

Remarks by: Peter Halpin, Executive Director, Association of Atlantic Universities

To: The Atlantic Mayor's Congress

World Trade Centre

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Good afternoon.

I am Peter Halpin, Executive Director, of the Association of Atlantic Universities – the AAU.

The AAU serves as an advocacy organization for the region's 16 universities and their Presidents.

It is a great privilege for me to speak to the Atlantic Mayor's Congress this afternoon.

Today I plan to talk about how universities enrich our region and its communities – as economic engines, social and cultural leaders and as talent magnets.

My opportunity to meet with you today is timely.

Yesterday, I was in Calgary for the spring meeting of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – the AUCC.

The theme of that meeting of university presidents from across the country was campus community partnerships.

Keynote speakers included Brock Carleton, CEO, of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and, Naheed Nenshi, Mayor of Calgary.

The meeting theme illustrates the growing significance of partnerships between universities and municipal governments.

Whether you preside over a rural community, a larger urban centre or a provincial capital, the presence of 16 universities in 18 communities across the region have a profoundly positive economic, social and cultural affect.

At a macroeconomic level, our universities support more than 38,000 jobs and contribute \$2.6 billion annually to the regional economy.

In Nova Scotia alone, our universities generate \$870 million annually in export revenues.

What surprises many is that in Nova Scotia, universities are the second leading export sector in the province behind tire manufacturing.

Universities are responsible for about 60% of the R&D conducted in the region, annually attracting more than \$500 million in funding, most of which comes from outside the region.

As leaders of regional R&D, universities led the creation of Springboard Atlantic, which has a mandate of moving university research from out of laboratories and into the marketplace.

Universities play a central role in the cultural and social life of Atlantic Canada. They enrich the lives of thousands of people who live and work beyond the campus.

Universities are open and accessible to the public who make daily, year round use of sports, recreation and fitness facilities; art galleries, theatres and libraries; classrooms, lecture halls and meeting spaces.

Communities are also beneficiaries and partners in a wide range of volunteer, charitable and outreach programs led by university staff, faculty and students.

Those activities range from food bank drives; community outreach programs in-support of literacy and disabled youth; fund raising for cystic fibrosis – to – community legal and medical services.

In short, universities make a massive contribution to local and regional economies and to the social cohesion of communities.

Atlantic Canadians increasingly understand the vital role their universities play in the progress of the region: they stimulate growth; incubate new businesses; attract talented new immigrants; promote healthy lifestyles and good citizenship.

Our region suffers from debt-burdened provincial governments; lagging economies (with the exception of Newfoundland and Labrador) and the country's least healthy and most rapidly aging and declining population.

This is compounded by the lowest rates of immigrant attraction and retention in the country.

In addition to universities performing their core mission of educating the next generation of community and business leaders; public sector officials and entrepreneurs and professionals,

The role of our universities in attracting and developing talent is an incredibly important function.

Currently, there are about 91,000 full and part time students enrolled in our 16 universities.

Almost a third of those students come from outside the region. And, approximately 25 per cent will decide to stay here following their graduation.

Each year, we graduate about 20,000 freshly minted degree holders, approximately 80 percent of whom will remain in the region. They become the life blood and future of your communities.

Many are beginning to agree with our point of view that universities are the best immigration policy tool to attract and retain highly qualified and motivated immigrants to our region and its communities.

Currently, more than 11,000 international students from more than 150 different countries study at our universities.

International student enrolments have increased by double digits for five straight years and there is no reason to believe that will slow down.

A recent study conducted among those international students revealed that a majority wish to live and work in Canada after graduation.

In fact, the opportunity to attain permanent resident status in Canada was cited as the primary factor in their decision to attend university in our region.

And, many of those same students also expressed a desire to remain in the region following their graduation.

However, these potential new citizens also expressed concern about the lack of job opportunities as the primary barrier to their staying and working in Atlantic Canada.

The big opportunity ahead is for our universities – the talent magnets – all levels of government and employers to partner and create communities in which highly educated and motivated international graduates are welcomed and encouraged to stay.

This is a high priority for our universities.

In Halifax, our universities are truly inspired by our recently elected mayor, Mike Savage.

Mayor Savage, in his inaugural address to the Halifax Chamber, identified the city's universities as a strategic asset that will help him achieve his vision for Halifax's future.

His view of universities as integral to civic success was addressed during a national meeting of University Government Relations Directors earlier this year in Ottawa.

My colleagues from across the country were inspired by Mayor Savage and envious of Halifax having a Mayor that appreciates the role universities can play in advancing municipal interests.

In partnership with the city, Metro's Universities are in the process of rejuvenating a long-standing memorandum of understanding between our respective organizations.

Our collective commitment is to become more actively engaged with the city's government to advance Mayor Savage's vision for Halifax.

As you know, provincial governments in our region are battling enormous fiscal pressures.

Universities, with the current exception of memorial in Newfoundland, have seen their funding either cut or flat lined in recent years.

The current trend of government dis-investment in universities, other than in Newfoundland, ultimately undermines quality and competitiveness:

Two critical attributes that have grown enrolments for five straight years, attracted more R&D funding and capital investment in our campuses.

Municipal governments are not responsible for funding universities.

However, their contribution reinforces the point that for communities, the returns from investment in higher education have never been greater.

As municipal leaders you can play an important role as public advocates for appropriate provincial government investment in our universities and the contribution they make to economic vitality and quality of life across our region.

Here's why, and I paraphrase FCM leader Brock Carleton's remarks yesterday to university presidents.

He said, the essence of the relationship between universities and civic governments is about sharing:

- Shared leadership in the community,
- Shared knowledge of the community, often driven by university research,
- Shared opportunities, such as international relationships and,
- Shared vulnerability, an important reason for joint advocacy.

In conclusion, I reiterate the point that the primary mission of the universities is the education of fully-engaged citizens who are equipped to take leadership roles in Atlantic Canada.

As critical thinkers, they will go on to develop effective public policies.

As life-long learners, they will adapt to our region's needs as its meets major environmental, social and economic challenges.

Equipped with the right tools to find new solutions to important problems, to develop new products and processes and market them worldwide, they will lead Atlantic Canada in the growth of its "smart" or "knowledge-based" economy.

In short, university graduates are the foundation upon which this region's future must be built.

The universities themselves will continue to strive to make that foundation a firm one, by meeting global standards of excellence in teaching and research.

Our universities and your municipal governments are companions in civic affairs and together, we are building a region.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to share these thoughts with you today and I look forward to your questions and comments.