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White Paper: Table 11

Continuing Education, Lifelong Learning and Distance Education

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1. Introduction

The areas of interest covered by our Table were distance education, life-long learning and continuing education. Following a very productive and open discussion in the first meeting, these three areas of interest were found to be linked by the fact that they were all formats basically oriented towards non-traditional learners. We therefore decided to frame our report in terms of this clientele, as opposed to a format-based perspective. Specifically, we wanted to think in terms of the adult learner at the University of Ottawa.

Two important factors stand out: First, the issue of format delivery remains an important one and will be specifically addressed in the report. But the primary objective is to address the needs/demands/interests of specific clienteles through the use of the most appropriate formats or combination of formats for each of those clienteles. Secondly, we wish to avoid a dichotomization of adult learners and traditional students, and this for a variety of reasons. Many young students combine work and study, historically a practice more often tied to adult learners. There are also adults who take regular courses and fully integrate into classes typically dominated by young people.

We know that many combinations exist with respect to preferred learning formats and learner age, but the majority of the roundtable participants wanted to structure the report in relation to adult learners. We therefore focused on the specific characteristics of adult learners; most notably, adults come with experience above and beyond that of younger students, they have whole sets of additional responsibilities, their motivations for pursuing their studies are usually highly specific, and they require a greater degree of flexibility. So, their learning needs differ from those of the general student population, hence the need for adults to be treated differently by the University. For these reasons, in

addition to the consensus of the roundtable participants that the University could provide better service to this clientele, we have chosen to approach the discussion from the perspective of the adult learner.

2. Commitment from the University administration

The roundtable participants felt that the most important first step for the University would be to decide whether or not to identify adult learning as a priority. It is possible to do both more and better for adult learning at the University; but to do so, a commitment from the institution is essential – without this commitment and an well-organized plan, it would be an inefficient use of resources. The University already has things in place that work well (see number 4), but to move beyond what is being done requires an explicit institutional commitment. This commitment must come from the top, as one of the decisions stemming from the strategic planning project, and made with an understanding of the support of the University community.

This report does not seek to discuss in-depth the specific arguments supporting a greater focus on adult learners. The arguments, for and against, are well known. We have included an example from the European context of the benefits and challenges for universities in improving their approach to adult learning (see appendix). Some identify the adult learner as the future of education, while others focus on the variety of factors that motivate adult learners (the training linked with their employment, professional education leading to a diploma, individualized professional education, knowledge, a second (or third) career, studies related to the recognition of prior learning experience and the recognition of foreign credentials and experience, resuming interrupted studies, etc.)

This variety of motivations serves as a reminder that a) adult learners do not fit into a typical “mold” and b) there is therefore no single, one-size-fits-all solution.

The roundtable participants feel that adult learners could form a very interesting clientele for the University for many reasons: adult learners bring valuable input into courses because of their experience and, as a result, contribute a unique and important kind of knowledge; they are also typically very motivated and therefore interesting ; what’s more, Canadian society needs to better recognize the experience of immigrants, and the University has a role to play in designing delivery formats that facilitate the recognition of experience; adults are also a source of funding for the University; finally, better recognition of adult learners will improve the University’s relations with the community.

3. An analysis of the University’s strengths and weaknesses

If the University decides to make adult learners a priority, an analysis of the University’s strengths and weaknesses (SWOT analysis) should be the first item of action. This is necessary because, with all the players in the field of adult learners, we need to identify our core advantage if we wish to develop this component. Instead of simply building on our current activities, we must assess not only our own strengths and weaknesses, but also those of other players in adult learning. Athabasca University and Royal Roads are probably among the most recognized and respected Canadian players in the area, although many others exist outside the Canadian university context, such as professional groups, private groups, and universities throughout the world. If the University commits to analyzing its strengths and weaknesses, a variety of innovative

analysis methods (appreciative inquiry, etc.) can be used. Whatever approach is adopted, both internal University resources and external resources should be called on.

4. Completing an inventory of existing services

Our meetings provided participants with the opportunity to learn more about the University's current range of activities for adult learners. Establishing a plan for the University first requires a complete inventory of current activities. A very preliminary list:

- a. Distance-education activities. The report from the Teaching and Learning Support Service on the Centre for Mediated and Teaching Learning (CMTL) is included in the appendix section of this report. Page 4 lists the programs offered through distance education.
- b. Professional development
- c. Post-RN program – Nursing Science
- d. Graduate certificates – Law, Management, Engineering, Social Sciences
- e. Agreement with the army – Social Sciences
- f. Central services – Library, InfoService

We know that the above list is incomplete and that other innovative initiatives are underway. That's why completing a more exhaustive inventory is a necessary step before we design a model for the University.

