

# Post-secondary education focus of senate committee study

Evidence shows non-financial barriers are at least as important as financial barriers, and are likely more important

By CINDY CHAN  
Epoch Times Staff

OTTAWA—Improving accessibility and equity of participation in post-secondary education are the focus of a comprehensive study by a Senate committee.

The Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology held its first meeting in early October and its second meeting last Thursday.

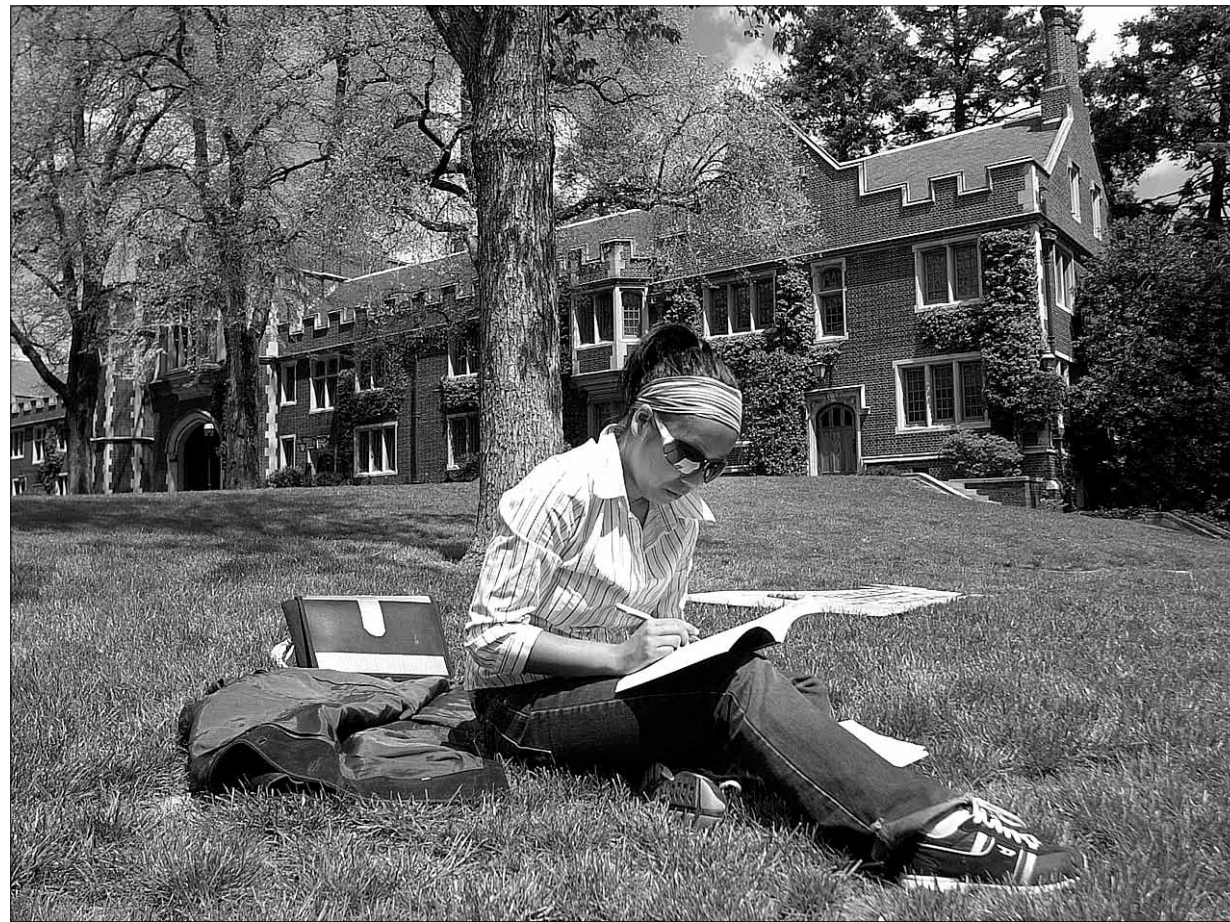
“[Post-secondary education] is vital to our economic future so we need to be paying attention to what’s happening and how to improve it,” Senator Art Eggleton, chair of the committee, told The Epoch Times.

