*A Canadian Perspective on Innovations in Online Delivery: Benefits and Challenges*

**Brenda Brouwer**
**Vice Provost & Dean, School of Graduate Studies**
**Queen's University**

Technology-enabled learning has grown considerably over the past decade and many would argue that digital technologies have transformed (or will transform) education. Advances in communication systems, inquiry-based networking and public access to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) paired with economic and social pressures are in many ways reshaping the delivery of post-secondary education. The impact has primarily been felt at the undergraduate level, though recent reports out of the United States make it quite clear that this is not just an undergraduate phenomenon (McClintock, C., Benoit, J., & Mageean, D., 2013). Over 45% of institutions offering face-to-face master's programs also offer master's programs online (Allen, I.E. & Seaman, J., 2005). Comparative Canadian data could not be found, although a scan of online graduate credentials offered by member institutions of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada provides an extensive list of options. The trend is expected to increase as provincial governments weigh-in on the importance and value of online delivery and university administrators consider it as integral to their institution's strategic mission. Indeed, the evidence indicates that students who are academically well-prepared and highly motivated to learn are best suited to benefit from online learning (Carey, T. & Trick, D., 2013). Graduate students exemplify these characteristics.

Paradigm shifts are often contemplated at times of financial constraint or uncertainty. We have all heard it said that online delivery translates into cost-savings compared to face-to-face instruction in part because it can be scaled to accommodate more students and requires limited physical resources. What is not typically factored in are the development, design, infrastructure, and maintenance costs which are not insignificant, particularly if the effort is largely at the local level rather than an institutional initiative. Institutional commitment to the development of online options for courses and programs enables enterprise-wide economies of scale in acquiring technological infrastructure and support services, but perhaps more importantly, it provides a clear educational directive behind the need for change consistent with the mission and strategic vision of the university (Graham, C.R., Woodfield, W., & Harrison, J. B., 2013). The latter emphasizes the pedagogical and social benefits apart from any economic benefit that may be experienced.

In the last two years at Queen's University, 75% of the new graduate programs approved were either online or blended (hybrid), the latter incorporating an initial one week on-campus experience. The primary reasons for adopting the online delivery paradigm were: 1) to target adult learners who can draw from their professional experience and who require flexible learning options to accommodate work schedules, and/or 2) to extend the reach of the programs to a broad-based clientele from around the globe to promote diversity in learning and perspective. Implicit is the underpinning of a sound business case that supports the need for a given program, including a cost analysis for development and delivery as well as the net revenue generation potential. To provide a high quality and desirable product requires broad consultation with prospective stakeholders (future students, employers, and professional associations as appropriate). In our experience, this was essential to ensure alignment of learning outcomes with identified needs, the result being highly marketable programs with economic relevance and an

added benefit of securing a target audience who have already bought into the product prior to launch.

Decisions to adopt a blended or hybrid model were based on evaluation of the value-added and benefits in terms of optimizing learning. Specifically, programs that introduced a one week intensive, on-campus residential component did so to provide opportunities for active learning exercises, practical sessions, and formal and informal engagement among students and instructors. Interestingly, these programs were all interdisciplinary, professional programs for which it was considered important that the cohort gained a shared understanding of the professional backgrounds of the participants, the particular interests that the various professions/industries targeted by the graduate program brought to the table and their unique approaches to addressing practical issues. Participants report that this insight enhanced their interdisciplinary, inter-professional learning by broadening their awareness and perspective, contributing to a high degree of program satisfaction. Arguably, a similar outcome may have been achieved absent the residential component; however, its inclusion was based on a sound rationale and the desired result was attained; hence there is no plan for a head-to-head comparison.

The introduction of online and blended programs is not without controversy or challenge. There are firmly entrenched beliefs that nothing compares to the quality and benefits of face-to-face learning despite substantial evidence to the contrary (McClintock, C., Benoit, J., & Mageean, D., 2013; Carey, T. & Trick, D., 2013). For residential universities such as Queen's, there is the conviction that a strong sense of community defines the learning experience that only on-site, traditional programs can deliver. Online programs are contrary to these core and emotive beliefs and consequently may be met with considerable resistance. The reality is that alternative methods of program delivery must be explored if universities are to be financially viable and grow revenue through increased student enrollment where physical resources (e.g., residences, teaching space, community housing) are limited.

At the graduate level we have found the interest in developing online and blended program delivery quite high, though our experience thus far is limited to professional graduate credentials. The target audience has the relevant background to succeed and typically include users of e-technology in their workplace, giving them a familiarity and comfort level with the approach. Another key factor contributing to the acceptance of online delivery includes a robust provincial quality assurance framework that requires clear articulation of learning objectives and indicators of achievement serving to maintain high program standards. Innovative strategies like the incorporation of synchronous encounters into courses and practical exercises serve to foster a rich intellectual environment, idea exchange, and discussion that supplement the more commonplace asynchronous e-learning. This method promotes deeper learning, integration of material, and community among learners. The demand for online graduate credentials is high and Queen's must build its resource base and educational support for online and blended program delivery if we are to develop a strong presence in this space. There is tremendous opportunity and because these programs have a large geographical reach they have the added advantage of advancing international reputation and brand recognition.

## References

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