Teaching and learning for new futures and better lives: The journey of McMaster Continuing Education from 2016–2021

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of McMaster Continuing Education (MCE) is to serve non-traditional learners—often called adult learners—as they seek ways to advance their careers and pursue their love of lifelong learning. Like others who attend university, these learners deserve the best we have to offer. Recognizing this goal, the reader is invited to learn about themes that characterize continuing education in Canada and the earliest days of continuing education at McMaster University. The reader is also invited to reflect on how MCE has advanced learning for adults since 2016 when new leadership and a new strategic plan guided its development. Last, this chapter positions MCE as a leader in the use of innovative learning strategies and explores how it was well equipped when the global pandemic of 2020 challenged educational institutions around the world. How MCE navigated its transition to remote learning for students and educators prior to the pandemic and its plans for teaching and learning in post-pandemic times may be helpful to other units wanting to nurture some of the practices MCE discovered during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

continuing education, adult learners, innovation, career, access to education

This chapter serves as a testimony of the development of McMaster Continuing Education (MCE) between 2016 and 2021. While 2016 marked new leadership and the launch of a new strategic plan for MCE, 2021 marked the end of this plan and the height of a global pandemic. During this period, MCE re-established its identity at McMaster University and in regional, provincial, and national continuing education communities. This identity builds on select themes evident in the continuing education literature as well as McMaster University's longstanding commitment to continuing education, previously called extension, since the 1930s. Notably, the term extension was used by many universities for decades since it encapsulates the idea of the university extending its knowledge and expertise to the broader community, including adult learners (McLean & Carter, 2013).

The primary building blocks of continuing education in its early days at McMaster included commitment to the social justice principle of access to education for adults, innovation and change in learning practices including models and technologies, and community

and partnership values. Therefore, this chapter begins by describing these three themes as core to the philosophy and practice of continuing education in Canada and then progresses to a reflection on how MCE has practiced them in its past and present and will continue to practice them in its future. Importantly, these same three elements prepared MCE for the challenges of supporting adult learning during the pandemic. MCE has also evolved its identity as a committed advocate for adult learners in contemporary times and a partner for likeminded teams within the university and further afield.

CONTEXT
Although continuing education has been described as a relatively new discipline in the academy (Nesbit, 2011), given its roots in (a) social justice, such as access to work-focused education for adult learners including equity-deserving groups; (b) innovative learning practices and change; and (c) commitment to community and partnership values, it is a discipline of profound value for our times. These three themes will be briefly explored as they are foundational to the evolution of MCE forward from 2016. As appropriate, connections will be made to present practices in MCE.

Access to education for adult learners
Throughout its history, continuing education in Canada has been committed to ensuring access to work-focused education for adult learners. This commitment is enacted by addressing scheduling barriers to participation in lifelong learning, acknowledging the unique learning needs and contexts of women learners and those new to Canada, and offering relevant programming that enables upskilling and recognition of prior learning for success in the job market.

A very practical barrier experienced by many adult learners that continuing education has responded to is the scheduling of classes during daytime hours. Classes scheduled in the daytime rarely meet the complex work and life needs of adult learners. Continuing education units, by comparison, approach scheduling and supports differently than undergraduate faculties. Over time, continuing education units have offered classes at night, on weekends, during summer, and in satellite locations. As an historical example of this, in the early 1920s, McGill University and the University of British Columbia offered evening lectures to persons not enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students. By 1935, these efforts evolved into a range of educational programs and services for working adults tailored to their needs and availability (McLean, 2009). While these same options—evenings, weekends, summers, satellite locations—are used today, online education in its various forms has become a valuable means of serving and accommodating the life complexities of adult learners.

