

Speech to KPMG and post-secondary institution administrators

Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell
Vancouver
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Check against delivery

Every year, KPMG does third-party audits for 14 of our 26 public universities, colleges, university-colleges and institutes, with total annual revenues of almost \$1.5 billion.

Much of that money comes from the provincial government – we invest \$2.2 billion of taxpayers' money in higher learning every year. That puts our operating budget as the third-largest of any ministry in government – and we're second highest in capital funding. In fact, we have committed more than \$1 billion to capital projects since 2001.

Taxpayers are getting excellent value for these investments – thanks in very large part to the work of people in this room. We're educating more students than ever before in the history of our province. And we're being recognized for the quality of our post-secondary education.

For example, in the Maclean's magazine rankings earlier this month, all of four of our research universities – for the first time – placed in the top five in their categories.

Our colleges and university colleges meet an incredibly diverse range of educational needs, both in far-flung, scattered populations – and in concentrated urban settings, delivering their programs in innovative ways.

And our provincial institutes offer top-notch programs in their areas of specialization, while maintaining a presence in regions outside their main campuses through creative partnerships with community colleges, university colleges and other organizations.

But as good as our institutions are individually, B.C.'s post-secondary system is far more than the sum of its parts. That's because we've focused on encouraging institutions to work together.

BCcampus is an excellent example, as a collaborative web-based gateway designed to give students one-stop access to online learning resources at any of our public post-secondary institutions. It's in the final stage of development, and already students are finishing their education faster by taking advantage of courses at other institutions. And students in areas with small population bases have access to the greater choices of programming offered by our province's larger institutions. It's fantastic to see you all working together so effectively, and to see such excellent results.

Another area reflecting high levels of collaboration is our transfer system – consistently described as one of the most comprehensive and effective in North America – if not the world.

Back in the '70s, universities were just beginning to recognize college credits towards their bachelor's degrees. By 2003/04, more than 4,000 students were transferring each year from colleges to universities – and according to recent studies, doing equally well as – or even better than – students who went to university straight from high school.

I'd like to tell you about just one of those students – although there are many like him. His name is Tag Danforth. His life has changed because of our transfer system – and he is likely to change the lives of many others as a result.

Tag grew up in Taber, Alberta, on the family grain farm he expected to take over as a fourth generation farmer. Because he wasn't focused on school, he just scraped by each year, and didn't finish Grade 12 – which might not have mattered so much if the farm had remained financially viable.

But, like many others, it fell victim to the financial changes of the '80s, and was sold. So Tag went to Vancouver. He picked up jobs in construction, doing some part-time work as paramedic. Meanwhile, he married, and he and his wife had two children.

But Tag's roots were rural through and through, and eventually it was time to get out of the city. He and his family moved to the Kootenays, where Tag worked – off and on – in construction. This was before B.C.'s economy turned around, by the way!

So Tag decided to go back to school, with the goal of becoming a doctor.

His first step was to enrol in seven adult basic education courses at Selkirk College – all in one semester. He scored the highest marks the college had ever seen – between 96 and 100% in all seven courses. Having proved to himself that his brain had NOT ossified, he went on to university transfer courses at Selkirk. Then he was accepted by UBC, and got into med school before even completing his undergrad degree.

Today Tag is in second year of the northern medical program at UNBC – and he plans to move back to the Kootenays to practise as a family doctor. Tag will be providing excellent medical care to people in an underserved area of our province – which is the whole idea behind our distributed learning for medical students.

We need more doctors – and a huge number of other professionals and skilled workers as B.C. moves into the knowledge economy, and continues to create jobs. Our employment rate is the lowest in 30 years, and we remain Canada's top job creator. At the same time, the pace of baby boomer retirement is beginning to pick up.

The partnership between the Ministry of Advanced Education and our post-secondary institutions is vital to help students prepare for the increasingly exciting choices open to them – and to keep our province moving forward.

One of the things KPMG has asked me to discuss today is how the Ministry of Advanced Education's work fits in to government's overall direction. Let's see – my next meeting is at 2:30 – do you all have that long?

Seriously, I can't stress enough how important advanced education is to the government's plans for the next decade. The Premier has set five great goals, and higher learning is intrinsic to all of them.

Keeping in mind that we do have time constraints, I'll give you just a few examples for each goal, starting with Number 1. To make B.C. the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent: We've begun the largest strategic expansion of British Columbia's post-secondary education system in 40 years, adding 25,000 new spaces over six years so students can get the education they need, where and when they need it. We've established a new university and new college in the Okanagan, and a new university in Kamloops, and are bringing the World Trade University to B.C. And we've doubled our funding for adult literacy programs in communities around the province.

Our second goal is to lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness. Studies show that people with post-secondary education enjoy better health, so as we educate more British Columbians, we're helping them move towards healthier living. We've also created a loan forgiveness program for doctors, nurses and others in health-related professions who practise in under-served regions.

Goal Number 3 is to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk and seniors: We've given resources to our institutions to provide a range of support services for students with disabilities. We're providing the technology needed by people with disabilities to pursue post-secondary education, in partnership with the federal government. And we're funding research chairs to spur new knowledge with long-term social benefits, including research on early childhood development, depression and addictions.

