

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

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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 Organization 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 engineering 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 national 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 counseling, 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.