



Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead VCC's Response

July 10, 2007

A. Introduction

The Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead Report is a significant document which is catalyzing discussions surrounding post secondary educational policy, teaching and research institutions and their learners. VCC is willing and ready to work with the Ministry of Advanced Education in implementing those recommendations which are a priority for the college, and to play our role in the long term evolution of the overall system.

We welcome the report's value in animating discussions and hopefully effecting constructive policy and procedural change in the post secondary system.

There is also much to commend the report in terms of its affirmation of the importance of higher education to the future of BC society as a whole. The Renewed Mission is bold and, if we build on, enhance and coordinate much of what is in place today, achievable.

The BC Access and Excellence Strategy Targets give shape to the mission statement, and, along with the call for the appropriate funding represent a clear call for action by the government and by the system as a whole.

A number of shortcomings in the report must also be noted. While these criticisms may seem to form the bulk of this response, they are well-intentioned, and indeed they reflect well on the report's role in stimulating on-going discussions about the future of higher education in BC.

A. The Colleges

BC colleges, universities, private providers, not for profit agencies, school districts and other agencies offer a market place of programs that, in the name of accessibility and outreach, can sometimes interfere with regard to duplication, quality and efficiency.

In this space, universities seek more access to research and a bigger share of public funding, as well as expand their lower level UT, diploma and certificate activities; some private colleges use almost any means to promote themselves; school districts are providing more postsecondary programming; settlement agencies are now major providers of adult ESL offerings in urban areas; degree-granting college programs demand recognition by university graduate programs; and students continue to demand accessible and affordable educational opportunities which have seamless pathways to further learning.

Adding to this landscape, there are increasingly complex multiple provincial relations that institutions have to build and maintain, each with their own regulatory and accountability context (more on this later in section B).

It is also important to acknowledge the unique complexity of the educational landscape in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland.

At the epicentre of this confusing array of overlapping priorities is the issue of mandate. While BC institutions have developed excellent educational programs and even complementary transfer agreements, they have done so in the absence of a provincially applicable overarching androgocical philosophy. The question of which type of institution, and which particular institution is best suited to do what, has been being increasingly relegated to market forces, a consequence of which is the shift to other priorities than those intended by the original charters that established post-secondary institutions in the first place.

An important and emerging dimension of this mandate issue is the increasingly active role of school districts in the areas of adult continuing education, ABE, ESL, and of the universities in terms of continuing education. The report puts undue focus on needing to focus or manage college activity disproportionately. Particularly so considering that these other diploma, certificate or non-credit “college-level” educational activities currently exist completely outside existing, system-wide quality management process, (e.g. no graduate outcomes surveying), government measurement (such as in the accountability framework) or conventional peer review systems.

As educational institutions have responded to shifting objectives and targets set by successive governments, there has been a tendency to enhance the delivery of educational priorities by creating regional or mutual interest stakeholder

groups, to inform and advise government policy makers. The historical representational bias has favored priorities set by the universities, and this bias is reflected in the report.

However, as major players in the training, development and education of our next generation of citizens, voters and leaders, and as institutions in direct contact with the secondary and business community, colleges must take their rightful place alongside universities in setting the priorities of the educational sector and in guiding public policy. The fact is that the college sector dominates higher education in BC – in terms of students, credentials issued, community involvement and geographical reach.

We therefore suggest that, before the Campus 2020 recommendations complete their rounds from proposal to public discussion, it is important to acknowledge the relative absence of the collective college voice and to reinforce its role in the crafting of meaningful educational experiences and tangible results.

For VCC, our mandate in relationship with the imperatives and terms of reference that guided the assembly of the report will illustrate that we share many goals with the report and, in essence, have made considerable progress in their implementation. The common themes of community, civic responsibility, the quest for excellence, and the notion that our educational sector gives us the tools to address the future, converge in both VCC's and Campus 2020 statements.

Lastly, and this is an omission in the report, is the vital matter of services to immigrants and immigrant settlement – in part through language services, and in part through training and credential recognition: this is a huge issue for the urban areas in particular. Colleges with urban mandates such as VCC must play the lead role in strategy development and implementation.

