VPRI responds to the federal budget

Robert Haché, vice-president research & innovation, has issued this commentary on the federal budget to the York community.

The recent federal budget reinforced the importance the government is placing on putting its fiscal house in order with some programs receiving cuts in excess of 10 per cent.

Within that overall context of restraint is a welcome affirmation of the government’s strong commitment to research and innovation, with funding programs largely preserved and substantial new commitments made. At the same time, the new investments focus predominantly on Canada’s innovation agenda, while the importance of supporting fundamental research is acknowledged in less tangible ways. It is explicitly stated on page 271 of the budget document that “programming in support of basic research, student scholarships and industry-related research initiatives and collaborations are preserved.”

The budget has reaffirmed the importance of Tri-Council funding by returning mandated budget cuts in the form of $37 million in new investment, albeit with a focus on industry-academic partnerships. This leaves Tri-Council with stable overall budget envelopes in the present fiscal year and the hope that next year’s mandated budget cut of $31.3 million may be similarly rescued through the infusion of additional new monies.

The long-term investment in the Canada Foundation for Innovation ($500 million over five years, beginning in 2014) and the doubling of support for graduate students to gain workplace experience through the Industrial Research & Development Internship Program, are further positive signals of the importance the government places on high-quality university research, and in attracting and retaining top students and researchers.

Other notable investments in research and higher education include:

- $40 million over two years to support Canada’s Advanced Research & Innovation Network’s (CANARIE) operation of Canada’s ultra-high-speed research network;
- $60 million for Genome Canada to launch a new applied research competition in the area of human health, and to sustain the Science and Technology Centres until 2014-2015;
- $10 million over two years to the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research to link Canadians to global research networks;
- $5.2 million in 2012–2013 to establish and integrate a network of mental health-related researchers in the Canadian Depression Research & Intervention Network;
- $67 million to assist the National Research Council (NRC) refocus on business-led, industry-relevant research, as well as doubling the contribution budget of the NRC’s highly successful cross-Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP) in aid of small and medium enterprises.

These investments can only be seen as encouraging and a reflection of continuing strong support for university sector research. They provide important building blocks to developing knowledge, creativity and innovation within universities, now and into the future. This is a reality the government recognizes. We are fortunate to have experienced a significant upswing in university research investments over the last decade, with investments having nearly quadrupled since the mid-1990s and continuing to rise despite economic setbacks. Budget 2012 presents a stable agenda for research funding – delivering a longer term message on research and innovation that reinforces the government’s goal, “to position Canada for increased success in the global economy that depends more and more on knowledge and innovation as a key driver of long-term competitiveness.”
Canada’s societal well-being and future economic health depend greatly on our capacity to innovate and build a highly competitive advantage. This is a vision that York University shares and will continue to foster in benefiting our researchers. With the sustained support towards higher education and excellence in research and technology, we will continue to work with the government to ensure the continuation of these vital investments – and to reinforce the need to invest equally in the ongoing development of fundamental research.