

Response to the February 2006 Throne Speech

Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell
Legislature of British Columbia
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It's an honour today, as Minister of Advanced Education, to rise and respond to the speech from the throne and to say that advanced education, research and technology and all British Columbians will be the winners as a result of the changes our government has signalled.

The measures announced in the throne speech will go a long way towards determining the future of this province. Research, technology, health care, life sciences and our place in the knowledge-based economy will all take giant steps forward as a result. These advantages will build on our government's accomplishments in leading our province towards fulfilling its rich potential.

Since 2001 we've been working to put a foundation in place that will support our goals and dreams for the future. A huge component of that foundation is higher education. Making sure all British Columbians have access to advanced education is one of the most important things our government can do in this era of transformative change.

As our economy grows and develops, we need more skilled people to fill the record number of new jobs we are creating. Those skilled people earn more and thus contribute more tax revenues, which provide services like health care. Because better educated people are also healthier, they make fewer demands on our health care and other services, and they have a strong sense of social responsibility which they can channel into making a difference in their own lives and in the wider world.

Those are some of the reasons we have focused on opening the doors of advanced education to more British Columbians. We promised to create 25,000 student spaces by 2010, and we've already funded almost 11,000 of them. We've established university campuses in both Kelowna and Kamloops, and we've committed more than a billion dollars to improve and expand campuses across the province. We've also put hundreds of millions of dollars into research and technology to help build the kind of world-class research community our province wants and needs.

Those of you who listened to the throne speech know we intend to do much more. The new global economy is ultimately driven not just by mastering what we have learned but by pursuing new knowledge. Our government has always been committed to investing in research and development and is supporting the wealth of research talent, ability and creativity in this province. We led the world in fighting SARS, and we continue to lead in genome research. Both are critical tools in the effort to prepare for the next global influenza pandemic.

Genome B.C. is producing groundbreaking discoveries in areas as diverse as agriculture, resource, health and the environment. Far from the brain drain Canada has suffered in the past, we are enjoying a brain gain as more and more scientists are attracted to the renewed vitality of British Columbia's research climate. We are building on that momentum by making new research investments in everything from life sciences to natural resources.

In the months ahead we will announce a major commitment to Genome B.C., which has already received \$64 million from the province. Another funding announcement will accelerate the spinal cord research done by the Rick Hansen Man in Motion Foundation. We also work with the B.C. and Yukon Division of the Canadian Cancer Society to establish a research chair in primary prevention of cancer. We will also collaborate with the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation to

help establish a national collaborative that will increase the efforts across Canada to find a cure for this destructive and heartbreaking disease. We are committed to finding the cause and the ways to prevent and treat not only dementia but also cancer and other illnesses.

In the technology field, a B.C. Hub network will bring together business and research to promote innovation based on our province's technical strengths. The end result will be a faster rate of commercialization and more globally competitive industries. As well, this year we will create a natural resources and applied sciences research endowment. Its purpose will be to support advanced training, research and development; technology transfer and commercialization in natural resources; engineering and applied sciences.

Our goal is to keep our resource sector competitive and sustainable. At the same time, we want to strengthen our high-tech industries, encourage new sectors, fuel economic growth and create jobs. We'll be working with industry, other levels of government and people in the various regions of the province to ensure the success of this new foundation. These new investments will complement our other research commitments, like the leading-edge endowment fund and the British Columbia knowledge development fund. LEEF is helping our post-secondary institutions attract and retain world-class researchers.

Twenty British Columbia leadership chairs and nine regional innovation chairs support innovation in health care, environmental stewardship, technology and other public services. Our B.C. knowledge development fund is available to post-secondary institutions, teaching hospitals and affiliated non-profit agencies when they need research equipment or facilities. It could be about \$30,000 for a workstation in the Okanagan to study watershed management, or it could be \$30 million to develop NEPTUNE, the world's largest cable-length sea floor observatory off North America's west coast.

Since we assumed office, grants from the B.C. Knowledge Development Fund, plus other funding, has helped leverage \$600 million from other sources throughout the country. We have also enhanced and expanded BCNET, British Columbia's advanced network of research and education. BCNET is vital to projects like NEPTUNE and WestGrid.

Working together as governments, businesses, post-secondary institutions and students, we can create an environment that nurtures and supports our growing research community, and every British Columbian will benefit in the long run. As we ramp up our support for research, we continue towards making British Columbia the most highly educated and literate place in North America.

Today we live in a brave new world with abundant opportunities. Our knowledge-based economy requires highly educated and motivated people who understand that what you earn depends on what you learn. Creating that workforce requires more access to post-secondary education, which we are providing through the largest strategic expansion of our public system in 40 years. We are almost halfway into our plan to add 25,000 new student spaces to our public system. Some of those spaces are for educating more nurses and doctors. In fact, we're leading the nation in the creation of new nurse and physician training.

When we took office in 2001, UBC's school of medicine was well regarded, but it was also very small, considering our population. It offered 120 first-year training spaces for student doctors — unchanged over the previous 20 years. In the same 20 years, however, B.C.'s population had increased by 50 percent. Not only that, the average age was rising and still is. In fact, as a population ages, the demand for health care grows exponentially.

