

The Online University Business School - Athabasca University's Centre For Innovative Management

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ABSTRACT

Ten years ago Athabasca University launched the world's first online Executive Master in Business Administration which has grown to deliver one in four of the Executive MBAs awarded in Canada today and is widely respected in the Canadian business and academic communities.

Using an asynchronous online delivery format, the MBA program is collaboratively focused. The 1100 students in the program today work together from across Canada and from 26 countries around the world. Research comparing the online environment with the traditional classroom has shown that an intense interaction exists within the courses and this is widely viewed as one of the Athabasca MBA's key strengths. A maximum professor to student ratio of one to twenty five is strictly maintained. With 80 faculty located across Canada and in the US and Europe, the MBA has more faculty involved in it than any other school in Canada.

The school is now focused on expanding the reach of its successful MBA program to new opportunities in online learning. Research is seen as a critical component in the school's work and plans are underway to add for a doctoral program (Doctorate in Business Administration). An online environment is being created that will integrate the teaching and research activity of the school. Online research institutes allow academics and students to collaborate on international research projects and to work more closely with the business community than has ever been possible before.

Athabasca believes that a *high quality university business school* requires the integration of teaching, research and relationships with the business community. This paper describes the work of Athabasca's Centre for Innovative Management today. It then discusses the schools plan's for the creation of the University business school of the future.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Athabasca University (AU), logged on with the world's first fully interactive online Executive MBA program. Today, the AU MBA is Canada's largest Executive MBA program, and one of the fastest growing programs in the world. Enrolment has increased from 130 students in 1995 to 1,082 students in 2004, capturing 25% of the EMBA market in Canada and an estimated 15% of the world online EMBA market. Students are middle to senior level managers from all sectors of the economy in Canada and 23 other countries.

Critical to the success of the AU MBA is its collaborative, interactive approach to learning and the flexibility of the asynchronous online environment in which the students work.

The key relevance of the Athabasca University MBA to the Commonwealth of Learning conference and to delegates interested in applying CIM's methods to address the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, resides in an analysis of the MBA program's collaborative distance learning model and associated administrative practices. The flexible nature of our distance model could easily translate into a vehicle for facilitating the continuing education of leaders and managers in development projects and institutions throughout the Commonwealth.

BACKGROUND

Athabasca University

Athabasca University was established in 1970 in response to a rapid increase in university enrolments in Alberta in the 1960s. Soon after, though, the growth in enrolments slowed, calling into question the need for another campus-based university in the province.

The university initiated a pilot project, based from Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, to study new teaching and learning strategies that would enable students to pursue a university education without leaving their communities, jobs, or families. The resulting distance learning centre offered fully-accredited university courses and programs, and attracted over 650 students between 1972 and 1975. Athabasca University held its first convocation ceremony for two graduates in 1977, and had its future ensured in 1978, when a revision of the Alberta Universities Act granted the University permanent, self-governing status (approval in principle was given in 1975).

In 1984, AU moved 145 kilometres north to the town of Athabasca, where it could serve as an educational hub for the province's widely-distributed northern population. Satellite learning centres were established in Calgary and Edmonton, the two largest cities in Alberta, providing student services such as advising, computer labs, resource materials and examination centres.

In 1985, the University adopted a mission statement to reflect its commitment to innovation, flexibility, excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, and service in the community. International development and building a base for public trust and private support were also emphasized. The mission was amended in 1999 to emphasize the University's growing national and international reach, extending far beyond its Alberta home.

The Centre for Innovative Management

In 1994, Athabasca University established the Centre for Innovative Management (CIM) in St. Albert, Alberta, a suburb of Edmonton. CIM was given an entrepreneurial mandate – to launch the world's first fully interactive, online Executive MBA program, and to make the program self-supporting. The program's tuition fees were to fully cover all operating expenses; the program would not receive government funding.

CIM rose to the challenge. Its academic team developed a high-quality, academically challenging MBA program adapted for online delivery to students via Lotus Notes® groupware. The student market was receptive, and the program drew 130 students in its first year. Today, the program has almost 1100 students enrolled, and its student satisfaction is such that internal surveys consistently indicate that most new students join the program because they were referred by a current AU MBA student or alumnus.

The Athabasca online Executive MBA degree is similar in academic scope and rigour to those conferred by many traditional, residential based universities in North America. The word 'Executive' in the degree name indicates that the admission requirements of the program include a work experience requirement – in Athabasca's case, from three to ten years of managerial experience are required. The average AU EMBA student is 40 years old, and has nine years of managerial experience when entering the program. Almost all students work full time during their studies and over 60% receive financial support from their employer.

CIM offers three EMBA program streams – the general Executive MBA, which covers in-depth the overall management principles that apply to all organizations, plus an MBA in Information Technology Management and MBA in Project Management. The

program structure (for all three programs) consists of 12 online courses – each eight weeks in duration – a one-week residential course made available in locations throughout Canada and Europe, and an Applied Project undertaken individually by each student on a subject related to their workplace. Most people take between two and two and a half years to complete the program, but are allowed up to six years.

