

*Originally appeared in the *National Post*, 30 March 2012 – 9:52 AM ET

Stephen Toope: Federal budget signals a commitment to innovation

By Stephen Toope

In the global knowledge economy, a country's greatest strategic advantage is its capacity to discover and innovate.

The federal government acknowledged this clearly in Thursday's budget, with its commitment to make smart investments in research and innovation. Maintaining such priorities at a time of difficult fiscal decisions affirms Prime Minister Stephen Harper's declared ambition to position Canada as a centre of excellence in research, innovation and higher education.

That last component — higher education — is critical to the mix. Education is our best tool for cultivating creativity and equipping citizens to engage globally.

When it comes to developing our human potential, Canada's universities deliver the greatest possible return on investment. They prepare today's students for tomorrow's challenges. They strengthen our communities and drive discovery through dynamic research. They are where critical questions are asked — curious, provocative questions — yielding insights that reframe challenges and expose new possibilities.

Universities play a vital role not only in generating specific innovations, but in building an overall culture of innovation, embedding it in the character of our country.

To make the most of our investments in higher education, we have to create conditions within our universities that will attract highly qualified international students and professors — and entice talented Canadians from all walks of life to stay and do their best work here at home.

The benefits associated with investing in higher education, research and innovation are profound: A strong economy, unlocking human potential, enhancing our quality of life. Fortunately, public investments in Canadian research and innovation have increased nearly fourfold since 1995 — and continue to rise even during the economic downturn.

Around the world, countries are moving quickly to advance their discovery and innovation agendas. This is especially true among emerging economies, which are transforming themselves through dramatic investments in higher education and research. The number of people graduating from China's universities and specialized colleges has nearly quadrupled since 2000, and the so-called BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China — tripled their output of scientific articles between 1996 and 2007, a measure of their drive to innovate. Canada cannot afford to rest on its laurels, and our government understands that reality.

In presenting a strategic, multi-year agenda for discovery and innovation — including stable funding for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and new investment in the Canada Foundation for Innovation — the federal budget signals a commitment to ensuring that Canada is a leader in innovation.

Our future economic strength and social cohesion will depend less on what we now know, and more on what we are capable of learning. We must enhance our capacity to acquire, discover and utilize knowledge. This is — and has always been — the role of universities.

With sustained support, Canadian universities will continue to be laboratories of change and incubators of resilience-producing global citizens who are ready to thrive in a world where nothing stands still and the future belongs to those who imagine it, and build it, first.

Stephen Toope is the president and vice-chancellor of the University of British Columbia. He is also chair of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC).