

# Forum / Tribune

## *The Times They Are a-Changin'*

### Time for a Major Emphasis on the Three Ls of Lifelong Learning at Canadian Universities

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#### ABSTRACT

This article contends that university continuing education is in need of a dramatic repositioning in the minds and wallets of most university administrations. In order to respond both to a developed economy's need for the continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge and to universities' needs for new funding sources, the provision of lifelong education and training—lifelong learning—needs to be strategically central to a university's vision, mission, and goals. Right now, in its non-degree form, it is a peripheral activity making only minor contributions to universities' reputation and revenue: according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada in its 2008 report *Trends in Higher Education—Volume 3: Finance*, only \$300 million was earned by universities in non-credit courses. This had not changed much in a decade. Canadian universities are missing out on opportunities in reputation, revenue, and relevance, both domestically and globally. The article goes on to suggest the steps needed in the development of an effective

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que la formation continue universitaire a besoin d'un repositionnement dramatique dans l'approche et les choix budgétaires de la plupart des administrations universitaires. Afin de répondre à la fois aux besoins en perfectionnement continu des compétences et des connaissances d'une économie développée et aux besoins des universités pour de nouvelles sources de financement, l'éducation et la formation permanente – l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie – doivent être stratégiquement au centre de la vision, la mission, et les objectifs d'une université. Présentement, les cours ne conduisant pas au diplôme constituent une activité périphérique qui ne contribue que faiblement à la réputation et aux revenus des universités: selon l'Association des universités et collèges du Canada dans son rapport de 2008 *Tendances dans le milieu universitaire – Volume 3 : Finance*, les cours non crédités n'ont rapportés que 300 millions aux universités. Cela n'avait pas beaucoup changé en une décennie. Les universités canadiennes manquent ainsi l'opportunité

lifelong learning strategy. Some would require changes in university management processes and philosophy to be effective, but continuation of the present half-hearted approach will not succeed in serving either Canada's lifelong learning needs or its universities' needs for relevance and revenue.

d'accroître leurs renoms, leurs revenus et leurs pertinences tant au plan local qu'international. L'article poursuit en proposant les étapes nécessaires au développement d'une stratégie efficace d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Certaines exigent des changements dans les processus et les philosophies de gestion universitaire pour avoir un effet, mais la poursuite de la présente approche timide réussira à servir ni les besoins du Canada en apprentissage continu ni ceux des universités en termes de pertinence et de revenus.

## INTRODUCTION

The contention of this article is that the current thinking of most university administrations about the relative importance of providing non-degree lifelong learning needs to radically change.

There are two "drivers" or "change agents" behind this view. The first is a developed society's need to constantly upgrade the skills and capabilities of its citizens; the other is the need of Canadian universities for relevance and revenue.

In a developed economy, where the need to constantly upgrade knowledge and thinking skills is essential to social, political, cultural, and economic well-being, the role of the university in providing non-degree lifelong learning has been underemphasized by policy-makers at all levels of government, industry, and education.

The fields in need of constant upgrades include literacy and numeracy; applied knowledge and skills in business, education, engineering, law, and medicine; social and cultural understanding and skills in anthropology, archaeology, the arts, geography, history, languages, philosophy, and religion; the understanding of economic, social, and political systems; the physical sciences and technology; and, of course, personal development opportunities ranging from parenting skills to throwing pottery.

We now inhabit a world where huge new capabilities are being unleashed by the so-called developing economies like Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and others, as well as by the developed triad countries of North America, the European Union, and Japan and South Korea.

In order to retain our cultural, economic, political, scientific/technological, and social advantages in a more globally competitive world, Canada needs its citizens to improve their capabilities at all stages of their lives. While universities are not the only institutions that can provide this upgrading, they are essential to our national ability to deliver this needed level of lifelong learning.

The second driver is the need for universities to maintain, or preferably build, their relevance and revenue in this changing environment.

