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# THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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In the days and weeks that followed, universities and colleges around the world came to similar conclusions and took identical steps. At the same time, schools, businesses, places of worship, and groups that bring together people from amateur sport to cultural and arts associations ceased their operations and the world became a quiet place.

COVID-19 has interrupted our “normal” operations: the historical methods we have used to learn, do business and gather as communities. Furthermore, we are learning a lesson about the fragility of our societal structures. The chaos we are experiencing is global – and this chaos is frightening to many, and a practical challenge for all.

But this situation provides a time for reflection – and the interruption of regular approaches is giving us an opportunity to look at new ways of going forward.

Our challenges are great and affect all Canadians. Record unemployment, significant debt and a stagnant economy are universal concerns. Learners, whether in urban, rural or reserve settings face new learning models. Our sense of community has been threatened. There is a lot to consider.

Canada’s world-class universities have collectively played an important role in furthering our society and we are now using this pause to understand how they will support recovery and future prosperity. At the same time, most of us are also providing timely responses to COVID-19, ranging from the use of our facilities to support the communities we serve to the work our researchers are undertaking in the aggressive global search for a vaccine.

Canada is a massive country, with a dispersed population. There are over 80 cities with a population of 50,000 to 300,000 people, and collectively account for almost 9 million Canadians (2011 Census) within their municipal boundaries, plus millions more in the surrounding areas regions. While many universities are located in Canada’s largest centres, some are found in less populated areas, Furthermore, regardless of their location they all represent diverse and unique regions of our country. When looking at the challenge of recovery, this is a very important detail.

The universities and colleges located outside large urban centers are all distinct in their history and geography, many created because of the advocacy of their regional leaders. Most often, these regional post-secondary institutions are smaller but their impact is critical to the communities they serve. Born from the needs and aspirations of their specific regions and the broader aspirations to make a difference in the world, their value cannot be overstated. Regional universities are drivers of local economies, supporting traditional industry while spurring new opportunities. They also provide the space and impetus for arts and culture, as well as being hubs of international activity, attracting bright young minds, world-class faculty and engaged staff. In short, regional universities support and enhance diversified, inclusive and resilient communities.

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The mere presence of a regional university is a huge economic and social driver. The U of L has an enrolment of 8,700 students, with approximately 8,000 of them studying at the Lethbridge campus. Greater than 70 per cent of our students are not from the immediate area, and as such, our city's population expands significantly in September. In Lethbridge, we are one of the city's largest employers and the collective economic activities of our students and faculty is critical to the local economy.

The U of L has a \$2 billion economic impact to the provincial economy with just over half of that distributed across southern Alberta.

When we look at the various initiatives undertaken at the U of L, we see the attributes, opportunities and challenges of southern Alberta reflected in these activities.

For example, from a teaching perspective the University's recent partnership with the Mastercard Foundation is built on creating new opportunities for Indigenous youth to access education and to build supports to enhance employment, economic inclusion and economic development opportunities within Blackfoot communities. This initiative is born of the needs from Canada's largest reserve and one of the University's regional communities.

Further, research activities on campus also take their lead from geography and the specific needs of our local communities. The U of L's significant research capacity pertaining to water quality and management is a direct result of the University's location in a key water management zone. As industry, agriculture and recreation compete for access to a limited water supply, the U of L is a major source of study and policy development for the region.

Our story, and impact, is similar to many other institutions across Canada and, collectively, our regional contributions are immense.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the new challenges our communities face, the network of regional universities can be strategically mobilized to help all regions of our country recover. Canada's approach to recovery must consider all of its citizens and that in an online world, rural and Indigenous communities are differentially impacted.

For example, as the pandemic has forced us to deliver our courses using alternative models, our Indigenous students face additional challenges associated with their remoteness and lack of basic infrastructure — Internet, computers, and access to IT — necessary to connect fully within our new context. While a pandemic wasn't anticipated when the MasterCard Foundation partnered with the U of L, the already established relationship between the university and the Blackfoot people allowed for swift action to meet a community need. The U of L is utilizing the resources of the MasterCard Foundation to eliminate these connectivity issues and remove barriers to study for Indigenous students. Initially, we have responded by meeting the hardware needs of Indigenous students, and now it is critical we address the broader and critical consideration of connectivity. This will require conversations with, and a commitment by, different levels of government and the telecoms.

We know challenges such as these exist in all parts of the country. Moving forward requires solutions that respect our unique locations. Our most important solutions will be arrived at locally, and must be

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supported by a national imperative. For that reason, we need to ensure regional universities are able to maintain capacity to be nimble and responsive to local needs.

But regional universities have much more to offer than just responding to regional needs. The very nature of having a network of regional institutions will serve the whole of our country and can serve as a strategic advantage.

As we look at our new normal, regional universities may find themselves in an advantageous position. For example, the utilization of new technologies to quickly connect with community members during this pandemic may be transitional in the moment, but one of the traditional strengths of regional universities has always been the ability to connect with local, remote and rural communities. Further, regional universities are uniquely equipped to interpret the future of post-secondary education because of their deep understanding of the needs of the communities they serve, and the advantage of their smaller size.

Regional universities should be looked to by governments and communities post-COVID-19 to ensure Canada's recovery is realized in all parts of the country. It is essential regional universities remain vibrant and able to support our local communities, while ensuring the knowledge they generate continues to contribute positively to all peoples.