

HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA

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Briefing Notes

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA

We describe key features of Canada's higher education provision and do so from a critical-reflective perspective. Rather than presenting a detailed analysis of the way in which higher education is arranged and managed, we look at key features, key challenges and underlying issues.

We do not provide a comprehensive review of the system in each province or territory nor do we provide a review of all of the issues policy-makers and institutional leadership are currently engaged in. Rather, we focus on "major highlights" or "key concerns".

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7 KEY FEATURES OF CANADA'S HIGHER EDUCATION "SYSTEM"

Canada does not have a "system" of higher education. It has several. Even the word "university" carries a different meaning in different parts of Canada. To understand the way in which higher education is provided, it is helpful to keep these 7 key features in mind.

1. Each province or territory in Canada has direct responsibility for post-secondary education.

While our federal or national government provides support for Aboriginal education, research and innovation and student scholarships and some funds, support for higher education institutions is a jealously guarded provincial responsibility. The absence of a national strategy has consequences: lack of consistency of funding, lack of national mechanisms to support post-secondary development constrains development and, according to some at least, reduces the contribution institutions can make to the competitive position of Canada. On the other hand, universities and colleges are better positioned to respond to local and regional issues and concerns when they are funded locally and regionally.

2. Post-secondary education is predominantly delivered through public provision.

The vast majority of college and university students attend public institutions. While there are private universities (e.g. Quest and University Canada West in British Columbia, a number of university colleges in Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island), the bulk of private provision is on college level programs (trades, para-professional and professional education). In recent years, there has also been the emergence of foreign-based institutions operating in Canada – e.g. Farleigh Dickinson University (US) in British Columbia and Charles Stuart University (Australia) in Ontario.

3. There are different understandings of the role of colleges, universities and polytechnics across Canada.

More specifically, there are two distinct histories of community colleges.

In Ontario, community colleges were established as institutions independent of the universities with the intention of offering a range of provision (trades, professional and para-professional education, community needed learning) at the level of trade qualifications, certificates and diplomas.

In Western Canada, colleges were established with a view to connecting to universities by offering qualifications which either laddered to university programs or were linked through transfer arrangements. Since the mid-1980s, colleges and polytechnics have also been able to offer degree programs (usually applied bachelor degrees, though in some cases graduate degrees have also been permitted).

We can capture these nuances in an understanding of 6 different types of institutions:

- (a) Comprehensive academic and research institutions;
- (b) Baccalaureate and applied studies institutions;
- (c) Polytechnic institutions;
- (d) Comprehensive community institutions;
- (e) Independent academic institutions; and

(f) Specialized arts and culture institutions.

All offer programs and qualifications.

4. Quality assurance is a patchwork quilt.

Just as provinces develop their own policies and strategies for the delivery of post-secondary education, they also manage and arrange the process for quality assurance. There are several quality assurance agencies in Canada:

- Degree Quality Assurance Board (British Columbia)
- Campus Alberta Quality Council
- Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board
- Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (Ontario)
- Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island)

There is no national body playing a role in quality assurance. Each province has similar processes, but there is no reciprocity between them. A program approved for delivery in Alberta may have to be assessed again for delivery in New Brunswick. Not all universities and colleges are subject to systematic program and intuitional review – the practice varies across Canada. There are no national accreditation mechanisms, except for professional programs authorized by professional accrediting bodies.

There have been attempts to create national standards for programs (see [here](#)) and these are generally followed, but emerging programs often vary significantly from these standards.

5. Credit transfer is problematic.

Transfer credit and learner mobility through transfer is problematic both within a jurisdiction and between them. Each province (and in some cases, each institution) has its own approach to transfer. Some have comprehensive approaches (e.g. British Columbia and Alberta), some are moving to such an approach (Ontario) and others rely on institutional decision-making (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia).

Given the mobility of labour in Canada, this is a significant issue from a student perspective. Most institutions have residency requirements (most often 50% of a program must be taken at the institution awarding the credential) which act to reduce the extent to which courses can be transferred.

6. Shifting demographics are impacting institutions.

Canada has a growing challenge with its demography. Canada's birth rate is below replacement yet some jurisdictions are growing quickly as a result of immigration. Other jurisdictions are ageing quickly.

For higher education, this means there will be a decline in the number of individuals seeking higher education direct from school and an increase in the number seeking higher education who are mature students, recent immigrants and (often) in work. Institutions are developing greater flexibility in the way in which they design and deploy programs – more online learning, more recognition of prior learning, more collaborative programs with employers – so as to meet this shift in the nature of their client base. They are not, however, systematically pursuing work-based learning accreditation.

7. Governments demand more with less.

Funding for universities and colleges per capita has declined over time. Between 1970 and 2012, funding fell from an average of 90% of institutional costs to an average of 57%. In this same time span, universities and colleges expanded significantly. The result: increased student costs, larger class sizes, growth in administration and a strong emphasis on fundraising. The same is true for many developed nations, including the UK.

A strong outcome of these shifts of funding is that student debt loads are significant. In 2015, it was \$15.8 billion (average graduate debt load is \$27,000 though only 50% of students graduate with debt) and rising quickly (see [here](#)). Canada has very high levels of personal debt (163% of income) and student loan debt is now almost as strong a component of these debts as mortgage debt.

One other contextual matter: Canada's competitive position in the World Economic Forum rankings continues to fall. In the 2014-2015 analysis, Canada ranked 15th overall (the UK 9th) – in 2008-2009, Canada ranked 10th (UK 12th). Its scores on some key variables linked to higher education were (UK comparison included):

	Canada	UK
Higher Education and Training	18 th (5.5)	19 th (5.5)
Technological Readiness	22 nd (5.6)	2 nd (6.3)
Innovation	22 nd (4.5)	12 th (5.0)

Some have suggested our research and innovation investments, both in universities, in the National Research Council and related entities and from firms, have been poorly used and unfocused. Others point out that we punch above our weight on ideation (measured in terms of patents) and below our weight on commercialization (see [here](#)). This is seen to speak to the interface between research and industry and between investments in innovation and the universities. The evidence suggests Canada has much to do.

THE “SYSTEM” IN CANADA

In this section, we provide a “snapshot” view of each jurisdiction in Canada and document 1 or 2 key issues for each jurisdiction. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive review of provision, but to enable those engaged in higher education to develop a “quick and meaningful” understanding of what colleagues are facing across the country.

2.1 BRITISH COLUMBIA (BC)

BC has 11 public universities, 2 private universities, 11 public community colleges (many of whom offer applied degrees and graduate diplomas) and a range of private college providers, some of whom are degree granting. It also has 3 institutions offering specialized programs. It is also home to Farleigh Dickinson University (US) offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees. One distinct institution is [Quest University](#) – a private undergraduate institution offering the block approach¹ to program delivery.

1. Students take 1 course at a time in a 3.5 week block with study for 3 hours a day for 5 days each week.

Some Issues

- The number and quality of international students – universities and colleges seek out these students since they command higher revenues. The issue: what percentage of overseas students within a specific program is appropriate?
- The extent to which Aboriginal students access, and have success, in higher education. Aboriginal students are underrepresented and less successful than non-Aboriginal students in universities and colleges in BC (see [here](#)).

2.2 ALBERTA

Alberta has 6 public universities, 11 community colleges, 2 polytechnics, 5 non-profit private university colleges (some of which offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees), and 2 specialist art and culture institutions. It also has a range of private trade and para-professional educational providers. All programs are reviewed for quality by the Campus Alberta Quality Council. Alberta has a systematic basis for transfer credit between all post-secondary institutions (public and private).

Some Issues

- Some of its post-secondary institutions are facing financial challenges – with one (Athabasca University) indicating that its problems require government intervention (see [here](#)). A new government (elected in May 2015) has now frozen tuition fees as it reviews its strategy. Consolidation or reinvestment are options under consideration.
- Despite significant fundraising and a strong focus on research at both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, their position in world rankings on universities continues to fall:

Times Higher Education Rankings	2000-2001	2014-2015
University of Alberta	75 th	124 th
University of Calgary	149 th	226-250 th

The issue here is: do these institutions focus on jurisdictional strengths (engineering and certain aspects of medicine and geomatics) or continue to build a comprehensive approach to R&D? There is a strong link between this question and the financial position of the universities. The province is seeking to focus the R&D efforts on a small number of grand challenges and is leveraging investments in ICT, “omics” and nanotechnology in support of these endeavours.

2.3 SASKATCHEWAN

Saskatchewan has 2 public universities and 4 federated colleges (including the First Nations University of Canada), 1 polytechnic, 6 affiliated colleges to the University of Saskatchewan, 8 regionally-based community colleges, 4 Aboriginal post-secondary institutions and a range of private career colleges.

Some Issues

- As with BC, access to, and success in, higher education for Aboriginal students is a key issue for Saskatchewan (see [here](#) and [here](#) and most especially [here](#)). As this is the fastest growing demographic in the province, the challenge is a serious social and economic issue.

2.4 MANITOBA

There are 4 public universities, 3 regional community colleges, 2 private universities and a range of private career colleges operating in Manitoba.

Some Issues

- Providing quality, meaningful and affordable education in Northern Manitoba continues to be a challenge.
- Funding – following many years of tuition freezes – continues to challenge institutional leaders. Given the size of the province and the nature of its economy, private funding for public higher education is problematic.

2.5 NORTH WEST TERRITORIES (NWT)

There are 2 higher education institutions in the Northwest Territories and residents also have access to courses and programs offered by the University of the Arctic (see [here](#)). A third college – College Nordique Francophone ([here](#)) – provides education in the French language. In a survey conducted in 2006, some 20% of the 41,200 residents of the NWT had a post-secondary qualification.

Some Issues

- Scale – whatever ambitions residents have for their learning is conditioned by access and issues of scale.
- Literacy levels are a challenge for the region. Significant investments have, and are being made, in offering programs to young people to improve their literacy.

2.6 YUKON

There are 2 post-secondary colleges in the Yukon and residents also have access to the courses and programs offered by the University of the Arctic.

Some Issues

- Given the growing importance of the north to Canada's economic future, several organizations have suggested that there should be a focused University for the North – these voices include those of the Science Council of Canada and the Board of Yukon College, who advocated this at the turn of the present century.

2.7 NUNAVUT

This small population (less than 35,000) in a vast geographic territory has access to just 1 college and programs offered online and by distance education by other institutions, including the University of the Arctic. The territory is relatively new and is still identifying what educational infrastructure it needs.

Some Issues

- The key issue is scale and access to required programs. Partnerships with other post-secondary institutions and a focus on online learning would help, except that the technology infrastructure to support such development is not widely available. The digital divide is very real.
- The related issue is cultural relevance. The people of Nunavut have traditional knowledge, language and culture that is endangered by development. A key role of post-secondary education is to ensure the development and support of this culture.

2.8 QUÉBEC

Post-secondary education in Québec differs from the education system of other provinces in Canada. Instead of entering university or college directly from high school, students in Québec leave secondary school after Grade 11 (or Secondary V), and enter post-secondary studies at the college level, as a prerequisite to university. Although both public colleges (CEGEPs - Collège d'enseignement Général et Professionnel) and private colleges exist, both are colloquially termed CEGEPs. This level of post-secondary education allows students to choose either a vocational path or a more academic path. There are some 48 publicly-funded CEGEPs, including some who only offer programs in English (Dawson College), and 20 private institutions.

There are 19 universities in Québec, including 3 Anglophone institutions, a dedicated distance teaching university (TÉLUQ) and 2 institutions which only offer graduate programs. The oldest university in the province is Université Laval, established in 1663.

Some Issues

- The key issue is the sustainability of this substantial system. Students from Québec attending Québec institutions pay the second lowest rate of tuition in Canada (only Newfoundland and Labrador is lower) and actively and aggressively resist attempts to raise fees. In March 2015, the Québec Government announced significant budget reductions for colleges (\$21 million) and universities (\$103 million).
- A related issue is the way in which colleges and universities are offering corporate programs – continuing education using sessional instructors or adjunct professors – so as to make up for financial shortfalls. This “corporatization” of higher education through sessional academic staff is an emerging political issue in Québec and other jurisdictions in Canada (see [here](#)).

2.9 ONTARIO

Canada’s most populated province has 22 public universities, 17 private (mainly religious non-profit) universities, 24 public colleges (21 colleges of applied arts and technology and 3 institutes of technology and advanced learning) which can offer applied bachelor degrees. It also has over 500 private career colleges. Included amongst its universities are 18 of the top 50 research universities in Canada.

Some Issues

- Since 2012, the government of Ontario has been pursuing what it calls a differentiation agenda. This requires each college and university to agree a strategic mandate (the aim is to ensure the sustainability of the system and the avoidance of duplication and unnecessary competition and build a system rather than a collection of institutions competing for registrations. The next step in this agenda, announced in 2015, is to revise the funding model for post-secondary education to better align with the different mandates for institutions.
- Quality is an issue which students raise in Ontario, especially given the significant expansion of access to the system since the early 1980s (student enrolment grew significantly, especially since 2000 – see [here](#)). Student leaders see quality, class-size and student engagement as significant issues.

2.10 NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

This province has 1 university (Memorial University) and 1 community college (College of the North Atlantic) together with some 25 private career colleges. Unusually, funding from government in support of the university and college increased from 81% of operating costs in 2009-2010 to 83% in 2013-2014, with student fees contributing a decreasing amount of base operating costs (down from 15% to 13% in this same time frame) following a significant cut in student fees.

Some Issues

- Significant shifts in the demography of the region are impacting both enrollment and the nature of demand for programs. In particular, there has been (until recently) a net outflow of qualified students to other parts of Canada since students saw program relevance in the offerings elsewhere.
- Memorial University is a leader in the Atlantic provinces in online and distance learning. Its ability to offer programs on a regional basis (and nationally through Canada's Virtual University) is part of its sustainability strategy.

2.11 NOVA SCOTIA

Nova Scotia has 10 universities, 6 of which are within the Halifax Regional Municipality. It has a single community college, which offers programs in 13 locations across the province. There are a range of private career colleges. The province has a population of approximately 1 million persons.

Some Issues

- For such a small population, the province has a complex post-secondary system. From time to time, governments seek to “rationalize” the system (see, for example, 2010 report by Dr. Tim O’Neill [here](#), especially at pages 99-120). There is constant uncertainty with respect to long term strategic direction, especially for the smaller institutions. The complexity of the system is placed in profile by declining enrollment linked to demographic shifts – there is an overcapacity of provision when set against anticipated demand.
- Recruitment and retention of faculty at some smaller universities (e.g. University of Cape Breton or Université Sainte-Anne) is a challenge.

2.12 NEW BRUNSWICK

There are 4 public universities in New Brunswick, including the first public university in North America (University of New Brunswick) and the first university in the British Empire to ever award a degree to a woman (Mount Allison University) in 1875. There are also 2 private universities, both delivering learning through online education. There are 3 private chartered universities, all with religious affiliations. The province also has 2 community colleges – 1 offering programs in English in 6 locations and the second offering programs in French at 5 campuses throughout the province. In addition, there are 2 specialist colleges – 1 focused on craft and design and the other on forest technologies.

Some Issues

- As with all of the Maritime provinces, demographic shifts and shifts in the economy are challenging the sustainability of institutions. While there is

collaboration and engagement between institutions, funding this system remains a challenge for governments.

- Not all of the institutions have comprehensive quality assurance policies and practices embedded in their work, according to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (see [here](#) especially at page 2).

2.13 PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND (PEI)

This island province has 1 university and 2 community colleges, 1 offering programs in English and 1 in French. There is also a Maritime Christian College which offers degrees and a range of private career colleges.

Some Issues

- Enrollment from PEI residents is in decline, but international enrollment is growing (over 30% in the last decade) as the range of graduate programs increase. PEI institutions are also advanced in their use of credit transfer (especially block transfer).

