

Installation speech as Chair of the board of Universities Canada

Delivered by Sophie D'Amours

In Ottawa to members of the association

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Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

It is a great pleasure and a privilege for me to chair the Board of such an important association on the national academic stage.

I step into this role with the comfort of knowing that the leadership of Mike Mahon has moved us ahead. I know you will agree that Mike is an engaged and dependable member of our board and has done a stellar job during his term in keeping doors open and the conversation going with government and others. I am grateful and humbled to follow his chairmanship.

We come together here to advance with common purpose. As diverse as our individual campuses and programs are, we have so much in common. We want to continue to succeed in our good work and we know we achieve more together.

I have been pleased to champion the cause of universities, working with many of you along the way. It has given me the opportunity to see the diversity of approaches across the country and to add my small imprint on where we're heading. Making the time to participate matters to me. Being engaged with Universities Canada allows my personal influence on behalf of the sector to grow. It allows my institution's influence to grow. And for all of us, it allows our collective impact to leave a legacy for the country.

I look around this room and think of all the students, faculty, researchers and innovators you support and nurture. Any one of us could walk onto any campus in Canada and see the same focus. Sure, our administrations and areas of expertise differ. Yes, the community culture varies from place to place—we build our loyalties around the Rouge et Or or Purple Power and take our selfies by the Raven or Gryphon—but the focus of faculty, students and administration is on learning, pushing boundaries, going beyond and succeeding.

Together, we represent a powerhouse fuelled by knowledge, science, youth and hope.

We study, research and teach with the hope of something more and something better. Canadians have trusted us with their aspirations and we cannot let them down.

You may know that some of my research has focused on value chain logistics—how we take raw materials, add value and move the new output to consumers through smart partnerships and alliances. We usually think of the field in terms of goods and services. But think of outcomes and you'll see the parallels in our work.

Adding value is the key. Every student who walks into our lecture halls wants something more out of their experience. They want to know that they will be a better person in our society with a university education.

The new generations of students expect this from academia. They need to know that cities, provinces and the country will be better off thanks to greater numbers of university graduates.

And every one of us in this room wants to shake hands with graduates on convocation day knowing that we have added value – value to lives, value to knowledge, value to our communities, the country and the world. So who are we, as universities, to be so bold in our ambitions?

We can define ourselves by our biggest discoveries, where we find ourselves in this world or the problems we seek to overcome. The lists are long, as you know. The summary is this: We are our strengths, our realities and our challenges.

Strengths

Each of us would argue that our university is unique. And rightly so.

Among our strengths is the range of programs and fields of study offered across this country from oceanography to forestry, microbiology to world politics, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to graphic novels. And how students access those programs is equally varied. They join us in person, online, through distance programs, residencies, coop terms and internships. We adjust and we add as the demands of the world require. In some cases, we prepare students for careers that don't yet exist.

In fact, we are clearly on the cusp of a new wave of artificial intelligence, advanced robotics and 3D manufacturing, among other things. A wave that will have a major impact on every aspect of our lives, especially on the way people will work, study, acquire knowledge and develop skills. A wave that will significantly transform the academic world. We need to keep in mind the impact of this digital transformation as our universities look to modernize, and ask ourselves how we can best serve the next generations of students.

At any moment, there are more than 1.4 million students coming through our doors. Most of us here know that the numbers don't tell the full story in this case. We are seeing more diversity in who enrolls, from what circumstance and from where. We're offering more international experiences and welcoming students from abroad.

In all cases, it exposes us to new perspectives, informs our education and adds to our knowledge of the world. International students, by the way, contribute more than \$20 billion to our economy. That's bigger than wheat, bigger than softwood, as big as auto parts, and as big as financial services exports. So our ability to attract those students is important to Canada's economy.

