



Federation of  
**Post-Secondary Educators**  
of BC

## **Opening Doors, Building Confidence**

Proposals to Strengthen  
Adult Basic Education in  
British Columbia

Presented to the Ministries of  
Advanced Education, Education,  
and Human Resources

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## Introduction

The provincial government ministries are in the final stages of preparing for a new fiscal year. The Finance Minister will introduce the 2006/07 provincial budget in mid-February. In her latest quarterly update, Minister Taylor has indicated that there is substantial fiscal capacity to begin re-building much-needed program spending across many parts of the provincial government. Although which programs will be targeted for renewal and expansion is still being evaluated by the Provincial Cabinet, our Federation is contacting three specific Ministries (Advanced Education, Education and Human Resources) to propose that special emphasis be given to the funding, student support and policy coordination of Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs currently delivered by BC's public post-secondary colleges, institutes and university colleges.

It is worth noting that the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, in its report on pre-budget consultations, highlighted the issue of ABE program funding support. The Committee report recommended that the government consider *"investing in variety of social programs to support individuals and communities. The Committee believes that the government should review the per-student funding allocations for BC's colleges and universities to ensure the new post-secondary education spaces are sufficiently funded and consider removing adult basic education tuition fees"* (Report on the 2006 Budget Consultation Process, page 54).

The Committee's report highlights an emerging view within government and the community that the cumulative impact of policy and funding changes in the public post-secondary system over the last four years has had a disproportionately negative impact on developmental education programs and students. In particular, the return to tuition fees for ABE programs in some institutions and the hefty increase in associated fees that ABE students often have to pay, along with the loss of various student support services and funding, have played a major role in discouraging ABE students from continuing in the public post-secondary education system. These students were already marginalized and had a fragile attachment to the post-secondary education system. The policy and funding changes only added to those

barriers and the provincial government needs to take steps now to carefully and deliberately dismantle those barriers. Only then can these students begin to enjoy the same access and rights that others in the post-secondary system have been able to secure.

The problems facing ABE students have always been significant. Many of these students have often struggled to simply survive academically in the K-12 system. Now, as adult learners, they are working in most instances to obtain literacy skills, upgrade in general or specific areas or complete their grade 12, or upgrade in subject areas that will allow them to access new career options.

No matter what the circumstances, these adult learners have faced a number of barriers. Our proposal to the three ministries highlights some of these barriers and recommends either funding and/or policy changes that the province needs to implement in order to remove these barriers.

### **Declining Enrolments**

The clearest evidence that ABE students have been discouraged from continuing their education has been the marked decline in enrolments across all developmental education program areas. A preliminary report by Laurie Duncan for the Ministry of Advanced Education confirms the problem of declining enrolments.

Unfortunately, that report misinterprets the factors behind those enrolment declines, leading some within government to conclude that enrolment declines are more the result of changing economic conditions than increased tuition costs and the dramatic loss of student support and funding. In particular, the preliminary report suggests that a strong labour market, especially the record low levels of unemployment, has been a major factor behind the decision of many ABE students to opt for work instead of post-secondary education.

There are several problems with that analysis. The most troubling is that it lulls government and policy makers into inaction on what should be a major concern: declining productivity. Many of the jobs that ABE students are taking are low wage

and low skill. Their prospects for improvement are limited by their own inability to improve their skill sets through better training and education. In effect, these students are caught in a low wage trap in which they are unable to secure the resources (i.e., post-secondary education) necessary to advance in the labour market. It is this low wage trap that contributes to declining productivity.

The second problem with this analysis of declining enrolments is that the declines in enrolment began **before** the unemployment rate reached its current record low levels. BC's unemployment rate averaged 7.7% in 2001. By 2004, the average had dropped slightly to 7.2%, having risen briefly during the intervening two years. It wasn't until late in 2004 and throughout 2005 that BC's unemployment rate dropped below 6.7%, a rate not seen in this province for twenty years.

By contrast, enrolment declines were first noticed following the significant policy and funding changes to the public post-secondary system which were implemented in mid-2002. By 2003, many students in developmental education had little choice but to abandon their education, as the combination of skyrocketing costs (e.g. associated fees and tuition) and loss of student support services made it increasingly difficult to continue. For many of these students, who already were multi-barriered learners, the implicit message in these funding and policy changes was that the public post-secondary education system wasn't interested in accommodating their needs.

The preliminary report by Laurie Duncan could have better reflected the impacts of policy and funding changes. However, as many College ABE Deans and Directors have noted, the process for gathering information did not allow for full discussion of how these changes affected enrolments. Many instructors and administrators in the public post-secondary education system have valuable insights into how these policy changes discouraged ABE students from continuing, yet their views were not canvassed in the Duncan process.