7 IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

Across Canada, post-secondary leaders and policy makers recognize a range of challenges from the technical (mechanisms of credit transfer, reciprocity of quality assurance) to the strategic. In this section of this briefing, we identify 7 challenges policy makers and institutional leaders across Canada identify as significant. This is not a comprehensive list of such challenges, but it is a list which emerges from discussion with policy makers across the country.

1. Austerity, revenue, recruitment and retention

All institutional leaders and policy makers are concerned about financial sustainability and uncertainty. In such a complex system, with so many institutions (many of which are small and a growing number facing financial difficulty), revenue and cost management are an issue.

For some large institutions (flagship universities) with significant reserves, this is less of an immediate issue than an issue of strategic foresight and planning. But for many institutions it is a constant concern. This leads to pressure on all to increase recruitment and retention but also to lower program delivery costs.

2. Competitive position of Canadian universities internationally

Canada has some flagship institutions highly regarded around the world for their research, teaching and scholarship. These include McGill University, the University of Toronto, University of British Columbia and the University of Alberta. But their position is constantly challenged by strong performance by other institutions world-wide, especially emerging Asian institutions and institutions across Europe.

Just as Canada's competitive position is in decline (see above at page 3), so our universities overall are slipping down the league tables. Despite various innovation strategies pursued by the Government of Canada and certain provincial jurisdictions, we are becoming less attractive to world leading scientists and innovators. It provides a cause for concern over the long-haul, especially for those universities seeking to build a world class reputation².

2. Canada has 4 universities in the top 100 of the Times Higher Education world ranking – University of Toronto (20), University of British Columbia (32), McGill University (39) and McMaster University (94). It has an additional 4 in the top 200 – University of Montréal (113), University of Alberta (124), University of Victoria (173) and University of Ottawa (188).

3. Research intensity

Universities Canada draws attention to the fact that investment in R&D in Canada, especially by the private sector, is low and support for the research infrastructure and the institutional costs of research is lower in Canada than in other jurisdictions – e.g. 21.8%, while US, UK and Australia provide 40% to 60% (see [here](#)). This reduces the capacity of institutions to support equipment-intensive research in genomics, nanotechnology, medicine and ICT.

This in turn has an impact on both the innovation agenda and the adaptive capacity of firms and innovation clusters.

4. Value creation and relevancy

Some governments and some other organizations, including some student organizations, are concerned about the employability of graduates from colleges and universities. They are raising the issue of the relevance and focus of programs and the link between education and employment.

The ideal of a “liberal education” is taking second place to a focus on skills, competencies and relevant programming, although this idea is being challenged. Community colleges / CEGPs have always had employability as a focus, but there is growing pressure on universities (linked to financial pressure and reputation) to reduce the number of programs which are not work-related and to focus more on programs that are.

This is not an uncommon challenge in many jurisdictions. Yet employers say that they are seeking critical thinking, cultural awareness, teamwork and strong communication and problem finding/solving skills – the very focus for a liberal education. This tension plays out in program decisions and funding allocations.

5. Changing student demographics and expectations

Throughout the review of higher education in Canada, especially in the Maritime provinces, demographic shifts found their way into the narrative. These shifts are very real and affect all institutions. The implication, especially as students are generally paying for more of their own education, is that there is a growing demand for flexibility in delivery, for learner mobility, prior learning recognition and transfer credit.

While some have seen this as a demand for more online learning, this is only part of the response. The real shift is in student expectations about flexible and affordable access to quality courses and programs and varied completion pathways – a more personalized pathway for learning. The adaptive capacity of universities and colleges to respond to these opportunities and new set of expectations requires varies significantly.

6. Aboriginal access and outcomes

The fastest growing demographic within Canada is the growth of Aboriginal population. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew at a much faster rate than the non-Aboriginal population at 45% and 8% respectively. Yet the access to, and success in, higher education for Aboriginal people is significantly lower than the non-Aboriginal population. This is true across Canada. While there is parity in college education access and outcomes, it is at the university where the disparities are the most significant (see [here](#)).

