

The Research Universities' Council of British Columbia

Submission to:

House of Commons
Standing Committee on Finance
Pre-Budget Consultation
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The Research Universities' Council of British Columbia (RUCBC) represents the interests of British Columbia's research universities: The University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, University of Northern British Columbia, Royal Roads University and Thompson Rivers University. RUCBC's mandate is to identify issues facing the universities, provide system-wide leadership in the development of relevant public policy and communicate on behalf of the university system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

Upskill Canadian Talent

That the Government of Canada works with the provinces on a national strategy to upskill and educate our workers to fill in-demand jobs across the Canadian economy. The strategy should support and extend post-secondary opportunities to traditionally marginalized communities, those most harmed by the pandemic, and to Indigenous peoples.

Recommendation 2:

Invest in Research and Knowledge Mobilization

That the Government of Canada leads a national innovation agenda with significant new investments in research and knowledge mobilization, with an emphasis on helping domestic companies grow and compete globally.

Recommendation 3:

Build New Education Infrastructure

That the Government of Canada works with the provinces to build the green, digital and accessible post-secondary infrastructure required to teach, learn and discover in a post-pandemic world where just-in-time and just-on-topic learning will become essential elements of national prosperity. Place emphasis on security and safety of computing, instructional, and research platforms.

Recommendation 4:

Attract and Keep Talent

That the Government of Canada rejects the knowledge isolationism emerging in other countries with new investments to attract and retain international and home-grown talent, focusing on opportunities for advancing graduate student and faculty support and recruitment.

Introduction

COVID-19 is exposing the fragility of societies and economies throughout the world. As a small, open economy dependent on global trade, Canada is particularly vulnerable to the economic and health effects of the pandemic.

Since its onset, Canadians have demonstrated the power of collective action to confront a common threat. We applaud the leadership of the federal and provincial governments to save lives, bend the curve, strengthen our health care system, and tangibly support those most impacted.

As Canadians look to recovery, we have an opportunity to mobilize resources behind a nation-wide effort to build a future that is more prosperous, sustainable and resilient to both natural and human-made calamities.

In pursuit of this goal, Canada has many advantages, from our abundant natural resources to our shared sense of citizenship and belonging. Of those strengths, our collective knowledge, and its potential to expand opportunities for all Canadians, is among the most valuable and enduring.

The Research Universities' Council of British Columbia (RUCBC) is dedicated to the proposition that *tapping and growing knowledge to expand opportunity is the surest way for British Columbia and for Canada to succeed in a post-COVID world marked by uncertainty and change.*

The four recommendations in this submission contribute to the broad-based generation and mobilization of knowledge so that Canadians from all backgrounds and regions of the country can realize their full potential.

These recommendations also support and amplify the proposals brought forward by RUCBC's member institutions and by Universities Canada with whom we share a common vision and goals.

Recommendation 1: Upskill Canadian Talent

COVID-19 has been devastating to our economy and has cost Canadians hundreds of thousands of jobs, of which many will not return. It has also accelerated the adoption of technological and related changes that will permanently shift how we work and live.

The impact of COVID-19 on job markets and on Canada's most vulnerable workers threatens to disrupt communities, increase economic inequality, and harm the fabric of our society. Meeting this challenge is one the most urgent priorities for a successful post-COVID recovery.

As in the post-War period, when Canada expanded the post-secondary franchise beyond a small elite, the post-COVID era calls for similar determination and vision to dramatically and comprehensively upgrade the skills and abilities of our national workforce. This effort must

extend post-secondary opportunities to traditionally marginalized communities, to those most harmed by the pandemic, and to Indigenous peoples.

In British Columbia, and throughout the country, universities are well-positioned to help meet this goal. Labour market surveys indicate that future new jobs will require university-level analytical, communication and creative skills. Our universities can respond quickly to the changing needs of our economy, directing resources to programs that are in high demand.

British Columbia's research universities stand ready to work with our partners in the provincial and federal governments to design and execute a national strategy to upskill Canadian workers, expand post-secondary access, and develop new programming that is aligned to the needs of all Canadians in the post-COVID economy.

Recommendation 2: Invest in Research and Knowledge Mobilization

It is widely accepted that research and innovation are the bedrock of sustained productivity and prosperity. The pandemic has provided valuable insights and lessons on how research can be mobilized to advance national priorities. British Columbia's research universities are prominent in regional, national and international efforts marshalling resources to enhance public health responses to the pandemic, to improve testing and develop vaccines, and to help understand and mitigate social and economic impacts.

In order to meet the challenge of recovery, the value that is being placed on research to confront the crisis must be extended to broad-based innovation. For Canada, that means strongly supporting university-led research and translating the results into jobs and opportunities. We need a nationwide increase in research investment to the level of peer nations accompanied by a comprehensive strategy for knowledge mobilization that promotes innovation, supports business creation and scaling, and enables strategic approaches to intellectual property and globally successful business models.

Investments in research backed by a national knowledge mobilization strategy can help domestic companies to scale and compete globally, provide the tools to accelerate and ease the transition to a low-carbon economy, and generate jobs and opportunities throughout the country. A knowledge mobilization strategy would leverage existing investments in university research, strengthen support for domestic companies, and enhance our economic and policy resilience in times of crisis.

Recommendation 3: Build New Education Infrastructure

Infrastructure and knowledge are the lifeblood of economic renewal and progress.

In the twentieth century, the expansion of post-secondary education came with massive investments in campus infrastructure to support an historic influx of new students. In the twenty-first century, further extending the reach and impact of post-secondary education will require a similar effort to build the next generation of learning infrastructure.

COVID-19 has brought these challenges into stark focus as post-secondary institutions have moved hundreds of thousands of students and learners from the classroom into the global digital network as a primary means of teaching. In the post-COVID world of increasingly blended learning, buildings and laboratories will need to be supplemented by broadband technology, cybersecurity, and the computer hardware and software that students need to succeed in an online learning environment. This is particularly true for students and learners in remote communities and for those who require flexibility in their learning schedules.

The conditions are ripe for such capital and infrastructure investments. The post-secondary sector has proven its ability to build and mobilize the benefits of new infrastructure quickly. Borrowing rates are low, Canadian workers need jobs, and provinces like British Columbia are ready to partner with the federal government on major infrastructure investment and renewal.

Recommendation 4: *Attract and Keep Talent*

The British Columbian and Canadian economies benefit enormously from both international and home-grown talent. High-caliber faculty and graduate students from Canada and around the world generate knowledge that supports the growth of companies, nurtures new industries and helps us tackle some of our most pressing economic and social challenges, from climate action to public health.

In some countries, COVID-19 has produced a reaction against international education. It would be a mistake for Canada to follow suit. The melding of international and Canadian talent in our universities sparks creativity, creates new opportunities, and supports the economic growth and dynamism that all Canadians rely on for our quality of life.

Therefore, rather than rejecting international education, we should take advantage of this opportunity to welcome talent to our shores and make significant investments to keep Canadian talent at home with new supports for graduate level education, faculty recruitment, and talent development.

Conclusion

Canadian history is punctuated by periods in which the country faced great challenges. Today, as we confront the worst health and economic crisis in living memory, we are all called upon to help build a post-COVID future that is worthy of our country and the values it aspires to. In this national effort, our greatest asset is the knowledge we share and the opportunities it creates. The recommendations in this submission are aimed at seizing the opportunity that COVID provides to getting the most out of our collective potential to build a better Canada, and a better world.