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Basic Investments in Canada’s Research Ecosystem Pay Many Dividends

(Ottawa, ON) April 23, 2021 - The Canadian Consortium for Research (CCR) recognizes the significance of this week’s federal budget, which identified a series of social, health and economic investments meant to place Canada on the road to recovery from the COVID-19 global pandemic. While science contributed significantly to the management of the pandemic, Canada’s research community was itself significantly impacted by the pandemic. We remain concerned that there were too few measures introduced to continue re-building Canada’s research ecosystem.

“The budget stops short of recognizing the concurrent contributions and impacts of the pandemic on Canada’s research community, and the role that research plays in Canada’s economic recovery”, says Dr. Lisa Votta-Bleeker, CCR Chair. “Today’s investment in basic research is tomorrow’s discoveries and innovations which drive our future competitiveness and prosperity.”

Budget 2021 invests in targeted research committing \$2.2 billion over the next seven years to boost Canada’s biomedical and life sciences research sector to in part increase vaccine development. While these investments are welcomed, Budget 2021 did not include any new funds for the base operating budgets of Canada’s tri-councils for investigator-driven research, nor did it consider the critical funding still needed to support researchers, trainees and students such as was provided by the 2020 Canada Research Continuity Emergency Fund.

In its 2021 pre-budget submission, CCR members noted “...it is more critical than ever that the federal government increase its support for Canada’s research funding agencies, students, early career researchers, academic institutions, international research, and research labs”.¹

Canada’s research ecosystem was significantly impacted by the pandemic. Research labs, studies, careers, particularly among women, and post-doctoral fellowships were halted and, in some cases, ended entirely. Physical distancing requirements created undeniable difficulties for many research projects in academic and non-academic settings. Reduced research funding from charities and non-profits left early career researchers with years of decreased funding opportunities. International students left Canada, and in some cases have yet to return. All these combined have not only impacted Canada’s academic and scientific resources in the short-term, but will be felt for many years to come.

“The inclusion of researchers in health sciences in the emergency wage subsidy program was helpful, but Budget 2021 fails to provide the ongoing research support and kickstart needed to regain the fundamental science that stalled or stopped in the pandemic,” notes Votta-Bleeker. “We were behind where we needed to be before the pandemic, and the gap has just widened.”

¹Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Budget, Canadian Consortium for Research, p.4, https://ccr-ccr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CCR_Pre-Budget_2021Consultation_Submission_FINAL.pdf

Canada's current government expenditure in R&D is the lowest it has been since 2001 at 1.54% compared to the OECD average of 2.47% (a 55% gap), putting Canada 23rd among the 37 OECD countries. Investment in R&D is necessary to Canada's economic recovery. The CCR called on the federal government for an increase of at least 10% to the base funding of CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC, until commensurate with other G7 countries, for investigator-driven research. R&D includes fundamental research undertaken in academia and industry; applied research directed towards specific objectives; and experimental development to produce new, or improve existing, products and processes. Together these boost economic growth and drive innovation, the impacts of which are better jobs and higher productivity.

"Canada's research community will continue to call for increases in basic research, as it is needed to both cultivate a strong and viable science culture, domestically and internationally, and to support and secure current and future generations of researchers who will ultimately contribute to Canada's economic strength and recovery."

The CCR is the largest advocacy coalition in Canada, focusing on research funding in all disciplines and support for post-secondary education. CCR includes 20 organizations that represent more than 50,000 researchers and 500,000 students across disciplines.

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