

September 29, 2006

To Select Standing Committee on Education
From Vancouver Community College Faculty Association

Adult ESL, VCC and the BC College System

We wish to thank the Select Committee on Education for this opportunity to submit our views on the challenges of providing English language education to ESL adults. We did take advantage of a hearing date in Burnaby on June 5th to provide oral submissions on ABE issues and one on ESL for adult issues. At that time our presenters on ESL mentioned that we would like to also file this further written submission focused on ESL for adult issues.

It will cover these main points:

**The Size of ESL programming at Vancouver Community College
Our Obligation to Adult Immigrants**

**The Good Things about Varied Approaches
The Bad Thing about Varied Approaches**

**Addressing the "Intermediate" Gap
The Need for Education Planning: the Manitoba example**

**Tuition vs. No Tuition
The need for Tuition Support**

Use the College system for One-stop Learning

**Immigrant Youth: Let's Fill the Cracks so No One Falls Through
Recommendations**

The Size of ESL programming at Vancouver Community College

As you may know, VCC is a key provider of English language education to adult immigrants in the lower mainland. Our association represents the ESL faculty at VCC, professional educators widely recognized for their expertise in English language education for non-native speakers of English.

ESL at VCC is not just another programming cluster. Direct ESL programming makes up over a quarter of our annual programming and there is probably not one of the 50-plus programs at VCC which does not have immigrant students with good, but not native proficiency in English.

To give some comparative examples, direct ESL programming at VCC (at about 1800 FTEs per year) is larger than total programming at each of four significant, stand-alone BC institutions: Northwest

Community College (just under 1800), Northern Lights College (1560), College of the Rockies (1500), and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (1270).

We make these comparisons to point out that our instructors really do offer a tremendous resource to the province on these issues. One that has gone underutilized over the past decades. Where else can one find 200 Adult ESL professionals and specialists ready and willing to work on these problems?

Recommendation

(1) Use and challenge ESL experts and practitioners such as those at VCC to help devise solutions to these issues.

Our Obligation to Adult Immigrants

Access to English language education is a literacy issue for adults needing ESL but it is a literacy issue of a different order than that faced by those fluent in English.

For the latter, literacy education comes first, and then access to ongoing training and education is possible. For the adult immigrant, most often the valued training and education has already happened and the language education, or literacy, is necessary in order to unlock their skills in Canada.

Government statistics show that “B.C. receives over 35,000 immigrants each year. About 64% are between the ages of 20 and 59....”¹ “ A Ministry of Advanced Education study, “2003 ESL Student Outcomes Survey”, shows that statistically 60% of this group have 12 years or more of education in their country of origin.²

Without continuous access to comprehensive English language education, they suffer the same consequences as those without literacy. They are unable to participate fully in the social, cultural and economic life of our community. Skills and talents are not utilized and opportunities for their families are missed or delayed and they are at an increased risk of living in poverty.

Without language education, ESL adult immigrants are unable to

- enter the workforce as skilled workers or professionals
- start bridging and mentoring programs designed for internationally educated adult immigrants to jumpstart their professional careers in Canada
- enter technical education programs
- pursue academic upgrading programs

¹ Office of the Premier. Ministry of State for Immigrations and Multicultural Services Press Release. Feb 12. 2005

² 2003 ESL Student Outcomes Survey

- develop the social and cultural knowledge essential for their promotion and effectiveness in the workplace.

If an English-speaking Canadian is unable to engage with society in these ways for all intents and purposes they would have a literacy problem.

It is absolutely appropriate and correct that adult ESL issues be included in the committee's discussion of literacy challenges. Our view is that the best possible adult ESL education should be regarded as a fundamental obligation our society owes the student who requires it.

Recommendation

(2) Elevate the awareness of adult ESL issues so that society regards it as an obligation to the citizen or immigrant who requires it.

The Good Things about Varied Approaches

B.C.'s system of providing English language education through a mixed delivery approach of ELSA and then through varied college level programming has created a good mix of educational approaches and encouraged innovation and responsiveness

For example, in our fee-paying ESL classes at VCC we have developed several programming models. The list includes: self-paced instruction, special skill-based classes such as writing, classes in the community, and combined skills-where students in engineering, resident-care attendant, hairstyling, baking and other programs get support from an ESL instructor while attending their skills-based classes.

Recommendation

(3) Seek to continue a variety of ESL approaches through varied college level programming as well as ELSA.

The Bad Thing about Varied Approaches

Currently we understand that three ministries: Advanced Education, the Ministry of Economic Development and the MACAWS fund adult ESL. Each ministry has its own mandate and expertise but a lack of coordination does create a lack of cohesion and impedes overall planning. A comprehensive provincial strategy for adult ESL would allow for more effective planning and help to create a more accessible and rational system.

These types of coordination problems are not unique to ESL issues. Surely, expertise within government exists to deal with them.

Access to all levels of English language education should be available throughout the province. Maintaining the presence of English language education in the public post secondary system is an essential and effective way to hasten the entry of new arrivals into the social and economic life of their community. Gaps in the

delivery of ESL waste the productive years of these internationally educated workers.

