

Higher Learning Symposium

Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell
Vancouver
March 24, 2006

Check against delivery

It's a pleasure to be here with so many leaders of B.C.'s post-secondary education system from both the public and private sectors. Our system's strength owes much to your dedication to higher learning, and to your excellent work in advancing each of your institutions, and supporting the system as a whole.

It was also a great pleasure this afternoon to have the opportunity to listen to Bob Rae, whose report is definitely "required reading" for anyone in Canada with a job connected to higher learning.

One of the things he recommended was more seats – something we've been working on in this province with our strategic investment plan. Two years ago we promised to expand our public system with 25,000 new seats by 2010. We made that commitment because our knowledge-based economy requires a workforce that is highly educated and highly motivated. And we also knew we had to work quickly to offset the loss of hundreds of thousands of baby boomers who are edging towards retirement.

We set our sights on making British Columbia the best-educated, most literate place in North America, and our seat expansion is one of the keys to reaching that goal. In the coming year, we will pass the halfway point in funding the new student spaces.

Many have gone to high priority programs like health care, and oil and gas, and tourism and hospitality. In our medical training program, for example, we added almost 100 spaces for student doctors last year, and again this year. We'll add the same number next year, and the year after that. In fact, we're leading the nation in training more doctors – and in training new nurses. We expect that by the end of this year, more than 6,500 nurses will have graduated in B.C. since 2001. These are terrific accomplishments, and I thank all of you who have helped make this happen, and are contributing to the future health of British Columbians.

We're continuing to roll out the new seats as originally planned, with a few modifications. This year, we have fine-tuned the plan to respond to our province's remarkable economic recovery, which has shifted enrolment patterns. Rural colleges have been particularly affected, as people put off their education to take the good jobs that are available. Meanwhile, some other institutions are seeing demand that's higher than anyone had predicted.

So this year some minor reallocations have been made, shifting seats to where they're most needed. I'm pleased to see this flexibility and co-operation among our institutions. And I'd like to thank everyone involved in making our strategic investment plan work for B.C.'s students and for B.C.'s economy.

Today, of course, it's not enough just to master what we've learned if we want a vibrant and growing economy. We must also pursue new knowledge through an aggressive program of leading-edge research.

Our province already has a good reputation in that regard. Far from the brain drain Canada has suffered in the past, we're enjoying a brain gain as more and more scientists are drawn here by the renewed vitality of our research climate.

Our goals are to improve our position, to keep our resource sector competitive and sustainable, to strengthen our high-tech industries, to fuel economic growth and to create jobs, another of our great goals. That's why last month's budget funneled so many resources into a broad range of research.

We earmarked \$50 million for an endowment that focuses on natural resources and applied sciences research. The fund will support research, innovation, technology transfer and commercialization. And it will do this through partnerships involving post-secondary institutions and industry.

We led the world in fighting SARS, and continue to lead in genome research. Both are critical tools as we prepare for the next influenza pandemic. Genome BC is producing groundbreaking discoveries in areas as diverse as agriculture, resource industries, health and the environment. We are building on that momentum by making new research investments in everything from life sciences to natural resources.

In life sciences, we made a major commitment to Genome BC, which has already received \$64 million from the Province and will now receive another \$45 million. An additional \$70 million will flow to the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research. We will also work with the B.C. and Yukon division of the Canadian Cancer

Society to fund a \$4-million research chair in cancer prevention. And we will invest another \$15 million in Alzheimer's research.

In the technology field, we're looking at a B.C. Hub network that would bring together business and research to promote innovation based on our province's technological strengths. The end result would be a faster rate of commercialization, and more globally competitive industries.

These new investments will complement our other research commitments like the Leading Edge Endowment Fund, and the B.C. Knowledge Development Fund. We've also enhanced and expanded BCNet, British Columbia's advanced network for research and education.

Looking to future budgets, we are also working on a graduate student plan, which has three main thrusts. It aims for funding for new graduate student spaces to allow research-intensive universities to expand their programs. It looks at supporting internship programs that will help students connect with industry – and industry connect with new thoughts and news ideas. And finally, it proposes a provincial scholarship and fellowship program to help us recruit the best and the brightest graduate students – and to encourage students to continue their master's, PhD and post-doctoral studies.

