

Confluence of Rivers, Confluence of Learning



*Thompson Rivers University Convocation Ceremony, 9
June 2005*

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*Remarks by: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO,
Commonwealth of Learning, on the conferment of the
degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa*

Greetings and Thanks

Madam Chancellor; Members of the Faculty; Graduates; and Guests.

I thank Thompson Rivers University for the privilege of receiving this honorary degree. Such recognition is always a thrill, but when the degree is awarded at the first convocation ceremony of a newly named university the pleasure is even greater.

Today's graduates, whose presence here today crowns years of hard work, are the founder members of a new generation of alumni who proudly carry the name Thompson Rivers University on their diplomas and degrees.

I congratulate you all on your success and thank your families for the support that they have given you. You know and they know that whilst your names are on the parchments you receive, higher education depends on moral and financial support from various sources, but above all from your families.

The Name of the University

I congratulate Thompson Rivers University on the choice of its name. It designates a geographical reality and it carries the name of a distinguished person. David Thompson, who mapped this territory, was the most distinguished geographer Canada has ever produced.

You chose to call the University 'Thompson Rivers' in the plural, rather than 'Thompson River' in the singular and that is a good choice too.

The confluence of the North and South Thompson Rivers into a single river is a good metaphor for the

way that this University itself represents a confluence of trends in higher learning.

I congratulate the University on two ways that it is bringing together distinct manifestations of post-secondary education within one institution. One combination concerns content, the other merges methods.

Confluence of content

In your earlier incarnations as Cariboo College and the University College of the Cariboo you developed a very strong programme in technical and vocational education and training. The University College of the Cariboo particularly distinguished itself in this area in both senses of the word: making itself distinct and achieving distinction.

Usually, when a college climbs the ladder to university status, it begins a process of mission drift, downgrading its technical and vocational programmes and promoting graduate programmes instead. You did not do that. You continued to strengthen your vocational programming and integrated all your vocational, technical and academic programmes into a seamless curriculum structure.

We used to talk about curricular ladders, implying that you climb steadily upwards from kindergarten to the doctoral degree. But that is no longer true. A climbing frame is a better analogy. Nowadays our learning is not a uniform upward progression. We move sideways, we go back downwards, we do zigzags, and we progress diagonally.

Many people in Canada finish a degree and then do a vocational qualification to gain practical skills. I did a Master's degree after my doctorate and have since taken first-year undergraduate courses. In a world of lifelong learning it is vital to facilitate these individual pathways. Thanks to your legacy from Cariboo College and UCC, Thompson Rivers University does that.

The way that TRU has strengthened its vocational offerings within a fully integrated curriculum is unusual and commendable. In today's world 80% of jobs require technical and vocational education and training. To offer it as you do, within a comprehensive curriculum is a great service to the students.

Merging of methods

I compliment you also on the way that you are engaged in merger of methods. You are attempting to bring together the two principal means by which people today engage in higher learning. On the one hand there is face-to-face instruction in the classroom; on the other there are the newer modes of open and distance learning.

Classroom teaching has a solid tradition here. Much newer is the contemporary trend of open and distance learning. In April the British Columbia Open University became part of Thompson Rivers University and will be known henceforward as Thompson Rivers University - Open Learning.

This is a very interesting. Open and distance learning has been the most significant development in higher

education over the last thirty years. It has led to the creation of many open universities, some of which, like India's Indira Gandhi National Open University with one and a half million students, are very large. These universities have created a revolution by breaking the insidious link between quality and exclusivity that was for too long a scar on higher education. Back in the 1990s I coined the term mega-universities to designate open universities with over 100,000 students.

Because of the way that they use technology open universities can increase access to higher education, improve its quality and cut its costs - all at the same time.

Three open universities have been created in Canada: the BC Open University, Athabasca University and the Télé-université of the Université du Québec. None of these are mega-universities because Canadian provinces have small populations in world terms. However, it takes skill to operate an open university with relatively small numbers - say less than 30,000 students - because scale makes it easier simultaneously to improve quality and cut costs.

Having worked at both Athabasca University and the Télé-université I find recent developments fascinating. Athabasca University continues to enjoy great success as an independent institution, but this year the Télé-université has become part of the Université du Québec à Montréal, just as the BC Open University has become part of Thompson Rivers University.

These are the only mergers of this type in the world. Many campus universities are trying to become 'dual-mode institutions' teaching both on campus and at a distance. The least I can say is that to develop a strong distance learning component and then operate both distance and on-campus modes successfully is not straightforward.

Thompson Rivers University, however, has the great good fortune to inherit a functioning Open University instead of having to build its open and distance learning programme from scratch.

The most challenging question, to which I do not have a glib answer, is how closely to integrate these two modes of teaching and learning within the structures and systems of Thompson Rivers University.

When two rivers flow together their waters do not mix immediately. Sometimes, when you fly overhead, you can still distinguish the colours of the separate streams many kilometres downriver from the confluence. It will be interesting to compare the patterns at the confluences of these two modes of learning in British Columbia and Quebec. What should the institutions do to give their students the best of both worlds? We at the Commonwealth of Learning will be watching their answers closely to share them with other Commonwealth countries.

Conclusion

Confluence of rivers; confluence of learning! The name and location of Thompson Rivers University is a beautiful metaphor for bringing together different strands in the curricula of post-secondary education and ancient and modern traditions of teaching and learning. I congratulate President Roger Barnsley, the staff

and the Board of Governors for creating such exceptionally interesting foundations for the newly named institution. Those foundations will give the students of Thompson Rivers University choices of what to study and how to study that are unrivalled in Canada.

In closing I particularly congratulate you, the first class of graduates to bear the name of Thompson Rivers University. I wish you success and fulfilment in the future. It is a privilege to be an honorary member of your graduating class.