

Supporting Students: The role of Interior universities in a sustainable recovery

A submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services | JUNE 2020



On behalf of the Thompson Rivers University (TRU) Board of Governors, we thank you for the opportunity to participate in this public consultation for Budget 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unforeseen challenges for students, and TRU is prepared to work with government to address these challenges in every way possible including financial assistance, improved technological access, and high-quality online learning resources. As a community-focused, open-access research university located in the BC Interior, TRU recognizes our students' challenges are closely related to the issues facing Interior cities, small towns and rural communities. The pandemic has not only affected students but has up-ended society, creating an uncertain future for many. This submission, and our request on behalf of TRU and our sector, recognizes the real and long-lasting impact of the pandemic on individuals, industries, and communities.

TRU has provided hope and opportunity for countless generations, offering a way forward for students of all socio-economic backgrounds, from high school graduates to those needing to upskill or reskill due to career transitions or job loss. This hope will be just as important, if not more so, in the months and years to come as universities partner with government to support recovery in a post-pandemic period. We look forward to keeping post-secondary education within reach, building a province where no one is left behind.



Barbara Berger
Board Chair



Brett Fairbairn
President and Vice-Chancellor



“...international students represent upwards of 40 percent of TRU’s on-campus student population.”

COVID-19: Sustaining universities to sustain communities

CONTEXT: As with most sectors, post-secondary education has not been spared the effects of a global pandemic. University revenues have fallen since March and this shortfall will continue through the remainder of the year. Areas affected include event bookings, international student group and trades contracts, residence stays, food services, parking fees, as well as investment income. A large and looming concern is the loss of tuition revenue for the university’s fall semester as students consider a delay to studies until the pandemic is over. Of particular concern is international enrolment, as international students represent upwards of 40 percent of TRU’s on-campus student population.

The global pandemic has quickly moved the university from a projected surplus to managing a potential deficit for the 2020/21 fiscal year.

GO FORWARD: Community-oriented universities like TRU are foundational to the regions where they reside and serve. We train individuals for jobs, we are stable employers supporting local economies, and we contribute to innovation and social change through research. And during times of economic hardship, our job is to provide hope.

This foundation has been affected by the pandemic and, while TRU is proactively managing the situation, we are seeking solid provincial support to maintain core stability. This includes a sustained level of provincial funding of the kind TRU has benefited from over the years, which has provided a reliable source of funding to plan operations.

We require the province’s understanding and active assistance to offset, if possible, and manage potentially enormous short-term fluctuations in enrolments. At TRU the largest portion of our operating revenue is at-risk student tuition revenue. As a university that combines local and global engagement, we are heavily exposed to international fluctuations. Support could be in the areas of added investment for high-impact, recovery-related priorities, as outlined further in this submission.

TRU’s Impact: Facts & Figures

- Two campuses (Kamloops and Williams Lake) and five regional centres
- 50 years supporting the region; 42 years providing distance and remote learning through Open Learning
- 30,432 students enrolled in full and part-time studies on campus and through Open Learning (14,177 FTEs)
- 39 percent of on-campus students are international from 100-plus countries (Fall 2019)
- 2,100 credentials granted annually
- 140+ on-campus programs / 60 Open Learning programs
- 2,750 faculty and staff
- 10 federally- and provincially-funded Research Chairs
- \$240.9 million total revenue
- \$70.6 million operating funds from the Province of BC
- \$705.3 million annual regional economic impact / 1 out of 9 jobs supported through TRU, its students and alumni
- \$1.5 billion annual provincial impact / 1 out of 150 jobs

Energizing recovery through high-demand occupations: health care

CONTEXT: Prior to the pandemic, BC's *Labour Market Outlook* (2019) anticipated 861,000 job openings from 2019-2029, with jobs in health care and social assistance topping the list at 16.5 percent of all jobs to address the medical needs of an aging population. The pandemic has intensified this need, underscoring the value of individuals working in health care along with the training that gets them there.

In early spring, students in the following programs were able to graduate early to provide support to hospitals, care homes and other health settings in support of pandemic preparedness and response: Nursing, Health Care Assistant and Respiratory Therapy.

GO FORWARD: To address the needs of an aging BC population, as well as the backlog in surgeries and services resulting from COVID-19, the province will need more health-care workers. TRU delivers health-care programs, the majority through targeted funding from the Province, while our Master of Nursing is self-funded by the students. TRU is also in the final stages of developing a Nurse Practitioner (NP) graduate program which will further address regional health-care needs. The NP program would be the first of its kind in BC, with a focus on specialized adult populations such as those who have proven vulnerable in the pandemic.

TRU graduates would be ideally positioned to support system challenges and transitions in care for adult

populations—seniors with complex chronic conditions, adults with mental health and substance use needs, adult cancer patients, and rural and Indigenous clients.

