

Online Learning: Compromising Quality

A Brief Submitted to the Advisory Committee for Online Learning
By the Canadian Federation of Students
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Introduction and Background Information

Since 1981 the Canadian Federation of Students has been the progressive and democratic voice of Canada's college and university students. Today the Federation comprises over 400,000 graduate, undergraduate and college students from over 60 students' unions from Newfoundland and Labrador to British Columbia.

The Canadian Federation of Students is pleased to provide the perspective of post-secondary students on the question of online learning. We would like to state at the outset that Canadian students support and encourage the use of new technologies for the advancement of learning both inside and outside the classroom. However we would like to raise a number of concerns, both general and specific regarding the social and political implications of online learning. While this submission does not conform to your suggested template, it is our hope that you will receive these comments in the spirit of learning that the Advisory Committee seems so willing to promote. Our critical remarks are as follows: first, we have serious concerns about the impartiality of the committee. Second, we have concerns about the fact that online learning will perpetuate the erosion of the quality of Canada's post-secondary education system. Finally, we have some critical comments about the underlying political economy of online learning.

1. Committee Composition

The Canadian Federation of Students has serious doubts about the impartiality of the Advisory Committee for Online Learning. We notice that the committee has no representation from either university and college teachers' organisations or from students' unions, nor does it have representatives from the general public. Furthermore six voting members of nineteen (one-third) are senior corporate representatives from The Learning Partnership, AT&T, Bell Canada Enterprises, Bank of Montreal, Lucent Technologies and IBM Canada. Along with such noted supporters of online learning as University of Waterloo President David Johnston and Acadia President Kevin Ogilvie, the committee is entirely made up of representatives who clearly have an interest in promoting online learning. For this reason, we share the concerns raised by the Canadian Association of University Teachers that the committee composition is unrepresentative and biased toward those who view education as a marketable commodity. Without fair and equal representation, that is to say 'democratic' representation, the committee cannot possibly be expected to provide a careful, balanced and broad-based consideration of the complex issues involved with online learning. Therefore the committees' final recommendations will be tainted by the composition of the committee.

2. Compromising Quality

The second critical comment we would like to raise is that the current drive for online learning will do nothing to improve the quality of post-secondary education. In our view, it's more likely to exacerbate the ongoing erosion of quality. As David F. Noble has recently argued, the paradox or Achilles heel of online learning is that pedagogical promise and economic efficiency are in contradiction.¹ Quality education is labour-intensive. It requires a low student teacher ratio, and significant interaction between the teacher and student. Any effort to offer quality in education must therefore presuppose a substantial and sustained investment in educational labour whatever the medium of instruction. However, by definition, the commercial requirements of online learning undermine the labour-intensive foundation of quality education.

As Noble argues, the history of correspondence education provides a cautionary tale for those now promoting online learning. He argues that the rhetoric of the distance education movement (the correspondence course) a century ago was almost identical to that of the online education movement today. The promise of distance education was a genuinely progressive movement for democratic access to education, particularly adult education. Distance educators have always insisted that they offer a kind of intimate and individualized instruction not possible in the crowded competitive environment of the campus, accessible to anyone from home or workplace. To make their enterprise profitable, however, they were and continue to be compelled to reduce their instructional costs to a minimum, thereby undermining their pedagogical promise. Since distance education was invented over a century ago, the central concern of the correspondence firms has been to keep instructional costs to a minimum. Instead of quality, students receive pre-packaged courses of instruction, 'delivered' by a casualised workforce of readers who work part-time and are paid on a piece work basis per lesson or exam. In order to make a living many correspondence instructors had to deliver a high volume of lessons and were unable to manage more than a perfunctory pedagogical performance. "Such conditions were of course not conducive to the kind of careful, individualised instruction promised in...promotional materials."² The result was not only a degraded labour force but a degraded product as well. And so the commercial effort at correspondence courses devolved into what became known as 'diploma mills'.