Senator Eggleton said part of what led to the study was “a mixed bag of statistics.”

On the one hand, Canadians are among the world’s best educated population. In 2007, Canada ranked the highest (48 percent) among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of those aged 25 to 64 with a college or university education.

But in some other indicators, Canada ranks low.

For example, the Canadian Council on Learning reported that in 2004 Canada ranked 20th out of 30 OECD countries in the proportion of science and engi-



IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION: A university student doing homework on campus. According to the Canadian Council on Learning, from 1990 to 2007, the number of jobs requiring a post-secondary qualification almost doubled, while the number of jobs that did not require one was halved. WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN/GETTY IMAGES

neering degrees to all new university degrees. Canada also ranked 20th in the proportion of science and engineering PhD graduates to all graduates that year.

“We also need to look at further access of different parts of the population—the disabled, immigrants, aboriginals—because the statistics are very uneven in terms of accessibility of those groups. We’re also looking at accessibility in the context of financing, debt level, the challenges faced by some groups, particularly aboriginals,” Senator Eggleton said.

For OECD countries, it is estimated that every additional year of full-time education is associated with an increase in na-

tional per capita output of about 6 percent.

Other key issues include research and development, especially in science and technology; internationalization in terms of Canadians studying overseas and international students in Canada; and establishment of a national post-secondary education strategy.

#### LIMITING DEBT, HELPING STUDENTS EARN MORE

At its meeting on Nov. 5, the committee heard from Prof. Ben Levin from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, associated with the University of Toronto, who holds the Canadian Research Chair in Canadian Research and Policy.

According to an unrevised transcript prepared for the committee, Mr. Levin noted that participation in post-secondary education is inequitable in Canada, especially in universities. Participation continues to be skewed based on social class, geography, and other factors.

While student groups commonly cite tuition fees as one of the main barriers to accessibility, the evidence does not support this viewpoint, Mr. Levin said.

“The evidence suggests that non-financial barriers are at least as important, and probably more important, than financial barriers.”

Mr. Levin said statistics show that half the students in Canada

do not borrow at all to finance their post-secondary education, and in fact very few students end up with huge debt loads.

Moreover, only about 10 percent of students have difficulty managing their debt.

Mr. Levin recommended against reducing or freezing tuition fees.

“We should be trying to keep them modest and moderate, and we should be trying to prevent sudden or rapid rises, but reducing tuition fees would be a counter-productive policy because it would be quite expensive and have very little impact on participation or equity of participation.”

An important but neglected way of helping students financially is to improve their ability to earn money, such as by raising the minimum wage, he said.

And greater work-study, co-op, and similar opportunities would give students the added benefit of doing work that’s related to their studies.

Mr. Levin also suggested limiting the maximum debt students could incur to \$5,000 per year, and providing protection from catastrophic illness or other such circumstances that may prevent students from being able to pay their debt.

#### THE HOME ‘A VERY BIG FACTOR’

Addressing non-financial barriers, Mr. Levin noted that secondary school completion rates must improve in Canada. They are currently 75 to 80 percent, and significantly lower in Quebec and Alberta.

He said culture within the home “is a very big factor,” because “aspirations [for more education] are critically important and are usually set in the home.”

In particular, targeted programs are needed to encourage participation in post-secondary education among recent immigrant groups, aboriginal students, and other communities that have relatively low participation levels.

“We have evidence that if you

have targeted outreach and support, you can get large numbers of people who would not have even met the entrance qualifications to be successful in quite demanding programs in colleges and universities.”

Outreach and support might include counselling, tutoring, mentoring, accommodation, or programs like high school dual credit courses that count as high school credits as well as college or university credits.

“It’s [also] important for people to have accurate information about how much post-secondary education costs, what the benefits are in terms of increased wages and other good outcomes, and what sources of assistance are available,” Mr. Levin said in an interview.