B. The System

Vancouver Community College sees the need for improved system integration, but we question whether the proposed structures would achieve such integration. Structural changes have been proposed to deal with the perceived main weakness in our complex BC system, that of disconnectedness and no “identifiable or properly accountable sense of collective purpose” as a result of a high degree of institutional autonomy.

The Report recommends the establishment of an (unelected) Higher Education Board, a 26 member Higher Education Presidents' Council, a number of Regional Learning Councils, and various centralized initiatives for data collection, information services, learning innovation, distance education, online library services, a portfolio and credentials recognition system, institutional accreditation, and a research clearinghouse.

Each of these ideas has to be carefully evaluated. BC has had mixed success with centralized endeavors, with some being extremely successful and which are envied globally (such as BCCAT), others which failed to realize their full potential, some which outlived their purpose, and some which need review (including the ITA and BCcampus) before any more public investment is made.

Although Vancouver Community College wholeheartedly endorses the goal of better planning, collaboration and accountability, the management of centralized and decentralized system-wide initiatives must be judiciously selected in order to ensure these benefits. AVED, and the government generally, asserts a great deal of regulatory, centralized controls, and these don't need to be compounded through a proliferation of agencies and governing bodies. Such endeavors will remove valuable resources from the system, which could be put to better use in the classroom (either face to face or online), or in the research laboratory, or to addressing the imminent staffing crisis in higher education, or to reducing costs to students.

Institutions need to provide guidance, based on their knowledge and practice, on what centralized systems or functions would provide most benefit to the practice of higher education in BC before any decisions are made.

We have some sympathy for the concept of regional learning councils, as long as they are structured to reflect the highly complex landscape in which institutions function. In Vancouver alone, not only are there multiple types of providers (see section C below), we have to work closely with several provincial ministries on matters related to our offerings to learners: Advanced Education, Education (regarding the increasing involvement of high schools in "post secondary" education), Economic Development (via ITA, for Apprenticeship Training), Health (for any health science programming initiatives), Children and Family Development and Community Services (for some Human Service programs), and the Attorney General (for English Language Studies for Adults). An AVED-organized regional learning council will have little impact unless it can direct the decisions of all these ministries.

A more obvious and cost-neutral solution would be to coordinate the government's own organization around post secondary education. AVED is but one player in an increasingly complicated funding, planning and accountability framework. At least from the College's point of view, it appears that inter-ministerial collaboration needs to be an area for greater attention.

The interface of an HE Presidents' Council as proposed, with the same four ministries, plus all the related federal agencies in areas such as research and development, as well as with the sector groups (such as TUPC, BCCP) will be complex, expensive, and the value-added is not yet obvious (compared to say,

the current use of targeted funding with meaningful accountabilities, that can drive change and collaboration within the system).

In short, we believe government itself has a significant role in ensuring overall systems coordination, and should endeavor to bring all educational leaders together from all education systems, to encourage all partners to act in a system-like manner. AVED needs to support and fund differentiated institutions appropriately, affirm mandates (see below), and let college boards govern.

C. The Whole Learner

Leading educational critics state that a quality education should prepare students for public life, not just for a career. This view has been a key element of higher education's contribution to the public good. Broadly educated individuals vote and are involved with political organizations (citizenship), join community organizations and volunteer their time (community development), and are healthier (reduced medical costs for society). Education is also an essential tool for personal career development. In the report Plant states that "learning is what it's all about":

However, the report fails to point out how our dynamic college institutions have matured in providing a wide range of practical, intellectual and civic training.

We would not want the recommendations of the report, by realigning, segregating and marginalizing learners to individuated institutions, to undermine our role and mandate, and stall our commitment to an informed and active citizenry.

Plant states that "we must be willing to give our diverse institutions distinct responsibilities, and to maximize the possibility that we can achieve the widest reach of opportunity and highest levels of excellence."