Noble's carefully researched analysis reveals the remarkable similarities with the current situation. For-profit enterprises are once again competing to provide vocational training to working people via computer-based distance education. Universities although trying to distinguish themselves from their commercial rivals are now collaborating with them and they are coming to resemble them "this time as digital diploma mills."³

Are the federal and provincial governments committed to quality teaching and research, or are online studies simply destined to be digital diploma mills? The student movement sees no evidence at all that 'quality' is a priority. On the contrary, since 1985 there has been a sustained public divestment from post-secondary education. Between 1982-83 and 2000-2001, public funding to post-secondary institutions steadily decreased as a percentage of operating revenue from 74% to 55%.⁴ To compensate for this massive underfunding, university and college administrators

adopted a number of related policies: they have passed off costs to students in the form of higher tuition and user fees; they have turned to private funds such as corporate donations and sponsorships; they have dramatically reduced the numbers of full-time faculty and they have reduced wages and degraded working conditions for other employees. Jobs and wages have been threatened as the work of Teaching Assistants and maintenance workers are contracted out and privatised. Students and their parents have been forced to mortgage their futures for a degree or diploma. Private colleges and universities have emerged, draining resources from the public system, and equity seeking groups have found that their fight for access is even more difficult as post-secondary education increasingly becomes a privilege for the rich.

According to Statistics Canada, between 1990 and 2000 university tuition fees have increased on average some 126%. Average tuition fees in undergraduate Arts programs have more than doubled across Canada. They are now over \$3,378 up from about \$1,500 in 1990.⁵ The costs of other programs have increased even more dramatically. As students increasingly assume the financial burden of their education, so their debts have steadily increased. Average student debt is now at a historic high of between \$25,000 to \$28,000. Moreover Universities are relying more on part-time faculty to deliver their educational programs. Between 1992-93 and 1997-98 the number of full-time faculty in Canada declined by nearly 10%. The number of full-time teaching staff fell in all provinces except Prince Edward Island and British Columbia. The number of part-time faculty increased 6% in the same five-year period. At the same time, the number of full-time and part-time university students decreased by less than 2%.⁶

The federal and provincial governments have made no indication that they are prepared to restore the billions of dollars cut from universities and public colleges to solve the problem of inaccessibility and degrading quality engendered by staff reductions and overcrowded classrooms. The enrollment explosion will be an even bigger concern in 2002 when the so-called 'double cohort' — the Ontario graduating classes of grades 12 and 13 — will simultaneously enter the Canadian post-secondary system. For their part Canada's university and college administrators have made no indication that they are prepared to hire the thousands of full-time professors and teachers that are necessary to restore quality to Canada's education system. On the contrary, most university and college presidents have readily and all too uncritically implemented the draconian austerity measures decreed by provincial governments obsessed with economic expansion and tax cuts for the wealthy. Throughout the late 1980s and well into the 1990s universities and colleges accelerated the degradation of quality. This accelerated decrease in quality occurred as a result of a number of policies: by promoting early retirement, by closing departments and faculties (euphemistically referred to as 'rationalisation'), by increasing workloads, by freezing and reducing the wages and benefits of Teaching Assistants and Sessionals, and by reducing the numbers of administrative support staff and maintenance workers.

This trend helps to explain why most students are sceptical about the supposed benefits of online learning. The problems in post-secondary education are something that online technology cannot solve. Since at least the 1985 federal budget, the biggest problem faced by colleges and universities is the billions of dollars that have been cut from provincial transfers. The Advisory Committee is interested in learning how universities and colleges can 'reap the benefits' to online learning. But what federal or provincial committee is investigating the devastating effects of two

decades funding cuts? What federal department is concerned about restoring faculty-student ratios to levels that truly advance the quality of post-secondary education? If the underlying aim of online learning is to ignore or undermine the labour-intensive foundation of quality education, then its pedagogical promise to quality contradicts its aim for economic efficiency. An online degree will cost the same as a regular one, only it will be of poorer quality.