We looked at the numbers, and we took action. We announced that we would nearly double the number of student spaces for doctors at UBC's medical school and would provide part of their education at the University of Victoria and the University of Northern B.C. in Prince George.

You ask why. Because we know that many doctors set up their practices close to where they've been trained, and we want our new doctors spread around the province, especially in underserved areas. So we did something brand-new in Canada — something being watched closely by other medical schools around the world: we built new facilities at all three universities. Then we linked them with high-tech video conferencing so students could all attend the same lectures, interact with each other and their professors all at the same time.

The first two classes of students in the northern and Island medical programs are already studying in Prince George and in Victoria. By 2009 the graduating class will be nearly doubled, and the number of doctors educated in B.C. in 2001.... But we're not stopping there. Our intention is to add still more seats to those three medical programs so that we'll have doubled the number of doctors graduating in B.C.

I'd also like to call your attention to other medical professionals that we're educating who can help us with our goal of leading North America in healthy living. We've created B.C.'s first programs to educate midwives and nurse practitioners, who are now playing important roles in our health care system. We are now training hundreds of more nurses every year. To date our government has increased the number of nursing seats by more than 60 per cent, and that's just one example of how our seat expansion is unfolding.

It is also targeted towards fulfilling the skill shortages anticipated as baby-boomers leave the workforce. Our plan was built on a balanced approach to train more people with the skill sets we need to keep our province firing on all cylinders. But the demand for skilled workers in energy, construction and in the related trades of forestry, mining, agriculture, engineering and technology goes well beyond B.C.'s borders. We will work with the other provinces and the federal government on a national plan for skills development, because there is no room for parochialism in approaching this nationwide challenge.

At home our industrial training authority will expand its programs in trades and training of apprenticeships. New initiatives will be launched to encourage employers to renew their efforts and investments in skills training.

Our government is also moving to capitalize on our province's emerging strengths such as digital media. B.C. has the largest digital media cluster in Canada, with over 800 companies. Our province is the third-largest film and TV production centre in North America. Vancouver is the largest game development centre in the world. That's why we will provide funding to create a leading-edge digital media centre at the Great Northern Way campus in Vancouver.

UBC, SFU, BCIT, the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the private sector will all collaborate to create this graduate program, which will be unlike any other in Canada. It will solidify our global reputation as a leader in digital media and will stimulate further opportunities for growth in digital entertainment.

British Columbia has also been leading by opening new universities to reinvigorate our post-secondary system. Last year Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops and UBC Okanagan in Kelowna expanded choices for students in the province's interior. Now we're looking forward to the opening of a private, not-for-profit World Trade University in Chilliwack.

The World Trade University was launched as a United Nations global education partnership and will offer graduate programs in trade-related fields and development programs for working

international executives. It will help to build the government's new Asia-Pacific gateway strategy, which will open up every part of our province to new opportunities.

B.C. has enormous potential as the world's crucial crossroad to Asia-Pacific commerce. Partly that's due to the happy circumstances of our geography. We must capitalize on the circumstances by understanding the cultures, speaking the languages and meeting the needs of the Pacific Rim. New Pacific studies programs will be developed and offered at key post-secondary institutions across British Columbia. Training will be expanded in Mandarin, Japanese, Punjabi and Korean, and incentives will be developed for students to take these courses and complete them successfully.

We must also continue to improve access to public post-secondary education through BCcampus and our world-class transfer system. BCcampus is a web-based gateway to open learning — to on-line learning that offers one-stop access to on-line courses, programs and services to every post-secondary institution in the province. It brings higher education to towns and villages that are far from the nearest college or university. It is also tailor-made for people who want to fit their education around their families and their jobs, and it is clearly meeting those needs.

The number of enrolments through BCcampus is almost five times what it was three years ago, topping 12,000 today. It's a collaborative venture that builds on the existing on-line offerings, and the new cyberschool concept announced in the throne speech for the K-to-12 education system will build on this success. Through BCcampus, students apply for admission at just one institution, and then they are able to take on-line courses and have library access at any other institution offering the program in the public system. As a result, students in areas with small populations have access to the greater choices of programming offered in the larger centres. Students facing full courses in urban centres are often able to enrol in courses offered at institutions where seats are available.

One of the reasons for the success of BCcampus is our internationally recognized transfer system. It allows students to combine credits earned at different public post-secondary institutions and to transfer from one to another to complete their credentials. A student living in an area served by a community college can take the first two years of a degree program close to home, where the tuition and living costs are less expensive. Then he or she can transfer to a university, a university college, a provincial institute or sometimes even another college where courses are available to complete a degree.

This year we intend to improve our transfer system even further by allowing new transferability of credits for students attending accredited private post-secondary institutions. By leading the way with a highly evolved transfer system, we've put a huge range of educational options at the grasp of every post-secondary student in this province.

