

Assignment 3: Chief Civil Servant for a Day

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## **Introduction**

The following report outlines a new provincial government's policies for e-learning at a post-secondary education (PSE) level in Ontario, Canada. These policies are based on a "political ideology" (Unit 4) which includes attainment of the following provincial goals: educational competitiveness, accessibility, quality, flexibility and economical improvement. The new government suggests the utilization of e-learning will address these goals and make Ontario a better province.

Provincial strategies to implement these goals include setting up an educational commission, establishing various consortia or partnerships, changing accreditation standards, promoting privatization, developing new funding strategies and researching the establishment of new e-universities.

## **Post Secondary Education in Ontario**

Ontario is home to over 12 million people and over 50 public and five hundred private post secondary education institutions (PSE) (Ministry, 2007). Ontario's main industries include auto manufacturing, tourism, forestry, mining and business (Education, 2009). Ontario is home to Canada's technological triangle and a popular area for new Canadians.

Currently, Ontario is experiencing a recession with industry closures, unemployment and PSE enrolment increases. In a response to this crisis, Ontario has increased funding to apprenticeship programs and established second career initiatives to help students and displaced workers obtain an education that will lead to work.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) oversees Ontario's post-secondary educational system by regulating public and private schools. The government and MTCU recognize the need for highly skilled workers and the shortage of workers with transferable skills. Ontario needs to meet society's current needs while also being ready for the predicted economical upswing. This government believes e-learning can help accomplish these goals.

### **Educational Issues**

E-learning will address social, educational and economic issues by making education more accessible and flexible for young computer users, lifelong learners, displaced workers and working students. As the Canadian population ages, more people remain at work and school pushing enrolment up. Global and private competition has also risen in recent years. The Provincial government also wants "to achieve the goal of 50% of high school graduates attaining degree status" (Conestoga, 2004, p.21).

In order to meet current needs, institutions must offer more PSE programs. Consequently, colleges need funding increases to keep up with the enrolment which include the cost of building schools and hiring and training faculty. Therefore, the expansion of e-learning becomes a favourable alternative with its flexibility and accessibility. Bates suggests governments could "encourage institutions to develop e-learning programmes without any additional net cost to government or the institution" (2001, p.106).

Furthermore, e-learning helps support a “knowledge-based economy” (Bates, 2001, p.111) by encouraging skills in communication, team building and problem based skills. Bates suggests “there is a global shortage of people with these skills” (2001, p.114). The Rae Report, a report by the previous government, suggests that employers “need graduates equipped with the learning skills to adapt to rapidly changing environments” (Conestoga, 2004, p.3). E-learning can fulfill the current provincial needs and help create students able to adapt to future change.

These needs include accessible education, relevant courses and flexible schedules. The new computer generation expects interaction, relevance and immediacy in their education. Canada is seeing a cultural change with a societal push for lifelong learning, accessibility and inclusiveness. E-learning has the ability to meet these needs.

Overall, Ontario needs to promote e-learning in PSE to help rebuild the economy by creating employable people. In today’s technological age, students need transferable skills like critical thinking and computer literacy if Canada is create a workforce that can compete internationally.

### **Current Policies**

Current government policies include supporting college initiatives to offer more courses and meet the needs of new groups of students by “developing a continuum of learning for full-time and part-time students, which ranges from preparatory and upgrading to applied degree, degree completion in collaboration with universities and post-diploma/post-degree programs for college and university graduates” (Conestoga, 2004, p.7).

Secondly, the government recognized e-learning's importance but found implementing provincial policy difficult: "the ability of individual nation-states to establish local policies that protect cultural heritage, strengthen national identity, and build social cohesion is increasing problematic within a global policyscape" (Brown, 2007, p.6). The new government offsets these problems by viewing successful countries like Australia and the U.K. These countries suggest meeting regional needs while focusing on the benefits of e-learning (Brown, 2007, p.5). Governments must remain focused on the province's educational vision in order to avoid sectional policies that only apply to specific groups.

Thirdly, consortiums exist like the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) which was "established to conduct research and provide objective advice on all aspects of higher education" (Higher, 2009, p.). The new government suggests creating a PSE equivalent of the Ministry of Education's group, E-Learning Ontario. Its purpose "is to meet the needs of a wide range of learners existing across the province" (e-Learning Ontario, p1). Its policy outlines everyone's responsibilities and the Ministry of Education monitors all users to make sure everyone is using the system properly (e-Learning Ontario, p1).

