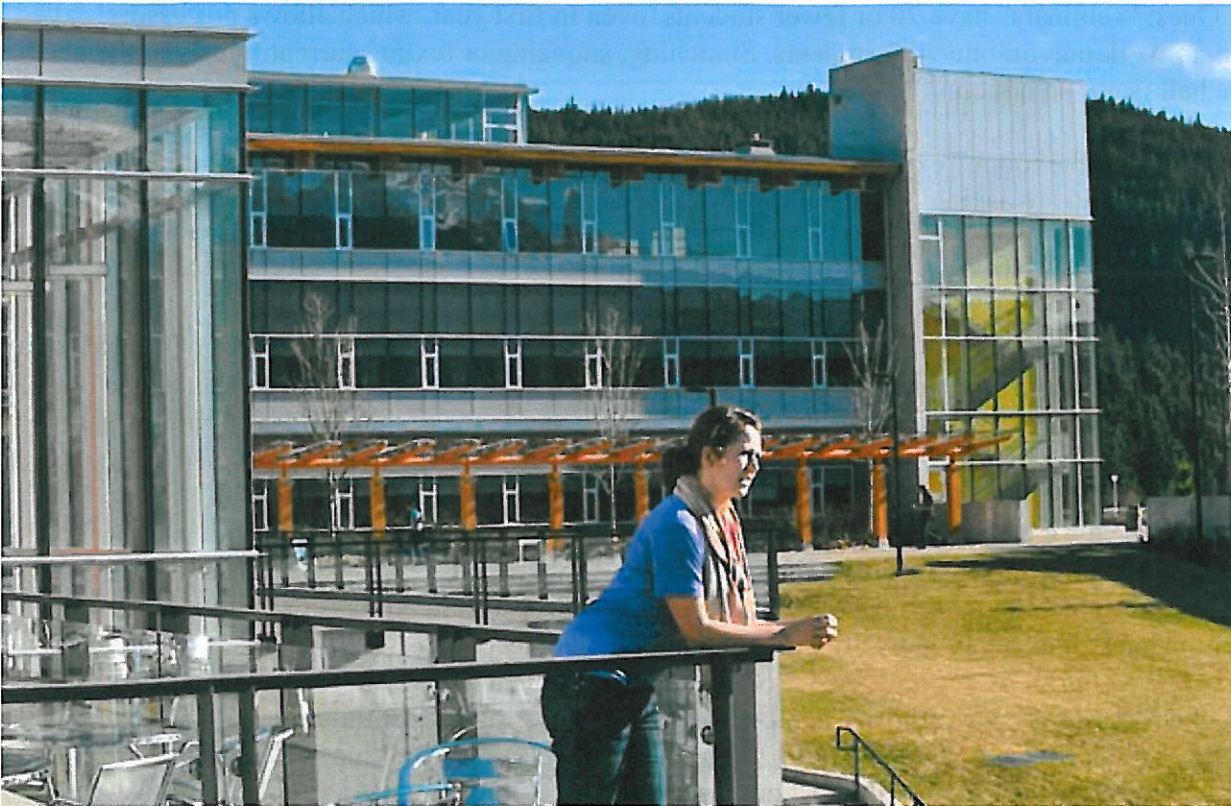


## Squamish's Quest University looks forward to first convocation

Little-known post-secondary school struggles for name recognition despite high satisfaction marks from students

By JANET STEFFENHAGEN, Vancouver Sun March 18, 2011



*Student government president Allie Chalke, of North Vancouver, admires the scenery at the campus of Quest University in Squamish, B.C. Quest opened in 2007 and is the country's first independent, non-profit secular university. Photograph by: Ian Smith, PNG*

SQUAMISH — A small university has been experimenting with a new form of undergraduate education in the Squamish highlands for almost four years, and is now preparing for its first graduation ceremony this spring. It's an occasion many hope will also signal to the world its coming-of-age.

But another goal might be name recognition in Canada because, despite its high-profile inception as the country's first independent, non-profit secular university, and keen interest in its progress shown by many academics, Quest University and its bachelor of arts and sciences program still fly under the radar for most.

"The challenge for us is letting the world know we're here," said the New York-born Eric Gorham, who joined Quest when it opened in September 2007, teaches politics and coordinates the social sciences division. "[We're] really quite different from other universities."

The first differences one notices upon arrival at Quest are the Coastal Mountains that provide a spectacular backdrop to the campus, its solitude, and a much-loved mutt named Bear who wanders the central square collecting pats. Quest has a small campus with only 300 students, and so feels a bit like a high school where all the students know one another.