How university continuing education units serve and support new-to-Canada adults and adults from other equity-deserving backgrounds including women is an important consideration, as, in 2020–2021 at MCE, more than 20% of all learners were new to Canada while 70% were women (New student demographics report, 2021). This is not a new pattern nor one that shows signs of decreasing. In fact, continuing education units have supported these groups and provided access to relevant language, personal development, and career

programs for many years, and there is a rich scholarship about this work. As an example, Adamuti-Trache and Sweet (2010) point out how the immigrant experience is often affected by personal and settlement variables. Many continuing education units facilitate access to services and resources that respond to these variables. Thus, in a continuing education context, access is often twofold in nature: access to educational opportunities as well as other life supports. Using a different lens that focuses on the classroom, Alfred and Guo (2012) advise adult and continuing education instructors to make purposeful attempts at internationalization of pedagogies. Approaches that acknowledge and value the plurality of culture in the classroom and that are grounded in the practice of universal design are highly recommended. The ideas of internationalization and personalization are also considered in work by Antropov (2020). Antropov shares his personal narrative of being an adult learner and crossing borders, including those of diverse cultures, geographies, and learning experiences. The instructor of the newcomer adult learner plays a powerful role in helping the learner from a different country cross some of these borders while acquiring new language, skills, knowledge, and overall access into a new world. Continuing education scholars have likewise written about the educational and life journeys of Indigenous and racialized immigrant women in Canada who drew on the knowledge and supports they experienced in continuing education to achieve important goals such as becoming activists (Chau, 2020). Finally, Sloane-Seale (2011) writes about retention and persistence among female adult learners who have taken continuing education courses and programs. The success of these learners ties not only to personal resolve but also to the following attributes of the continuing education experience: accommodating instructors; small classes; schedules that mesh well with the life, work, and family needs of adults; and access to relevant learning experiences and services.

As suggested by Sloane-Seale (2011), program relevance is a key ingredient in the discussion of access and continuing education. In the case of contemporary continuing education units, there is a distinct focus on knowledge, skills, and competencies that enable adults to re-skill and/or upskill for the job market. A relatively recent example from the late 1990s and early 2000s spotlights how continuing education units responded to workforce needs in nursing. At that time, various Ontario university continuing education units, working collaboratively with schools of nursing, developed and delivered programs that enabled diploma-prepared nurses, a largely female group, to transition to baccalaureate status, which became an entry-to-practice requirement in 2005 (Carter, 2003; Carter et al., 2006). More recently, as new technologies have emerged and patterns in the workplace have changed, adults require education and training that will keep them in their jobs and prepare for new ones; such learning needs are not generally met by undergraduate and graduate faculties. Because continuing education courses are taught by instructors with professional backgrounds and may include work-integrated learning experiences, there is potential for adult learners not only to learn new skills, but also garner social capital and networks they might not otherwise have.[1] Such opportunities are especially important for new-to-Canada learners and those who may be changing careers and looking to build new relationships. MCE has been able to embed online work-integrated learning experiences into courses since 2017.

In addition to offering programs in specific career and employment areas, some continuing education units are known for their work in prior learning assessment and recognition of learning (PLAR) (Gingrich & Rowlinson, 2020; Susskind et al., 2020; Vegas & Winthrop, 2020). Through strategies such as evaluation of a portfolio that documents the learner's knowledge, skills, and career accomplishments over time and/or tests focused on knowledge and skills in specific areas, the PLAR process can reduce the formal course work the adult learner needs to complete. The win here is two-fold: in addition to reduced course work and a shorter route to new career options, the adult learner may experience a boost in personal and professional confidence; the workplace secures competent employees more quickly than otherwise (Belisle & Rioux, 2016; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010). This is especially valuable in the context of internationally trained professionals and other new-to-Canada adult learners who arrive with skills and knowledge that Canada requires in its skilled labour market. As an example, in the case of internationally trained professionals, MCE serves health professionals who have trained abroad but who need a Canadian credential to advance their options in this country. Today MCE offers a wide range of programs which are vitally important across all kinds of careers.[2]

Innovation and change in learning practices

In addition to being known for their alternate approaches to scheduling and their career-relevant programs, many continuing education units at Canadian universities were practicing online, virtual, and blended learning before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020. In large part, this innovation was a response to necessity—to the work and life complexities of adult learners who cannot attend classes in face-to-face contexts and/or who experience geographical restrictions (Brockerhoff & Carter, 2022). As an example, northern Ontario has practiced distance education for many years because of its expansive geography, inclement weather, and sparsely populated areas.