For exceptional students who are taking advantage of the transfer system to finish their degrees, we've created a new \$15 million scholarship program. Applications are being accepted for the Irving K. Barber B.C. Scholarship, which provides \$5,000 for up to 150 students each year who must move within the post-secondary system to get their bachelor's degrees. We've also tripled the value of the Premier's Excellence Awards, which go to the top high school graduates in each of our 15 college regions who are staying in B.C. for their post-secondary education.

This year we will follow through on our commitment to help post-secondary students pursue their studies in other countries through a One World scholarship. We'll announce details of this exciting opportunity in the coming months.

Meanwhile, we've taken action to keep higher education affordable for all students, because affordability is a large piece of accessibility. Last year, after tuition in B.C. reached the national

average, we limited further increases to the rate of inflation. The majority of students graduating from post-secondary programs in B.C. report: "Finished with no debt." For those who need to borrow, we offer a comprehensive, flexible student assistance program so that every student can choose to invest in their future.

We also have a loan reduction program to help students most in need to keep their debts down. Last year nearly 25,000 students benefited from this program and had more than \$65 million in B.C. student loans forgiven.

We want all British Columbians to be able to participate in the transformative growth and prosperity of this province. We are encouraging people who haven't traditionally made up much of the skilled force to consider going boldly where few have gone before.

That includes aboriginal students. We're encouraging that — that more are going on to higher education — in part because the number of aboriginal students who finish grade 12 is up 6 percent since 2001, but we still have a lot of work to do at education levels. For instance, most of our post-secondary institutions are in urban areas, while aboriginal people make up a large proportion of B.C.'s rural areas. So we are bringing education to rural and remote communities 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 the 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. We have also been discussing aboriginal post-secondary education issues with our institutions, which are looking for ways to develop accountable measures for aboriginal student participation and success.

We've signed an agreement with the federal government and aboriginal groups to demonstrate our intention to improve levels of participation and success in advanced education and training in British Columbia. We've increased funding for special projects that help our institutions promote culturally sensitive educational programs and support activities of aboriginal learners. We've reviewed the aboriginal programs, services and strategies in our post-secondary system, identifying innovative practices in this province.

Choice for everyone is one of our government's most basic tenets as we expand our post-secondary education system. Private post-secondary institutions, which have offered excellent programs in this province for the last hundred years, are part of providing that choice. Because private institutions operate at no cost to government, they allow us to maintain funding levels for the public post-secondary system. We expect them to offer quality comparable with the public counterparts in degree-level education.

Our Degree Authorization Act extends degree-granting privileges to private and out-of-province public institutions, but only after they undergo a thorough and rigorous review by the Degree Quality Assessment Board. Under this government, British Columbia became the first province in Canada to have an independent board review new degree programs for both public and private institutions. New degrees must meet established criteria for standards before they are given the green light. To date more than 70 new degrees from B.C. public and private and out-of-province institutions have been approved, giving students 70 more educational choices in this province.

Changes in legislation have also allowed public colleges to grant applied bachelor's degrees and university colleges and institutes to grant applied master's degrees. This contributes to the dynamic education system that ensures that new degrees meet the emerging needs in our

society and our workplaces. We are proud to be the Canadian leader in applying common quality assessment standards for degree programs at public and private institutions that will give our students greater access to quality education.

We are proud to be working with the private training institutions to ensure that students preparing for careers have excellent consumer protection as well as the option of choosing accredited schools for quality assurance. Private institutions offering career training programs must register with the Private Career Training Institutions Agency, which administers a student training completion fund. That fund provides consumer protection by offering students 100-percent compensation for their unearned tuition fees should the school unexpectedly close.

Registered training institutions also have the option of undergoing accreditation. This assures students choosing those schools that they have the facilities needed for the programs offered and instructors with the right blend of education and expertise.

Our goals as government are to enhance both public and private post-secondary education and training systems and to make sure that no unnecessary barriers stand in the way of any student in this province or in any way the future prosperity of this province as a whole.

One of the barriers we're very serious about eliminating is low literacy levels that prevent some British Columbians from doing essential tasks of daily living. Most of us take for granted that we can fill out a job application, balance our chequebook, read instructions on a medical label and understand our children's report cards, but for some, these tasks are difficult or even impossible.

The Ministry of Advanced Education has doubled the funding for adult literacy programs around the province. We're building on the adult literacy strategy to complement the many other literacy initiatives moving forward under the Ministry of Education. B.C. will host a pan-Canadian forum on adult literacy in June of this year — sponsored by the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada.

I also welcome the work being done by the Select Standing Committee on Education focusing specifically on the challenge of adult literacy. We have a top-notch post-secondary education system in this province, and that is the foundation for our success. We also have a strong, vibrant research community that's about to become even stronger as a result of the announcements you can expect over the next few months. Both are critical drivers of the transformative change needed to achieve the Premier's great goals in this province.

We're investing in new seats, new facilities, new approaches to make our system even better, and we're already seeing the results. Our researchers are opening doors to discoveries that will improve the quality of our lives in ways we can hardly imagine. More British Columbians are getting the education they need to fulfil their hopes and dreams. We can be sure that those hopes and dreams will translate into benefits for everyone in our province and for the people well beyond our borders.