

By Elaina Loveland

## Place and Promise

An interview with Stephen J. Toope, president and vice-chancellor of The University of British Columbia

**S**TEPHEN J. TOOPE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA has been a strong voice for internationalization. During his tenure, the university has created a strategic plan called *Place and Promise* that has become the guiding document in helping all parts of the UBC community integrate internationalization into every aspect of the institution.

*But, the strategic plan, as important as it is for engendering a unified vision for UBC, was only the first stage in a multi-tiered process. Toope has worked with a broad spectrum of individuals and groups from the entire UBC community in the development of detailed action items and metrics for each part of the university that have become important measuring sticks on both the macro and micro levels.*

*An international law scholar who represented Western Europe and North America on the UIN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances from 2002–2007, Professor Toope's academic interests include public international law, legal theory, human rights, international dispute resolution, and family law. Toope has studied in his native Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.*

**IE: The University of British Columbia's Place and Promise plan includes international engagement and intercultural understanding as institutional priorities. How did this plan develop and how does the university plan to meet these priorities?**

**TOOPE:** UBC's strategic plan, *Place and Promise*, was developed over an 18-month period. The process involved broad consultations with groups and individuals on our campuses, as well as discussions with alumni and broader community groups. Our planning process was neither "top down" nor "bottom up," but instead grew out of an iterative series of exchanges. We employed many face-to-face meetings to discuss key themes, and we also leveraged the

power of the Internet to facilitate individual comments and group discussions.

In focusing on international engagement and intercultural understanding, you have coincidentally highlighted two of the areas in which I developed initial discussion papers myself early on in the plan's evolution. In part, support for the plan comes from the way it was developed, and the number of people at and around UBC who see themselves in its goals and commitments. I am pleased to report that in a series of recent external reviews, a consistent message is that our community is actively engaged in supporting *Place and Promise* and figuring out how to meet our commitments.

Planning is only a first step. Our strategies for meeting the *Place and Promise* goals include our development of detailed action items and metrics for each area; integrating *Place and Promise* into our budgeting model; and reporting annually on our progress. In addition to this high level plan, UBC has a range of mid-level plans developed by faculties and administrative units. These range from faculty academic plans to thematic plans such as our Aboriginal Strategic Plan to operational plans in finance and IT, all designed to support the articulated commitments of the university. These plans specify action items and metrics at a more local level, and show how these units link their activities to *Place and Promise*.

**IE: How is Canada and the University of British Columbia, in particular, opening the doors to international students? Why is this important?**



**UBC President and Vice-Chancellor Stephen J. Toope**

**TOOPE:** The University of British Columbia (UBC) has been attracting increasing numbers of international students, at both its campuses, over the past five years. We aim to increase our total international enrollment to about 15 percent of our undergraduate class and more than 25 percent of our graduate class within the next three to five years. Our strategies for reaching this goal include increasing the amount of financial aid available for international students, working to ensure that admissions procedures are streamlined, increasing the amount of student housing available on our campuses, and continuing to improve the academic and student life experience for all students at UBC. We are also refining our welcome and support programs tailored for international students.

International students enrich our campus immensely, by the perspectives they bring to the classroom and the lab, as well as to campus life generally. World leading universities have diverse student bodies, so that international student recruitment is also vital to our efforts to recruit the best researchers from around the globe. In addition, international

students bring not only their own human gifts but also a whole network of family, business, academic, cultural and social ties that Canada needs to succeed in the global community. The personal contacts that international students make during their university years are often a precursor to a variety of new relationships, from business and diplomatic opportunities to laying the groundwork for travel-learning opportunities for Canadian students abroad.

**IE:** The UBC vision statement says that the university “creates an exceptional learning environment that fosters global citizenship.” Why is global citizenship so vital to the university’s vision and why is it a goal that higher education institutions should embrace?

**TOOPE:** Global citizenship means being able to successfully navigate the interconnected world of the twenty-first century. This requires intercultural fluency, an awareness of the complexities of international relations, and an understanding of global disparities. Of course, our aim

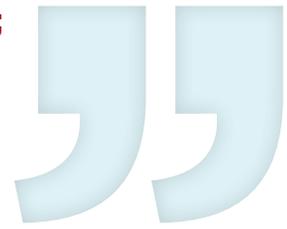
is not simply to require students to take a course on globalization (although many of them will), but rather to ensure that all of our learning programs are attuned to the global context in which contemporary knowledge is generated and used. Citizenship also means engagement and responsibility. In all of our programs we aim to equip students with the skills needed to participate broadly in the diverse communities—local, national, and global—that they will live in throughout their lives. We also aim to model and to value engaged citizenship in all of our endeavors.

