

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

Mixed Campuses to Foster Inter-university and Industrial Partnerships



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Competition amongst universities to attract both students and faculty can often give rise to a perception that it comes at the expense of limiting the return on the significant investments made by governments on behalf of society as a whole. Undeniably, the funding formulas which are weighted heavily on the number of registered

students do to a certain extent drive a numbers race in the delicate balance between financial viability and the preservation of academic excellence. Moreover, the environment in which researchers from different universities compete for government research dollars and private sector contracts contributes to this notion of inter-university competition. The fact that stringent criteria are applied in assessing the quality of proposals put forward and the strength of their proponent researchers, and are both measured against high standards of research excellence is however a desirable feature of the granting process for individuals and teams of researchers, and must remain the basis for attribution of funds.

For their part, university administrators have a role to play in balancing the above competitive forces through collaborative efforts between universities as a means of creating optimal conditions for conducting research, thus

maximizing public and private returns. In so doing, institutions can achieve their ultimate goals of formation of highly qualified personnel, the pursuit of knowledge and the socio-economic development of the country and welfare of its citizenry. The establishment of partnerships among universities is especially critical in periods of economic austerity as the demonstration of value for money spent becomes all the more important.

Hence, both governments and university officials must make efforts to instigate and support new groupings of researchers by embracing a multidisciplinary approach, building upon the best available research talent, regardless of their organizational affiliation. Gone are the days of private academic fiefdoms and the belief that research excellence must be concentrated only in a handful of prestigious universities. The future direction of research resides in developing new partnerships, clusters and

networks of outstanding researchers with complementary skillsets, dedicated to addressing emerging societal needs as well as the upcoming challenges of the twenty-first century.

Governments at both the federal and provincial levels have taken several measures to foster greater collaboration between researchers and promote partnerships with the private sector and other end-users of the resulting research knowledge. In this regard, the government of Quebec has been at the forefront of this activity through its significant investments in the creation of large research consortiums, focused on its key economic sectors, the upshot of which has been to yield major benefits and sustainable, long-term partnerships. Similarly, federal programs which require co-financing of research projects are also effective in promoting partnerships.

Without diminishing in any way the success the above measures

have achieved both in this country and abroad, there is however one approach which has barely been exploited in Canada and could work to enhancing the benefits of university and industrial research partnerships. It entails the creation and development of mixed campuses, combining various universities in a single location, along with governmental and industrial research centres, all targeting the same thematic fields. This form of collaborative model drastically changes the classical university paradigm; while remaining administratively attached to their home institutions, researchers nevertheless share the same physical surroundings, enabling daily contact with their university and industry colleagues involved in similar or complementary disciplines, all focused on common research endeavors.

The benefits of this physical proximity are several fold. Firstly, it offers the possibility of making available and therefore increasing the accessibility to large platforms of leading edge scientific research equipment. Through programs of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, Canada has invested considerable

sums over the past several years in major research infrastructure and expects to continue to do so in coming years. The sharing by many researchers of this world-class equipment would constitute an important gain by optimizing the level of Canadian research and its spin off transfer to industry. For researchers, availing themselves of this caliber of equipment which otherwise would be difficult to access, provides a clear advantage in areas of applied research and the economic benefits it produces for the country. The recently implemented Canada First Research Excellence Fund program would also be enriched by consortiums such as these.

The second positive outcome would be enhanced training of students, especially at the masters and doctorate levels. It would also facilitate the co-direction of inter-university activities, improve the interface with industry and its access to high performance technology parks, to name but a few examples of how the model would benefit the university sector and its partners. The support of governments for such innovative approaches should be favored in coming years.