5. Building a model for the University in 5, 10 and 15 years

With a full inventory of current services and an analysis of our strengths and weaknesses, the University can confidently develop a comprehensive service plan (programs, formats, attitudes) for adult learners. Time-sensitive plans would work best – for instance, what would we need to see at the University in 5 years, in 10 years, or in 15 years to build a reliable technical, programmatic, pedagogical, human-resources infrastructure? The model would build on what already exists at the University, and would thus be coherent and pragmatic.

6. Establishing pilot projects

The pilot projects should be structured to work towards the coherent model of the University in 15 years. The choice of pilot projects will be based on existing resources, on the importance and relevance to the complete network, on the existing interests and on the importance of highlighting the University's interest for adult learners.

The decision to launch pilot projects is also related to the importance placed on evaluation. By evaluating the success, costs and benefits of the pilot projects, the University can gauge whether the investment is worthwhile. We therefore see an evaluation process as part of the pilot projects from the very beginning.

a) Access structure

The first pilot project must begin with the creation of an access structure designed specifically for the adult learner. We have heard many stories of adult learners who were unable to find information they were looking for because their

questions do not fit well with the structures in place. We need a service that understands adults, that treats them as adults and that has information on the services, programs, etc. of the University. We also suggest that this service be responsible for recognizing prior learning experience and that the University craft a policy in this regard, possibly linked to specific programs (see the following pilot projects). We recommend that the University hire a person who has taken early retirement from the public service, who is interested in improving the links between the University and adult learners, who is familiar with the public service (given the importance of this area for the University) and who knows a bit about the University environment. The most important qualifications would be genuine interest in adult learning, energy and administrative abilities. Administrative support and a strong advisory committee comprising people from both the University and the broader community would also be needed.

The work would entail the creation of systems for access, advising adult learners, creating partnerships with community organizations that train or wish to be trained, etc., and increasing our links with the public service. Still to be determined is the exact format for the service (mix of virtual location on the Web and actual physical location, etc.), but the fundamental importance of this service is clear. The key is designing an initiative thought out in terms of adult learners. In addition, the recognition of prior learning/experience has to be separate from specific programs, and we believe this would fit in with the access structure. This is clearly the priority as a first step towards an integrated and coherent model.

b) The graduate certificate in governance

We propose, as a pilot project, the development of the graduate certificate program in governance. The certificate, offered jointly through the Faculty of Social Sciences and the School of Management, begins in September 2004. The pilot project would aim to formulate a policy and procedures to recognize prior learning experience towards the certificate, with a specific interest in seeking ways to recognize the prior learning experience of immigrants faster. At the same time, the pilot project would include strategies to publish information, and would systematically evaluate these strategies. Other objectives would be to study the effectiveness of administrative processes, to examine the different formats and the satisfaction of adult learners with these formats, and to evaluate the success of the program from the participants' perspective through a questionnaire both at the time of graduation and a year or two after.

c) Graduate certificate in evaluation

This certificate is being created jointly by the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Social Sciences. A pilot project would give us another model of prior learning/ experience recognition and another evaluation of the administrative processes, of the program formats and of adult learners' experience. This pilot project could also involve discussions with professional organizations, because Canadian Association of Evaluation is interested in the certificate.

7. Service format

We have chosen two answers with respect to format: mixture and experimentation. Just as we've suggested with the idea of pilot projects, a culture of evaluation must be created – the key is to try different formats and evaluate them at the same time. We received very useful information from one of the participants about the new technologies for on-line courses. The array of possibilities is clearly huge, so decisions by the University should stem from comprehensive evaluations of available products.

A last point raised by a number of participants is the need to properly support people wanting to experiment with non-traditional formats. Certain successful examples were given, including the post-RN program in Nursing, but we also heard examples where inadequate support created enormous frustration and even caused projects to fail.

8. Synopsis

This report revolves around a central idea: the University must decide whether or not to place more emphasis on adult learning. If the answer is yes, there are areas where the University could do better and more. If the answer is no, suffice to say that the University has opted for other priorities.

The participants at our roundtable supported the idea of giving greater importance to adult learners, but remained sympathetic to the other priorities and many possible directions for the University.

Making adult learning a priority would be a commitment on the part of the University. But this commitment would be just the first step – it would have to be

followed by an analysis of the University's strengths and weaknesses, one that would pinpoint the University's comparative advantage in the area of adult learning. Following this, we recommend that an inventory of the existing services be completed before the University designs a plan/model of what to offer to adult learners in 5, 10 and 15 years. The first step in the entire process would be to create an access structure specifically for adult learners, a single point of entry to the University, so to speak. We would then launch pilot projects and systematically evaluate those projects.