Fourthly, the previous government's role was one of facilitation over colleges and universities with more money going to universities and more influence going to colleges. The new government would like to offer alternatives suggestions to equalize this.

Finally, education has remained a provincial not federal mandate: "Canada provides an excellent example of a country where early federal initiatives to develop a pan-Canadian e-learning strategy were overtaken by local provincial government

initiatives where responsibility for public education resides” (Brown, 2007, p.6). The new government suggests that this mandate remains. The remainder of this report outlines the new government’s recommendations.

## **Recommendations**

After viewing the previous government’s strategies, the new government makes the following recommendations: create an educational commission, establish various consortia, change accreditation standards, promote privatization, develop funding strategies and research the establishment of new e-universities.

### **Educational Commission**

Ontario should create a review board that is given the task of understanding new trends to help Ontario develop clear provincial and institutional visions for e-learning. The board would ensure all groups involved understand the true benefits of any new technology including the fact that there is not always an immediate need for change.

This commission would meet with provincial government members, various educational groups and local businesses to discuss social, educational and economic needs. The government would share its vision as leaders of the community and discuss funding policies. Educational groups would include elementary, secondary and tertiary education members to discuss all areas of education. They could bring to the table issues of funding, gaps in service, current needs and future trends. Business people could inform all groups of the current needs and shortages within the business sector.

The commission's objective would be to gather information in order to bring together the political, educational and economic needs of Ontario. Results would be shared with interest groups. It is this government's belief that shared knowledge and collaboration are the foundation of a knowledge based province. This government also believes that e-learning will help all parties obtain their goals. With educational research under way, the government would encourage further partnerships and consortia.

### **Consortia**

This government suggests establishing consortium to share knowledge, conduct research, train instructors and share costs. Various institutions could partner to create a collection of web based material for sharing which would benefit anyone who has access to information.

Institutions could collaborate to obtain funding, recognition and relevant course material. These same institutions could create programs which allow students to take courses from any school in the group which creates accessibility. This strategy has the potential to bring international money to Canada by offering courses an e-learning environment.

Students can belong to one university but take courses at those in the consortia. The Open University of BC is a consortium that includes the University of British Columbia, the University of Victoria, Simon Fraser and the "Open Learning Agency (OLA)" (Bates, 2001, p54). Students can get a degree from the OLA and "transfer credits" between institutions (Bates, 2001, p55). These institutions join together to plan

courses and market services (Bates, 2001, p55). The government supports the consortia by funding each institution based on “course enrolment” (Bates, 2001, p55). Institutions share the money instead of competing for it.

Members can work together to promote research by collaborating, sharing resources and sharing funding. Governments can encourage such groups by offering to fund consortia based projects. Currently, one such consortium involves the “ministry and partners in post-secondary education and in research and technology” (Budget, 2006, p.3). Bates suggests other collaboration advantages such as “fight[ing] off perceived competition from other sources” (p.52) and “avoid[ing] unnecessary duplication within the system” (2001, p.53).

Businesses partners could help institutions create relevant courses for current workforce needs. For example, the Western Governors’ University (Bates, 2001, p.56) offers relevant courses but no accreditation. Another group, the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has partners for training using an e-learning format.

A consortium can be regional, provincial, national or international with benefits for all. Smaller areas can share resources and countries can benefit from international influence. Internationally, Sweden’s government has “established the Netuniversity portal, where 35 tertiary institutions collaborate to offer 2700 courses” (Brown, 2007, p.6).

Canada has the Canadian Virtual University (CVU) which is “a consortium of Canadian universities that offer complete university degrees, diplomas, and certificates over the Internet or through distance education. CVU universities accept each other’s courses for transfer credit” (Canadian Virtual University, 2009).



One advantage of such partnerships is government control. The government can fund groups, set up policy, meet business needs and help “prepar[e] students properly for the new world of work” (Bates, 2001, p.58). Furthermore, governments can negotiate between the various institutions (Bates, 2001, p64.). By contributing funds to consortia groups, governments can save money by creating “economies of scale” as enrolment increases and costs go down (Bates, 2001, p.64). Institutions also benefit by sharing costs and “agree[ing] among themselves to stop duplication” (Bates, 2001, p.61). Students also find consortiums advantageous because they are not restricted to courses in one school; they can take courses from home and transfer credits.

Consortium between institutions, businesses and the government can benefit provinces by insulating institutions from “the threat [of] out-of-state e-learning programmes” (Bates, 2001, p.59). Bates suggests a strong provincially led consortium can “provide a powerful alternative choice for students considering out-of-state and private sector e-learning providers” (Bates, 2001, p.62).