In the eyes of the colleges, knowledge, to be useful must be tied to engagement. Wisdom is located in relational knowledge. This is particularly important since more and more knowledge lies in the space between disciplines, and it is increasingly important for individuals to learn to synthesize knowledge and how to extend it. If anything, our imperatives, our renewed mandates should seek to redefine how we value knowledge and should recognize that the answers to many of our most pressing issues may lie in the ability to allow post-secondary institutions to concentrate on a greater integration, not a segregation of knowledge gathering and analysis.

Campus 2020 seems to suggest that the imperative for post-secondary education is to drive the economic engine. In other words, capitalizing on training opportunities that generate common wealth will lead to a more engaged society.

The “Great Goals” stated on page three of the Report all refer to measurable outcomes based on participation, spending and recruitment but not one refers to the essential culture that all our institutions both colleges and universities aspire to and nurture.

Finally, what happens if we achieve all the targets outlined in the 2020 Report? Will we have a more enlightened populace, a safer, more sustainable nation? Will the final outcome of expanded education be the integration of cultural activity into all facets of life? Will we be more Canadian? Will knowledge evolve from an acquired skill to an innate sense of self?

What we do know is that we welcome change, we embrace inquiry and that in order to achieve the loftier goals of community engagement and civic responsibility we need both the flexibility and the rigor of a clearly defined and inclusive post secondary education policy guidelines and stewardship.

D. College Degrees

The error in Recommendation 37 regarding College degrees has been quickly pointed out and dismissed by AVED, but its inclusion, reinforces a bias that is not supported by almost all of the documentation and opinion filed with the review. More than any sector in the system, BC Colleges have always focused exclusively on the same essential question posed by the Report: “what is best for learners?”: the Report would appear to suggest otherwise.

With respect to the prospect of 3 new “regional universities” (Recommendation 35), we feel that the directions proposed by Dr. Greg Lee, President of Capilano College, in his submission to the Campus 2020 process, are worthy of further serious discussions. In particular, the concept of a “Vancouver regional university” as a federation of the independent lower mainland colleges, or a regional provincial university to embrace the degree granting activities of all the colleges and smaller institutes might make sense. This would seem to build strength and credibility in numbers on the degree-granting mandates, and also let each college and institute focus on the local needs of the community each serves.

E. Excellence – more than just research

Excellence in British Columbia’s post-secondary system is as varied as the institutions themselves, and excellence goes well beyond the focus on research activities, post-graduate programming and stronger commercialization initiatives discussed in the report. This work is unquestionably important; it is only part of excellence, however, and it is complemented with the considerable presence of the college sector, which is a critical component of supporting regional social and

economic development. That presence was not mentioned, perhaps unintentionally, in the report; that is a serious omission, and we would extend the notions of excellence to encompass a much broader perspective.

“We have tremendous natural and human advantages in B.C.,” Mr. Plant wrote, outlining his vision for “truly world-class higher education” where the “best and brightest” can reach their full potential. VCC argues that “truly world-class education” includes colleges and the important work they do.

Access and excellence are not mutually exclusive. It is at colleges where students – many of them facing perhaps difficult social, physical, economic or educational factors – reach their true full potential: that of being able to meaningfully engage with their community, with employment prospects or with further education. That, itself, is excellence. Consider an example from VCC:

Mae was an elementary school principal in her home country of China, but after immigrating to Canada she could only find work in a low-wage, low-skill job on the early shift of a fast food restaurant.

Her dream was to continue working with children in her new home city, Vancouver. She enrolled in VCC’s Early Childhood Education program, where a flexible course schedule let her complete this specialized training while she continued working. Mae went on to be a senior administrator at a large and well-respected child care centre.

There is a strong culture of access and excellence – teaching excellence, program excellence, outcomes excellence, student excellence – at colleges across the province, including at VCC. That excellence is evident through the three national program or teaching excellence awards that VCC has won from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges over recent years. Most recently, our students dominated the 2007 Skills Canada B.C. competition, where they won 12 medals and captured gold in every category they entered.