The province has assisted with one-time funding to address critical skills shortages in the region, which has been appreciated by TRU, its students and communities. Recently, these have included: an added cohort of Health Care Assistant students (18 FTEs) for Williams Lake in September 2019; an added cohort for the same program in Kamloops (32 FTEs)—the start date has unfortunately been delayed due to COVID-19; and one-time funding for 11 licensed practical nurses to ladder into the second year of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, with a start date of September 2020.

TRU also, importantly, offers the only Respiratory Therapy program in the province. This spring graduates from the program went directly into service in the pandemic.

Requested support from the province:

- Additional funded seats for: Nursing and Health Care Assistant programs, and Respiratory Therapy
- Funding to launch the Master of Nursing, Nurse Practitioner program, making it affordable and accessible to future students

Over last five years, TRU has delivered

School of Nursing:
2,514

FTEs in nursing programming,
12% Indigenous students

- 6 certificates
- 1 diploma
- 1 baccalaureate degree
- 1 master's degree

Faculty of Science:
2,910

FTEs in health related programming

- 3 certificates
- 2 diplomas
- 1 baccalaureate degree through Open Learning

Student Outcomes

Bachelor of Science in Nursing

- 94%** satisfied with their program
- 97%** in a job related to program
- 100%** said knowledge and skills gained useful in their job

Bachelor of Health Science

- 97%** in labour force
- 97%** satisfied with their program
- 21%** were self-employed
- 19%** were male



Engineering the future: technology's place in and after a pandemic

CONTEXT: As COVID-19 has shone a light on the value and need for health-care workers, it has also done the same for people who work in and create technology. Their innovation has allowed individuals to work or learn from home, assisted with pandemic modelling to guide public health decisions, and created 3D printed face shields to help businesses and people get back to work. They've also eased quarantine isolation. Where would we be without our smart phones and streaming services?

Such innovators are engineers, whether their specific discipline is in electrical, computer, or software engineering. They've all had a hand in global preparedness and response to the pandemic, and their expertise will be needed even more in the future. COVID-19 has fast-tracked digitalization, increased the use and reliance on technology, and changed our possibilities.

TRU, along with industry partners, has been keen to develop this potential for the Interior well before a pandemic to meet both current and future needs. A 2015 Labour Market study for Kamloops noted a lack of skilled trades and engineers to fill open positions in the region. Provincial and national labour market analysis in the past five years further supported the demand for engineers, to fill future vacancies and grow the sector.

GO FORWARD: TRU launched its Bachelor of Engineering in Software Engineering in 2018 through funding secured by the province—a solid step forward to a shared university and industry goal to bring engineering closer to home. This new program gives students in the Interior the opportunity to complete an engineering degree at TRU, instead of transferring out after Year 2 to another institution. Furthering this goal, in May 2020, TRU received endorsement from the provincial Degree Quality Assessment Board for two additional engineering degrees, in the disciplines of computer and electrical engineering.

Development of these programs to completion would meet the training needs of the Interior, support the local tech industry and local economies, create a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) knowledge centre, and provide an accessible and affordable option leading to highly skilled employment for students in the region.

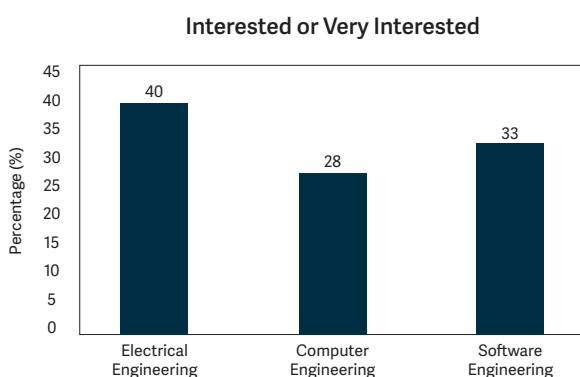
Requested support from the province:

- Funding to launch the Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering and Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Engineering.

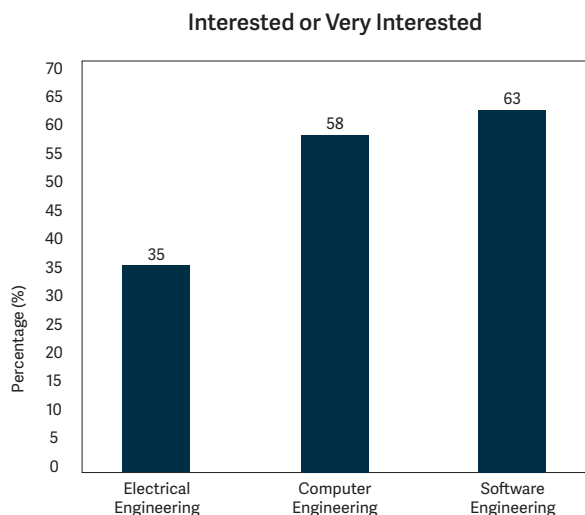
Student demand for TRU engineering degrees

In fall 2018, TRU administered two surveys to determine level of student demand for Software, Computer and Electrical Engineering.