These variables considered, when internet-supported education became possible in the late 1990s and early 2000s, continuing education units at universities in Sudbury and Thunder Bay began to offer online programs to meet the learning needs of adults (Bates, 2005; Carter et al., 2006). Previously, they had been practicing correspondence education whereby course packs, videotapes, and other learning resources were mailed to learners who studied independently and then submitted their assignments. While geography and population patterns may not be barriers for the majority of adult learners in southern Ontario, time constraints and complex lives frequently are. Thus, many continuing education units across Canada had adopted online education models and practices prior to their main campus peers and in advance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

More recently, continuing education units have made valuable advancements in skills-based learning through virtual and artificial intelligence technologies, micro-courses, courses that use a boot camp model, digital credentials, and other innovative models (Piedra, 2021; SUNY, 2019). Because of this work, continuing education has much to offer not only adults looking for short, focused, and verifiable programs, but also employers and campus colleagues interested in conceptualizing and supporting learning in different ways.

As suggested, continuing education units tend to be nimble and act as early adopters of innovative learning models (Carter & Janes, 2021). This innovative spirit ties to several factors including how continuing education units are often structured as businesses rather than faculties. Because many of them are structured this way and since online education enables students who live in British Columbia or New Brunswick to be able to study with an Ontario-based continuing education unit, the landscape of continuing education has become increasingly competitive (Holman, 2022). Not to be nimble and quick to respond to new ways of delivering adult education could well mean the demise of the continuing education unit.

Community and partnership values

The values of community and partnership are central to the vision and mission of most continuing education units in Canada. These values are most evident in the following ways: a commitment to community programming, the use of partnership strategies, and the idea of collective resilience.

While the largest portion of programming in a continuing education unit will be career-oriented, community programming and personal lifelong learning are also important elements. Such programs are generally offered at lower price points than career-focused programs and, at times, are available at no cost. Sharing of knowledge around social and political issues through panels and group discussions; talks by community leaders, university scholars, and other experts; and programs that serve the interests of specific demographic groups are all examples of community initiatives.[3] These kinds of programs are aligned with the thinking of Grace (2014) who writes about changing our thinking about adult education and community programming as separate and discrete and shifting to thinking about the interrelated nature of public, adult, and higher education.

A further kind of community within the university continuing education sector exists among units themselves and through their professional association. In Canada, the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) serves as the professional home for university continuing education units. Dispersed across Canada, CAUCE members interact as a "virtual community of practice" (Dubé et al., 2005), carrying out advocacy work with government and generously sharing information with each other despite the competitive nature of continuing education.

Partnership is an equally critical differentiator of continuing education, playing out in how continuing education units develop programs and how they engage in partnerships with other organizations and teams. New programs are the result of careful market research conducted by continuing education staff complemented by the insights and recommendations of program advisory boards and other experts. According to Sloane-Seale (1997), the model is collaborative and builds on a praxis model, meaning that there is a blending of theory and practice. Through this kind of sharing and partnering, different ways of thinking about teaching and learning and programs result (Mizzi, 2020). Further, there is an interprofessionalism in this work, particularly when the course or program involves online and multimedia components—program planners, industry experts, representatives from professional associations, instructional designers, web developers, and administrators come together united by the

common goal of an effective and meaningful educational experience (see Clemens et al., 2022, for discussion on the evolution of online course development at MCE).

Partnering with other organizations is a hallmark of continuing education. A current example of a partnership that highlights this idea is MCE's recent collaboration with the YWCA of Kitchener-Waterloo to deliver the Upskilling in Specialized Technology program. This program is offered to employment-ready women and gender diverse individuals who, upon successful completion of the program, will earn a certificate in data analytics and receive mentorship so that they can support others in their career and educational journeys. Graduates of the program will contribute to economic recovery in southwestern Ontario. A further example of collaboration involving MCE is its role in supporting the delivery of the Family Engagement in Research (FER) initiative offered by a team from the Faculty of Rehabilitation Science at McMaster. Through this program, researchers (graduate students, research staff, investigators) and members of families (parents, siblings, grandparents) interested in child neurodevelopmental research study together in an online course. MCE brings its expertise in making the course available to persons outside of the McMaster community, while the FER team delivers an exceptional learning opportunity.

