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REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Inquiry by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[Translation]

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Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, I want to draw your attention to how important small- and mid-sized universities are to our communities, our regions and Canada as a whole because I believe that these universities should be given greater recognition.

There are a number of academic models in Canada, and these institutions of higher learning all contribute, in their own way, to the development and vitality of their respective communities and communities across the country. Small- and mid-sized universities make many vital contributions.

[English]

Let me give you a few examples of the contributions small to mid-sized universities, which sometimes self-identify as regional universities, bring to our communities.

Universities like the University of Lethbridge, the University of Northern British Columbia, Mount Allison University, Acadia University, the University of Moncton, and the Campus Saint-Jean of the University of Alberta, for example, offer outstanding experiences to their students, as outlined time and again in numerous national student satisfaction surveys.

One such survey was published in October 2016 by *Maclean's* magazine, as it does every year, and smaller universities did particularly well in this regard. In this specific instance, students rated their schools on everything from the calibre of their professors to the quality of mental health services.

These small to mid-sized universities also play a very important role in making university education more accessible to the population they serve. This is exemplified, notably, by increased university participation rates, particularly among traditionally under-represented groups, such as individuals living outside of large urban areas, First Nations and first-generation Canadians.

The community of Prince George, British Columbia, of our colleague Senator Neufeld, is a stirring example of how proximity alone can have an impact on university participation rates. Indeed, according to Statistics Canada, the participation rate in that city for people aged 20 to 24 went from 18.5 per cent in 1996 to 26.8 per cent in 2001, a mere seven years after the University of Northern British Columbia first opened its doors.

Also according to Statistics Canada, these figures are consistent with university openings in other communities across the country.

In addition, small- and mid-sized universities are major employers and key drivers of our economy. They promote and foster entrepreneurship, instigate partnerships with community

groups and industry, and help attract talent to their city or region. In fact, regional universities continue to demonstrate the important role they play in terms of economic diversification and social development.

For example, an article published in *University Affairs* a few years ago featured a study that concluded that Atlantic Canada's generally small- and mid-sized universities had an economic impact of more than \$4.4 billion. This same study also showed that these universities collectively employed over 27,000 full-time and part-time employees. But the most striking figure, in my mind, was the fact that Atlantic Canadian universities accounted for 63 per cent of the region's total research and developmental output, helping attract in the process technology companies to this part of Canada.

Given what we know about the future of the Canadian economy being largely knowledge-based, skills-based and innovation-driven, small- and mid-sized universities are perhaps our greatest enablers in making this happen from coast to coast and not just in a select few large urban areas.

Let me provide you with another example, this time closer to home. The University of Lethbridge, founded less than five decades ago, has already made significant contributions to its community and to Alberta. Indeed, this university, smaller than most of its peers but consistently growing, has, since its inception, recognized its location on traditional Blackfoot territory and has become a national leader in the creation of programs and institutions tailored to meet the needs of the First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

The establishment of a Department of Native American studies in 1976, and later a major in Aboriginal health, a Native American Students' Association and a First Nations Metis & Inuit Alumni Chapter are just a few such initiatives.

Another innovative enterprise, the Community Research Exchange, now facilitates the interaction and exchange of ideas between the university and the external community, and many ideas do, in fact, stem from the University of Lethbridge.

In today's *Lethbridge Herald*, for example, University of Lethbridge President Mike Mahon identified three areas of research and innovation for the university: health care, smart agriculture and environmental technologies.

The University of Lethbridge has become one of the top research universities in the country at the undergraduate level. In addition, it is now estimated that the University of Lethbridge has an annual provincial economic impact of about \$1.1 billion, nearly half of it in southern Alberta. A case in point is the recent Cavendish Farms announcement of a major potato processing plant to be built in Lethbridge, in large part because of the presence of the university and its research ecosystem.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, there are also examples of small- and mid-sized francophone universities that have a major impact on their communities. The Association des collèges et universités de

la francophonie canadienne alone represents a network of 21 French-language post-secondary educational institutions outside Quebec, including about 15 small- and mid-sized universities.

The goal of this Canada-wide network is, and I quote:

... to help expand access to post-secondary education in French while enhancing the vitality of the Canadian francophonie and promoting the development of Canadian society as a whole.

This association also seeks to maintain, and I quote:

... collaborative relationships among its members in relation to both education and research, [to represent] their common interests by joining with national partners, and [to provide] them with visibility, both in Canada and internationally.

Among the universities that belong to this network, the Université de Moncton, the Université de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, and the Campus Saint-Jean in Alberta are perfect examples of small and medium-sized institutions that are essential to the development of the francophone communities in those provinces and to maintaining the vitality of those communities, in addition to being important economic and cultural assets for the regions where they are located.