Evidence suggests that people least likely to participate in post-secondary education are those who overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits.

Another barrier is that most universities try to recruit top students and make little effort to recruit people from under-represented groups who could be successful with the right supports.

Various incentives could be created to encourage institutions to outreach to these groups, such as linking it to program funding, said Mr. Levin.

The committee will hold 21 sessions for this study and aims to release its report next June or September.

Background information provided to the committee notes estimates by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada that by 2015, some 5.5 million jobs will open up in Canada due to retirements and job creation.

Two-thirds of those will require post-secondary qualifications, or will be in management.

As well, Canada will need 1.42 million additional university graduates before 2015, and 2.02 million college or apprenticeship graduates, according to the Canadian Council on Learning.

## Canada’s cell market about to get more competitive

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Newcomers Public Mobile, Wind Mobile, and Dave Wireless need only one million customers (out of the 15 million Canadians who have yet to get a cell phone) to create a successful business, said Iain Grant, who heads up Seaboard Group, a strategic consulting and research company focusing on the technology and communications industries.

Grant is among those optimistic that the new companies will bring major changes to Canada’s cellular market.

“I think when people go in to their wireless company and look at the options taking a contract, they might be wise to drag their feet and wait for the launch of Public Mobile, or Dave, or Wind,” he said.

All three companies are talking about better customer service and dramatically improved price points, including \$40 all-in plans that are the fulfillment of a promise many Canadian consumers have only known as the wiggling worm in current bait-and-switch advertising campaigns.

Plans could include long distance, voice mail, call forwarding, caller ID and so on, says Grant.

“And if you talk for 1,000 minutes it’s included. What is different with the \$40 plans from Dave for instance, is that they will be \$40.”

Public Mobile is also offering a flat \$40-a-month plan with “unlimited talk and text” and no contracts or service fees.

Wind, like Dave, has not officially announced plans but, in some media interviews, top executives have said they will have as few as two or three plans although they expect to need only one.

#### CHALLENGES AHEAD

But before Canadians can enjoy the fruits of increased competition, the newcomers need to get their networks up and running and secure handsets that work in their slice of the wireless spectrum (cellular airwaves).

Public Mobile, in particular, is working in a frequency virtually unused by previous cellular networks and may offer a more limited selection of handsets.

Public will launch in Toronto in the coming months and then extend cov-



Three new companies are poised to enter Canada’s cellular market in the coming months promising revolutionary deals. PHOTOS.COM

erage throughout the Greater Toronto Area by the end of 2010. Future plans include coverage for most of southern Ontario from Windsor to Ottawa and eventually Quebec, though only Quebec’s Videotron and the big three incumbents have spectrum there.

Dave, which has said it will change its name before launch, will service Canada’s five most populous English markets, including Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa. Like Wind, it is constructing an HSPA 3G network that works with smartphones and data services.

Wind is the only newcomer that bought spectrum all across Canada except in Quebec. It had promised to be the first to launch in late 2009 but hit a regulatory snag when the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) said the ownership structure of parent company Globalive Wireless didn’t fit within the requirements set out by the Telecommunications Act.

Either the company needs to revise

its ownership structure or the CRTC needs to change its ruling on Wind to launch.

Wind is protesting the CRTC’s ruling, but Grant says this is a “small matter” that may save the company from getting egg on its face.

“They may be actually breathing a sigh of relief in that they can’t launch just yet. Because if they had been allowed to launch and had no impediment, they may have been announcing postponements.”

The challenge for each of the providers is getting their network up and running reliably. Any delay would likely be due to that, said Mark VanderHeyden, former CEO of Siemens Networks Inc. and now president of Scire Solutions.

VanderHeyden is a key player in Canada’s cellular market, helping companies, including almost all of the new entrants, develop their technological infrastructure.

Though the new providers will be fighting an uphill battle for market share, VanderHeyden says they do

have a notable advantage.

