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In Need of a Boost: Innovation at Canada's Universities and Colleges

Ottawa – Innovation in teaching and learning and research dissemination is widespread on Canadian campuses. But a policy environment of “benign neglect” means we know too little about the impact of that innovation, and are doing too little to sustain it, says a new CPRN study.

Innovation and Differentiation in Canada's Post-secondary Institutions, by Robert Crocker, of Atlantic Evaluation and Research Consultants, and Alex Usher, of the Educational Policy Institute, argues that provincial and federal governments must take steps to encourage research and innovation in teaching and learning if Canada is to maintain its human capital edge over rapidly emerging international competitors.

Crocker and Usher examine the state of innovation in the country's post-secondary (PSE) schools, the conditions that foster it and the barriers that hinder it. Their case studies from campuses across Canada help illustrate factors common to successful innovation stories. They also make suggestions for further research.

The study defines “innovation” for its purposes as changes in *general* practice at an institution. It focuses on innovations in teaching and learning or knowledge mobilization, and innovations designed to differentiate an institution from others like it.

“Our results support the conclusion that innovations are more likely to be driven by internal factors, like a facilitating culture or inspired leadership, than by external factors”, says Alex Usher. “In fact, institutional cultural factors are so important that it is often difficult to ‘export’ innovations in one institution to another.”

The authors find that successful innovation depends on widely shared ‘buy-in’ within an institution, a general consensus on the innovation's desirability, and internal institutional supports.

The study finds universities and colleges use innovation in teaching and learning, and in research dissemination, to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Most strikingly, it concludes that “substantial effort over a long period of time” is needed before an innovation becomes widely identifiable with an institution. The examples of Acadia

University's high tech "advantage", Waterloo's co-operative learning, and McMaster's Problem-Based Learning confirm that conclusion.

"Serious and successful innovation is a slow-acting process, based as much on culture change as on policy change," says Robert Crocker. "Culture change at PSE institutions deserves scholarly attention, given culture's centrality in these issues."

In survey responses and key informant interviews, the most widely cited barriers to innovation were; limited resources, limited incentives and opportunities, limited rewards and recognition, and resistance to change. The study advises further research to assess the real impact of each of these.

The authors urge governments to create policy environments that will stimulate more innovation and to provide support for research that defines and measures post-secondary outputs.

"We need to determine what knowledge and skills contribute most to the economic and social impact of PSE, how to maximize this impact, and which learning and teaching approaches are most cost-effective," says Ron Saunders, Director of CPRN's Work Network. "It is ironic that the area of research where our PSE institutions are weakest is research about teaching their own students. We are convinced that with the right incentives our universities and colleges have the capacity to change that."

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