Finally, while the previous examples highlight MCE's present commitment to collaboration and collective resilience, these same ideas are found in the broader continuing education literature including work by Chau (2020), Heavey and Jemmott (2020), and Lange et al. (2015). These scholars as well as others explore issues such as societal transformation and collective resilience from a continuing education lens. In short, through collaboration and partnership with others, continuing education aspires to make contributions that strengthen our communities and economies.

A moment of pause

In closing this reflection on select themes in the continuing education literature and related general practices, the following are re-presented as foundational to university continuing education in Canada: commitment to the social justice principle of access to education for adults, innovation and change in learning practices including models and technologies, and community and partnership values. The next section offers specific insights into MCE's past, present, and anticipated future building on these foundational elements.

MCMASTER CONTINUING EDUCATION: ITS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

A long and rich history

To understand the present and future of MCE, it is important to have some sense of its past, which the leadership and staff at MCE have recently begun to explore—it is a history of more than 90 years. The goal of this work is two-fold: first, there is interest in being better able to describe MCE's expertise and history to adult learners returning to study after the pandemic. Today, there are many options available to them in what is now a crowded, noisy, and confusing learning sector. Therefore, being able to share McMaster's long history in continuing

education is an enabler of trust. In addition, understanding the original vision for continuing education or extension may help inform MCE's future aspirations. At the very least, there is value in the questioning and reflection that happens when the past is juxtaposed with future goals and objectives.

MCE's work in understanding its history has recently been complemented by the work of Dr. Scott McLean from the University of Calgary. According to McLean (personal communication, February 2022), at most Canadian universities, annual reports were published from the date of the establishment of the university until sometime in the 1960s or 1970s. These reports generally included information about continuing education or extension as it was often called in its earliest days at McMaster and in many other post-secondary institutions across Canada.[4]

At the time this chapter was prepared, McLean had discovered annual calendars at McMaster that provide an overview of courses and programs offered through extension in its early days. However, he had not yet discovered annual reports for this same time period. The calendars, while interesting, do not reveal how extension programs related to McMaster's priorities at the time; nor do they describe their impact. As a result, what is offered here about the beginnings of extension at McMaster is restricted to the 1930s and 1940s and is brief in nature. Still, the key characteristics of extension from this period are quite clear and continue to be emphasized today.

The earliest artefacts were minutes of meetings dated 1930 (Extension Committee, September 13 & 18, 1930). These two sets of meeting minutes clarify how extension would function; that is, under the direction of a committee of academics. Fast forwarding to today and reflecting on governance and structure, how university continuing education units function varies a great deal. The Chang School at Toronto Metropolitan University is an example of a continuing education unit intricately connected with the main campus and undergraduate programming. MCE as it stands today is a mix: while its academic certificates and diplomas rely on the support of the university's faculties, its professional development programs are designed and delivered independently. Further, although there are echoes of its original conceptualization given its relationships with the faculties, today, MCE functions as an ancillary or business with considerable independence. At the same time, many of its processes and systems are integrated with those of the university.

Returning to the past, a set of minutes from the later 1930s is particularly relevant to this chapter. These minutes point out that extension was using different teaching and learning models including evening classes and technologies such as radio broadcasts (Extension Committee, September 20, 1937). The challenge of providing engagement opportunities for adult learners so they could feel part of the university is noted in an extension document from 1940 (Henry, 1940). This same challenge exists today. Although present-day MCE is committed to experiences that help adult learners feel that they are part of the university, the identity of the unit as an ancillary and the complex lives of adult learners make achieving this goal challenging.

From its beginnings, extension at McMaster has been about community engagement, and this is evident in the work of the unit's first director, Dr. C. H. Stearn, from the Faculty of

Arts. Appointed in 1941, Stearn served in this role for 16 years (Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, 2022). In addition to his work as a dedicated administrator, Stearn is remembered for bringing the classics to the Hamilton community and the principles of community engagement (Henry, 1940). Importantly, engagement with the community continues to be a distinguishing feature of MCE.

