Role of PSE in BC’s Economic and Social Recovery

I wish to strongly endorse the proposals that RUCBC will present later today concerning the needs of students adversely affected by COVID-19 and its impacts. Meanwhile, I will focus my remarks on the contributions that Simon Fraser University and other post-secondary institutions can make to BC’s economic recovery strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted social and economic conditions on a scale we have not experienced in recent memory. It has exposed and exacerbated inequalities, particularly for low-paid workers in service sectors where women, young people, and new Canadians are over-represented. Not only have huge numbers of these workers lost their jobs, but it’s expected that many of these jobs will not return in the economy that follows the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic has given rise to a strong sense of social solidarity, concern for inequality, and appreciation of the capacities of public institutions to advance common interests. The forces unleashed by the pandemic combine to generate both a need and a unique – some might say historic – opportunity for transformative economic and social change. Of the tools government has at its disposal, post-secondary education is among the most powerful. Post-secondary institutions possess potent and responsive capacities to support a transformative economic recovery in three significant areas:

- as developers of human capital;
- as engines of social mobility; and
- as generators of research and innovation

Even before the pandemic, BC businesses were struggling to find the skilled labour they needed to thrive, and the province was losing almost $8 billion in GDP and $2 billion in forgone tax revenues due to talent shortages. In a post pandemic universe, BC has an opportunity to grow the economy by developing human capital in ways that also promote social equity and environmental sustainability.

The Province’s recent investment in SFU’s Sustainable Energy Engineering program in Surrey provides a powerful example of how this can be done. Not only will the talent, research and innovation generated by that program help to establish BC as a leader in clean tech and sustainable energy technologies, but I am proud to say that 42% of the undergraduate students in that engineering program are women, demonstrating our capacity to drive economic growth in ways that reduce our carbon dependence and advance social equity.
Need for PSE Expansion in the South Fraser Region

Opportunities like this exist across BC’s robust post-secondary system in every region of the province, but nowhere is the need and the opportunity greater than in the Surrey region whose population is younger, faster growing, more diverse, and has less access to post-secondary education than in other regions of the province.

SFU’s Surrey campus is uniquely well positioned to build the human capital, and to produce research and innovation, in areas that the province needs to grow and that will promote social equity and environmental sustainability.

As far back as 2006, the Province recognized that this region suffered from a serious shortage of post-secondary capacity and signed an MOU that pledged to double the size of SFU’s Surrey campus – from 2500 to 5000 domestic student seats – by 2015. However, as I come before you today – in my final days as SFU president, and almost 15 years since the MOU was signed – we have seen only 440 of those 2500 long-promised seats.

I therefore respectfully request this committee, as it has done before, to recommend that the Province recommit to the MOU by increasing the number of funded student spaces at SFU Surrey to 5,000.

Conclusion

Meeting this commitment will open a door of opportunity to thousands of young British Columbians who deserve a chance to make the most of their potential. And in doing so, it can contribute to a transformative economic recovery that benefits ALL British Columbians.

If the events of the last three months have taught us anything, it’s that societies that nurture belonging, trust and inclusion are better positioned to adapt and thrive in world of uncertainty. British Columbia has fared well applying these principles during this pandemic. Now, together we have an opportunity to build on that success – to build a more equal, more sustainable and more hopeful society.

Post-secondary education is key to the future we choose.

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