

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: EXPANDING STUDENT OPPORTUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The BC Progress Board, established by Premier Gordon Campbell in July 2001, is an independent panel of 18 senior business and academic leaders. The Board benchmarks British Columbia's economic and social performance against other jurisdictions and tracks the province's performance over time. The Board also provides strategic advice to the Premier and the Government on ways to improve the economy and provincial social policy supports.

The education sector of British Columbia accounts for close to 30 percent of the provincial budget and employs over 130,000. At the same time, private and public sector education providers have significantly increased activity in the area of international education over the past two decades. Public and private sector organizations export educational products and services overseas and provide a wide range of education and training to international students studying here in British Columbia.

BC's public and private education sector has been able to attract about 150,000 international students each year. In addition, the province's colleges, university colleges, universities, the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT), and the Ministry of Education have established teaching and research partnerships overseas and frequently deliver contract and consulting services to international clients. Annually, the education sector is responsible for generating more than \$2 billion from its international education activities. Approximately one-third of this revenue flows directly to the education organizations as tuition, while the balance is spent by international students on housing, food, and leisure activities.

UNESCO estimates that, worldwide, there are currently two million students studying outside their home countries, a number that it expects will grow to five million by 2020. It follows that there is potential for British Columbia to attract increasing numbers of overseas students to study in the province. In addition, enhancing efforts to market, promote and sell our education services abroad will further increase the international profile of the province. This will assist the Government's broader strategy of increasing trade, especially with India and China – two countries slated to become the world's largest economic powerhouses in the next decade.

While both public and private sector education providers have been relatively successful over the past decade in attracting overseas students to British Columbia, the marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive. On the international stage, British Columbia's education providers come up against highly effective, coordinated, and government supported marketing and promotion campaigns from the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Similarly, Ontario and Quebec's education providers have adopted a coordinated approach to marketing and promotion in the international arena, again with government support. In contrast, marketing and promotion in British Columbia's international education sector is carried out, for the most

part, by individual organizations. As a consequence, the province presents a confused and uncoordinated image to the marketplace. It is unlikely, given the increasingly competitive nature of the field, that the current uncoordinated and piecemeal approach will ensure British Columbia's current market share will remain stable and not decline. This suggests that mechanisms need to be created that bring about a greater degree of cooperation and coordination between the various education providers and the Government of British Columbia. However, such mechanisms should strive to ensure that the entrepreneurial activities of the various education organizations are not restricted or impeded in any way.

The development of the international education sector has considerable potential to assist in the general economic development of the province. For example, regional economic development could be enhanced by increasing international student enrolments outside of the Greater Vancouver and Victoria metropolitan areas. In addition, provided that the Federal Government's visa regulations can be adjusted, the pending shortage of skilled workers in the province could be alleviated by tapping into the pool of skilled, English-speaking international students – a group of potential immigrants already familiar with Canadian culture. Over the longer term, increased opportunities for domestic students to engage in study abroad or overseas cooperative education placements would begin to build the kinds of global competencies in the province's workforce that are critical for success in an internationally integrated economy. Finally, BC's international education efforts are instrumental in building the kinds of personal relationships that are critical for success in an interconnected globalized economy in which 'know who' is as important as 'know how'.

The education sector faces a challenge common to many trade-dependent sectors in the province: in order to prosper there is a need to create and maintain a 'BC Brand'. While Canada and Vancouver have high international visibility, British Columbia has minimal brand recognition. Obviously, BC should be positioned as part of Canada but distinct for the purposes of certain export activities. The province has plans to use the promotion and marketing of the 2010 Olympic Games to further the global recognition of British Columbia; this may be of great assistance in positioning British Columbia internationally in the field of education.

The report suggests that the current successes in international education should be recognized and celebrated and should be used as a basis for even greater growth. In this regard, international education needs to be fully integrated into British Columbia's efforts to diversify its economy and build an internationally recognized set of trading relationships.

In conclusion, the report makes seven key policy and program suggestions to the Provincial Government. These key suggestions are augmented by forty detailed proposals to expand international education activity in the province.

The seven key policy and program suggestions are:

- 1) Incorporate the international education sector into the Provincial Government's integrated trade development initiatives and ensure that the sector can benefit from the development of the 'BC Brand.'
- 2) Consider creating an organization, modelled on Tourism BC, which can deliver effective coordination and support to the public and private international education providers.
- 3) Expand study abroad opportunities in order to develop a more globally literate workforce in the province.
- 4) Support the international education sector's role in regional economic development.
- 5) As a matter of high priority, address quality assurance concerns in the ESL training arena by re-regulating private sector schools and by establishing minimum teaching qualifications for both public and private sector providers.
- 6) Address existing visa processing challenges with the Federal Government and secure a pilot project that will assist BC in meeting the pending shortage of skilled workers.
- 7) Minimize policy and procedure impediments to the entrepreneurial activity of both public and private sector international education providers.