While the unit has had several directors since its early days, it has always held true to the importance of community and the imperative of change. As an example of this latter point, the unit has experienced several name changes from Department of Extension/Extension Department to Department of Continuing Education to School of Adult Education to Centre of Continuing Education to McMaster Continuing Education or MCE. These changes highlight the evolving nature of the unit and the idea of inclusion. For instance, the term extension points to a mission to extend knowledge and skills to others whose lives may not permit attending daytime classes and whose learning interests may lie beyond traditional subjects explored in degree studies (McLean & Carter, 2013). Today's name—McMaster Continuing Education (MCE)—suggests belonging to the McMaster community which is important to the adult learners MCE serves. It also emphasizes MCE's role within the university as a whole.

The idea of sustained learning holds meaning not just for adult learners who take courses through MCE but for the unit itself: to be successful, its leadership and staff have had to be deeply committed to changes in their approaches, programs, and processes. Thus, over time, continuing education at McMaster has evolved in a variety of ways including the kinds of courses and programs it offers, when and how courses are offered, and the methodologies and technologies used to support teaching and learning.

With an acknowledgement of a major leap in time, the next three sections explore windows of exceptional change and innovation for MCE: (a) Summer 2015–Spring 2020, (b) Spring 2020–Fall 2021, and (c) Fall 2021 and into the future. While these times are markedly different from the 1930s and 1940s, there are some striking similarities between MCE today and the roots and values of extension in Canada and at McMaster in days gone by. As further context for focusing on this time period, it was in 2015 that the author assumed the position of director of MCE, and it was between 2016 and 2021 that the unit experienced a re-vitalization within the campus community and in the continuing education community across Canada.

Summer 2015–Spring 2020

Early in 2015, McMaster University relocated MCE and a handful of other units to an office building directly behind the Jackson Square mall in downtown Hamilton. Through this relocation from the old courthouse on Main St. and continuing education's historical alignment with social justice values including access to education, MCE became a sign of the university's commitment to the community. This physical location is at the centre of the city and close to Hamilton's north end, both areas distinguished by higher levels of disadvantage than other parts of the city. As well, in 2015, MCE was positioned to support McMaster President Dr. Patrick Deane's call to action for greater community engagement, as articulated in a letter, *Forward with Integrity*, released in September 2011.

As noted earlier, in 2015, MCE welcomed the author as its new director. With the sunsetting of an existing strategic plan and the need for a framework to guide MCE's community objectives and to ensure teaching and learning excellence in the context of adult education, much of the director's early work focused on the development of a new strategic plan, which was released in 2016. Through an iterative process facilitated by a strategic planning consultant from Queen's University, MCE staff and members of the leadership team developed a plan grounded in four pillars. The pillars of the plan, illustrative events, and changes in line with the plan are described below.

The first pillar of the plan was engagement itself. As evidence of this pillar, between 2016 and 2020, MCE became an increasingly active member of the McMaster and Hamilton communities and a leader in provincial and national adult learning and online education contexts. Examples of this work include diverse partnerships with McMaster University faculties and external professional associations that led to new academic and non-academic programs (at the time of writing, MCE offers more than 55 programs). Likewise, during this time, MCE participated in the co-development and delivery of various public education events. The Trump Talks was a collaboration with the Faculty of Social Sciences and explored various facets of American politics during the tenure of President Donald Trump. Conversations That Matter was the result of a partnership with the Hamilton Public Library and provided Hamiltonians the chance to engage in discourse about an upcoming provincial election. The hosting of the 2019 conference of the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education with a record number of participants gathering in downtown Hamilton for 3 days of learning, sharing, and networking put MCE on regional, provincial, and national stages for university continuing education. In similar fashion, the sustained delivery of a no-cost, open-access online course called Caregiving Essentials launched in 2018 was a strong sign of MCE's commitment to social betterment. Since the program's launch, more than 1,500 caregivers including family members, personal support workers, and persons aspiring to work in care settings have accessed the course.

