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Budget was clear on research spending. Will universities get the message?

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A chart, buried deep in the budget (see infographic), shows Canada spends more on research and development in the higher education sector than any other G-7 country.

Every picture in the federal budget plan tells a story. This one's explicit message is that Canada is a world leader in post-secondary research. Implicitly it raises other questions. Why do we spend more money on post-secondary research than other countries? Are Canadians getting value for those research dollars?

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Governments elsewhere have attempted to reform their post-secondary sectors, ending tenure, and introducing regular [research assessment exercises](#)

[\[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_Assessment_Exercise\]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_Assessment_Exercise). I suspect that Prime Minister Stephen Harper would like to follow their lead, but the federal government has no jurisdiction to act in this area. What the federal government can do, through its budget, is send out clear messages about priorities.

One priority is “world class research.” For example, the 2013 federal budget set aside \$225-million for the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which [funds](#)

[\[http://www.innovation.ca/en/OurInvestments/ProjectsFunded/SummaryProjectsFunded\]](http://www.innovation.ca/en/OurInvestments/ProjectsFunded/SummaryProjectsFunded) multi-million dollar projects in health, science or technology – such as superconducting electron accelerators – at Canada's large universities.

A second priority is commercial, business-oriented endeavours, especially public-private partnerships. This budget has funding for the National Research Council “to help the growth of innovative

businesses”, and a large investment in Genome Canada, which funds bio-tech research, especially university-industry collaborations.

A third priority is the college sector. The budget contains several measures designed to “encourage the contribution of colleges to the innovation system”. There is new money for collaborations between industry and the college sector, and more opportunities for undergraduate students at colleges and polytechnics to obtain scholarships and internships. Colleges also feature in the centerpiece of this budget, the new Jobs Grant, which can be used to fund training at “*eligible training institutions, including community colleges, career colleges and trade union training centres.*”

By omission, the budget reveals what is not a priority: University research, especially social sciences and humanities research with no immediate commercial applications; and university courses that do not deliver specific, marketable skills.

Over the next 10 to 20 years population aging will put enormous pressure on government budgets. Health care spending is the Pac-man that gobbles up everything in its path. Provincial governments in particular will look at universities, and start asking: How much research is being produced? What is its social value? Most importantly, are universities delivering quality education?

Universities can demonstrate that scholarly research is worthwhile by producing policy relevant research, and making findings publicly available. For example, UBC economics professor David Green studies topics that people care about, such as [the effects of school principals on student outcomes](http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/dgreen/publications.html) [http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/dgreen/publications.html] (they matter –students’ scores on the BC grade 12 exams are significantly higher in schools with good principals). He also makes his research findings available for anyone to download on his website.

Relevant research does not have to be world class. In economics, for example, the top-ranked journals are American or European, and rarely publish articles on specifically Canadian policy issues. As professors Herbert Emery and Wayne Simpson [have shown](http://economics.ca/cgi/jab?journal=cpp&article=v38n4p0445) [http://economics.ca/cgi/jab?journal=cpp&article=v38n4p0445], the more economists strive for international recognition, the less Canadian content they produce – which hardly seems beneficial for the Canadian taxpayer.

Public-private partnerships are one way of identifying relevant research topics, but not the only one. When it comes to research, valuable is not the same as profitable. Take, for example, the question: [can warts be cured with duct tape](http://worthwhile.typepad.com/worthwhile_canadian_initi/2012/07/modern-medicine-warts-and-all.html) [http://worthwhile.typepad.com/worthwhile_canadian_initi/2012/07/modern-medicine-warts-and-all.html]? There is no money to be made by proving that regular household duct tape is effective in the treatment of *verruca vulgaris* (unless one can figure out some way of getting people to pay large amounts of money for tiny pieces of duct tape). So even though many people would like to know if duct tape cures warts, the question will receive little attention as long as private funding drives medical research.

In sum, universities can do many things to increase the value of their research output. But should they bother?

Ontario's [Drummond Report](http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/reformcommission/chapters/ch7.html) [http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/reformcommission/chapters/ch7.html] recommended that universities “refocus resources and rewards towards teaching.” That’s a bit like telling someone who is overweight that all they need to do is eat less and exercise more. It’s accurate, but not helpful. Universities, like other large institutions, are hard to change. University professors resist being told what to do, or how to teach (given the state of high school curricula, we have a point).

The message of the 2013 federal budget is that complacency is not an option. If universities do not deliver, governments will look to colleges and the private sector to do so.

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