3. The New Ideology: Education as ‘Knowledge Based Industry’

The first two problems identified here are merely corollaries to a more fundamental issue that the student movement has with online learning. The assumption on which our movement was founded is that education is a fundamental right, not a privilege limited to the wealthy. When we say ‘education is a right’ we do not make a distinction between primary, secondary and post-secondary education. We mean that a free and democratic society and a vibrant and socially just economy depend upon universal access to post-secondary education. Long gone are the days when a high school education is enough. Post-secondary education is essential.

The system of education we defend is one that is based on the five principles of the Canada Health Act: public administration, comprehensiveness, universality, portability and accessibility. To preserve this public system, Canada’s post-secondary education system requires a complex and comprehensive framework of federal, provincial and territorial policies, laws and funding arrangements that restrict the rights of private investors and service providers. We believe that the Canadian as well as provincial and territorial governments must have the power to enact laws to protect the public system of education, laws that reflect and enhance the regional, cultural, linguistic and political complexities of Canada.

The trade liberalisation objectives of Industry Canada, in cooperation with the various international financial institutions, fundamentally conflict with these principles. International finance and trade agreements exist to reduce the common good to just another commodity or product that can be bought and sold on the market. This new globalisation ideology and its goal of ‘commodification’ of education is not a hidden agenda. To the contrary, Industry Canada has wholeheartedly endorsed and promoted the strategy of turning ‘rights’ into ‘products’. Promoting the commercial trade of education is the self-described mandate of most federal and provincial governments. In his letter of August 2000, the Chairman of the Advisory Committee for Online Learning, David Johnston, offers evidence of the new philosophy of public policy:

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) is committed to assisting jurisdictions across Canada in developing vibrant post-secondary education systems. For its part, Industry Canada recognises the potential for expanding domestic and international markets for a Canadian learnware sector. Both recognise the interdependence of the economic and educational policy agendas.⁷

In the same letter Johnston uses a similar language to describe online learning. The justification for online learning is not to improve the quality of or accessibility to post-secondary education. The reason given to embrace this new technology is that “Canadian institutions face severe competition in their local markets from foreign public and private training enterprises.” He adds,

“we are concerned that the majority of our universities and colleges are not in a good position to take advantage of online learning opportunities and benefit from the transformative potential of online learning.”

The great symbol, or rather ‘showcase’ of this new ideology of education will occur November 26-30, 2000 in Halifax at the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers Education. In a concerted effort to promote the trade of education, a parallel event will be held, an International Trade Fair, with the theme “Shopping for Solutions”. According to the June 2000 Operational Management Plan, the goals and objectives of the trade fair are as follows:

1.3.1. Goal:

The International Trade Fair will place an emphasis on putting on show a range of systems, packages, projects and approaches, from traditional to technology-based, that offer proven solutions to many of the challenges that the Ministers will be deliberating on.

1.3.2. Objectives:

The International trade Fair is not simply about putting a range of products on display. It is expected to enable delegates from a wide range of Commonwealth countries to have a one-stop appreciation of possibilities for tackling the many issues and problems that they are grappling with in education. It is also expected that, where there are packages on display, it should be possible for countries to make the kind of contact that can promote rapid transfer, adaptation and sharing of these, in the best tradition of the Commonwealth, and in keeping with mutually beneficial commercial transactions.⁸

1.5. Incentives (Expected Results/ Outcomes)

As we know, the domestic/international education and training markets are evolving quickly and the education sector is one of the important integral elements of Canada’s knowledge-based industry. Canadian educational “savoir-faire” and products are in great demand in all parts of the world and the need for expertise in the development of educational and instructional products requiring different delivery models and infrastructures are increasing in all countries. A number of Canadian organisations are currently investing considerable resources to the marketing and export of Canadian educational products and services. Participation at the International Trade Fair will be seen and managed as such, an investment in showcasing products and services, and potentially an opportunity to expand our market share internationally.⁹

