

## 2016 – Wishes for Online Learning in the Spotlight

[Contact North | Contact Nord](#) – a proud member of EDEN – greets 2016 as a year of action for online, and distance learning – with all EDEN Members taking concrete steps to increase access, success and quality for learners all over the world.

As a way of greeting the new year, we have outlined the top ten wishes of Contact North | Contact Nord for online learning – to benefit students, faculty, institutions, communities and societies and economies.

An important and challenging context for online and distance learning can be found in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, recognized learning as an engine for individual, social, and economic development. Of the document’s 17 goals, one focuses on education, stating: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The targets associated with this goal emphasize access, equity, quality, affordability, skills for employment, literacy, and the skills to promote sustainable development – for all levels of education from pre-primary through university and including both formal and informal approaches to education.

Online learning has a substantial contribution to make towards the achievement of this goal, and with this in mind, Contact North | Contact Nord has outlined its goals and aspirations for 2016.

### 1. AN ACCEPTANCE OF ONLINE LEARNING AS EQUAL TO OR BETTER THAN FACE TO FACE – AN END TO SKEPTICISM

The evidence is clear. There are no significant differences in learning outcomes from face-to-face versus online learning (see [here](#) for the evidence base). This is the conclusion of multiple studies conducted across a range of disciplines and conditions over many years.

Yet, online and distance learning are not accepted as equal to face-to-face learning by governments, institutions, students, employers, or the public in many parts of the world. All those engaged in this work need to be active advocates for online learning, using specific strategies suited to their circumstances, including political action, networks dedicated to explaining and encouraging online learning, exemplary practice, supporting champions, or enhanced promotion of achievements. 2016

could be the year in which all involved with higher education accept that blended and online learning are an equal part of the mix of options offered to learners for their courses and programs of study.

## **2. ADEQUATE, SUSTAINABLE, AND EQUITABLE FUNDING**

The need for adequate and sustainable funding is fundamental to many of the wishes and goals outlined here and in numerous other documents. Appropriate funding is also an acknowledgement of the essential role of online education in higher education, whether formal, informal or part of lifelong learning. In addition, we would like to see funding that demonstrates equal consideration for online and face-to-face education, providing, for example, not only brick and mortar buildings but also technological infrastructure.

## **3. 2016: THE YEAR WE ACTIVELY RETHINK OUR UNDERSTANDING OF QUALITY**

All education systems are seeking to increase access to and success in quality education. But our understanding of quality is changing. We would like to see it expand from the current standards and compliance mechanisms to focus on the quality of the experience of the learner – on student engagement, student to student and student to instructor interaction, and the learning supports and resources they can access and use. Rather than looking solely at design and outcomes, quality would be increasingly focused on student satisfaction. In 2016 (and beyond), rethinking quality will be a major task for all engaged in higher education. In many countries, this work has already begun.

## **4. A COMMITMENT TO ACCESS AND EQUITY AS ESSENTIAL STARTING POINTS**

Equity is about more than access to education, it is also about success. Success begins with ensuring that all have an opportunity to access and be successful in higher education and training. Increasing access and success in higher education and training is at the root of much of the policy work being pursued by OECD, UNESCO, the European Commission, the Commonwealth and many other organizations. In terms of action, we hope to see more being done to support different kinds of learners achieve success and more focus given to ensuring that historically disadvantaged groups – single parents, prisoners, ethnic minorities, aboriginal peoples, those with disabilities – have access to lifelong learning opportunities.

## **5. STRENGTHENING THE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS OF FACULTY**

It is clear from research and the mounting evidence of the impact of technology in education that effective teaching and learning require a new set of teaching and learning skills and approaches: a new pedagogy for different time.

Many of those who teach in colleges, universities, technical institutes or other post-secondary settings do not have these skills and only limited access to acquiring them. We would like to see increased investment in professional development and a growth in train the trainer and capacity building workshops, online courses and open educational resources, and other faculty-directed learning opportunities in 2016 to fill this need. A potentially promising new source of training, free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which focus on these skills appeared in 2015 and many more are planned for 2016.

## **6. A STRONG FOCUS ON SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES**

Governments are seeking to ensure that those who graduate from schools, colleges, and universities have the skills needed for the social, cultural, and economic development of their nations. In parallel, colleges and universities are increasingly focusing their work on program design on learning outcomes and assessment of knowledge, skills, and competencies. In 2016, especially in professional education, technical and vocational education, and apprenticeship, we hope to see a strong focus on relevant skills and competencies, new methods emerging for the assessment of skills and competencies, and a growth of international agreements for learner mobility based on skills and competency recognition agreements. As a hopeful sign, we can see such agreements for recognition built into a variety of recent trade agreements (both multilateral and bilateral).

## **7. ACCESS TO BROADBAND AS A RIGHT**

Several countries, including Spain, France, Finland, Costa Rica, and Estonia, have determined broadband access is a fundamental right of its citizens. 2016 is the year in which many other countries should make this commitment and accelerate and reinvigorate innovations to make this possible. Free Basic, a collaborative offer from [internet.org](http://internet.org) (a Facebook supported organization) has enabled Internet access by 15 million individuals who otherwise would not be able to do so. [Free](#)

[Basic](#), a multiplatform, free/open source compiler will be available in thirty countries in 2016 through partnerships with thirty-four operators. If we are to collectively achieve the sustainable development goals, then internet access becomes an essential right for all.

## **8. INCREASING NUMBERS OF QUALITY OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER)**

As access to learning increases, so too will the demand for Open Educational Resources (OER). Such demand will spur the development of more learning resources, simulations, serious games, new forms of assessment and support resources, and new audio and video resources for learning. Supported by major project funding, institutions, governments, and foundations, the OER movement could thrive in 2016, resulting in more than one billion free-to-use OER materials available in the world. These can be incorporated into innovative approaches to access, learning, assessment and new forms of credentials.

## **9. INTEGRATING STUDENT VOICE INTO PLANNING AND PROGRAMS**

Integrating student realities, views, and experience into the planning and delivery of online education brings a number of benefits to institutions, faculty members and, of course, students themselves. Understanding their needs, capacities, goals, and concerns and responding to them through program design, support services, and administrative practices can result in improved, access, retention, and success. Tracking their experiences during and beyond their studies could result in more flexible and effective teaching and learning.

## **10. INCREASED INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION**

No list of wishes for 2016 would be complete without the inclusion of enhanced international collaboration. Partnerships may have institutional, regional, national, or international scope, and include both private and public partners. The potential projects include sharing of courses and programs, exchange of students and faculty, shared policy development, cooperative development of open educational resources, shared recognition of MOOCs for credit, credit transfer arrangements, and joint research and development. International collaboration offers benefits far beyond the actual experience or product, to a wide international understanding and support.

## **2016 – BUILDING ON PAST SUCCESS, WORKING TOWARDS A DIFFERENT FUTURE**

The future is rarely a straight line from the past – development happens through a combination of continuous improvement and embracing disruptive but effective innovation. EDEN, with its focus on innovations on online and distance education, will continue to be an encourager and enabler of these developments.