Universities face ever-increasing competition for funds from all sources. Governments, which in 2008/09 accounted for 60.7% of total university revenues (Statistics Canada, 2010, table B.2.12, p. 1), are faced with increasing demands from many sectors: health, infrastructure

improvement, social services, defence, and, within education, levels from kindergarten to post-secondary. Student fee revenues, which in 2008/09 accounted for 22.2% of all revenues (Statistics Canada, 2010, table B.2.12, p. 1), will probably rise but there will be resistance and possibly a negative impact on total enrolments. Outside of government funding, competition is strong and is on the rise for donations and bequests from an increasing number of not-for-profit sectors: arts and culture, health, religious and social charities, and other educational institutions. According to Statistics Canada (2010, table B.2.12, p. 1), in 2008/09 donations and bequests accounted for 11% of university revenues.

The best way for universities to maintain and build their relevance and revenue is to demonstrate a differentiated and relevant role and purpose in contrast to other public and private sector institutions supplying similar services. Universities must highlight their skills in both of their key areas of strength, research and teaching. However, the teaching component can no longer be limited to degree programs primarily targeted at the narrow group of 20-somethings. While 24% of 18-to-24-year-olds attended university degree programs in 2006, only 8% of 25-to-29-year-olds and 1% of 30-to-64-year-olds did the same (Statistics Canada, 2009).

In order for universities to continue to be relevant in this changing world and gain financial support for their activities, they need a broader view of their target audience. Meeting the lifelong learning needs of all population segments with both degree and non-degree programs should be viewed as a central role for Canadian universities.

Unfortunately, universities often view the traditional activities of extension programs, or continuing education, as secondary to the purpose of providing degree programs and conducting and publishing research. They are seen as a useful, though small, add-on to a university's activities and revenues. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2010, p. 1), in 2009 only 400,000 students attended continuing education programs; 870,000 were enrolled in degree programs. Continuing education programs along with other forms of university retail activity (like bookstores) accounted for 9.3% of total university revenues, a proportion that hadn't increased much since the 8.8% recorded for 1999/2000 (Statistics Canada, 2010, table B.2.12, p. 1). A 2008 report indicated only very modest increases in revenues from non-credit courses: from \$125 million in 1977, the total rose to \$250 million in 1996/97 and to approximately \$300 million in 2006/07 (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2008, p. 60).

Extension and continuing education activities—lifelong learning—need to move to centre stage in the vision, mission, and goals of universities. If this does not transpire, then universities will risk losing relevance to their community and will potentially hand both this activity and the revenue entirely over to the colleges or the for-profit sector.

Let's examine these drivers of change in a little more detail.

## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE: ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY'S EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

We are seeing huge changes in our world. Three obvious ones are demographic changes, globalization, and technological advances.

### *Demographic Changes*

In 2010, for the first time in recorded history, 50% of the population in Canada was 40 and older. This is a worldwide trend but is most advanced in the developed economies.

**Table 1:** Percentage of World Population over 60

%	Africa	Asia	Middle East	Europe	South America	North America
2010	6	9	6	20	9	16
2050	11	23	18	34	26	28

Source: United Nations, 2004, p. 68.

As can be seen from Table 1, in 2050 there will be fewer youth seeking education and more demand for it from older populations. Additionally, with working populations diminishing, growth in gross domestic product (GDP) will be moderate in developed economies, so funding from governments will be restrained. In this world, universities must reach into new demographic categories to both serve and earn new revenues.

### *Globalization*

Two globalization impacts are important to consider: new competition for developed economies like Canada, and the emergence of more and stronger globally competitive universities.

#### *New competition for developed economies*

Unless Canada can accelerate its shift to a more knowledge-based economy, we will not be able to sustain growth in economic benefits to our society, despite the natural resource benefits we possess. Loss of competitiveness and its impact on national wealth will have significant negative impacts on our lifestyle and culture. While universities are not the only answer to increasing the capabilities of our citizenry, they are a potentially significant part. Already 12% of Canada's labour force has a bachelor's degree and another 33% has a post-secondary trade, college, or university certificate or diploma (Statistics Canada, 2009, p. 1). However, to compete in an increasingly complex and competitive world, a range of short- and long-term, degree and non-degree, general and custom programs are needed to serve the country's citizens. Canada as a society will lose its capability to compete globally without full engagement by its universities in lifelong learning.