We've also been active in improving all our major undergraduate scholarships. We've tripled the value of the Premier's Excellence Awards and the major Queen Elizabeth Centennial Scholarship. And for exceptional students who are taking advantage of our transfer system to finish their degrees, we've contributed \$15 million to a new scholarship program. Until the end of the month, we're accepting applications for this year's Irving K. Barber B.C. Scholarship. It provides \$5,000 for up to 150 students each year who must move within the public post-secondary system to get their bachelor's degrees. This year we will also follow through on our commitment to help students study in other countries, through the One World Scholarship.

Merit awards like the Ike Barber and One World scholarships are important – but they are only a small part of the financial assistance the Province makes available to students. Our major focus is helping those with low incomes to go on to post-secondary studies – and to complete them. Over the next three years, we've budgeted more than \$485 million for student financial aid, including loan reductions for students most in need, grants for students with disabilities, debt relief and loan forgiveness. Over \$300 million is also available every year for B.C. student loans.

This year we're increasing funding for student financial assistance by 17 per cent to ensure costs relating to increased interest rates and inflation are met. That includes \$800,000 more for loan reductions.

We were very pleased with the first run of our loan reduction program last fall. We forgave more debt than we'd predicted – in fact, fifth-year students with dependents had all their B.C. student loans forgiven for 2004-2005.

On the Aboriginal front, our landmark MOU with our post-secondary institutions, the federal government and key Aboriginal groups is a source of great satisfaction, and even greater promise. The partners are developing an action plan for working together to improve participation and success for Aboriginal students.

Meanwhile, last week, the ministry presented its Aboriginal strategy at our annual forum and received very valuable feedback. Last month, we announced the first of our two Aboriginal research chairs – and the other announcement is expected in the next few months.

We're encouraged that the number of Aboriginal high school graduates is rising every year, along with the number of post-secondary students who identify themselves as Aboriginal. This is due, in part, to the \$7.8 million in Aboriginal Special Projects Funding the government has provided. It's benefited more than 3,400 Aboriginal learners so far, increasing participation, success and retention rates.

We're also making sure we bring education to rural and remote communities, where Aboriginal people make up a large proportion of B.C.'s population. We're doing this through BCcampus, regional college campuses, and courses delivered right to the door of Aboriginal communities.

We're also working to increase the number of Aboriginal faculty and staff at post-secondary institutions. That way, we'll improve understanding of cultural differences in learning styles and needs – and give Aboriginal students more role models.

We've established the minister's advisory council on post-secondary education, which includes Aboriginal representation. As you know, we've also been discussing Aboriginal post-secondary education issues with our institutions, and are looking at ways to develop accountability measures for Aboriginal student participation and success.

We are also turning our attention to international education. Supporting the efforts of post-secondary institutions to attract students from other countries is a priority because international education is good for the social, cultural and economic development of our province.

International students add to the foundations of improved international relations. They enrich the experience of other students on our campuses. And on top of the direct revenue they generate by way of tuition fees, they also contribute to our economy with what they spend on housing, food and entertainment.

More than half of B.C.'s international students come from the Asia Pacific region. That's why international education is a key part of our Asia Pacific Gateway Strategy.

We've re-dedicated ourselves to boosting B.C.'s advantage in attracting international students. We're looking at ways of improving our marketing, including focusing on particular countries and integrating our work with efforts by the Asian Pacific Trade Council.

I know your institutions have also been working to attract more international students. And I've been impressed by the services for these students at the various campuses I've visited around the province.

We're well positioned to attract international students – because of what British Columbia has to offer. That includes a high standard of living, stable, safe and beautiful surroundings and a superior post-secondary education system.

Your work, and that of your colleagues, deserves much of the credit for the quality of higher learning in B.C. today. My goal – and I know you share it – is to keep our standards high and to continue, bit by bit, to raise the bar.

We need to know that we have the right mix of programs and institutions for British Columbia – and that we're putting the foundation in place for success. We want to provide the best possible education for today's students, and set the stage for students of the future to have learning experiences that are just as good – and better.

I look forward to working with you more closely over the coming months as we review our system and define our vision for the future. We will have the best educated, most literate jurisdiction in North America. And we will have you to thank for it.

Thank you.

-30-