Important to Canada's strength is more inclusive and innovative universities. We all know we need to ensure space for a variety of ideas, geographies, cultures and views. Our benchmark survey on equity, diversity and inclusion has made that clear. No one has a monopoly on good ideas. And in a time of global economic, technological, social and environmental disruption, we can't leave out anyone. The world needs all ideas and perspectives in play.

And all of our institutions have made great strides in becoming more inclusive, while aiming for excellence in research and teaching.

This is a very important goal.

And we need to achieve it for many reasons, one of them being that a more equitable, diversified and inclusive environment is also richer, more stimulating and more innovative.

This applies very much to the decade or so of effort we've dedicated to ensuring more access and success for Indigenous students, in close consultation with Indigenous communities.

By coming together to formulate Universities Canada's principles on Indigenous education and our continued effort through events like the recent Building Reconciliation Forum at Algoma University (I couldn't be there, but Université Laval was represented in Sault Ste. Marie and my colleagues came back energized. I hope you will join me and my co-host Johanne Jean, president of the Université du Québec network for next year's forum in Quebec), we are doing our part to close this education gap, recognizing the urgency of this issue for the country.

- More than two-thirds of Canada's universities are working to include Indigenous representation within governance or leadership structures.
- Two-thirds of universities are incorporating Indigenous knowledge, methods and protocols into research and teaching policies, programs and practices.
- We've increased the number of Indigenous academic programs and are reaching out to prospective Indigenous students.

It is worth repeating the words of the Honorable Justice Murray Sinclair following the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. "Education is what got us into this mess," he said, "but education is the key to reconciliation".

While we recognize much has been done – we all know there is more to do.

Reality

Part of our reality is the role we play in our communities. Even those who do not enrol or participate academically benefit from universities. Many of our libraries, theatres, sports fields and studios are open to the public. So are student performances where the community gets a first look at tomorrow's cultural influences. Summer camps inspire our youngest, and high school programs enrich secondary school curricula.

And we bring good jobs to our home communities. Let me use Quebec City as an example:

- Université Laval employs almost 10,000 people.
- More than 30 per cent of the active population holds a university degree, and 1 person out of 4 holds a Université Laval degree. This shows an incredibly strong link between a university and its community, something that can be found in many places in Canada.

- 9,000 students are enrolled in continuing education, 4,000 of them in lifelong learning courses for seniors.

That's a lot of added value.

- Even more: when our scientific community is engaged in finding solutions to societal challenges. For example, how do we reduce health inequality in Quebec... this is a field where synergies between research and education provide even more value.

Any one of us can speak to the connections we make with our city's leaders. We are, sometimes, the neutral voice – neither business nor government, but fully engaged in contributing to vibrant communities.

Across the country, we put our best minds to problems in our communities through research partnerships and student placements. Our experts are sought out to provide evidence, perspective and logic.

Our home cities can and do take advantage of the wealth of expertise we offer.

This approach has been very successful, to the point where these partnerships have become a defining feature of Canadian universities.

Our universities are key local partners as well as global players.

In Canada, we produce a vast amount of knowledge, with a publication rate far in excess of our demographic weight. The strength of Canadian research and development is a key pillar in our ability to harness the knowledge and innovations produced. However, it should be noted that we are far from the only ones doing it. Our international networks are highly useful in ensuring the development and flow of ideas, before they show up as social and technological innovations.

We can easily imagine that in the next 15 to 20 years, scientists will make more discoveries than we have since the beginning of humanity. These discoveries will also help Canadians when it comes to making choices and orienting decisions. For example, how best to harness artificial intelligence? Important decisions for the future of our country, the economy and the well-being of the population. Experts from a wide variety of fields—notably social sciences, engineering, law and health care—will have to work together in support of our decision-makers.

This extraordinary contribution explains, in large part, the quality of life we enjoy in Canada.

We reach outside to bring in the best knowledge and expertise. We take down borders to access the best and most current information. We are open to learning and sharing to move forward.