An example of the emerging competition is known as "the return of Asia." Until the industrial revolution of the 18th to 20th centuries, Asia dominated the world's economy, accounting for 70% to 75% of the world's GDP. With the success of the industrial revolution, this proportion had shrunk to 20% by 1975, with the triad countries (North America, Europe, and Japan) dominating the world's economy. However, by 2010 Asia's share of GDP had risen to around 40%, and it is expected to reach 50% by 2025 (McKinsey, 2009, p. 20).

*Globally competitive universities*

Universities in Canada have grown up with a strong provincial or national orientation. While there are many areas of international co-operation, these will not be sufficient for the newly emerging world described earlier. The growth of international institutions, greater interdependence, and more fluid cross-border communications and transportation will provide the opportunity for educational organizations that have both a global outlook and a lifelong learning perspective to better compete for global resources and students and higher-quality strategic alliances.

In a number of applied areas, such as business, education, engineering, and health, there are already universities that attract the best students and resources from around the world and that ally with other “best practice” universities. This approach will result in huge advantages for the host countries as they will become centres of excellence. Those that engage in global best practices and alliances to provide global lifelong education will thrive. They will be more successful in attracting top talent, top students, and top funding. Ben Wildavsky of the Kauffman Foundation and the Brookings Institution writes:

Where study overseas might once have been seen as a “broadening” experience for the upper classes, it is becoming both more common—recall the 41% increase from 1999 to 2006 in the number of students studying internationally—and more strategically considered. For a certain group of students the choice to leave home to earn a degree in another country is less a matter of seeking new cultural or linguistic experiences than simply of finding the best available scholarly brand. (Wildavsky, 2010, p. 168)

He calls this phenomenon the “global brand mentality.” Those universities that do not earn these opportunities will be more challenged and will be forced to adopt one of two strategies to survive.

One viable direction is specialization and therefore concentration of resources in a few areas in research, degree programs, and lifelong learning education: the University of Guelph in agriculture and foodservice and the University of Waterloo in information technology (IT)/engineering are examples. Global brand mentality is evident in non-degree programs too.

The other direction is to provide a purely localized level of education at a lower cost. Whether global or local, traditional universities will have to compete with both colleges and a growing for-profit sector in both degree and non-degree education and training. Organizations such as CDI, Crandall, Everest, ICS Canada, Quest, and Reeves will grow to provide this lifelong learning service, and multinational entries like the University of Phoenix will be particularly aggressive.

*Technological advances*

These will take place not just in transportation, manufacturing, energy, and medicine/genetics, but in communications, information, entertainment, and education. The impact on the need for lifelong learning to keep current with these changes is obvious.

However, there are additional university-specific impacts that are worth mentioning, such as the direct application of communications technology, which is already supporting distance education. As this technology progresses, live global education sourced from leading thinkers anywhere in the world will be viable and will compete with locally sourced offerings. Virtual cases and simulations will be easier. Global sharing of ideas, education, and training will become easier and cheaper. New-style online universities are emerging. These have no boundaries. A university’s brand credibility, built from the quality of its content and learning experiences

rather than from physical proximity, will be a key success factor. While this effect has already begun, the full technological capability and impact have yet to be experienced.

The global landscape is indeed changing rapidly: as Bob Dylan observed in 1963, "The times they are a-changing." In developed economies, societies that can no longer compete on a cheap-labour, low-skill basis need institutions that can help our population constantly upgrade and improve their intellectual and physical skills. In Canada, in addition to families and private and public enterprises, the educational institutions have been primarily charged with this mission. While colleges are also important contributors to lifelong learning, universities must step up to the role more actively. Universities are well placed to meet that need, but unless they take a more active approach, others will.