As part of our contribution to this policy debate, we have provided copies of an analysis done by Shauna Butterwick, an Association Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her study, which will be

released in late-January 2006, is co-sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' BC Office (CCPA) and our Federation. Her analysis points to the whole range of cuts in program supports for students, especially for low-income students, as major contributors to the declines in enrolment. More importantly, her report argues that these policy changes were "*short sighted and oppressive, essentially blocking off a key pathway out of poverty for many Income Assistance (IA) clients.*"

### **ABE: Recognizing a Basic Right**

The public policy debate that underlies the entire discussion of strengthening ABE programs must never lose sight of the fact that the skills acquired through these programs are the skills needed to fully participate in society. Certainly that participation has an economic dimension (e.g. higher skills lead to higher productivity), but the more fundamental concern is that a democratic society is strengthened when every citizen is provided the opportunities and skills to fully participate in all aspects of that society. That concern lies at the heart of our organization's efforts to see ABE programs adequately funded.

Often lost in the debate about adequate funding of ABE are some of the major inequities that most ABE students face. In particular, many ABE students, because of their age, have to pay for programs that would otherwise be provided for free in the public K-12 system. This is not to suggest that these adult learners should look to that system for program support. Far from it, adult learners should learn in an adult environment and the public post-secondary system provides the appropriate learning environment for these students.

It is an accepted tenet of public policy that primary and secondary education is a basic right that is fully funded by the provincial treasury. However, those rights and benefits begin to blur for many older students who return to our public colleges and institutes to complete high school. Depending on their age and specific criteria within their post-secondary institution, these older students are being forced to pay for virtually all of their secondary school education. If primary and secondary school education are basic rights, the age at which a person completes their secondary school education should not be a factor in determining who pays and who doesn't. Unfortunately,

that's exactly what has happened in BC with the advent of tuition fees for ABE programs. At the very least, the government needs to correct this inequity by returning to tuition-free ABE programs.

### **Adult Learners Need Adult Learning Environment**

There are some within government who would argue that the most appropriate mechanism for delivering a wide range of ABE programs (especially adult literacy programs) is through the secondary school system. After all, the skill-based learning outcomes for these programs are similar to those in the secondary school system.

However, the reality for the vast majority of adult learners is that they need the supports and flexibility of an adult learning environment to achieve their full potential as a learner. Many of these adults were unable to succeed in the curriculum-based system that characterizes learning in the K-12 system. Because the post-secondary education system is articulation-based, instructors are able to develop content, learning materials and teaching strategies that incorporate the needs and experience of adult learners and, in so doing, allow those learners to build the interest and confidence necessary to achieve their educational goals.

### **Government Needs To Act Now**

In her latest fiscal update, Minister Taylor emphasized that BC's fiscal capacity was benefiting from a confluence of several factors. Transfers from the federal government are reversing a decade-long decline that began in the mid-1990s which, in turn, has undermined program support in several areas including health care, post-secondary education and support for low-income individuals and families. As well, economic growth and strength in natural resource prices (especially energy prices) have substantially increased provincial government revenues.

However, the Minister also commented that a looming skills shortage will restrain BC's growth prospect if the government does not address this problem. It is an issue on which our Federation, the broader labour movement and those in the province's business community all agree: BC needs to address our looming skills shortage now.

In a recent report by the BC Chamber of Commerce, **Closing the Skills Gap**, the authors noted that:

*British Columbia is at a skills crossroads. The quality and creativity of the workforce has become the single most competitive factor in the industrialized nations. The degree to which skill shortages are averted by stakeholders will be a large determinant of B.C.'s economic prosperity and social health.*

The shortage that the report refers is the result of demographic, economic and technological forces that will transform both our provincial economy and our labour force during this decade and beyond. The demographic forces are by far the most significant. An aging "baby-boom" generation will begin to retire from the labour force in this decade. That shift will create one of the most significant changes ever seen in BC's labour market. By 2010, for example, more people will leave the labour force as a result of retirement than will enter the labour force. The gap between entrants and retirees is expected to be very significant: various estimates place the gap between 100,000 and 300,000 workers at the peak of this change.

Adding to this situation is the fact that BC's economic profile is also shifting away from a resource intensive economy to one in which the service sector plays a more significant role. With that shift will come demands for new skills as well as a growing need to replace those skills lost through retirements. The shifts will also be affected by the on-going pace of technological change which will constantly transform existing jobs in the economy. Against this backdrop of change within the labour market the need to both replace existing skills and adapt to the demands of a changing economy and changing technology, the role of post-secondary education and training will become even more critical.

The Chamber's report also acknowledges that the skill shortage threatens every sector and region of the province. As well, the shortage is expected to affect every occupational group, whether they are white collar or blue collar. More importantly the looming shortage is expected to have serious economic consequences on the BC economy. In fact, the government's own Economic Forecast Council has identified the

pending skills shortage as the one risk to BC's future economic growth over which the provincial government has direct control.

The Council's statement is yet another indication that we can-not afford to ignore the impact of this problem. Given the nature of our economy, its dependence on trade and exports for growth and its vulnerability to cyclical swings in growth, it is critical that we take every step available to guard against economic problems over which we have a significant amount of control. BC has the fiscal capacity to increase its education and training effort in the public post-secondary system and we need to use the 2006 provincial budget to outline the government's commitment to address this problem.