7. Uncertainty

The most common phrase amongst presidents and policy makers is uncertainty. Significant shifts are occurring in the attitudes of governments to policy, funding and governance. Whether this relates to changes in the quality assurance regimes for colleges (BC), a new and unexpected tuition freeze in Alberta, a review of funding models (Ontario), system rationalization (Maritimes), there is always uncertainty. While this is not a new feature of the post-secondary landscape, there appears to be a stronger focus on system rationalization, differentiation, funding and adaptability than hitherto.

For some, these issues are not new. For others, the combination of these issues is challenging. These issues are identified here with the intention of stimulating debate and conversation.

ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN CANADA

Canada is a world leader on online and distance education. This may seem a bold claim, but it is based on these observations:

- Two of the leading learning management systems (LMS) platforms in the world were developed in Canada – Blackboard Web CT and Desire2Learn.
- Smart Boards – now present in classrooms around the world – were pioneered and developed by a Canadian company.
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) began in Canada with the work of Stephen Downes and George Siemens at the University of Manitoba in 2008. Both the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto were amongst the first institutions to offer MOOCs through Coursera and several Canadian institutions are founding members of OERu.
- The Canadian Virtual University is a consortium of online learning degree program providers offering programs to all Canadians.
- Athabasca University – a dedicated distance education institution offering courses online and operating across Canada – opened in 1970. A similar institution offering programs in the French language – TÉLUQ – also began operating from a base in Québec in 1972.
- Athabasca launched the first fully online MBA in 1974 and the first fully online Masters in Distance Education in the same year.
- Canada is home to the Commonwealth of Learning following the endorsement of the original proposal to create this institution at a Commonwealth Summit held in Canada.
- Provinces have established coordinating mechanisms for online and distance learning and related infrastructure – BCcampus, e-Campus Alberta, e-campus Manitoba, OntarioLearn, Ontario Online Learning Consortium, and Contact North | Contact Nord are all examples.
- All universities and colleges in Canada offer blended learning, with a growing focus on the use of open education resources especially in Western Canada (see [here](#)). The University of Laval offers more blended learning courses in French than any other institution in the world.

- Canada is home to a number of centres of excellence in online and distance education and is also home to the most read journal in the field – the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (see [here](#)). The National Research Council supports a program focused on Learning and Performance Support Systems.
- Some of the leading thinkers and writers on online and distance learning and open educational resources work from a base in Canada – Dr. Dominique Abrioux, Dr. Terry Anderson, Dr. Joanne Basque, Dr. Tony Bates, Dr. Marie Bountrogianni, Dr. Marti Cleveland Innes, Dr. Alex Couros, Stephen Downes, Dr. Keith Hampson, Robert Martellaci, Dr. Rory McGreal, Dr. Susan Moisey, Dr. Stephen Murgatroyd, Dr. Ron Owston, Dr. Gilbert Paquette, Dr. Michael Power, and Dr. George Siemens.
- It is estimated, in each year, some 1.3 million post-secondary students registered at a Canadian college or university are enrolled in one or more courses delivered entirely online.
- Contact North | Contact Nord’s educational portal for faculty and instructors (www.teachonline.ca) and the related newsletter, Online Learning News (www.teachonline.ca/about-us/newsroom/past-newsletters), is one of the most frequently viewed sites amongst those dedicated to online learning supports for faculty and instructors in the world averaging 130,000 visits a year. So is Contact North | Contact Nord’s portal for students (www.studyonline.ca) which averages 140,000 visits per year).

These activities reflect the commitment of faculty to innovation and the support of policy makers and institutional leaders for innovations in the application of technology in support of engaged learning.

FIVE SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS

Canada has developed a robust, innovative and successful post-secondary education system which has many institutions with a global reputation for teaching, research and community service. Some specific achievements:

- **A significant expansion of access to post-secondary education coupled with growing satisfaction and completion rates**
Just to take one example, enrolment in Ontario universities grew from 10,000 in 1960 to approximately 400,000 in 2007. This required an expansion of existing institutions and the development of new institutions. Similar developments have occurred across Canada.
- **A strong focus on women in higher education**
In particular, this expansion has benefited women and has contributed significantly to Canada’s commitment to gender equity. Women comprise approximately 58% of undergraduates, 50% of master’s students and 45% of those in a doctorate (Clark et al., 2009). Female participation expanded from a total of 75,000 in 1966 to 465,000 in 2006 – a remarkable achievement.
- **Growing the investment in research and development**
Universities now invest some \$11.9 billion annually in this work, leading Canada to be very successful in the development of new knowledge and patents.

