change goes through a “people’s agenda”, those of academic leaders and providers who share common goals and values. They value knowledge and openness, learning and sharing, individuality and autonomy, clarity and transparency. It is by building networks and collaborations on these values that one can build the trust necessary to ensure that educational consortia endure the test of time.
RESUMEN

La movilidad estudiantil es frecuentemente restringida por barreras institucionales legítimas que pueden ser sorteadas a través de redes o consorcios de colaboración. En este artículo se describen dos ejemplos canadienses de los cuales se extraen "lecciones aprendidas" para guiar y enriquecer experiencias futuras. Las "lecciones aprendidas" se encuentran dentro de cinco categorías: 1- Liderazgo, 2- Gerenciamiento consultivo y participativo, 3- Claridad y transparencia, 4- Financiación, y 5- Políticas y tecnología.

REFERENCES

Andres L. and S. Carpenter (1997) Today’s Higher Education Students: Issues of Admission, Retention, Transfer, and Attrition in Relation to Changing Student Demographics
Appendix 1

Six BC Council on Admissions and Transfer Guidelines (adapted)

Accountability and format

1. Although formal transfer negotiations shall take place via the designated persons at each of the institutions, discussions concerning course content, adequacy of supporting facilities and related matters should generally occur first at the local (i.e., department to department or instructor to instructor) level. The institutions seeking transfer credit should be prepared to provide the following information: course name, course number, length of instructional period, hours per week (lecture, lab, seminar) objective of course, and although subject to change without notice - texts and required reading, initial proposals for method of instructing and evaluation, and the qualifications of instructors.

Rules and process

2. Negotiations between institutions regarding equivalency should recognize that effective learning can occur under a variety of arrangements and conditions. Various methods of demonstrating or achieving equivalency may be employed, particularly for career programs, for example, course equivalency, competency tests, challenge exams, program equivalency and bridging programs.

Participation and Cooperation

3. Program or discipline articulation committees consisting of representatives of institutions offering the respective programs meet routinely to share information and enhance cooperation among people providing instruction in given areas of study; to promote course equivalency where appropriate; and to aid in the process of achieving inter-institutional transfer credit. Curriculum issues arising from transfer agreements may be addressed to appropriate articulation committees.

Openness

4. An institution which denies the transfer of credit requested by another institution shall state the reasons for the refusal.
Consistency

5. Once an agreement has been reached on the conditions of credit transfer of an individual course or program of studies, it shall not be abrogated without reference to the designated authorities in the institution affected.

Fair notice

6. An institution planning changes to its curriculum which will affect the requirements for credit transfer should inform the members of the relevant articulation committees as far in advance of implementation as possible so that other institutions can consider the desirability of alterations to their courses and programs. Until others have been notified of changes, institutions have an obligation to fulfill the commitments of current course outlines.

Appendix 2

BC Open University Consortium: Operating Principles and Guiding Principles (adapted)

Operating Principles

1. The Consortium exists to facilitate the offering of the degrees, certificates and diplomas of its member institutions that are free of conventional residence requirements.

A major feature of these programs is the existence of a major component of independent study.

2. The degree that enables students to use all the available course offerings listed in the Consortium calendar is the Bachelor of General Studies degree. Other degree and diploma programs, with varying restrictions, are offered by the member institutions.

3. Individual institutions have the right to define and offer their own programs, and to control admission to such programs, whether in a face-to-face or distance delivery mode.

4. Inter-institutional contacts on operational matters will normally take place directly between the Open Learning Registry and the university offices responsible for distance education courses.

Guiding Principles for Educational Programs

The following guiding principles will be applied to establish priorities for the planning, selection, development and implementation of the educational programs of the Consortium.

1. The Consortium and its members will attempt to ensure that any person in British Columbia who so desires, irrespective of residence, has the opportunity to complete appropriately recognized university degree, diploma, certifi-
cate, professional and other approved programs and courses through effective and cost efficient distance learning methods.

2. The Consortium will offer its educational programs through an assortment of distance educational methods. The appropriateness of methods will be determined on evidence of effective instructional design recognizing such factors as subject matter, learner characteristics, numbers and geographical dispersion, and costs.

3. The Consortium will offer programs and courses which address demonstrable needs in the province.

4. The Consortium will endeavour to offer programs and courses which complement the educational activities of other institutions and organizations in the province’s post-secondary system.

5. Regular appropriate evaluations of the ongoing programs and courses offered through the Consortium will be conducted to maintain the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of its learning systems.