

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Ross Finnie, Richard E. Mueller, and Arthur Sweetman
To: Provincial Ministers of Education and Immigration; Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
Date: August 25, 2017
Re: **THE CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

A widely held belief in Canada is that expanded access to post-secondary education is integral to improving national productivity. It also plays into the Canadian sense of equality of opportunity and the just society.

In addition, Canada is not alone in beginning to experience a decreasing labour force participation rate as baby-boomers enter retirement. Even the country's large immigration flows are not sufficient to compensate for this contraction. This puts additional pressure on productivity; across 20 members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, it would need to increase at an average [0.4 per cent per year](#) to offset the loss of GDP per capita from population aging. An increasingly skilled workforce is, therefore, one source of interest in increasing post-secondary access rates.

Another reason for increasing access rates is that the declining number of people moving into the standard age-range for higher study is threatening to force some institutions to downsize or even close entirely. This can cause particular pressures in rural areas and disadvantaged regions, where higher education institutions often represent an important social, economic and cultural force. Also, tertiary-level institutions play a critical role in a nation's performance with respect to research and development.

Standard models of human capital (held dearly by most economists) posit that individuals make rational choices about higher education, based on the information available to them, aimed at maximizing their lifetime well-being. Their decisions supposedly take into account their intellectual ability, other choice factors such as personal tastes, and the costs and benefits of these choices. In practice, this has meant a narrow policy focus on costs – especially tuition, and student financial aid.

However, there is a mounting body of [empirical evidence](#) showing that [cultural influences](#) represent the most important determinants of post-secondary access in Canada. These include parental education, reading habits and parental and community aspirations – particularly, the pro-education values imported by [immigrant families](#), whose access rates generally far exceed those of non-immigrant youth.

At their current levels, financial issues are not the central barriers to increased access.

The policy challenge is both to increase higher education access across the board, and to level the playing field for youth from different cultural and economic backgrounds. How can we, for example, reach children who do not have accurate information about higher education's benefits and costs, or who fail to grasp the importance of academic preparation?

Non-financial policy approaches are required to complement the financial ones in place at present. Perhaps youth from communities with low access rates could be taken on visits to college and university campuses – possibly from as early as primary school. [Another idea](#) is that senior secondary school students could be given in-school assistance with application forms for university admission and financial aid. The University of Liverpool's improbably named [Professor Fluffy](#) model is another example.

But, [further research](#) is needed on how to best execute such initiatives to maximize their impacts – including the implementation and evaluation of trial programs.

Overall, it is clear that financial constraints are not the only impediment to higher educational attainment; cultural factors must also be addressed if Canada is to develop the highly educated workforce it needs.

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