- **Fostering Centres of Excellence across Canadian universities**

Investments in network centres of excellence – the Canadian Water Network, Stem Cell Network, BioFuel Network - has enabled researchers from across Canada to work together on grand challenges that impact social and economic fabric of Canada. Rather than compete, universities and research centres collaborate for greater social impact.

- **Enhancing Collaborative Programs**

There are a growing number of collaborative programs between institutions, often between institutions in different provinces or in different parts of the world. These range from the Kellogg-Schulich MBA at York University to a collaborative Nurse Practitioner program between the Saskatchewan Polytechnic and the University of Regina or a joint PhD at 3 Ontario universities or joint MA programs in history between the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg. Students at the Canadian University of Dubai can complete their first 2 years of study in Dubai and complete their degree at one of several Canadian universities – similar arrangements are made with many other accredited institutions around the world. British Columbia recently announced a series of joint programs between its post-secondary institutions and partner institutions in China (see [here](#)).

While there is much more to do – Canada’s post-secondary institutions can build on a history of responsive, innovative and collaborative approaches supported by government and communities across Canada.

SOME LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This briefing was occasioned by the visit of leading educators and decision makers from higher education institutions in the UK to Canada in July 2015. As they compare and contrast their own challenges and situations with that of their Canadian counterparts, they are likely to recognize significant similarities. It may be worth thinking more about what is different than what is the same.

Three opportunities for a comparison of differences seem worth pursuing:

- 1. The role of governments in shaping a national agenda (UK) versus the role of provincial and territorial governments (Canada) in shaping a regional agenda for higher education**

Does this give rise to significant differences between Canada and the UK and, if so, what are the benefits of these two different approaches? In this context, it should be remembered that the Government of Canada, through a range of funding mechanisms, is a significant investor in the R&D capacity of universities and colleges and, through these mechanisms, can shape the direction of R&D in certain fields (e.g. through Genome Canada, shaping Canada’s genomic investments).

It is also the case that Universities Canada plays an advocacy role on behalf of universities and that it has been influential in both shaping government attitudes towards universities but also in helping universities collaborate.

- 2. The fragmentation of quality assurance and the absence of national accreditation in Canada**

Does this create reputational challenges for Canada? While no one suggests the provincial mechanisms are not robust (as robust,

for example, as US regional accreditation methods), national and international accreditation seems to be a sought after feature for higher education institutions. Is Canada losing out here?

3. The expansion of international student body

While the UK is also pursuing international students for reasons of both cultural diversity and revenue, so too is Canada. Some universities and colleges are very successful at this, others are not. UNESCO estimates that some 8 million students worldwide will be moving to countries other than their residential base to study by 2030. How well prepared is Canada for this competitive market, especially given Canada's immigration and foreign student policies? Canada ranks 8th in the desired destination list for international students behind US, UK, Australia, France, Germany, Japan and Russia (see [here](#)) – what do we need to do to move up this list? How is this issue connected to the previous two?

These 3 issues speak to significant differences between the UK and Canada in the way in which the post-secondary system is looked at politically.

MUCH TO CELEBRATE
IN THE ACHIEVEMENTS
OF OUR UNIVERSITIES
AND COLLEGES

We did not provide a comprehensive analysis of higher education in Canada. We offer more of a snapshot aimed at positioning relevant issues and concerns. What we do seek to do is stimulate conversation and discussion.

There is much to celebrate in the achievements of our universities and colleges and, as always, many opportunities for improvement. The key to our future prosperity lies in learning. As Ari de Geus, former head of strategic planning at Royal Dutch Shell, said “our only competitive advantage is the speed at which our people learn”.