Referring to a paper by the Seaboard Group, he noted that the price of establishing a wireless network now is a small fraction of what it was 10 or 20 years ago.

“The new entrants have an interesting cost advantage at that starting point,” he said.

“And there are other new ways they can manage their networks. The incumbents have large organizations and their own field crews. The new guys have an opportunity to do a fair bit of outsourcing and manage services, which can also help the cost structure. They may have the ability to give us much more impressive pricing plans.”

#### NETWORK CONSTRUCTION BOOM

The boom in network construction—both Bell and Telus recently created a network capable of handling the iPhone 3G—has attracted a number of companies to Canada including Harris Stratex, Optimi, MTE, and Smartprust. These companies offer everything from radio backhaul to a way to transfer content from one cell phone to another so that customers don’t have to manually transfer all those ring tones and videos.

For the consumer, the extra competition from new cellular providers and the potential for slimmer business models due to outsourcing could lead to significant savings.

The incumbents aren’t taking the threat lying down. Each of them now has a discount brand aimed at the lower end of the market where the new entrants are expected to grow.

For Bell, Telus, and Rogers, there are Solo, Koodoo, and Fido respectively. Each is already introducing plans that are notably cheaper from just 18 months ago.

But there is potential for progress to be stalled. Just as Fido once offered unlimited voice and data transfer to customers before being purchased by Rogers, so too could the new entrants be bought into the fold of the incumbent providers.

While it is too early to tell if the promise of better deals will be as elusive as those \$40 bills, or if any change can stand the test of acquisition, it does seem Canadians will pay less for their cell phones in 2010.

## Rights group worried about Vancouver “sonic gun”

VANCOUVER (Reuters)—A civil liberties group accused police on Tuesday of quietly buying a high-tech audio weapon for possible use against protesters at next year’s Winter Olympics in Vancouver.

The so-called long range acoustic device (LRAD) can fire a concentrated blast of sound powerful enough to cause hearing damage and temporary vision disruption, according to the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association.

The group, monitoring security for the 2010 Games, said there should have been independent safety testing of the “sonic gun” before Vancouver Police were allowed to buy it, executive director David Eby said.

The purchase, which was never publicly announced, “reduces the credibility of blandishments from city officials about not interfering with lawful and peaceful demonstrations,” the civil liberties group said.

Vancouver Police bought the device last summer to communicate with large crowds and during natural disasters where audio systems such as hand-held megaphones are not effective, according to spokesman Constable Lindsey Houghton.

“To call it a ‘sonic gun’ is like us calling a 1972 Cadillac a 2,000-pound metal missile. It’s a public address system,” Houghton said.

Houghton said the equipment had already been used to address a large crowd of boaters during a fireworks event last summer, and the purchase had no link to the Winter Olympics, which will be held in February.

American Technology Corp says the LRAD, which it sells to military and police forces, can broadcast information from a safe distance and “creates increased standoff and safety zones” that help prevent the use of deadly force.

The company also says the equip-

ment is not a weapon and that police have full control over the volume, which can be “easily and quickly adjusted based on situational use.”

“We’re worried it’s like the Taser, where it gets brought in as an alternative to the sidearm and it ends up getting used on fare evaders [on the transit system]”

It can blast sounds of up to 152 decibels within one meter of the device and issue warnings over water to vessels up 3 km (2 miles) away. Sounds louder than a range of 120 to 140 decibels can cause pain and damage to human hearing.

Eby said it is “disingenuous” to say the LRAD is not a weapon, since that is how it has been used by police against protesters in countries including China.

Police in Canada have been criticized recently for increased and unnecessary use of Taser stun guns, amid safety concerns about the electronic weapons.

“We’re worried it’s like the Taser, where it gets brought in as an alternative to the sidearm and it ends up getting used on fare evaders [on the transit system],” Eby said.

Some anti-Olympic groups have warned they may demonstrate at the Vancouver Games. A small protest did disrupt the start of the Olympic torch run last month, but threats to create wider problems for the torch relay have not materialized.