Course lecture notes, case studies, links to online libraries and group discussions are distributed through the Internet, though hard-copy textbooks are also couriered or mailed.

The Athabasca University MBA has become well recognized in Canada as a high-quality program that allows working professionals to obtain a master's degree while still remaining in their workplace. Indeed, the Athabasca Executive MBA has been ranked #3 in Canada by *Canadian Business* (2001), within the top 75 Executive MBAs in the world by the *Financial Times of London* (2003), and consistently highly ranked by other internal and external surveys.

COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING

“Individuals learn principally through interaction and dialogue with other learners” (Haggerty, Schneberger, and Carr 2001:2). This philosophy permeates the learning methods employed in every course in the Athabasca University MBA program.

In each online course, cohorts of eight to twelve students are linked to each other and to an academic coach by Lotus Notes® software. The academic coach evaluates assignments and participation, but most importantly serves as a facilitator, guiding discussion points, encouraging dialogue, offering academic expertise, and helping students link theory with practice. All academic coaches are highly qualified in terms of academic background (minimum master's degree, but most with PhDs) and business experience.

Any given discussion provides students with an opportunity to experience the viewpoints of professionals from a variety of industries and employment roles as all students relate the issue at hand to their own organizations. If, for example, a course question requires analysis of a labour relations problem, the resulting discussion might include thoughts from a human resources professional in a large multinational company, a financial manager in a government ministry, a general manager in a small company, a police force sergeant, etc. – each of whom would present a different perspective on the issue. It is this kind of discussion and analysis from several

perspectives that helps AU MBA students develop exceptional critical thinking and innovative problem solving skills.

Because the discussion element of each course is so critical to the learning experience for all students, students' final course grades are affected by the quality and quantity of their participation. Each assignment – be it a discussion question, case study analysis, issue resolution, or any of a wide variety of exercises – requires every student to comment, discuss, offer opinions, or otherwise share their thoughts with every other student in their class. Failure to contribute effectively to discussions results in a failing course grade, regardless of individual or group project marks.

As previously mentioned, the Athabasca University has been highly ranked by independent surveys both inside Canada and internationally, but rankings in and of themselves do not fully explain why the AU online MBA is successful. One research project in learning theory supports the effectiveness of the AU MBA online learning environment. The study, by Athabasca University and the University of Western Ontario (Haggerty, Schneberger, and Carr 2001), examines cognitive learning and communications through surveys conducted among individuals in three media environments – asynchronous online, synchronous video conferencing, and face-to-face classroom. The researchers found that while online respondents exhibited lower mean perceptions towards richness of social interactions and procedural interactions, they perceived that analytical interactions occurred more frequently, were longer and of higher quality, and contributed the most to learning when compared with respondents from classroom and video conferencing. The collaborative, asynchronous learning model appears to encourage more reflection, introspection, and measured responses, which are perceived as being higher in quality and learning contribution than classroom or videoconferencing participation.

BEST PRACTICES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE ONLINE UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL

Building on the success of its online MBA, CIM is now expanding the range of online programs and services. These initiatives serve as examples of best practices and will help lead the future of the Athabasca University online business school.

One initiative undertaken by the Centre for Innovative Management in the past two years is to take components of MBA courses and develop non-credit, management development courses for public and private sector organizations. The courses are four

weeks in length and designed for participants all within the same company or profession. The collaborative, asynchronous model of learning is used and a coach facilitates discussion just as for regular MBA courses. For example, AU recently delivered three, four week long courses in knowledge management, change management, and e-government to employees of the Ontario, Canada Government.

From a research perspective, AU is undertaking a project in Supply Chain Management whereby an interaction simulation model has been developed that allows for collaboration among different supply chain managers to conduct exercises and control different scenarios along a virtual supply chain. The research derived from developing the supply chain simulation has assisted and enhanced teaching and business applications.

Athabasca University is also developing a virtual campus, the E-Campus, which provides the capability for students to access university functions such as course registrations, grades, alumni chat rooms, as well as online libraries throughout North America and the world.

The Centre for Innovative Management at Athabasca University is also investigating the possibility of expanding its academic programs to offer a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA). Subject to government approval (all university programs in Canada must be approved by respective provincial education ministries), the AU degree could be the first DBA conferred by a Canadian university. Approval of the DBA will mean that a university exclusively devoted to distance education will be providing the same full range of bachelor, master, and doctoral programs as traditional, residentially based universities – and all within a few decades of existence.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative, online learning facilitated by an expert has the potential to become an empowering tool for leaders, agents of change, and all types of development workers to share ideas, ask and respond to questions, and learn from others all over the world. Barriers exist, certainly, such as lack of computer and internet access and difficulties in coordinating and maintaining servers and technical support, but a well-planned, networked system of online courses is an efficient and effective option for lifelong learning for a diverse, geographically scattered array of individuals interested in expanding their knowledge and learning from their peers. By linking people the world over, online learning has the potential to play a significant role in the dissemination of

information and the sharing of expertise amongst agents working in a global partnership for development.

REFERENCES

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