

Robert Asselin, CEO U15 Canada

Presentation to the Standing Committee on Industry and Technology
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Chair, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Robert Asselin, and I serve as CEO of U15 Canada — Canada’s 15 leading research universities. Together, our institutions conduct more than 75% of all university research in Canada, enroll 70% of the country’s full-time doctoral students, and generate much of the nation’s innovation — from patents to private-sector research contracts. Collectively, our universities are a national strategic asset: anchors of talent, research, and innovation.

We are living through a profound transformation in the global economy. The era of unfettered trade—the belief that open markets would always deliver stability—is over. Around the world, we see the return of economic coercion: supply chains weaponized, technologies restricted, nations redefining prosperity through the lens of security.

In this new era, economic and national security are inseparable. The long-term contest among nations is now about who can compete—and win—in advanced industries.

As former Google CEO Eric Schmidt’s Special Competitive Studies Project put it, “innovation power”—the ability to invent, adopt, and integrate technologies at scale—is now the foundation of both prosperity and security.

And as former U.S. ambassador Rahm Emanuel recently wrote, industrial policy can only succeed if it rests on a deep and sustained base of advanced research.

The same is true for Canada: science and research are the foundation of economic power in the 21st century.

History offers powerful lessons on how existential threats can drive transformation. In 1957, the launch of Sputnik was a shock to the United States. The response was not incremental—it was transformational. President Eisenhower created DARPA – the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency. DARPA’s innovations – GPS, the internet and more – became the backbone of U.S. economic and technological dominance. In 1962, President Kennedy went to Rice

University to deliver his famous “moon speech” and called for a national mission to lead in science and technology.

Crucially, they placed their leading research universities at the centre of that effort. NASA’s partnership with Caltech’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory became a vibrant model for what alignment between government, academia, and industry can achieve. It turned scientific excellence into national capability—and produced spillovers in robotics, materials, communications, and defence that still shape the world today.

Canada now stands at a similar inflection point. Our leading research universities—the U15—are among the best in the world. They produce extraordinary talent and cutting-edge discoveries. Yet too often, our breakthroughs are scaled elsewhere because we lack a coordinated strategy linking discovery to deployment, and research strength to industrial advantage.

That gap—the failure to connect our research power to national purpose—has been the Achilles’ heel of Canada’s industrial policy.

The creation of Borealis, Canada’s new defence innovation platform, offers a way to change that. It can be our version of DARPA—a vehicle to translate advanced research into deployable technologies for the Canadian Armed Forces and for our advanced industries.

But we must execute boldly. We have to connect the full chain: talent and intellectual capital, foundational research, commercialization, and public procurement.

Advanced industries are not only drivers of productivity—they are the building blocks of national security. In an age of AI, cyber tools, and autonomous systems, Canada cannot afford to remain a passive adopter of foreign technologies.

And yes, Canada is not the United States. Our scale is different. But scale is not the lesson. The lesson is alignment. When research excellence, receptive industrial capacity, and predictable procurement work together, sovereign capabilities follow.

If we get that alignment right, we will strengthen our security, drive innovation, and build the technological foundations of Canada’s prosperity for decades to come.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.