Disadvantages of creating partnerships include vast price differences and programs which lack credentials. There is often difficulty building trust between group members who may be competitive. Other issues include ongoing expenses and the need of support “from existing national higher education institutions” (Bates, 2001, p.67).

Despite the difficulties, e-learning consortium could still help fulfill the province’s vision by providing better access and flexibility. This leads to the issue of accreditation.

### **Accreditation**

Ontario should adopt new accreditation standards which would change the existing system by either allowing colleges to grant applied degrees or by encouraging partnerships with universities through e-learning courses. The government “ensure[s] quality of provision of higher education through the accreditation of institutions” (Bates, 2001, p.47). Conestoga College in Ontario suggests that “Ontario needs a post-secondary system that is more accessible, diverse, and integrated if we are to achieve the goal of 50% of high school graduates attaining degree status” (Conestoga, 2004, p.7).

Governments can create specialized universities and give more money to colleges who will offer degrees. This change will create accessibility for students who are currently unable to obtain university acceptance. The government can help “establish or negotiate an effective division of roles and responsibilities” for each institution (Bates, 2001, p.50). PSE institutions can set up niches to avoid program overlap such as research universities, teaching universities, colleges and polytechs. The change in accreditation rules would allow colleges to grant applied degrees and universities to grant academic degrees.

The government would also need to regulate accreditation from other countries by creating guidelines and equivalencies to “educate consumers” (Bates, 2001, p.48). Governments can ensure that students receive an education that is recognized in their own country.

This government also encourages a new policy regarding transfers of courses. According to the Conestoga Report, “there is very little transferability of academic credits from colleges to universities. Ontario college graduates face significant barriers to degree completion” (Conestoga, 2004, p.7). This government agrees with the recommendation that “the Government of Ontario establish a new Admissions and

Transfer Council with the mandate and resources to improve the transfer of credits within the post-secondary sector” (Conestoga, 2004, p.8). Students could move between institutions and get degrees at college (Conestoga, 2004, p.8). Groups like nurses would benefit because they now need degrees to practice nursing. Colleges could grant applied degrees which would counter the “the looming provincial and national shortage of nurses [which] has been exacerbated by the recent insistence on a university degree for entry to practice” (Conestoga, 2004, p.10). Changes in the accreditation system would allow the government to meet current needs and also “ensure that institutions keep to agreed mandates” (Unit 4, p.13).

### **Privatization**

Another strategy proposed by this government is the promotion of privatization and “allow[ing] public-sector institutions to establish for-profit companies” (Bates, 2001, p.95). A free market system promotes competition in price and quality and gives students the ability to find the courses they want at the price they want to pay. Competition can also lead to the creation of better course material and reputable schools which address specific business needs. Bates suggests that “TeltecGlobal is a good example of the increasing synergy between technology, education and business” (2001, p.70). If Ontario combines privatization and consortia, they can have government institutions that partner with high tech firms like Research in Motion (RIM). Students can benefit from the latest research and technology or receive hardware like Blackberries or laptops. Privatization can also lead to the “creat[ion] [of] jobs and bring in revenues from other countries” (Bates, 2001, p.76).

Privatization also has its disadvantages such as the creation of monopolies which push out smaller institutions and may infringe on the PSE system. Companies that cannot afford the costs of supporting a technological or a human infrastructure could fold.

Secondly, there is no current accreditation system or quality assurance in place. Private institutions without government accreditation may not be able to offer degrees (Bates, 2001, p.50). Governments could lose control of quality. Bates suggests that courses may not be high quality or there may be course program duplication because the private sector may “focus on the profit-generating areas of the curriculum” (2001, p.70).

Furthermore, students may take courses internationally sending money out of the province. However, in the reverse “the funding of programmes that are taken mainly by out-of-state students” can bring in money (Bates, 2001, p.51). Privatization can also be detrimental to students who cannot afford competitive market prices.

Overall, the new government suggests allowing free markets with some government control. Ontario can control private companies by creating regulations tied to funding. As Bates (2001) suggests, this method means “institutions are judged against government-agreed performance criteria and are funded accordingly, or are allowed to collect more and more of their revenues through student or client fees” (p.49). Initially, governments will regulate institutions but eventually “once national standards have been set and performance measures put in place,” governments can back off (Bates, 2001, p.49).