### **Provincial Policies Contribute to Skills Shortage**

Our Federation has noted in previous submissions to government that the policy and funding changes made in the public post-secondary education system over the last four years have created "perfect storm" conditions as our province tries to address the looming skills shortage. Rather than adopt policies that encourage citizens to access post-secondary education and training (and thereby help increase our future supply of skills), BC government did almost the exact opposite. Tuition fees were de-regulated and quickly skyrocketed, forcing thousands of students deeper into debt or simply "pricing" lower income students and families out of the public post-secondary education system.

It is important to remember that even if BC did not face a looming skills shortage, it has a major skills gap that must be closed. Currently only 59% of BC's labour force has some sort of post-secondary education, whether a degree, diploma or certificate. However, a number of reports confirm that 73% of all new jobs require some form of post-secondary education, whether a degree, diploma, or certificate.

By increasing the barriers to post-secondary education through higher costs (e.g. tuition fees) or more difficult access (e.g. fewer spaces, fewer programs, less support / counselling for students), the government is denying thousands of British Columbians the opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge. That process not only



undermines opportunities for personal development and advancement, it undermines the economic fundamentals of our province.

ABE students have been particularly hard hit by these changes. Many of these students require more direct learning support. Often their learning experience has to be based on the learners' needs and can require more intensive instructor time or more flexibility to create self-paced learning conditions.

However, when the funding support required to create these learning conditions is cut, these students have great difficulty surviving. Add to their situation the fact that many ABE students face other learning as well as economic and social barriers and it is easy to see how ABE students are not only the first casualties in a funding crunch, but also the most permanent casualties.

The changes that have pushed ABE students out of the public post-secondary system are not restricted to those of the Ministry of Advanced Education. In fact, many of the program, funding and policy changes in the Ministry of Human Resources have been just as detrimental in forcing ABE students to abandon their post-secondary education. While our proposal documents specific changes we hope to see from that Ministry, it is important to emphasize that more careful coordination between ministries is just as critical to restoring ABE programs as restoring adequate funding of ABE programs.

For example, because many former ABE students were income assistance clients, the massive cuts in that assistance had a major impact for those students. Many were single parents for whom daycare was critical as a factor in their ability to return to school at all, let alone to complete specific courses. When daycare supports were lost, so too was their opportunity to advance in any meaningful way in the post-secondary system. As well, single parents were told that they had to look for work once their child(ren) reached 2 years of age. Low-paying, unskilled jobs do not serve parents trying to raise children; in fact, these jobs only hinder them.

Similar problems emerged for other groups as well. For many immigrants, for example, the changes that provided tuition-free courses at only a basic level meant most simply could not afford to move beyond those basic skills. They then were prevented from accessing post-secondary programs.

### **Measures to Strengthen ABE**

The problems created over the last four years can be fixed. The Finance Minister acknowledges that there is the fiscal capacity to address these issues. More importantly, the glaring inequities that ABE students face need to be corrected now to ensure that their basic rights are respected. Moreover, the province would be well-served by ensuring better access to post-secondary education because economic and demographic pressures will put even greater demands on our current and future skills.

As Ministers prepare for the provincial budget in mid-February, our Federation asks that the following initiatives be incorporated into both their budgets and service plans:

#### **Ministry of Advanced Education**

- Eliminate tuition fees for all Adult Basic Education courses
- Use targeted funding mechanisms to ensure that every college, institute and university college is able to provide adequate ABE programs in their communities
- Increase ABESAP funding to ensure that students have sufficient support to pay for associated fees, books, childcare and transportation while enrolled in ABE programs.
- Maximize the use of our public colleges, institutes and university-colleges to deliver any publicly funded training program for adults.
- Establish separate funding targets to overcome the systemic barriers that women, single parents and First Nations face in completing ABE programs.

- Give post-secondary institutions sufficient funding to allow greater flexibility in establishing realistic timelines for ABE students trying to complete their programs.

### **Ministry of Human Resources**

- Raise the age of the youngest child to 8 years old when a parent on welfare must begin looking for employment.
- Allow those receiving Income Assistance to be enrolled in ABE and post-secondary education programs.
- Provide additional funding to ensure that income assistance is sufficient to cover extra costs associated with returning to school.
- Recognize literacy as a barrier to employment and support literacy upgrading in the public post-secondary system as part of their employment plans.

### **Ministry of Education**

- Acknowledge and support the work that the public post-secondary institutions do to deliver the vast majority of adult literacy programs in the province.
- Use the public post-secondary education system to deliver any new programs in adult literacy.
- Respect the needs of adult learners to learn in an adult environment.
- Ensure that federal literacy programs are delivered by the public post-secondary education system.

In summary, our Federation believes the February 2006 provincial budget provides an important opportunity for the government to renew and strengthen a variety of developmental education programs in the public post-secondary system. These

programs have suffered badly over the last four years as a result of both funding and policy changes. The students in these programs are some of the most vulnerable in our public post-secondary system. They deserve the opportunity to develop skills that will help them more fully participate in the economic and social future of our province.