And of course, it is also true that while we at UBC cherish global citizenship as a value, it is a value broadly shared by higher education institutions around the world. Indeed, good education has always fostered good citizenship.

**IE:** UBC is situated on the Pacific Rim. Has this influenced the university in its planning with regard to any particular regions of the world to build higher education ties with? Are there any goals to build



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**partnerships or develop higher education capacity in this region or other regions?**

**TOOPE:** The Pacific Rim is an important area of focus for UBC, but it is certainly not our only area of focus. As a world leading university, we have ties at an institutional level that span the globe. At the level of the individual researcher, UBC faculty members are involved in research partnerships in, literally, every corner of the globe.

In early April, our vice president research and international officially launched our International Strategic Plan, setting clear priorities for the next three to five years. This plan includes three areas of geographic focus: China, India, and Europe. This framing provides another way of answering this question. These areas were selected because there are important game-changing actions to be taken in these areas over this time frame. And the goals are dramatically different in each case: China is a priority because of the changing landscape for university education there. As Canada's pre-eminent location for scholarship on China, this is an ideal moment for UBC to expand and reaffirm linkages through research collaboration, graduate student exchange, and student recruitment. In the case of India, UBC is joining with other institutions to really put Canada on the map as a destination of choice for Indian students. We are also looking carefully at the possibility of partnerships to provide educational opportunities in India. In the case of Europe, our focus is on expanding our research partnerships.

UBC will always have a dominant strategic focus on parts of the Pacific Rim, but we are too big, and too diverse, for this to be our only focus.

**IE: In October 2010, UBC formed a partnership with the Max Planck Society, a**

**German research institution. Can you describe how both institutions plan to conduct joint research projects and increase scholarly exchanges?**

**TOOPE:** The Max Planck-UBC Center for Quantum Materials was formed with funding from both sides to jointly perform research and training in one of the most fascinating areas of physics, namely study of the exotic phenomena in materials that are directly determined by the quantum nature of the constituents. The Center operates through summer and winter schools in which each of the partners brings faculty and trainees together in either Germany or Vancouver to listen to experts lead discussions of particular areas in quantum materials. The workshops that have been held in this series thus far have already initiated some exciting new research activities both at UBC and in Stuttgart at the Max Planck Institute for Solid State Research. Progress reports on experiments and recent theoretical advances provide an exciting substrate for generation of new ideas and directions of investigation. Faculty and trainee exchanges are also covered by Center funding, and some support for research services is included to allow expert maintenance and development of the extraordinary experimental facilities available to both parties. All research accomplished through the Center is published jointly by the investigators from both countries. An intermediate term goal is to expand the physical presence of the Center at UBC with the support of donated funds.

**IE: Why is joint faculty research across borders important to building a greater global knowledge economy and how can institutions help create such projects?**

**TOOPE:** Internationally collaborative research is valued by universities because it

builds intellectual synergies, tests ideas, and pools resources. Knowledge is no longer predominantly local; it is a global phenomenon, built collectively. Knowledge that connects directly to the "knowledge economy" is not unique in this regard.

Universities foster international collaborations in myriad ways through funding support for conferences and workshops, thorough visitorships, and travel grants involving professors, post-docs, and research students. Universities also establish partnership relationships at an institutional level within which individual researchers can develop collaborative projects.

UBC researchers have scores of such partnerships with universities around the world, and especially in the United States, Europe, and China. For example, an exciting research partnership in infectious disease research has been created with nodes at UBC and Hong Kong University. Additionally, partnership patterns differ around the globe. In some locations, the most appropriate partnerships are with independent institutes, such as our new partnership with the Max Planck Institute and our long-term relationship in mathematics with France's CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research).

