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Onward and upward for B.C.'s universities; The first system-wide study in decades makes a compelling case for shared resources and focused energies

*Campus 2020*, a comprehensive report on B.C.'s post-secondary system released this week by special advisor Geoff Plant, sets out an audacious plan for the future of learning and research in British Columbia.

One of the many achievements of Mr. Plant's sweeping review and recommendations is the clarity with which his report addresses the provincial government's "great goal" to be North America's best-educated and most literate jurisdiction.

Not only has he suggested that universities must work together to share resources and focus energies, he has also posited new mechanisms to ensure greater cooperation between universities and the communities in which they are active. There hasn't been a system-wide vision comparable to what Mr. Plant delivered this week to Premier Gordon Campbell since John MacDonald's 1962 report, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future*. There is much to praise in *Campus 2020*, and much for the government to contemplate in the coming months. Two linked ideas particularly resonate in my reading of the report.

First, Mr. Plant clearly believes, as I do, that across B.C.'s post-secondary system, institutional differentiation must be nurtured as carefully as institutional diversity is celebrated. Acknowledging the importance of access to BC's postsecondary offerings, he praises the breadth of choice on a continuum from skills training to graduate research.

But he goes further. For any of BC's higher education institutions to be truly excellent at the global level, we must have the focus of clear differentiation in mandate and funding framework. For example, within the university sector, Mr. Plant differentiates between the special roles of regional universities (like Kwantlen, Fraser Valley and Malaspina, which he recommends transitioning to full university status) and those of the research-intensive institutions (UBC, UVic and SFU).

"We must ensure," Mr. Plant writes, "that we have, within the province, institutions recognized as global leaders in teaching and in knowledge discovery, creation and application. These research-intensive institutions must continue to be the key incubators of the innovation needed to address our most pressing social and environmental challenges and to develop a strong economy."

The second idea that resonated strongly with me – it flows from the first -- is how to best support the research-intensive universities. Mr. Plant recommends that BC move from the current national position of fifth in provincial research funding to the top three. And he goes much further, calling for UBC, UVic and SFU to form a *Georgia Strait* research cluster that would receive at least 95 per cent of provincial research funding. He notes: “The only chance we have of creating a world-class centre of research excellence lies in the southwestern corner of the province.”

Mr. Plant adeptly recognizes the critical role that graduate students play in the research enterprise, from assisting senior investigators to renewing the professoriate. “To build world-class learning institutions,” he writes, “there must be an additional intensity of dedication to excellence at higher levels of learning, particularly in graduate studies.”

He sets a bold target: by 2015, BC should have the highest per capita grad student enrolment in Canada. And he maintains focus: all new graduate spaces should be allocated to the Georgia Strait research cluster, according to the existing distribution of research funding and grad student enrolment.

For this increased public investment in research, Mr. Plant wants, naturally, to see greater public benefits. He notes UBC’s technology transfer success in the life sciences, which has attracted \$1.5 billion in private investment and placed it among North America’s top 10 universities for spin-off companies and patents. But the Georgia Strait universities, he believes, can and must expand their partnerships to create equally valuable social and economic innovation in areas as diverse as multiculturalism, environmental science, global migration and changing demographics.

While all involved will scan *Campus 2020* through their particular lens, I believe that we can all agree it is as thoughtful and comprehensive a prescription as any could have wished from the intensive five-month consultation that Mr. Plant led. From inspiring goals for Aboriginal participation, to bold ideas on tuition and financial assistance, and an entirely new accountability infrastructure, Mr. Plant has made a remarkable contribution to our province’s post-secondary future.

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