

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Candidates' post-secondary stance key to B.C.'s future; Political leadership key to boosting role of colleges and universities

Fri Dec 31 2010
Page: A11
Section: Comment
Byline: David H. Turpin, Andrew Petter and Geoff Plant
Source: Special to Times Colonist

This year marks an unprecedented opportunity for political renewal in B.C. as both major political parties choose new leaders. New leadership offers the potential for new ideas. And at a time when economic uncertainty means many British Columbians are worrying about jobs for themselves and prospects for their children, there is a compelling need for sound policy and a vision for the future.

We need to use this moment to consider the kind of society we wish to shape. To this end, we have a right to expect leadership candidates to present clear, considered strategies to improve the social, economic, cultural and environmental well being of our province and its citizens.

What strategies are required? One thing is clear. In a globalized economy, new opportunities will increasingly be created through knowledge, creativity and innovation. Leadership candidates who wish to position B.C. for those opportunities will need to offer policies that facilitate and encourage our province's leadership in the new economy.

Ironically, while there is justified concern about the unemployment rate, the government's recently released workforce analysis shows we will need to fill a million jobs over the coming decade. An ever-growing proportion of these jobs will require post-secondary education and training. With only 650,000 individuals currently in our education system, we have a challenge. If nothing changes, many of the jobs created in the new economy might go unfilled while unemployment will increase for those who do not have post-secondary education. We could face the situation former Seneca College president Rick Miner describes as "people without jobs and jobs without people."

However, along with this challenge there is a huge opportunity. If we can close the emerging skills gap, we can both forge a stronger economy and reduce unemployment. This should appeal to leadership hopefuls of all political stripes.

A commitment to education, especially post-secondary education, must lie at the heart of such a strategy. To succeed, therefore, B.C. must strengthen its post-secondary education system and increase participation rates, from trades training through to graduate studies and research.

In particular, we suggest an agenda that includes three components. The first is to achieve a dramatic increase in the number of students going on from

high school to post-secondary education. That will have the additional benefit of greater inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups, most notably aboriginal learners and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This has always been a desirable social goal; it is now becoming an economic imperative.

Creating these opportunities will not be easy. B.C. ranks seventh among the 10 provinces in the number of university degrees granted per capita, up from last place a decade ago, but far below the position we should occupy. We must also strengthen our capacity in graduate education and research. The United States awards twice as many master's degrees and 30 per cent more PhDs than Canada.

Increasing the post-secondary participation rate will not be enough to meet the labour market shortages B.C. will soon confront as a result of our declining youth population and aging workforce. The second thing we must do is increase recruitment and retention of talented students from across Canada and around the world.

What better way to meet the needed levels of immigration than through our universities and colleges attracting promising new citizens? Educating the next generation of immigrants in Canada will serve to instil the practices and values of Canadian society. International students also enrich our campuses with global perspectives, enhancing the quality of the learning environment for everyone. Those who do choose to return home help build a global network that advances the interests of British Columbia around the world.

For our new economy to reach its full potential, a third initiative is required. We need to ensure students learn in an environment alive with research and innovation. The ideas and discoveries emanating from universities power our society and our economy. This will be even more true in the decades ahead.

The quality of research in B.C. universities ranks near the top nationally. Yet, on a per-capita basis, our province ranks only fifth in terms of federal granting-council funding.

We have to expand research and knowledge-transfer activities at our research universities in order to position B.C. at the forefront of innovation and development in Canada.

As we do this, there is an opportunity for a whole

new level of engagement between post-secondary institutions and society. We need to strengthen connections between post-secondary institutions and the communities they serve and foster a culture that is passionate about creating, sharing and developing knowledge and skills for social, economic, cultural and environmental betterment.

The potential of such a strategy is enormous, but its realization requires political will and leadership.

Now is the time to look forward and ready ourselves for the next round of challenges and opportunities. As we assess the leadership hopefuls in the coming weeks, we urge British Columbians to consider how well they appreciate the central role that post-secondary education and research play in ensuring this province and its citizens enjoy a secure and prosperous future.

David H. Turpin is president and vice-chancellor of the University of Victoria; Andrew Petter is president and vice-chancellor of Simon Fraser University; and Geoff Plant is a partner, at Heenan Blaikie and the author of Campus 2020.