September 15, 2015

Dear Western students, staff and faculty,

Welcome back! I hope you have enjoyed a wonderful summer and that you are energized to greet the challenges the coming year will bring.

This letter is the first in an ongoing series I plan to write to highlight some of the activities that engage me as president and to reflect on important matters I believe deserve our attention as an academic community. I hope you find this communication informative and I welcome your feedback. Please write me at amit.chakma@uwo.ca with your comments and suggestions.

Let me begin by applauding several groups across campus working to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. Western International, the Registrar’s Office, the Faculty of Social Science and the Centre for Research on Migration & Ethnic Relations are among those promoting special initiatives, including the Western Refugee Sponsorship Fund, the Syrian Refugee Student Awards, and the Scholars at Risk Program. For more information on what Western is doing and how you can help, please visit http://www.uwo.ca/helpsyria/.

Closer to home, I’m delighted to welcome students and colleagues who are new to campus, including approximately 5,200 first-year undergrads. While a large segment of this year’s incoming class originates from London and the Greater Toronto Area, ~10% are international students arriving from 100+ countries, including—most predominantly—China, Korea, Pakistan and the U.S. Another ~10% of our first-years come from provinces other than Ontario, while the balance of our 23,465 total undergraduate body consists of upper-year students returning to campus to complete their studies—reflecting the fact that Western has among the highest retention and graduation rates in the country.

Meanwhile, 20% of our 5,759 graduate students come from abroad, with 83% of those arriving from Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa. We are also pleased to have more than 300 postdoctoral scholars among us, 46% of which come from outside Canada. Regardless of where you are from, I hope Western and London soon feel like home.

To all of our students and postdoc scholars, let me congratulate you on making a great decision in choosing Western. Much of what will make your time here so enriching is the exceptionally good company you are keeping. In addition to award-winning faculty and staff, you are surrounded by classmates who are among the brightest in Ontario. In fact, we anticipate that the average entering grade of our incoming class will be the highest in the province for the second consecutive year.

Further evidence of the high quality of our students can be seen through the 31 “Highly Commended” Western finalists (including three Huron students and two from King’s) recently recognized in the international Undergraduate Awards competition. We are immensely proud of their achievements across the full range of disciplines taught at Western.

Welcome also to our new faculty and staff colleagues who have been recruited by Western over the summer months. They include 192 new full-time, clinical, adjunct and part-time faculty members; 58 new PMA, CUPE and UWOSA staff members; and approximately 120 new contract staff. Among our new colleagues, I wish to congratulate Dean of Social Science, Bob Andersen, Dean-elect of Health Sciences, Jayne Garland, Associate Vice-President (Student Experience), Jana Luker, and Vice-Provost Elect (Academic Planning, Policy & Faculty) Karen Campbell on their recent appointments. Combined with nearly 4,000 “veteran” employees, your contributions to Western’s mission, vision and priorities are greatly appreciated.
Let me also take this opportunity to congratulate Professors Kathryn Brush (Visual Arts), John Leonard (English & Writing Studies) and Jesse Zhu (Chemical & Biochemical Engineering) on recently being named Fellows to the Royal Society of Canada. In recognition of their outstanding scholarly, scientific and artist achievements, election to this prestigious academy is the highest honour that can be awarded to our academic colleagues.

Looking outside Western to the external environment, we are entering this new academic year with a considerable degree of uncertainty, but our concerns should be tempered with optimism.

The outcome of the October 19 federal election has the potential to alter the government’s approach to funding university research. Meanwhile, the province is reviewing the formula that funds our operating grants and provides the framework for how tuition fees are set. Within this context, sagging oil prices and a volatile global economy are adding to the fiscal challenges facing all levels of government, which in turn spells uncertainty for the post-secondary sector.

However, through prudent planning, a commitment to working together and continued effort to diversify revenue, I am confident Western will maintain its position among Canada’s top schools while distinguishing itself on the world stage in key areas of strength. Among many positive developments, I am encouraged by the fact our Be Extraordinary Campaign has raised $605 million (as of August 31) against a $750-million target, which is a clear vote of confidence our many supporters have in Western’s future.

Please watch for more letters from me in the weeks ahead as I look forward to sharing news and information with you on matters important to us all. In the meantime, I wish you all the best for success wherever you may be studying, teaching, researching and working across our great university.

Sincerely,

Amit Chakma
President & Vice-Chancellor