The second pillar in the plan was a superior student experience which was also a key message in Dr. Deane's 2011 letter. After a decision was taken in 2016 that online courses and programs would best facilitate educational access for adult learners based on their needs and lives, MCE took up the challenge of ensuring excellent online learning experiences by creating an in-house educational development team (see Clemens et al., 2022). This team brings best practices in online instructional design to the course development process and stays abreast of innovative teaching and learning practices, all of which ultimately benefit learners and their instructors. Between 2016 and 2020, MCE refined its practices around the recruitment of dedicated and caring instructors who could, because of the realities of online education, be recruited from coast to coast. Supports for instructors such as information nights, newsletters, workshops, and online teaching and learning tools were developed. Supports for learners and enhanced communication patterns were made possible by the implementation of a new customer-client relationship management (CRM) system. This CRM system facilitates communication with existing and prospective learners in ways not previously possible. MCE has

been recognized as a campus leader for its CRM work, and other McMaster units are now considering CRM as a solution to their communication, marketing, and business needs.

The third pillar in the plan involved high-quality programming and innovative teaching and learning experiences enabled through judicious use of educational technology, exploration of experiential learning models, and new formative and summative evaluation tactics. Changes to how existing programs are developed, reviewed, and revised were integral to this work. A new role dedicated to educational research and analysis was created; this role enables MCE to be aware of market and employment trends and workforce needs so that MCE can make evidence-informed decisions about programming. Knowledge transfer related to online, continuing, and adult education was accomplished as various MCE team members participated in provincial, national, and international conferences. Several of them have, in turn, published in peer-reviewed journals, books, and open-access contexts. Although knowledge transfer and dissemination are not requirements of the work that staff do, it is a wonderful form of professional development for those who do and is always supported by the leadership team. It is likewise a part of the culture of continuing education to share experiences and practices with others through informal and formal means. Members of the leadership team are active in research, writing, and presentation work.

The final pillar in the plan was sustainable policies, processes, and roles. While there are distinct differences between the first three pillars and this last one, outcomes associated with the former pillars simply do not happen without appropriate infrastructure. Thus, between 2016 and 2020, the following occurred: updating of policies and procedures for learners and staff, clarifications related to the My OWN McMaster pathway with the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences (this pathway permits adult learners to start their studies with MCE and progress to degree studies in either history or sociology), work on processes and practices which facilitate partnering with others beyond the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area, and preparation work for a new student administration and registration system.

MCE had just begun to look ahead to a new strategic plan when the global pandemic arrived in 2020. Significantly, in many ways, the pandemic provided evidence that McMaster Continuing Education had been on the right track while pointing out directions for its future.

Spring 2020–Fall 2021

All of us will remember March 2020 for a very long time. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the imperative to immediately adopt remote learning models, educators around the world found themselves uniquely challenged. However, because of the work that MCE had already carried out from 2016–2020 and its familiarity with serving learners at a distance, its transition was comparatively smooth: simply stated, most of its courses were already online. A limited number of courses and programs still occurring in traditional classrooms were quickly transitioned to virtual formats that used Zoom and WebEx platforms. While there were impacts on administrative and technical staff who needed to make and share changes with students and instructors quickly, staff responded well. The educational development team responded with equal professionalism, focusing on the rapid development

of models and resources to support teachers and learners who found themselves needing to use synchronous virtual tools more than previously.

While some university faculty found the experience of teaching at a distance to be a less than satisfactory experience, this was not the general case for MCE instructors. Instead, most of them had been teaching at a distance through asynchronous online and hybrid models before the pandemic. Those who had to shift to synchronous virtual models in Spring 2020 were, as indicated above, effectively supported by MCE staff.

The overall satisfaction of MCE's instructors and learners with their Spring and Summer 2020 teaching and learning experiences was reflected in a university-wide Fall 2020 experience survey. These findings became the basis of Teaching and Learning Recommendations for Winter 2021 (Virtual Learning Task Force & MacPherson Institute, 2020). Analysis of satisfaction ratings provided by MCE students and instructors suggest that MCE practices around course design and navigation, assessment, and educational tools used in courses were appropriate. Furthermore, the unique needs of instructors and learners in the online context and the development of supports had been largely addressed between 2016 and 2020.