Perhaps in this room we aren't surprised that we have enjoyed a positive reputation among Canadians for some time. Universities Canada's latest poll shows 66 per cent of Canadians have a positive view of universities (I can't help but mention that Quebec measures above the national average at 75 per cent). Canadians see us as helpful on the issues that matter most. We can take some pride in that.

But, that positive view can't be taken for granted.

Challenges

Of course there are challenges. Anxiety about the economy, jobs, and how people will navigate technical disruption, has created an unease that fuels the worrisome populist movements we are witnessing.

There is growing distrust of elites, evidence and institutions – everything we stand for. The outbreak of so called “fake news” continues to disrupt our understanding of truth. We have to pay attention to that.

The times we are living in have seen many breakthroughs and changes. In light of this, it is important to recall the significant contribution of higher education as a non-partisan, mobilizing force.

The work of Universities Canada in pressing our issues with all parties must be commended and supported. Because of that approach, we are well positioned with all doors open.

Our Canadian poll also tells us some believe universities are not valuable enough and that we are headed in the wrong direction.

Those surveyed have concerns about student debt, stress and mental health. We see that on campus. While we challenge students to reach beyond, we must be mindful of the prevalence of anxiety and depression among young people.

Our students trust that they will gain knowledge, learn to think bigger and will succeed with a university degree. Trust by our students can't be taken for granted either.

Our predecessors worked to build our place in this country. It's on us to maintain it.

We have seen in recent years governments step beyond their historic role in ways that threaten university autonomy. All universities in Canada are experiencing increased provincial regulation and outside interference that challenges institutional decision-making authority.

Sustaining autonomy is a collective responsibility. We have to assert our fundamental value in a disrupted world.

We cannot say that distrust has led to this erosion. But we do know that universities can be both autonomous and worthy of trust. Helping governments see that is complicated.

Along the same lines, in part, freedom of speech is an important value in our university system, but it has been in some instances conflated with freedom to hate.

Universities play a fundamental role in healthy democracies, especially as safe spaces for difficult dialogues. We have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the free, respectful expression of ideas.

Civil debate and openness to a plurality of voices can be challenging, inside and outside the academic world. That's why we are calling for a common commitment on this issue.

The discussion has become so politicized that the words “freedom of speech” take on new meanings in some circles. How do we set a modus operandi that supports freedom of expression while protecting from freedom to hate? How can our scientific know-how and universal values provide respectful bases for debating and mediating?

It would be easy as Canadians to feel smug in our relative stability as we look offshore. There are many places in the world that would envy our relative security. But the more connections we make abroad, the smaller this world becomes. The world is also our community now, and it's a complicated place. We are among the most sophisticated international interlocutors in the country and so we continue to do what we do best but with eyes open to the geopolitical realities of conflict, changing loyalties and trade issues.

Look at China and the U.S., or Britain and the European Union. As political relationships falter, universities have a role to play in staying focused, protecting and strengthening the bridges we've built with students, citizens, leaders and researchers all over the world. We can keep conversations and exchanges of ideas going. It's better for all of us.

Universities Canada

As members of Universities Canada, we know the benefits of working together. As a forum of presidents, we are also a forum of national conversations. I know that each one of you is a leader of deep conviction.

And this is our strength, particularly at this time of great change and disruption. We now must navigate a minority Parliament. What does that mean? It means that we need to be more vigilant, more united, and we need to be more focused on the issues that matter to Canadians. And we will be more successful if we take that on together through Universities Canada.

Because irrespective of how the world, governments and society changes, this axiom will endure: Universities have a substantial impact on the economy, social development, culture and globalization. No one in this room would argue that. So the conversations we have today and will have during the coming months and years matter.

By our participation, we choose to have an influence. And by always asking ourselves are we doing enough, we choose to do more.

Because our Canadian universities are strong, diversified and open to the world. They all have the ability to make an impact, both in Canada and internationally.

Together with our partners, we have everything we need to make an enduring imprint on society and to educate the next generations of leaders.

Thank you.