

## OPINION

# Universities crucial to post-pandemic recovery

*By: Scott Forbes and Jim Clark*

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The global COVID-19 pandemic presents Manitobans with an historic challenge, and decisions made now must be the right ones, for both the current crisis and the long-term well-being of the province. This requires an appreciation of the roles played by core institutions, including universities.

Manitoba's public universities educate about 45,000 students each year. This number will grow during and after the pandemic, because universities historically provide shelter during an economic storm, for both traditional students and the unemployed. Given youth unemployment will reach unprecedented levels, these storm shelters need to be fortified, not weakened.

Many university graduates work in jobs essential for coping with crises. Universities have trained health-care professionals, scientists and other workers at the National Microbiology Laboratory, as well as public administrators. Such people are key to developing a strategy to ensure that Manitoba emerges from the crisis strong and healthy.

University graduates and faculty also conduct research that answers key questions during crises. University research teams are working to understand the basic biochemical pathways and vulnerabilities of the coronavirus. Others work to understand societal processes, such as adherence to social isolation and other policies.

But research requires faculty, graduate students and equipment to be in place and already supported by government. Otherwise, Manitoba cannot respond to such crises. The critical question right now is: are the education and research functions of universities essential or incidental to the well-being of Manitobans?

The answer from the Pallister government appears to be "incidental." The government demanded on April 16 that public universities prepare (by April 21) immediate budget cuts of 10, 20 or 30 per cent — just five days to prepare massive cutbacks to institutions built over decades.

Such cuts would seriously compromise our capacity for teaching and research. The universities of Winnipeg and Brandon would not survive as full-fledged universities, and the Université de Saint Boniface would likely be absorbed by the University of Manitoba, which itself would face crippling, though not fatal, program cuts.

Faced with an economic crisis, the Progressive Conservative emphasis on continued and intensified austerity is rejected by governments and economists. Many governments will

promote huge deficits during the COVID-19 pandemic. While not desirable per se, deficits will protect jobs, the economy, our social safety net and, most importantly, lives.

For comparison, the enormous deficits of the Second World War were followed by a long period of economic growth, industrial expansion and rising incomes. At the same time, we built the social safety net that people rely on today.

So deficits, while not desirable, can be overcome. Mr. Pallister himself stated recently that his proposed cuts to the public sector would shave a dime from every dollar of deficit financing during the crisis. A dime saved, but at what cost? His shaved dime will do permanent, large-scale damage to our universities that are, now more than ever, essential services.

Looking forward, universities will play a critical role in the well-being of the province and its citizens. Strong universities are needed to educate large numbers of students as they prepare for work. This will include health-related and management professions at the forefront of the current crisis, and also diverse occupations required for a functioning society.

Nor should we neglect the importance of critical thinking in this era of challenges and fake news; from the liberal arts to the natural sciences, universities and other educational institutions train minds. Graduates learn to adapt, to find and process information, to ask the right questions, to problem-solve, and to separate genuine facts from nonsense, such as that spouted by the likes of Dr. Oz and Dr. Phil, and certain orange-hued politicians.

Universities are also critical to develop and maintain our research capacity. Faculty, students, research assistants and material resources are essential to further our basic understanding of the physical and social worlds in preparation for the future, whatever it brings. Having such resources in place will prepare Manitoba to better cope and weather the next crisis, which no one can predict.

The world after the pandemic will be very different than before. Whether Manitoba is positioned to thrive in that different world will depend in part on our capacity for education and research. Our universities are essential to these goals and should not be put at risk for short-term and marginal savings on the deficit: full stop.

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