The education these universities provide for young bilingual leaders in fields like business administration, engineering, nursing, education, the natural and social sciences and the humanities is an asset to the region and to our country. These graduates often become role models for their communities and promote them in their province and their country and at the international level.

The Campus Saint-Jean of the University of Alberta, where I have had the privilege of being a professor, a researcher and dean, plays a crucial role in the Franco-Albertan community and has impacts across Canada. First, because of its rich history, the university is part of the province's heritage. Since 1908, this dynamic campus has offered a constantly growing Franco-Albertan and francophile population the opportunity to obtain a top-notch education in French.

Because of its unique linguistic location west of Manitoba and its many fields of expertise, the Campus Saint-Jean exerts a strong attraction for human resources and research in the French language. Its Canadian studies institute, for example, gives students and members of the community access to professors who are recognized for the quality of their research on Canadian Francophonie and federalism, and to annual conferences on a range of subjects, to hear renowned speakers.

Another example of the Campus Saint-Jean's great contribution to the francophone community of Alberta and the West is undeniably its teacher training program, which meets the growing need for qualified teachers who are able to teach in French-language schools and French immersion programs. The Campus Saint-Jean admits more than 100 new students every year from all across Canada into its education programs, but this is nowhere near enough to meet the demand. The Campus Saint-Jean could do more, but funding is

insufficient. The Campus Saint-Jean has also enabled Bonnie Doon, the neighbourhood where it is located, to establish itself as Edmonton's francophone neighbourhood and to become the heart of the francophone community in the entire city, if not the entire province.

Honourable colleagues, in spite of the fact that education is a provincial responsibility, the federal government still has a fundamental role to play in funding university research and infrastructure and in student financial aid, as we can see in the March 2016 federal budget and the announcements made in that regard in the last year. I am thinking, for example, of the increase in student aid for students from low-income and middle-class families and the post-secondary institutions strategic investment fund, which will provide up to \$2 billion over the next three years to accelerate the completion of infrastructure projects at Canada's universities and colleges.

For example, Bishop's University, a small English-language university in Sherbrooke, will invest \$24.5 million to modernize its library and natural sciences laboratory. This has been made possible through a federal government investment of \$10.24 million that was announced just two weeks ago. These infrastructure investments will definitely have a major impact on that institution and community for many decades to come.

Given those investments, the government of Canada has a definite influence on the development of our universities that can be felt even by smaller institutions located both within and outside the large metropolitan regions. However, in spite of announcements like these that will benefit a number of universities, there seems to be a trend that has been growing over the past few years in industrialized countries of concentrating funding for research and research infrastructure in a few of the nation's leading universities. Canada is no exception. The stated goal is to ensure that the centres of excellence, and thus Canada, remain competitive on the international markets.

The results of the first two competitions associated with the Canada First Research Excellence Fund are telling. The Fund was created by the Government of Canada in 2014 to help post-secondary educational institutions excel globally in research areas that will create long-term economic benefits for Canada. The \$1.25 billion awarded by the Fund to date has been divided among only 17 universities, including one affiliated university, with 85 per cent of that amount being allocated to universities that are part of the Group of Canadian Research Universities (U15), which represents the 15 largest research universities in Canada. Only one university with fewer than 18,000 students received any of the money.

While I am happy to see such investments being made by the government, and to see that these funds are being awarded on the basis of the strengths of each of the universities, it would be counterproductive for the more limited resources and less intensive lobby of our small- and mid-sized universities, rather than their respective academic specialties, to become the determining factor in the allocation of funds for research and research infrastructure, whether through the Canada First Research Excellence Fund or through any other major funding

bodies. Ultimately, this could well undermine the objective of ensuring that Canada is competitive on the international markets, today and in the future, particularly if we are to believe certain studies that say that the prosperity of regional economies is closely tied to the health of their colleges and universities.

May I have five more minutes?

The Hon. the Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Tardif: In other words, we would do well not to neglect our small and medium-sized universities, especially those outside large urban centres, if we want Canada to remain a prosperous and equitable economy.

In conclusion, honourable senators, the main purpose of my speech was to underscore the importance of small and medium-sized universities in Canada to reinforce the idea that federal policy and program development must take into account

the added value of these universities in matters of economic, social, and human development.

We must continue to support these universities, not just by way of funding to make education accessible, but also in matters of research, research infrastructure, and programming that recognizes the specificity of small and medium-sized universities, especially in the regions.

[*English*]

Honourable colleagues, universities play an essential role in the creation and the dissemination of knowledge, and these are important factors in economic and social growth.

Let us make sure that the creation and dissemination of this knowledge is as widespread as possible in 21st century Canada by recognizing, first and foremost, the value of small and mid-sized universities. These universities matter to our country, and they matter greatly.