Governments should include for-profit companies in its mandate with policies similar to private colleges. This government encourages the engagement in privatization to create “hybrid E-Learning networks that are combinations of academic, professional

and corporate content” (Seufert, 2001, p.3). Bates suggests collaboration has funding benefits because funds “may be obtained by borrowing money from outside the institution at market rates” (Bates, 2001, p.107). There is also the risk of losing money if the company fails. Bates also warns that these companies are “driven [more] by the need for profit than meeting educational needs” (Bates, 2001, p.108). However, government funding and collaboration could ensure that “the purpose of a publicly supported university or college is to serve the public, not make money” (Unit 4, p.14).

### **Funding strategies**

Suggested funding strategies include reallocation, collaboration, and grants. The government should review funds to see if they can move money toward e-learning. Bates suggests that “the most practical reallocation option for an institution is to replace some face-to-face activities with e-learning, and to make more effective use of teaching staff through the use of technology” (Bates, 2001, p.97). One problem is convincing all parties that reallocation is advantageous.

Secondly, money should be moved from infrastructure to support services, program development, training and IT support. Bates suggests that “for every dollar spent on technology infrastructure, ten dollars are needed to operate and use the infrastructure” (Bates, 2001, p.98).

Consortiums between institutions encourage saving money and could lead to economies of scale. Once the initial costs are in place, the increase in enrolment would drive down the cost per student over time. The government would support the consortia

by funding each institution based on “course enrolment” (Bates, 2001, p.55). Institutions share the money instead of competing for it.

Government grants for special projects can bring initial funds. Unfortunately, grants run out and money can only be spent in very specific areas. Furthermore, special “grants tend to reflect the needs and priorities of the sponsors” (Bates, 2001, p.102). Tuition hikes and cost recoverable programs may also be possible (Bates, 2001, p.95).

In conclusion, if e-learning has major importance then “governments have a responsibility to face up to the additional costs that are necessary to support e-learning” (Bates, 2001, p.102). The cost of e-learning is unclear so Ontario needs to find a funding formula that works. Conestoga suggests the equalization of funds between colleges and universities. They suggest the “federal government has made a significant commitment to provide research monies for our universities to enhance innovation (\$1.2 billion annually). We need to see a similar commitment to invest in colleges to deal with the issue of skills shortages” (Conestoga, 2004, p.11). Furthermore, the government is giving money for infrastructure but they need to fund support services as well. As enrolment increases so should support like training and IT services but this is not happening because money is always needed to keep up with constant changes in technology.

Another radical strategy that concerns this government is Bates’ suggestion of establishing a new e-university (2001, p.95). This government believes this may be a good alternative in a strong economy but not during the present economic recession. Instead it would be more economical to incorporate e-learning into existing educational institutions. Bates (2001) suggests building on what already exists (p.47). In the future,

new institutions like the United Kingdom's Open University may create greater access and be cheaper for those who cannot afford university.

### **Government Influence**

Overall, the new government will take a leadership role by researching educational trends and developing policies that address these needs. They will encourage partnerships by providing funding to those who use e-learning to share resources and provide support services for newly established apprenticeship and second career programs.

Governments will support those institutions that have accessibility and improvement through e-learning in their institutional vision whether their focus is "local, national or international" (Bates, 2001, p.52). However, governments must show there is a demand for e-learning and define that demand (Brown, 2007, p.4). They cannot just focus on e-learning but must focus on educational problems as a whole.

Governments can research workforce needs and tie these needs to PSE with "bridging programs" (Conestoga, 2004, p.8) and then use e-learning to absorb extra enrolments (Bates, 2001, p.104).

Government interference is appropriate because education affects the economy and society both provincially and federally. Canada will fall behind in skills and students will go elsewhere to get an education, taking Canadian money with them. Instead Canada can use e-learning to keep Canada current, meet workforce needs, close the gaps between schools and jobs and keep Canada competitive globally. However, government influence

should be moderate not authoritarian. Moderate interference allows a blur in roles between schools, the government and businesses with governments acting as overseers.

### **Conclusion**

Pressure to use e-learning comes from globalization, privatization, increases in enrolment, new types of students and a faltering economy. Since e-learning will happen with or without government support, the provincial government would be best suited to embrace e-learning and become part of the process. Ontario should invest in e-learning “to improve the quality of learning and to develop workforce skills that will eventually facilitate economic development” (Bates, 2001, p.96).

The current government believes strategies that encourage e-learning will help the province move toward greater student accessibility, high quality programs, flexibility of services and economic improvement.



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