Stripped clean of any pretence to equity, fairness, quality and accessibility, herein lies the new public policy, or ideology, of post-secondary education. Education is now a business opportunity, a ‘sector’ of the economy like any other. Under the market-obsessed direction of Industry Canada, education has now become perversely redefined as a “knowledge-based industry” that offers “training services” and “instructional products” requiring different “delivery models”. Even more troubling, is that such an ideology is being promoted by ministers of education.

Canadians reject this vocabulary entirely. Education is a universal right, not a business opportunity. It is something inherent to the self, to our very notion of what it means to be a person. Because education is not optional but an essential part of being a full and equal citizen, it simply a mistake to redefine it as a commodity, as something that can be traded, or bought and sold in the ‘global market’. Education is part of what the ancients called the *res publica* — the public’s thing — the common good. Education must therefore be publicly funded and administered for all to enjoy and benefit equally. Like Canada’s cherished healthcare system, education must be protected from any attempts to reduce it to a personal privilege, or any effort to subject it to the profit-driven logic of supply and demand.

It is our resistance to the very idea that education is an industry, a business, a product, a commodity, a ‘sector’, that has compelled the student movement to organise in historic numbers. As you know, on January 25, 1995 and in succeeding peaceful public demonstrations (February 7, 1997, January 28, 1998, November, 1999 and February 2, 2000) hundreds of thousands of students and their supporters demonstrated against home-grown structural adjustment economic policies and international structural adjustment economic policies promoted by various international financial institutions and trade regimes, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organisation and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Students marched, rallied, organised forums, leafleted, camped out and even conducted strikes to highlight the crisis in post-secondary education. Part of the criticism raised in these student protests was to call into question the subordination of human rights (the right to education and healthcare for example) to the rules of trade and commerce and the dictates of private corporations.

The stated goals of trade and investment regimes like APEC and the World Trade Organisation and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) undermine the integrity of basic social, economic and environmental standards. Their basic principles clash head-on with the principle of high quality and accessible education. To reduce or compare education – our shared and contested understandings of the world – to a collection of commercial transactions, is simply ridiculous. To turn what is a right into a consumer product is simply absurd. The ‘student’ cannot be reduced to a utility maximiser in a great marketplace of learning. The student is an apprentice, scholar, researcher, pupil, disciple, fellow, and novice. The student is someone who is taught not just to understand but also to challenge traditions and conventions. Rather than ‘consuming’ knowledge, students are researching, investigating, questioning, probing, receiving collective wisdom, and in the words of Milton, “beholding the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies.”¹⁰

Therefore it is our general position that the government of Canada and the Council of Ministers have a duty to abandon the growing commercialisation of education and support instead publicly funded and publicly administered post-secondary institutions, and the non-profit sharing of science and technology.

To promote the right to education is also a global strategy and it is not a new one. In fact it was a Canadian who helped to co-author *The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of which Article 27 (1) provides:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible on the basis of merit.

Furthermore in 1976, Canada recognised the right to education by signing the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Article 13 (1) (2) (c) obliges signatory states to achieve the full realisation of the right to equally accessible higher education, “in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.”

By voting in favour of the *Universal Declaration* and then ratifying the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Canada has not tacitly but expressly recognised that higher education must be free in order to be “equally accessible”. We would like to note for emphasis that the *Declaration*, one of the most sacredly held and influential human rights charters of the 20th century, lists education as a universal right, not a universal product or a universal service. Therefore, to treat education as a ‘sector’ and a ‘product’ is to expressly violate both the spirit and letter of the *Universal Declaration* and the *International Covenant*.

