Turning the calendar page to September always puts a spotlight on the agenda ahead. For AUCC, that means strengthening links with the new Cabinet in Ottawa, briefing ministerial staff and deputy ministers new to the job this summer, and highlighting university and research issues for those who “hold the pen” on the upcoming Speech from the Throne this October.

It’s been a busy summer on the higher education front. In July, AUCC submitted recommendations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance focussing on our 2014 pre-budget priorities – increased funding in three areas: the research granting councils, indirect costs of research, and research infrastructure through the Canada Foundation for Innovation. Staff are now preparing for the committee’s hearings which would typically be held this fall. However, hearings could be delayed until November given Parliament’s prorogation. Anticipated topics for the hearings are areas such as fiscal sustainability and economic growth; supporting research and innovation, including through tax incentives; and helping vulnerable Canadians, including Aboriginal Canadians, youth, persons with a disability and newcomers. It is expected that the committee will report to the House of Commons in December with recommendations for the 2014 budget.

Among those with an interest in higher education and research, indirect costs continue to be a focus. The federal government is in the middle of a review of the Indirect Costs Program, announced in Budget 2013. AUCC received a letter on July 15 from Gary Goodyear, at that time Minister of State for Science and Technology, to say that the federal government was seeking AUCC’s assistance in its review. The minister also invited submissions by individual member institutions of the Association. Even with the Cabinet shuffle, Industry Canada officials asked that universities provide individual submissions to Greg Rickford, now Minister of State for Science and Technology by September 13. While initial plans had been to launch a series of meetings with university presidents over the summer, there are no immediate plans at present for formal in-person consultations.

A major focus for the past few weeks has been on immigration issues – and particularly the impact of the dispute between the government of Canada and the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers. AUCC has been working with government officials to mitigate the impact on students. We have been highlighting the impact on this fall’s arriving international students – and the even greater concerns for potential long-term reputational damage to Canada as a welcoming place for international students for years to come. AUCC staff gave dozens of media interviews throughout the summer on this issue. On one day alone, staff did 21 early morning CBC radio interviews in communities across the country, each time using the opportunity to highlight the substantial educational benefits international students bring to university classrooms, and the $8 billion economic impact that international students have in communities across the country.

Over the course of the summer, AUCC has been consolidating relations with the business community. Paul Davidson has been working with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce on its “skills gap” efforts. The Chamber’s president, Perrin Beatty, has identified improving connections between educators and employers as a major priority for chambers and boards of trade. AUCC has encouraged the Chamber
to define skills widely, and to recognize the contributions university graduates make to Canada’s economic prosperity. We are also working with the Conference Board of Canada to provide input on its new Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education, a major five-year initiative to examine advanced skills and education. The Conference Board will kick off consultations at a summit scheduled November 6-7 in Toronto, where Paul Davidson will be taking part in a panel discussion on how Canada’s postsecondary institutions are responding to the skills challenge, along with Denise Amyot, president of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and Nobina Robinson, CEO of Polytechnics Canada. A number of university and college presidents are also slated to play leading roles in the summit.

A misleading view of the declining value of a university degree remains an easy target for media and other commentators. To set the record straight, AUCC has provided member institutions with communications tools and messages, which we’ve also shared with journalists across the country. We also provided quick analysis and key facts to allow member institutions to respond quickly to the report by CIBC World Markets, which provided a negative and corrosive message on the economic pay-off of a university degree, through data that could be easily misinterpreted.

Looking ahead, the fall schedule for AUCC will be full, as we continue our advocacy both publicly and in the corridors of Ottawa. The Speech from the Throne will be an important opportunity for the government to set its long-term vision for Canada, leading up to the 2015 federal election. AUCC is making sure that officials responsible for crafting the speech are up-to-date on the contributions universities make to Canada – especially in terms of the career success of university graduates and the impact of university research. We will also be sending all Parliamentarians a submission outlining how universities drive Canada’s economic and social success later this fall, and will share it with member institutions as well. We will soon launch a new section of our website focussing on real-life stories of recent university graduates. This is part of our ongoing efforts to share stories and facts on how a university degree equips Canadians for their future careers and lives.