During this same period, MCE leaders, staff, and learners shared their expertise in some of the exceptional initiatives led by the MacPherson Institute (MI) to support the broader faculty community. The participation of MCE's director and an adult learner in the 2021 President's Teaching and Learning Retreat hosted by MI is one example of this kind of sharing. Such opportunities have led to a deepening of the relationship between MCE and MI which has led to greater visibility of MCE as a teaching and learning partner at McMaster and to increased supports for adult learners. For instance, in 2021, with funding from MI's Student Partners Program, MCE staff and two learner-student partners worked together to enhance supports for adult learners who are new to Canada and/or experiencing mental health distress. Similarly, MCE leaders and staff participated in the activities around the rollout of McMaster University's (2021) first teaching and learning strategy, *Partnered in Teaching and Learning*, that MI had helped facilitate. Likewise, MCE responded to MI's call for peer reviewers of submissions to the province's Virtual Learning Strategy competition. Positively, MCE was successful in receiving funding for two submissions and partnered with MI on one of these initiatives. MCE is grateful to the leadership and supports available through MI throughout this journey. Finally, as invested partners in learning, the two units have much to offer each other including but not limited to knowledge about emerging pedagogical practices, serving specific learner groups, and innovative approaches to teaching and learning that keep the learner at the centre.

Fall 2021 and into the future

Still in the pandemic but thinking about the future, MCE launched another strategic plan for 2021–2026 in Fall 2021. Called *Forging New Futures*, the plan is again defined by four pillars: (a) people, (b) programs, (c) processes and infrastructure, and (d) partnerships and community (McMaster Continuing Education, 2021). How does this plan differ from the 2016–2021 plan? Although there are clear similarities in its focus on educational access, community engagement, superior programs, and strong infrastructure, there are two principal differences. The first is

found in its title—*Forging New Futures*. The second pertains to how MCE will serve as an innovator in three main ways.

The title of the plan acknowledges the profound ways the pandemic has affected the lives of adults and their families and the criticality of re-building the socioeconomic well-being of our country. It identifies MCE's commitment to enabling adult learners as they re-build their lives, create new futures, and contribute to Canada's return to national stability. The reference to forging, in addition to being an allusion to Hamilton's history in the steel industry, suggests the hard work of re-calibrating lives and careers—at times, this will entail full-scale re-imagining of careers and educational pathways. MCE leadership and staff are committed to doing the best they can to support these goals.

While educational innovation was a key strategy in MCE's 2016–2021 plan, over the 5 years of this new plan, MCE will continue to innovate, and this time from an established position of strength. At this time, innovative practices are unfolding in three main areas: programming, the educational technologies selected to deliver programs, and a new student administration and registration system.

Regarding innovations in programming, MCE leaders and staff are making contributions uniquely aligned with MCE's 2021–2026 mandate of enhancing the careers of adult learners through the four pillars noted above. Part of this work includes exploring the landscape of microcredentials and alternate digital credentials (Brockerhoff-Macdonald & Carter, 2022; Piedra, 2021), as well as partnering with other adult education providers that use innovative learning models including boot camp strategies through which specialized learning is offered over a condensed time period. Such partnerships permit MCE to assess the appropriateness of such models for MCE learners. Through short skills-focused programs developed in partnership with employers and professional associations that reflect industry needs, MCE is making a contribution to bettering the lives of working, underemployed, and unemployed adults. It is also making a contribution to our country's overall well-being.

As a second area of innovation, MCE will continue to explore emerging educational technologies to complement its present roster of teaching and learning tools. Ideally, this work will contribute to McMaster's evolving digital learning strategy and lead to opportunities for evaluation and research. MCE will also grow its contributions to the scholarship that explores online and other forms of technology-supported learning. This scholarship embraces not only more conventional conceptualizations of scholarship in post-secondary teaching and learning (referred to as the scholarship of teaching and learning, or SoTL), but also the unique experiences of discovery, collaboration, innovation, and dissemination (Boyer, 1990) that frequently occur within continuing and adult education.