The first survey elicited responses from former TRU Engineering Transfer students (completed between 2013/14 and 2017/18 academic years)



The second survey invited current TRU students (enrolled in selected courses in Fall 2018) and Engineering Transfer applicants (applied for Fall 2018) to participate.





Renewing infrastructure

CONTEXT: TRU has spent approximately \$87.4 million on capital projects in the last five years. From classroom renovations to construction of a new Industrial Training and Technology Centre and a Nursing and Population Health Building, these projects funded through government grants, donors and previous TRU surplus revenues are supporting students and communities at large. Based on an economic impact study conducted for TRU in 2019, these capital projects represent a total of \$66.7 million in additional short and long-term income to the regional economy.

GO FORWARD: TRU is ready to participate in future government infrastructure programs in support of regional economic recovery. A STEM building to support the current and future demand for STEM disciplines is a priority for TRU's Kamloops campus. Such a building would bring together the various disciplines under one roof, support interdisciplinary work and research collaboration, and provide space for future program growth to address labour market needs, as STEM are among the highest-demand occupations for the future.

Supporting student needs in a pandemic

CONTEXT: Students with limited financial resources are struggling with job loss and reduced summer employment options due to COVID-19. While universities, student unions and both levels of government have provided relief through grants and specialized assistance programs, the need for students remains. Additionally, the demand for student service supports has been a growing concern for universities in recent years, as universities are providing more services outside the classroom to help students be successful.

One such area is student health and wellness, and particularly mental health concerns, which have only been amplified during the pandemic. Students are worried about finances, adapting to change in delivery of education, and dealing with other personal and family issues. The April 2020 launch of Here2Talk, the province's new mental-health counselling and referral service specifically for post-secondary students, is a welcome resource.

Requested support from the province:

- Additional capacity to target needs-based resources directly, particularly to vulnerable students.
- Additional targeted support to protect student health and well-being, including mental health.

“Opening up” education

CONTEXT: Throughout its history, TRU has opened its doors to students by reducing barriers to education: flexible entry requirements and flexible pathways (through time and choice of modalities), lower-cost tuition, online and distance learning, and investing in the development of free, open educational resources (OERs) to reduce textbook costs for students. COVID-19 and the near-universal shift to remote learning has opened up new options in education delivery for the future. Conversely, access to education for individuals experiencing pandemic-related job loss or increased financial and family hardship may present a considerable challenge.

GO FORWARD: Through its Open Learning division, TRU has been a leader in distance and online learning for 42 years. The strength of this experience has positioned TRU well in shifting to remote and virtual learning for its traditional campus-based courses during the pandemic, and will continue to help British Columbians through an uncertain and ultimately, stronger future. Additionally, TRU will continue to be a strong advocate for making education more accessible, whether through the advancement of open education or recognition of courses based on OERs.

This spring, TRU became the first institution in North America to offer an international credential transfer based on courses that exclusively use OERs. It is also among the first in the world to recognize micro-credit transfer toward a university-level qualification. TRU is a member of the Open Education Resource universitas (OERu), a non-profit network of post-secondary institutions from five continents united in making education affordable and accessible through OERs.

Requested support from the province:

- Investment for course redesign and technological enhancements for online learning
- Investment to create more open education resources that are shared among BC institutions for the benefit of all students

Research: its role in restoring, rebuilding, recreating our future

CONTEXT: Communities in the Interior and TRU increasingly live in partnership as it's the university's long-held belief that it exists for the betterment of the communities it serves. In this context, community-engaged research—research that involves community members and solves community problems—is moving to the forefront.

