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University Canada West (UCW), housed in the former Blanshard Elementary School, will open in September becoming the first private for-profit university in the country authorized by any government.

"We'll meet all the same criteria as any other university in terms of academic quality," says president David Strong, Ph.D., who once helmed UVic. "Our degrees will be carefully judged and monitored."

A Bachelor of Commerce with a specialty in Technology Management and an MBA will be the inaugural offerings in the 36,000-square-foot facility that's currently undergoing renovations to accommodate up to 2,000 students. Demonstrating its long-term intentions, the university negotiated a 99-year lease with School District 61. Upcoming discussions with the Quadra-Hillside Neighbourhood Action Group, Blanshard Community Centre, local business and others will help guarantee a good fit among others in the environs.

To secure the property, parent company LearningWise Inc. made an up-front payment of \$1,900,000. Annual payments over a 10-year period of term rent will rack up another \$2,606,164, for a total of \$4,506,164. "We'll start with a class of 30 people," says Strong. "We'll be losing money until there are 600 students." Though so far only 18 applications have made their way to university administrators, the target market is vast, he contends. "There were 13,000 B.C. applicants to universities in 2003. Seven thousand were selected and received placements. Of the remainder, 2,000 were without any post secondary places."

Since schools such as UVic require high school graduates to present an average above 80 per cent to gain acceptance, many young people can't make the grade. At UCW, those with a 65 per cent average will be accepted "on a first-come, first-served basis. Even Canadian universities that accept students with a 65 per cent average have a limited number of spaces and admit students with the highest averages," he says.

Though each course at UCW will cost on average twice as much as its public school counterpart, the undergraduate programs can be completed in three years instead of the usual four-year stint. "Since the academic year has been organized into four quarters, the degree takes a shorter time to complete," Strong says.

Royal Roads University also offers a compressed timetable for undergrads, who can complete conventional third and fourth year requirements in just one. MBA candidates, most of who remain in the work force, learn via on-campus residencies and the Internet over a two-year period. UCW will offer a similar option to its

students.

"Canadian universities don't address the needs of mature students," says Richard Skinner, Ph.D., president and vice chancellor of RRU. "Most work when they go to university. The need for lifelong learning is so clear. That's even more important since we're competing in a global economy."

The demand for alternative educational options is palpable as yet another institution, U.S.-based University of Phoenix, set up shop last August. Learners can opt for the BA in Business Management, an MBA or an MA in Education. Programs are delivered in one of three forms - online, face-to-face or combined modality. Currently 50 students are enrolled in classes that convene in the Hotel Grand Pacific.

"We'll continue to expand here," says Benjamin Colling, director of admissions and business development. "Victoria has been fantastic. There's a high expectation of education here and a greater desire for people to upgrade to the MA. It's a good opportunity for us and for our students." Colling reports, "steady growth" for the institution in B.C., with 700 students on board in Vancouver. "Our students are unique and they don't fit other models. All are working adults and part of the great rush toward upgrading in North America." Students seeking a Bachelors degree can expect to spend \$8,000 to \$10,000 per year, twice the fee at a public university. "We give considerations for work experience and the degree can be completed in three years," he says. "Our MBA is now one of the least expensive at \$24,000." Besides costs, extra assistance distinguishes some facilities from the competition. For example, University of Phoenix students can access a writing lab when composing term papers. At UCW, content and learning coaches have been recruited to facilitate the process.

Still, a private institution like UCW may have to contend with pre-existing attitudes that may negatively impact its success. "In Canada, private universities are viewed with skepticism," says Skinner. "The idea for UCW is really bold because there's not much of a precedent. The market will tell us if there is a demand."

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