The third area of innovation in the 2021–2026 plan is MCE's implementation of a new administration and registration platform. This work is a different technical undertaking than the previously mentioned CRM work, which is a primarily a communications and marketing system. By contrast, the proposed administration and registration system will ensure that adult learners and partners will be able to access and register for courses and programs in user-friendly ways. Further, the system will include administrative capabilities that support the work of MCE staff who presently work with systems designed for undergraduate education. Having a system that

better supports non-traditional learners and partners will be a substantive benefit for all who interact with MCE. It will also benefit McMaster units and faculties interested in offering programs targeting the general public or specialized groups not composed of McMaster undergraduate and graduate students. Possible outcomes include other university groups using the MCE instance of the platform or taking the lessons from MCE's experience to implement their own instance. Although this initiative is a substantive undertaking, it only makes sense—if MCE is to serve adult learners, community members, and industry partners effectively, it requires a platform and systems that afford seamless educational access and that are easy for staff to use. It is time for those who work in the continuing education field and those who want to engage as learners, employers, partners, and community members to have systems that meet their needs. This new platform will facilitate better tracking and reporting as well as provide supports for the innovative learning models MCE will roll out between today and 2026.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We return to where we started—to consideration of MCE's strong roots in the history of adult education in Canada and the principles of educational access for adult learners, innovation and change related to learning, community and partnerships. These roots tie back to the emergence of continuing education not only in Canada but also at McMaster more than 90 years ago. Just as these values have informed MCE's past and present, they will contribute to its future and the various futures that adult learners forge when they choose MCE for their learning and career pathways.

While this chapter has described a forward journey for MCE, it would be remiss not to acknowledge some of the struggles the journey has included. For instance, working with technology is never a sure thing and keeping the learner at the centre is a daily challenge. Indeed, there are any number of innovative and shiny tools that the educational technology world would entice MCE to use that will not necessarily help us meet our goals. Further, MCE is working diligently to offer supports for adult learners, but discovering the right combination which provides value to a diverse student body involves some trial and error. Likewise, the highly competitive nature of continuing education in our country cannot be underestimated. As a result, MCE leadership and staff need to stay aware of emerging trends and possibilities and respond quickly and judiciously. Continuing education practitioners live in a world of constant flux, and flexibility is a professional essential (Daniel, 2016)—while this is an exciting place to be, it requires ongoing personal and professional resilience.

Building on its culture of continuous learning and doing, MCE looks ahead to sharing its experiences with others within the university and beyond. Knowing that there is supportive institutional culture (Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011), MCE looks forward to enhanced relationships within the broader SoTL community of the university. In like fashion, MCE will extend a warm welcome to McMaster colleagues interested in collaborating and learning about MCE's entry into online education and other forms of technology-supported teaching and learning. Finally, through conversation, collaboration, and commitment, MCE aspires to make valuable contributions to McMaster University's 2021 vision statement which was introduced by

President Dr. David Farrar and which emphasizes "impact, ambition and transformation through excellence, inclusion and community."

NOTES

1. In MCE, work-integrated learning is made possible through a partnership with a company called Riipen.
2. The MCE program page provides insights into the many career-focused programs it offers.
3. To further illustrate this point, the Chang School of Continuing Education at Toronto Metropolitan University, the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto, and MCE at McMaster University each offer a wide variety of community and personal interest programs.
4. To get a sense of the kind of report Dr. McLean is looking for, see the University of Toronto's (1939) *President's Report*. Extension, a descriptor used in Canada for university continuing education in early days, is mentioned on pages 10 and 101–103 of the report.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Lorraine Carter, *PhD, is the director of McMaster Continuing Education. Prior to joining McMaster in 2015, Lorraine played an important role in advancing online and technology-supported education in health education and other professional sectors in northeastern and northwestern Ontario. She has served as president of the Canadian Network for Innovation in Education (CNIE) and the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE). Having chaired the CAUCE Research and Information Committee for 6 years, Lorraine has received various awards for her leadership and scholarly work. Today, as the leader of McMaster Continuing Education, Lorraine continues to champion innovative approaches in career-focused learning for adult learners.*

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