To keep these international promises, the federal and provincial governments must adopt another global strategy than the one currently promoted by Industry Canada. That is, Canada must create and support democratically accountable institutions whose focus is not just finance and trade but also the advancement and protection of human rights, social justice and the environment. We must promote institutions in which knowledge (the humanities, science and technology) is shared equally, not to the highest bidders or those more technologically advanced.

The government of Canada has a duty to discuss *access to education* not access to ‘learnware’ markets. The government of Canada has a duty to discuss the barriers to that access: the cost of education, racism, sexism, homophobia, and linguistic and cultural barriers. The government has a duty to discuss what it should be doing to reduce the terrible legacy of debt it has inflicted on an entire generation of young Canadians. It should be putting on the table options for making our education system open to students all over the world, regardless of their financial means, not through a computer terminal but on campus and in the classroom with other students.

In this way, high quality will be achieved the way it always has: through interaction with others who have similar and different cultural perspectives, in discussion and debate, in agreement and conflict, by making mistakes and working with others for solutions, by being encouraged by a professor who serves as an inspiration and mentor. This kind of education imparts not just ‘knowledge’ in the technical sense but what Aristotle called *phronesis*: understanding of ourselves and others who live in our society and our world.

Conclusion: What is a quality education?

We would like to end by clarifying a few misconceptions. One of the mistakes of the new globalisation ethos is to reduce all human practices to commercial transactions, but also to assume that it is through commercial transactions alone that technology is shared and produced. Yet history does not support this view. Since the first university was founded in Bologna in the 11th century, scholars around the world have shared their understanding of nature and the human condition without the goal of profit. Furthermore, it is only a recent phenomenon that we would conflate ‘education’ with the technical means to promulgate it.

To equate education with technology is to miss the point entirely. As professor Noble writes, education is a human relationship. It is a process that necessarily entails an interpersonal relationship between people that aims at individual and collective knowledge.

Whenever people recall their educational experiences, they tend to remember, above all. Not courses or subjects or the information imparted, but people, people who changed their minds or their lives, people who made a difference in their developing sense of themselves. It is a sign of the current confusion about education that we must be reminded of this obvious fact: that the relationship between people is central to the educational experience. Education is a process of becoming for all parties, based upon mutual recognition and validation and centring upon the formation and evolution of identity. The actual content of the educational experience is defined by this relationship between people and the chief determinant of quality education is the establishment and enrichment of this relationship.¹¹

We cannot dispute that there are potential benefits to ‘online’ learning. However, they cannot possibly replace the benefits ‘offline’ learning. The students of Canada will not accept the premise that machines can or should replace people. Until the provinces and federal government commit to more public funding to hire more people — faculty members, teaching assistants, administrative support staff and maintenance staff — the quality and accessibility of education will not improve, regardless of the latest technological discoveries.

¹ David F. Noble “Digital Diploma Mills: Rehearsal for the Revolution” in James L. Turk (ed.) *The Corporate Campus: Commercialization and the Dangers to Canada’s Colleges and Universities* James Lorimer And Company Limited, Toronto, 2000, pages 103-104.

² Digital Diploma Mills, pages 106-107.

³ Digital Diploma Mills, page 104.

⁴ Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education, *Canada Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 1999*, Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2000, page 62; and Statistics Canada “University tuition fees”, *The Daily*, Monday August 28, 2000.

⁵ Statistics Canada, “University Tuition fees”, *The Daily*, Monday August 28, 2000.

⁶ Statistics Canada, “Part-time university faculty”, *The Daily*, Wednesday August 30, 2000.

⁷ David Johnston, Chairman, Advisory Committee for Online Learning, Letter to Michael Conlon, August, 2000.

⁸ “Building a Showcase: The Canadian Presence at the International Trade Fair 14th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers (CEM) An Operational Management Plan”, June 2000, page 3.

⁹ “Building a Showcase”, pages 5-6.

¹⁰ John Milton, *Reason of Church Government: Introduction*, book ii.

¹¹ Digital Diploma Mills, 101-102.