

# Prying open Post-Secondary Education

*Canadian Taxpayers Federation*

March 16, 2005

Of all the post-secondary education (PSE) initiatives implemented by the Campbell government, the one that will have the biggest impact has received the least amount of attention. In 2002, the government passed the *Degree Authorization Act* and opened up post-secondary education to the private sector.

The Act set out new parameters for the granting of degrees and restricted the use of the coveted term “university.” A Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB), was created to review applications and make recommendations to the Minister of Advanced Education. Another approval process was set up for institutions that wanted to grant degrees under the “university” designation.

The first institution to undergo the government’s new application process, University Canada West (UCW), recently won approval to grant two degrees and is currently awaiting approval for five more. UCW also obtained ministerial approval to use the term, “university.” UCW is the first private, for profit university in Canada authorized by a government.

After spending three decades working in government institutions, UCW’s founder David Strong recognized the demand for post-secondary education would never be fully satisfied in a system that relied on a limited supply of tax dollars. Because government funded spaces are limited and demand keeps growing, entrance grade requirements have jumped up to 82%. The reason government universities can’t keep pace with demand is because they rely on a single resource source--the taxpayer.

A private university has investors who want a return on their dollar which means growth in the student population is essential to success. As Strong notes, “Because we are a private sector corporate entity, we have access to investors and investment markets and are independent from government funding--- although we are subject to the same government quality assessments as any university in BC. This puts us in a unique position in the province to deliver post-secondary education in new and innovative ways.” Unique, indeed.

UCW will be offering students three year degrees, smaller class sizes, access to a learning coach as well as a program assistant. The MBA program, for example, will combine internet based courses and periodical in-class learning- the earn while you learn approach. It makes sense that a private university would be student focused, innovative and flexible.

Students are UCW’s customers. Student success in the marketplace post-graduation will be the best measuring stick of UCW’s success. That’s a market based economy at work.

Opening up PSE to the private sector will also force government funded schools to compete for students, to be more responsive to students and market needs.

Suddenly, students are not simply government funded spaces, worth a certain amount tax dollars, they are, customers. As such, students can shop around and find the best bang for their buck or find a program that is tailored to meet their needs. Government institutions no longer have a *de facto* monopoly on education and consequently tuition fees.

The Liberal's should be commended for opening up post-secondary education to the market, offering students more choices, ending the state-run monopoly and easing the unsustainable pressure on the public purse.

*Sara MacIntyre  
British Columbia Director  
Canadian Taxpayers Federation*