Studies show that if those with training do not get real access to their fields as soon as possible then their skills lose currency and they settle into alternative patterns of employment, thus losing the skill set that helped get them into Canada in the first place.

Recommendation

(4) Require that all ministries and agencies involved with funding English Language programs for adults coordinate their activities so that the best interests of the learner are paramount

Addressing the "Intermediate" Gap

The present system has allowed gaps in delivery of language education to develop. New immigrants to B.C. can access free English language instruction at Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) levels 1 to 4 which provide beginning language skills in speaking, listening, writing and reading. This is primarily delivered through ELSA providers.

The next level of English language education – the intermediate level (CLB 5 – 8) is a pivotal level in language learning. Without access to this level of language education, entry into further career training, bridging programs or academic study is stymied. As an example, recently B.C. Skills Connect initiated a new program to help skilled immigrants find jobs. This innovative program will help internationally educated professionals move into their professional areas. This type of programming however will require language proficiencies in the CLB 7 to 8 ranges.

Furthermore, current patterns indicate that a very large number of immigrants arrive with English skills too high to access ELSA but too low for programs like Skills Connect.

A provincial plan to ensure access to the intermediate levels (CLB 5-8) of English language education needs to be adopted. Providing a comprehensive and seamless system for the funding and delivery of English language education from beginning through intermediate to advanced levels is essential to maintaining B.C.'s attractiveness to internationally educated immigrants and utilizing the talent and skills of those who have selected B.C. as their new home.

Recommendation

(5) Ensure that there are no gaps in delivery which inadvertently create obstacles to learner progress.

The Need for Education Planning: the Manitoba example

One possible remedy would be to establish a system of educational planning for individual students based on their career plans and possibilities with financial assistance that would sustain the individual's educational plan. One province has established a system of educational planning attached to financial assistance is Manitoba. We understand from conversations with counterparts at Red River College in Winnipeg that immigrants in Manitoba receive comprehensive language testing and counselling. That individual education plans are worked on so immigrant students have a roadmap to success. Furthermore, they are fully supported with tuition free training as they work through their plan. Their plans can take them to community classes, colleges, skill-based training, or to university preparatory levels. A key factor is giving considerable weight to the incoming student's projected arc of learning. For example, if a person was a medical doctor in their home country and wanted to become a cardiology technician in Canada, then they would be supported for the time that it took to get to the English level they needed. Of course, this only occurs with the appropriate review of individual progress along the way.

We can do more to support immigrant students. As a minimum, we should prioritize a provincial strategy to create a real and/or "virtual" information clearinghouse that would provide information on access to English language education delivery throughout B.C., available professional bridging or transitional programming, support services and financial support information available be a priority.

Recommendation

(6) Adopt a model of education and career access planning that helps expedite the ESL learner's path toward integrating their skills with our society's needs.

Tuition vs. No Tuition and Funding

Unlike ABE where there's usually been a clear consensus that tuition-free access is a given, ESL for adults has developed a different history in BC. It's been tuition free through ELSA, but at subsequent levels college programs have charged tuition comparable to mainstream students. Some could argue that this is why BC has been able to develop the variety of programs that it has and that charging fees allows for more access. Now that tuition has risen so high, so quickly, however, many argue that tuition has become a barrier. The VCCFA agrees that fees are too high. Our ideal would see low-fee or tuition-free classes for adult ESL students that preserve the variety of approaches that have developed over the years.

At the post-secondary institutional level, there should be an increase in designated funding for the developmental programs (ABE and ESL Adults) so that demand can be met and delivery stabilized so that students can expect on-going programming. As a first step it should be recalibrated to pre-2002 levels when, for example, VCC was able

to fully one-third more learners when measured in FTEs than we are now.

If there's no decision to lower or eliminate fees, then this group of students needs “protection” from further tuition fee raises. As developmental students they do not yet have the core literacy or English language proficiencies demanded in the applied, technical and professional workplace.

Canada and BC invited these people here; there is an obligation to assist them as they struggle with often entry level incomes.

Recommendations

(7) While seeking to lower or eliminate student fees, do not permit further increases to this group of learners.

(8) Increase designated funding for developmental programming in post-secondary institutions to at least pre-2002 levels, when measured in terms of the student FTEs colleges are expected to deliver.

The need for Tuition Support

The tuition challenge for the ESL adult student is daunting, and especially so in the face of fees that have doubled over the last five years. The government's Adult Basic Education Student Assistance Program (ABESAP, worth \$1.5 million at VCC last year) allows many adult ESL students to attend English language education programs. However, many of our students are the working poor and are ineligible for this funding because the threshold levels for ineligibility are set too low. Students will register for a term then leave for a period of terms until they have worked and saved enough money for another term of study and frequently this cycle of intermittent study is repeated several times. The outcome for this interrupted course of studies is a significant delay in students acquiring the literacy levels required for further study or employment.

As touched upon above, each year away from utilizing the skill-set they brought to Canada diminishes value of their training. More and more students have to interrupt their schooling and look for employment which puts their educational plans on hold. This jeopardizes their achieving full and productive employment as they have not yet developed the language and literacy skills required by the workplace.

Developing literacy in a new language requires not only financial support but time. A study from the University of Alberta shows that at the CLB intermediate levels (5 to 8) English language students need 9 months of full time study to increase their proficiency by one level. To meet the language requirements for workplace entry levels 8 and 9 are essential. Bridging programs that aim to connect internationally educated professionals, technicians, and skilled tradespersons to the workplace require CLB levels 7 to 8. For many ESL adult students that will require several years of financial support before they have the language and literacy skills to be fully productive in the workplace.

Recommendation

(9) Increase the overall amount of ABESAP funding and the amount available for the individual student and recognize that the acquiring literacy in a new language takes time.

Use the College system for One-stop Learning

The publicly-funded PSE system has a responsibility to students in the developmental areas of ABE and ESL for adults. It must provide them with access to ongoing quality educational programming. Colleges are unique in that they can provide ESL education from beginning, through intermediate, and on to advanced levels of English. Students can then transition to further applied training or content course work - be it in health sciences, technology or university transfer courses required for professional certification or upgrading.

Publicly funded colleges can and do provide educational counseling and advising and student support services such as libraries and learning centres which are key to student success. Utilizing the expertise and resources of the local publicly-funded community college should be a priority for funders.

Colleges have the advantage of being accountable. They are administered through long standing, fully transparent, accountability standards which have a high degree of confidence throughout the society.

Whatever the funding source they can provide the program needed and can do it in an already coordinated structure throughout the province.

Recommendation

(10) Designate the BC College and Institute system as the primary provider of the developmental education for adults.

Immigrant Youth: Let's Fill the Cracks so No One Falls Through

This is one sector of the adult ESL profile that has not received adequate attention from the system. Often referred to as "late arrivals" these young adult immigrants arrived in Canada as high school students and some have not had the time to develop the reading and writing literacy skills necessary to compete for jobs or meet prerequisites for college programs. These youth are in danger of being marginalized and as they fit neither the traditional ABE nor ESL student profile, the system is struggling to find appropriate, effective and efficient language training for them in the post secondary environment.

Recent research presented by Lee Gunderson of UBC finds that approximately 6 years of full time study is needed to be successful in post-secondary studies. He

also states that fully 40% of immigrant youth don't make it through high school their first time through.

In increasing numbers, young citizens and immigrants are showing up at our door at VCC as "quasi" high school graduates.

The VCC Assessment Centre is currently compiling data on the number of applicants for post-secondary programs who lack the pre-requisite English skills, particularly in reading and writing, and who have attended or graduated from BC secondary schools. The majority have studied Communications 11 or 12 and often Communications 12, rather than "academic" English 11 or 12.

Over the past year, the ESL Division has seen more and more of these young adults being assessed with reading and writing skills at approximately a grade 10 level or lower. Currently, although they are almost completely fluent in spoken English and consider themselves Canadian kids, they currently have to be placed in ESL classes with very recent adult immigrants many years older than themselves; in these classes, the former BC high school students are developing their reading and writing abilities at the grade 6 to 10 levels.

VCC's Program Advisory Committee, which is comprised of advisors from community agencies and immigrant serving groups as well as representative from BCIT and the K-12 system, has pointed to the above group as one that is truly of concern and underserved.

Recommendation

(1) Develop a provincial strategy for cooperation between the public secondary school system and the post secondary college system to plan and devise appropriate responses to the needs of immigrant or new Canadian youth who are post high school but "pre" post-secondary in their writing and reading skills..

Recommendations

Once again, we thank the Select committee for this opportunity to submit to them on the challenges our students face to acquire adequate language and literacy skills. We have grouped our recommendations below.

(1) Use and challenge ESL experts and practitioners such as those at VCC to help devise solutions to these issues.

(2) Elevate the awareness of adult ESL issues so that society regards it as an obligation to the citizen or immigrant who requires it.

(3) Seek to continue a variety of ESL approaches through varied college level programming as well as ELSA.

- (4) Require that all ministries and agencies involved with funding English Language programs for adults coordinate their activities so that the best interests of the learner are paramount.*
- (5) Ensure that there are no gaps in delivery which inadvertently create obstacles to learner progress*
- (6) Adopt a model of education planning that helps expedite the ESL learner's path toward integrating their skills with our society's needs.*
- (7) While seeking to lower or eliminate student fees, do not permit further increases to this group of learners.*
- (8) Increase designated funding for developmental programming in post-secondary institutions to at least pre-2002 levels, when measured in terms of the student FTEs colleges are expected to deliver.*
- (9) Increase the overall amount of ABESAP funding and the amount available for the individual student and recognize that the acquiring literacy in a new language takes time.*
- (10) Designate the BC College and Institute system as the primary provider of the developmental education for adults.*
- (11) Develop a provincial strategy for cooperation between the public secondary school system and the post secondary college system to plan and devise appropriate responses to the needs of immigrant or new Canadian youth who are post high school but "pre" post-secondary in their writing and reading skills.*

for the
Vancouver Community College Faculty Association

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