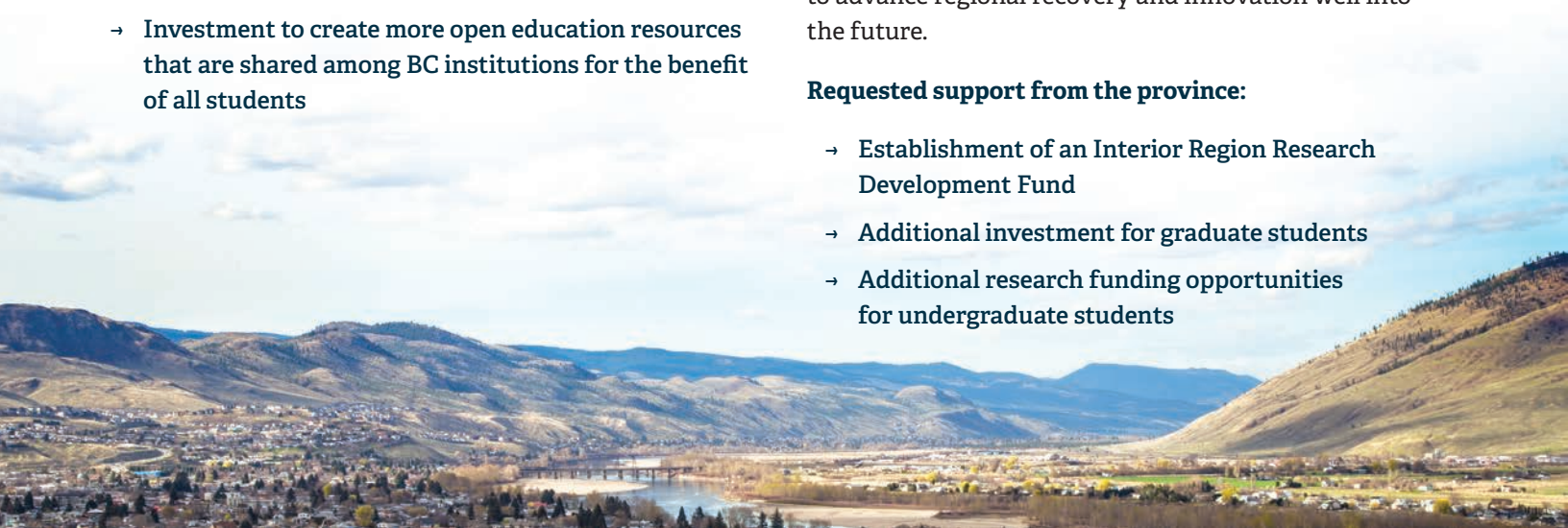
Already, TRU is involved in pandemic-related research, and at a local level. TRU scientists are working with local authorities to investigate sewage, identifying traces of the coronavirus and creating a possible early warning detection test. Another research team is working with the United Way, local businesses, and non-profits to map and better shape community response to the dual crisis of COVID-19 and opioid overdoses, especially as these challenges affect our most vulnerable populations.

Moving beyond the boundaries of one city and into the reaches of a much larger region, TRU along with its partner institutions in Prince George (University of Northern BC) and Kelowna (UBC Okanagan), have been advancing joint-research projects through the Interior Universities Research Coalition (IURC) with the involvement of host cities. Areas of current and future collaboration include natural disaster management, such as flood and fire prediction and response; interface fuel management; evacuation management; community health; and ecosystem impacts. Integral to this research is the involvement of graduate students—our future scientists—who, like other students, have been affected by COVID-19. Their research has been disrupted and their personal financial situations have been challenged.

GO FORWARD: As the province and its communities start planning for life after a pandemic, evidence-based, community-engaged research will have a strong role. In the Interior, the IURC is a ready partner along with its representative communities, programs and students, to advance regional recovery and innovation well into the future.

Requested support from the province:

- Establishment of an Interior Region Research Development Fund
- Additional investment for graduate students
- Additional research funding opportunities for undergraduate students



Indigenous Education and Knowledge

Examples of TRU's commitment to truth and reconciliation:

- The Coyote Project – a \$1 million, five-year university-funded investment in initiatives to support indigenization
- Indigenous student enrolment – 13% of on-campus domestic students in Kamloops, 26% in Williams Lake (fall 2019)
- Targeted trades training for Indigenous students and surrounding Indigenous communities
- Indigenous-focused research – Dr. Lisa Bourque Bearskin is one of only six researchers nationally awarded an Indigenous Research Chair in Nursing from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the only one in BC. Her research focuses on advancing Indigenous health nursing.
- Dr. Shelly Johnson, (Mukwa Musayett), is the world's first Canada Research Chair in Indigenizing Higher Education, and a recognized leader in Indigenous research methodologies and leadership. Her research focuses on how university-based research and teaching can better serve Indigenous advancement.



Closing comments

Thompson Rivers University is both proud of and humbled by our place in the Interior of BC. This comes from five decades of a shared history with students and communities, as we grew from a college in the 1970s, to a university college in the late 1980s, and a university in 2005. As we embarked on 2020, we prepared to celebrate the year of our 50th anniversary. An anniversary of supporting students and communities to build a better future.

Now, with COVID-19, our attention has turned to ensuring our stability—that TRU emerges from the pandemic strong and able to continue fulfilling our distinctive mandate. As outlined in our submission, we are addressing significant financial pressures. ***We have taken aggressive steps to reduce costs and manage our budget—freezing hiring and discretionary spending, issuing layoff notices—while at the same time redirecting limited resources to deliver education and student services in a new, virtual way.*** We are being diligent during this time, mindful of the circumstances around us.

Our request is that the province continue to support our mission, including our growing role in the Interior and our unique impact through Open Learning. With students and communities facing uncertain times, TRU is a lifeline to a secure, prosperous, and healthy future.