The target is to build enrolment to 650 within the next few years, despite tuition fees that are among the highest in the country. At \$27,000 a year, these fees are five times the average undergraduate tuition in Canada, where publicly supported universities are still the norm.

In addition, students pay \$9,000 a year for room and board in one of four student residences on the 60-acre campus alongside Garibaldi provincial park. All students are expected to live in residence, unless they meet certain criteria such as being married or having children.

Where the differences are most obvious are in the classrooms. Unlike the large-group lectures in traditional universities, the Quest “seminars” have 20 or fewer students, even in first year, which allows professors, called “tutors” at Quest, to work one-on-one with students. Slouching, snoozing or texting surreptitiously at the back of a large lecture hall is not an option.

“It’s not me at the front of the room,” explained math tutor Ryan Derby-Talbot. “It’s me in the middle of all these engaged students, who are asking questions, who are part of the process, who don’t allow things to be taken for granted. It’s a place where classes are alive ... it’s not professors giving facts to students. [Instead] there are topics of discussion with tutors guiding them.”

Quest president David Helfand, who divides his time between Squamish and New York where he is chairman of Columbia University’s astronomy department, describes it this way: “The focus of this institution is one thing, and that’s delivering the best possible undergraduate education. It’s the focus of the faculty, our policies, our staff, our campus is constructed around this model.”

That’s worked well for Allie Chalke of North Vancouver, the university’s student president who is in her fourth year of studies after transferring to Quest from UBC Okanagan. “I wasn’t engaged when I was at UBCO, and I don’t know if that’s a testament to myself or to the university — maybe a little bit of both,” she said. “I spent a fair bit of time in the back of a lecture hall sitting there, not really engaged.”

Not so at Quest. “I love class, I love doing my homework,” she said during a recent interview. “I get excited about doing my homework so that I can go to class and participate, and I’m not sitting at the back of the class pretending to listen while I’m actually goofing off on Facebook.”

Her enthusiasm is not unusual here, according to last year’s results from the National Survey of Student Engagement. The survey found Quest students more satisfied with their educational experience than students at any of the other 52 participating Canadian universities.

The Quest model was envisioned by David Strangway, a former University of B.C. president who had grown dissatisfied with the state of undergraduate education and wanted to try something new after retiring from UBC in 1997. He imagined a liberal-arts program that would engage and inspire students and transform them into global citizens.

Because it would be a private venture, Strangway encountered opposition early on, but in 2002, the newly elected Liberal government passed a bill allowing for Quest’s creation. Private funding paid for land and construction but the early years were rocky and enrolments fell short of expectations.

Hoping for a lifeline in 2008, university officials signed a deal with the education-management firm that owned Spratt-Shaw Community College that would see the two institutions share a president. Students and faculty were shocked, with many questioning how a company focused on job training would be able to deliver on the Quest promise of a unique educational journey.

Within months, the deal was off and Helfand, who had been involved with Quest from the start as a part-time tutor, was named as the young university’s fourth president. It was intended to be a temporary position for Helfand but his lengthy commute from New York continues to this day, although the university says it is in the final stages of choosing a new president.

One-quarter of the Quest students are from the United States, where high tuition fees for private post-secondary education are not unusual. About 20 per cent are from other parts of the world and 55 per cent are from Canada.

Small classes are just part of the attraction, students told *The Vancouver Sun* recently. Many also like the unusual block plan that sees students focus exclusively on one subject for three and a half weeks before moving on to the next. Each term has four courses, but their delivery allows students to immerse themselves in the topic, the university says.

To ensure a well-rounded education, Quest has 16 required courses during first and second years that range from mathematics, political economy and molecular biology to classes on rhetoric, reason and freedom, and democracy and justice. There are also studies abroad, field work and internships.

Some students say they also like the fact their tutors are teachers, first and foremost. Although they engage in research, teaching is their prime responsibility and their continuing contracts include an expectation that they will be on campus for at least nine months of the year. There is no tenure.

“I do feel that ultimately the success of this university depends on my own contributions,” said life-sciences tutor Annie Prud’homme-Généreux. “I think most of us feel that way, that this university belongs to us.”

Surprisingly, in a province where supporters of private and public education often clash, there’s been little criticism of Quest recently. At a University of B.C. conference last fall about higher-education governance, Quest’s chief academic officer, Jim Cohn, was warmly received by his public-university colleagues.

“I welcome Quest,” said David Mirhady, president of the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of B.C., which represents academic staff at the province’s five big public universities.

“The opportunities for Quest’s sort of small, liberal arts niche seem wide open, and I’ve been impressed with Jim Cohn’s vision.”

Strangway, the university’s founding chancellor, is retired in Kelowna and no longer involved with Quest.

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