**IE: Can you describe how UBC is supporting peace efforts though hosting events with Peace it Together or through other means?**

**TOOPE:** UBC is committed to the principle that knowledge and respectful dialogue foster global understanding. Our commitments to global citizenship and to intercultural understanding are themselves commitments to a more harmonious global future. We certainly do work with institutions like Peace It

Together, which focuses on trying to bring together people with diverse perspectives on the Middle East. But individual events or sponsorships are only one small part of the picture. Our students are involved in international service learning with communities in Southern Africa, they participate in international medical outreach, Engineers Without Borders, Terry Talks, and Africa Awareness activities. Our faculty members participate in research and conflict resolution projects as diverse as transitional governance for emerging states and historical reconciliation following human rights atrocities. Working with World University Service of Canada (WUSC), we have also established a program for staff members who want to take leave to participate in volunteer work overseas. All of these activities have peace as an objective.

**IE: How important is the opportunity for students to study abroad during their college experience?**

**TOOPE:** At UBC we certainly believe in the educational value of student mobility

programs—whether for traditional undergraduate exchange studies, for research or co-op training, or to participate in international service learning. We already have a greater percentage of our students participating in mobility programs than any other large university in Canada. And we have set ambitious goals to increase this participation rate to roughly a third of the undergraduate class within the next five years. We value international mobility because of our commitment to global citizenship—the experience of “living” another perspective has enormous transformative potential.

UBC also recognizes that we will probably never be in a position to offer all of our students an international mobility experience. For those students who complete all of their studies in Vancouver or Kelowna [the city where UBC’s Okanagan campus opened in 2005], there are important ways to provide international experiences. These include internationally relevant curriculum, instructors from around the globe, using the full reach of contemporary technology

to build classes with students at partner institutions. Our campuses host lectures, workshops, conferences, and roundtable events—with visitors from around the world—on a weekly, if not daily basis. Like any internationally engaged university, UBC is a global space. Finally, making sure that we have a critical mass of international students in all our classrooms and dorms helps to “internally internationalize” the university. Our aim is to ensure that every UBC student has to think through intercultural differences on a daily basis.

**IE: What is the greatest challenge for university presidents today in terms of internationalization and how do you think this challenge can be met?**

**TOOPE:** I see two interrelated challenges: setting priorities and enabling widespread participation. There are more opportunities to engage internationally than ever before. Almost every day, UBC professors, and the institution itself, are invited to work collaboratively across borders. But resources are

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by definition limited. So, it is essential that we think carefully about where partnerships can really make a difference. I could personally spend all my time on airplanes, racing from one meeting to another. Each one may be important, but if we don't set priorities the collective result will be underwhelming. That is why our new international plan establishes clear priorities for the next three to five years of university-wide effort. At the same time, we want to make sure that people who can truly benefit from international partnerships are enabled to take up opportunities. In Canada, our granting council funding rules do not encourage international connections; nor are their significant special programs to seed international collaboration. This is in distinction to the Fulbright program in the United States or the British Council, to take but two examples. Similarly for students, I do not want international opportunities to be limited to students with independent means or with wealthy and supportive parents. We are actively exploring a framework to provide

increased financial assistance for all UBC students to gain access to the myriad opportunities for international experience that we have worked so hard to create. Our "Go Global" program is a great beginning, but we need to scale it up.

**IE: You earned degrees in Canada, the United Kingdom, and in the United States. How do you think your own experience as an international student influenced your philosophy of higher education and as a university president?**

**TOOPE:** For me, the defining experience as an international student was in the UK. Being in the northeast United States as an undergraduate was not much of a cultural or social challenge. I made great friends who continue friends to this day, but almost all the people I met at Harvard were Americans, who seemed pretty familiar in most—but not all—ways. But at Cambridge, I met people from all over the world. The assumptions were often different, and even the aspirations were not always predictable.

I found it fascinating and deeply challenging at times. From that experience, I learned that it is not enough for a university to have a great international reputation to feel diverse and global in scale. A university really has to create a critical mass of people from around the world, enough people to challenge the assumptions of the host nation. And a university has to be confident enough to let its students go abroad, to learn elsewhere, and come back with new ideas. I think that universities are harmed by a belief that "we do it better than anyone else" or "our programs can't be matched, so we can't let students escape for even a semester." Now the opportunities for global connections are far greater and more diverse than when I was a student. If I were doing things all over, I would make sure to learn a non-European language, and I would try to spend significant time as a student or researcher somewhere in the developing world.

**IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is managing editor of *IE*.

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