## THE NEEDS OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

In Canada we have grown up to expect that certain institutions will be primarily government-funded: our public security and defence systems, some of our transportation systems, our health system, and our education system. As noted earlier, in 2008/09 governments still accounted for almost 61% of university revenues. As governments have become more financially challenged, all these institutions are seeking alternative revenue sources. The primary response has been to increase user fees and philanthropy and sponsorship. This is a very limited response.

What has been striking, especially in the health and education areas, is how little revenue has been generated by the commercialization of intellectual property (IP) and research. In health this is slowly beginning to change as major hospitals such as the Hospital for Sick Children and Sunnybrook in Toronto actively seek global revenue from their research and knowledge.

The education sector has not done a good job "commercializing" its IP, either domestically or, especially, internationally. For example, while the numbers of foreign students attracted to Canadian universities have been increasing, they are still modest. In 2009 (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2010, p. 2) Canada attracted 77,000 full-time university students and 10,000 part-time students. But these numbers are small compared with the foreign students who study in the institutions of our global competitors. Back in 2004, when Canada drew 40,000 foreign students, Japan had 117,900, Australia 167,000, France 237,600, Germany 260,300, the United Kingdom 300,100, and the United States 572,500 (UNESCO, 2006, pp. 130-131).

Then there is traditional continuing education. While most universities have some sort of continuing education program, either as a central university activity or attached to certain faculties, the evidence of the low revenues and student numbers mentioned earlier suggests that it is still an afterthought and certainly not a core activity.

Additionally, despite the large numbers of Canadians with post-secondary learning, we underspend on continuing education, even in applied areas. In one area, that of management and technical skills-based training, we rank 21st in the world, with spending of around 1.51% of payroll, down from 1.73% in 2002 (Conference Board of Canada, 2009, p. 15).

Meanwhile competition, in the form of non-university training and education options, is growing rapidly. Now virtually every cultural institution offers its own programs; clubs, associations, and special-interest groups are extremely active. Corporations in many fields are offering free training as a promotional enticement (Microsoft and IBM are two examples). Then of course there is the dramatic growth of private-sector suppliers, from the small one-person operations to medium-sized start-ups like Knightsbridge and multinationals like the American Management Association (AMA, or in Canada the CMA), Apollo Global, DeVry Inc., Kaplan Inc., Laureate,

NIIT, Sylvan Learning Systems, Whitney International University System, and the consulting companies like the Boston Consulting Group. New entrants include the big tourist attractions that recognize the baby boomers' desire to study as well as experience: Disney and all the cruise lines totally understand this.

In these changing times we need the three Ls: the demand for lifelong learning is evident and a modern developed society needs to constantly upgrade the skills of its citizenry. Many other suppliers are recognizing this and universities, with few exceptions, have not taken this role seriously despite needing the revenue. What should be done about it?

## FUTURE PLANNING FOR UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING

So what could be the future of lifelong learning in universities? Here are some observations and questions.

First, under the rebranded positioning of lifelong learning, move this activity to the centre of the university's vision, mission, and goals. Non-degree lifelong learning should join research and undergraduate and graduate degree programs as a core strategic activity.

Second, develop a clear lifelong learning strategy. This will seem obvious. While many universities have something resembling strategic plans, many are so general as to be non-strategic, and most do not have a strategic concentration on the development of a lifelong learning non-degree strategy.

This entails developing a clear strategic and business plan. It requires careful examination of the external socio-economic and internal organizational environments, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, a competitive analysis, and an assessment of current and future revenue potential. This strategy should fit with a university's overall strategic direction but it need not be restricted by it. There is the opportunity for the lifelong learning strategy to lead university activity in geography, subject matter, and/or faculty. What is essential here is that the strategy and the plan are realistic about two key elements: where the opportunities lie and where the university has the competencies required to seize those opportunities. Included in this analysis must be the following elements:

- **Organizational structure:** Should a structure for offering lifelong learning opportunities be centralized and university-based, or decentralized and faculty-based, or some combination of both? The criteria should be based on where the brand strength lies in the institution (university vs. faculty), where the knowledge and facilitation competencies are, and where the revenue is required. In addition, the lines of reporting and responsibility must be clear and contained within a most senior role.
- **Scope of the offerings:** What subjects should be offered? This will involve research about the target audiences and their needs in the areas the university/faculty serves, an assessment of the core competencies of the university/faculty, and a competitive analysis. A fatal strategy would be trying to offer everything to everybody; focus is essential.
- **Information technology:** A coherent IT plan must be developed involving instruction technologies, distance learning, simulations, accounting, and project management processes. These systems will be different from the traditional student-based systems at the university.
- **Management decisions:** In order to achieve the mission, vision, and goals, a series of strategic decisions need to be made. For instance, will the faculty consist of university

faculty only, practitioners, a mix of both, or people who each have blended expertise? Other staffing issues that are critical include whether the staff working in this area of the university are hired, rated, developed, and evaluated in the same way as other university departments. If the group is to be competitive with other suppliers of lifelong learning, then greater flexibility in responsibility and remuneration needs to be agreed upon. Among other decisions to be made is the customer value proposition: what quality of course delivery at what price? And, of course, there are the marketing communications and customer service decisions: most universities are poor at both customer service and marketing communications in both the capabilities and resources allocated. This needs to be an area for much greater attention.

- **Certification decisions:** Which non-credit programs can ladder into credit toward degree programs, and which are stand-alone? Currently the separation between degree and non-degree programs is mostly inconsistent and arbitrary. Clear paths and positions for the programs need to be established.
- **Financial decisions:** What is the strategic balance between providing low-priced programs as loss leaders and/or to fulfill social responsibility obligations, and realistically priced programs that generate a surplus for the university? Both types can be accommodated but the portfolio strategy needs to be clearly articulated. Right now the returns from university continuing education programs are mostly small and do not have a clear value proposition for either the university or its customers. In addition, issues of what programs can be sponsored and which intellectual property can be sold or licensed must be delineated. Another key area is the accounting and finance process for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning processes have to work differently from dealing with students in degree programs: decisions in purchasing, processing, and payment dealing with suppliers and customers have to be made faster and with greater flexibility. Data and information need to be more detailed and more readily available.

A third focus for the future of lifelong learning in universities is to consider “stretch” goals. Earlier in this article I wrote about the poor performance of Canada in providing continuing education on the world stage. In many areas of continuing education, Canadian institutions have superb talent and capability, but we are not capitalizing on them commercially. With a greater focus on the lifelong learning rubric, there is no reason why these programs should not reach past their immediate geographic location and go national, regional, or even global. This can be done either directly or by strategic alliances with other universities or organizations. The approach must be focused on countries of interest and based on a realistic assessment of whether the training is at world standard or, preferably, better. The point is to spread reputation, encourage alliances and earn money.

## CONCLUSION

Universities must evolve if they are to retain or, for the more pessimistic, regain their relevance to contemporary society. The recognition is dawning that in today’s world Canada needs institutions that provide lifelong learning in all areas to retain, or regain, its quality of life. Universities need to embrace this goal more fully than ever before, both to keep the institutions relevant to the needs of society and for financial reasons. The times indeed are changing, and Canada and its universities cannot afford to be last.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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Suite à une carrière de 25 ans en affaires en tant que praticien, Alan Middleton est maintenant professeur adjoint de marketing à la Schulich School of Business à Toronto ainsi que le directeur exécutif du Schulich Executive Education Centre depuis 2001. Alan est coauteur de deux livres et a écrit des chapitres dans plusieurs autres ouvrages. Il a publié des articles sur le retour sur l'investissement des communications de marketing, les stratégies de compensation client-agence et les relations client-agence. Il est cofondateur des prix CASSIES en publicité et a corédigé le premier livre sur les lauréats du concours. En 2005, il a été intronisé au Canadian Marketing Hall of Legends dans la catégorie mentor.