Our fourth goal is to lead the world in sustainable environmental management, with the best air and water quality, and the best fisheries management, bar none. That includes:

- Funding research chairs on environmental management, including salmon conservation, sustainable horticulture and marine ecosystems.
- Providing millions of dollars for clean energy and fuel cell research infrastructure, and for new aquaculture research infrastructure.
- Investing in Project NEPTUNE, the world's largest cable-linked seafloor observatory, which will lead to more accurate estimates of commercial fish stocks and improved models for climate prediction.

And finally, we're also contributing to creating more jobs per capita than anywhere else in Canada: Investments in research at post-secondary institutions are leading to new, exciting commercial applications that are resulting in new companies and jobs around the province. Our 25,000-seat expansion itself will result in thousands of new jobs. The new Okanagan campus of UBC alone is expected to create more than 2,000 jobs by 2010. And once students finish their post-secondary education, many start their own businesses, and go on to hire staff, creating even more positions.

I've also been asked to speak today about what I've been working on – to the extent I'm able to share that information ... thank you for that caveat!

One major area, of course, is research and technology, which I was delighted to have added to my portfolio.

British Columbia's prosperity is closely tied to how successfully we seize emerging opportunities – and how we position ourselves in the knowledge-based economy. Our formula for success is research, innovation and commercialization.

The importance of research and the effect it has on the world we live in cannot be overstated. Research is changing our day-to-day lives and the landscape of our communities – it is helping create the tools British Columbians need to adapt and learn and prosper. Ultimately, our goal is to ensure communities, businesses and families across our province move forward and benefit directly from research funding and the subsequent opportunities it will create.

Government is committed to investing in research and development because we believe that it's essential for the growth of a knowledge-based economy and society. With initiatives like the Leading Edge Endowment Fund, and the B.C. Knowledge Development Fund, we are building the kind of world-class research community this province wants and needs.

We're currently working on an overarching research and innovation strategy, which has excellent support among my cabinet colleagues. The strategy will take full advantage of public AND private research facilities in the province.

Another of our top priorities is Aboriginal education, which supports this government's long-term vision of economic prosperity for all First Nations and Aboriginal communities in British Columbia.

Higher learning for Aboriginal students is a key to that prosperity. And because of the large number of Aboriginal youth, it will also help meet our province's growing needs for skilled workers. That's why our landmark memorandum of understanding on Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training is so important. It was signed by key Aboriginal organizations, our government, the federal government and our institutions of higher learning. And it signals our collective commitment to work together to bring more Aboriginal students to our campuses – and to improve their levels of success.

Our institutions are already doing phenomenal work in making their campuses more welcoming and inclusive for Aboriginal students. As a result, the numbers are rising – by about 1,000 each year. With this year's budget increase for Aboriginal Special Projects Funding, we expect those numbers will continue to grow. And we're currently working on a strategy that will, over time, result in Aboriginal students completing their studies on a level that compares with other learners.

Some of our plans will depend upon the upcoming budget, of course.

At this point, all I can tell you is we've made our submissions, and are waiting for feedback from Treasury Board. But what I can talk about in more detail is the work we're doing to ensure funding to all post-secondary institutions is transparent and consistent.

Earlier this year we committed to limit future tuition increases to the rate of inflation so we could keep education affordable for students – and for taxpayers. We recognized that this would affect the ability of some institutions to raise revenues. But we remain committed to our 25,000-seat expansion program – and to working with post-secondary institutions to ensure appropriate funding is available to meet our seat growth targets.

Our first step was to collaborate with the universities and BCIT on a financial review to help them manage the tuition policy change. Now that we've finished that review, we want to ensure the funding framework for our other institutions is also effective, transparent – and consistent.

We are also enhancing transparency on another front by changing the way we count students in the college sector, and moving to a method that is more like the university model.

Simply, one full-time student equals one FTE. And an FTE represents one student completing all the requirements of a full-time program in a period that extends over one normal academic year.

Currently, as those of you from the college, university college and institute sector know, different methods of counting FTEs are used for different program areas.

The new model removes inconsistencies that have arisen since the early and mid '90s. It allows for innovative delivery, and eliminates disincentives for some programs. And I understand the new method is also simpler and easier.

A 10-member peer review committee has put a lot of time and effort into considering this approach. I want to thank Roy Daykin from Kwantlen University College, and Ken Burt from Okanagan College, for their contributions to that committee.

And in addition to thanking Roy and Ken, I would like to commend all the other administrators in this room for their contribution to the students of B.C.

Your leadership, and in particular your expertise in financial planning and budget management principles, has helped make the most of every dollar the Province has invested in educating our students.

And your willingness to work in partnership with other institutions, and with the government, is taking post-secondary education to new levels in British Columbia.

Some aspects of our system – the high degree of articulation, for example, and the innovative approach provided by BCcampus to online learning – are leading the way for other educators in Canada, and elsewhere in the world.

I am proud of our partnerships, and I thank you for your contribution, and for your commitment to excellence in post-secondary education.

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