Students who leave VCC do so highly satisfied and with the core skills for career success, educational advancement, and mobility; our graduate outcomes are among the highest in the province, and rival – or exceed – those of another institution that is known for its graduate success, BCIT. Our expertise in career programming is well known, and we are a regional leader in developmental education, the largest and most important resource to immigrants, and a pioneer in serving students with disabilities. Our learner profile is the most diverse in the province, and we are proudly urban, connected with and responding to the needs of our community, employers and individuals.

VCC is simply ‘closer to the ground’ and an institution that works for a living – much like its students. We are grounded in the changing realities of the urban landscape, where university is not a practical – or even necessarily desirable – option for a substantial portion of the community, and those with barriers to

traditional education need welcome, support and understanding to realize their education. We repeat a quote we included in our original submission to Campus 2020:

“Since 1996. . . . I sat in many offices listening tirelessly to the teachers, the principals, the psychologists, and the doctors tell me his ‘problem’. . . . Struggling to find direction and focus for my son became my first priority. He engaged in just about every sport and activity imaginable. . . . He went through the motions but he didn’t have any passion. . . . The passion and solution came the day he walked through the doors of the VCC Automotive Collision department. The transformation from boy to man, loss to triumph, student to employee has been immeasurable. . . . As the parent of a potentially wayward child, I am hoping you all take this most sincere letter in the highest regard of our appreciation.”

-Lyndsay Taggart, whose son attended VCC’s Automotive Collision Repair program

Although we agree that research is not the most significant role for VCC – excellence in teaching is – we believe there is a role for colleges in research. Is it not the colleges that maintain the most intertwined relationship with industry? Can they not deliver knowledge creation and training at the same time? Colleges can well serve the short term needs of the market and can equally provide the research catalysts that drive industrial and economic engines.

In summary, we believe colleges exemplify social entrepreneurship and a culture of excellence. Universities see knowledge creation through research (which we agree is also vital to BC) as a significant unfunded mandate (and we agree that this needs addressing). Meanwhile, colleges are entrepreneurs in co-creating alternatives and solutions to social problems and at-risk populations with whom the other sectors have not been as successful. In this sense, we are equally important in creating a knowledge-based economy, and a cohesive, literate society. Colleges extend the reach of formalized, higher education and effectively deal with barriers to study.

F. The Privates

We consider the section on private education to be weak. BC’s reputation and higher education brand has been weakened with the inclusion of private education in the system without the proper quality assurance. As is the case for health care, a properly funded and organized public education system is a cornerstone of Canadian society, and access to quality higher education for qualified adults at a reasonable cost should be fundamental. Quality assurance of all institutes is required, but we are not sure the proposed accreditation approach would work – nor that a single quality assurance approach can work for all types of education providers.

G. Aboriginal Learners

While VCC obviously completely supports, and indeed, acts upon, the overall goals of equity, and social justice, an Aboriginal voice and suggestion of a self-determined process is completely absent in the report.

H. Teaching and Learning

Our response to recommendations 9, 10 and 11 regarding a new Pacific Centre and award for learning innovation is simple: don't do it, just give the money to the public institutions and make them accountable for demonstrated innovation and enhancement.

I. Priorities for Moving Ahead

VCC supports, and places a priority on the following recommendations:

We support the Report's post secondary targets (Recommendation 1)

VCC regards this recommendation for the required funding needed to attain the post secondary targets as validation of its unique funding challenge (Recommendation 2)

We agree with the intent, but the established of new layers of governance and coordination needs careful discussion with all stakeholders (Recommendations 3 and 4)

12-14 - We agree on the need for more focus on Aboriginal learners.

First Generation learners are an important component of VCC's learner profile (Recommendation 15)

Independent review of ITA: this should occur much sooner than later, and we suggest the same for BCcampus (Recommendation 16)

We agree with the expansion of options in online learning and learning accreditation (Recommendations 23 and 24)

A review of the PCTI Act is urgently needed (Recommendation 29)

We agree with the intent of the recommendations regarding international education (Recommendation 32 to 34)

We support the linking of tuition fees to HEPI and elimination of all ABE (to include ESL for those not eligible for ELSA programs) fees as long as the new funding levels are adjusted accordingly (Recommendation 48 and 49)

We support a review of the financial assistance program. (Recommendation 50).