

Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations
Sept. 15, 2020

NDP's PSE review

1. Alberta has a wide variety of post-secondary institutions and programs demonstrate that a 'one size fits all' approach won't help when it comes to ensuring our institutions and programs continue to be world class. From your organization's perspectives, what are the key challenges that the provincial government needs to step up and address to support the work of Alberta's diverse post-secondary system?

The most important challenge to Alberta's PSE system is to maintain the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education for all Albertans. Our largest research universities have recently slipped down in the international rankings¹ and our regional and undergraduate universities have undergone significant changes in recent years. This apparent reduction of quality has nothing to do with the abilities of professors, researchers and administrators but rather has to do with the loss of funding over the same time period and how universities in other jurisdictions have increased their funding in the same period. Accessibility is also an issue for Alberta's PSE system: tuition has increased greater than inflation and more seats are going to international students who pay higher tuition fees, as administrations attempt to deal with this loss of funding. This means qualified Albertan students are having to delay or forgo their studies, as well as move to other jurisdictions to attend the program of their choice.

While Alberta has a varied system of post-secondary institutions that serve different groups of Albertans and provide a variety of educational programs, there is one solution to these two key challenges: *to restore and improve funding through the Alberta Campus Grants.*

2. What supports do Alberta's post-secondary institutions, students and staff need from the provincial government to support the continued delivery of high-quality education?

Provincial Research Funding

The most important stand-alone support for academic staff would be a peer-reviewed system of provincial research funding. While Alberta provides more research funding per capita than Ontario and BC, these funds are typically directed through Alberta Innovates, and narrowly focus on the commercialization of oil/gas or agricultural technologies. Instead of outdated economic paradigms directing research funding, the most novel and innovative breakthroughs develop out

¹ QS's ranking of University of Alberta is ranked 119 and University of Calgary is ranked 245 in 2021.

<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2021>

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings has U of A ranked at 131, and U of C ranked at 200.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/locations/CA/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

of projects that the researchers' peers, national and/or international experts, recognize as important. Commercialization is an important part of research, but in order to create new and globally competitive industries, and commodities for the market, there must be basic research to develop novel ideas and unique primary materials. Continuing to fund commercialization research over basic research will lead to a situation where there is little to nothing left of basic and fundamental innovation and discovery to turn into new products and services—both aspects of research, basic discovery and commercial, need to be fully supported and funded by the provincial government. This new system of research funding needs to include: adjudication of projects based on peer-review; that encourages both basic research and commercialization research; and funding for a broad spectrum of fields and disciplines, including humanities and social sciences, not just STEM disciplines or oil/gas development.

Graduate Student Support.

A parallel system of graduate student research funding would also be valuable to students, staff and all Albertans: such a system could be based on Ontario's Trillium Scholarship program. First, it would help fund labs doing ongoing or new projects in Alberta's Post -Secondary Institutions (PSIs), increasing Alberta's share of intellectual property and patents. This would also mean that more research would be completed in the province and the possibility that there will be more slots for graduate students in these programs. Second, it would help young graduate scholars to develop a funding track record of their own—helping to attract federal research dollars, and help Alberta retain our brightest graduate students, instead of losing them to jurisdictions with more attractive funding opportunities.

Improving High-Speed Internet Access for All Alberta.

The current COVID-19 crisis and the tendency to move classes (or components of them) online has brought unevenness of internet access to the forefront at our universities. The increased demand for high-speed internet access associated with increased online instruction, places our rural students and academic staff at a disadvantage, since reliable high-speed internet is not universally available in Alberta. Furthermore, the cost of the highest speed internet, often necessary with cutting edge fields, places some of our students and staff in a precarious economic situation. CAFA is especially concerned that this will impact Indigenous, rural, and minority students by placing them at a disadvantage in their classes, as well as placing new burdens on sessionals and part-time academic staff for course delivery. The Government of Alberta needs to address these demographic and geographic inequalities around high-speed internet in order to ensure all Albertans can meaningfully participate in advanced education.

3. Alberta's post-secondary institutions are essential to Alberta's economic prosperity and future success. What supports do Alberta's post-secondary institutions need from the provincial government to ensure post-secondary work in research, and skills training are sustainable and successful while respecting public health orders related to COVID-19?

An Understanding of the Value of a University Education: Acquisition of Durable, Adaptable, and Expandable Competencies

The biggest obstacle that PSE institutions face in relation to teaching is public and government awareness that universities do not just teach skills; rather, universities teach competencies. Instead of skills specific to a single job or trade, universities teach an envelope of competencies and abilities that prepare and enable graduates to continue to grow and learn long after they leave university. This approach to student development is essential, because job-specific skills tend to have a shorter window of usefulness: as the specific technologies and demand for certain trades are constantly changing. Strong development of core and transferable competencies allow university educated workers to shift and grow with new workplace demands and changing economic environments. It is this flexibility and capacity for growth that employers are or should be searching for in future employees for the 21st century.

Also, skills often become a proxy for a narrow band of technical skills: computer or coding competencies, business leadership ideals, and vocational skills taught in the college system. Skills, or competencies, need to include the larger groups of soft skills and communications skills that are in high demand in the labour market. Critical thinking, written communication skills, and knowledge of a second language are all in demand attributes that Albertan employers are looking for, but funding to non-STEM programs is constantly under attack. Competencies in all fields are needed to diversify the Alberta economy and to make sure we have a variety of highly skilled labour within the province.

Substantially Broaden Areas That Receive Provincial Research Funding.

Research is an engine of innovation and future economic diversification, but Alberta often funds research in a limited number of fields: specifically, those that have commercial and practical applications in the oil and gas fields. The Government of Alberta provides a generous amount of provincial research funding, often through Alberta Innovates, but these funds are far more directed than our comparator provinces' research funding. This unevenness of provincial funding is one of the reasons why our researchers do not capture more federal funding. If non-oil and gas research was much better funded by the province, this would help researchers build up funding track records and get projects off the ground—which in turn would put our researchers in a better position to obtain federal and non-governmental research funding. This is also true for our graduate students. Alberta needs to set up a system comparable to Ontario's Trillium Scholarship, which would allow young researchers to start building up a funding portfolio of their own while contributing valuable resources to the exceptional labs and projects they already work within.

The government of Alberta needs to move away from a primarily commercialization approach to research funding and towards a system that also substantially funds basic discovery research in all fields. Some basic research does not produce commercial products immediately but can establish critical building blocks that will drive a more robust economy in the future. Other basic research is in fields of social value but may not have the same commercial value. Examples of the latter would be in education, social policy, or health policy research that will be valuable to many Albertans and could possibly save the government substantial amounts of future expenses. Research projects in the humanities not only enrich our society, but also contribute to processes where critical thinking,

communications competencies, and research skills are taught and imparted to the next generation of employees and scholars.

Additional Support for PSE On-line Instruction.

In relation to the current COVID-19 crisis, the Albertan faculty associations strongly believe that we should follow the procedures of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer. We strongly believe that we can continue to teach and research in this environment. One concern for us is that our employers continue to download extra work and costs on to our members, examples include: the expense of high speed internet or web cameras, the expectations to attend online pedagogical classes, to become IT experts, and the additional demands of putting more students in online classes than would be in the physical classroom. The extra costs and time commitments of the current COVID-19 pedagogy needs to be understood by government, acknowledged by our administrations, and not just passed off to professors and sessionals.

4. How do you think the existing governance structure is working? Can you give suggestions on how to improve existing governance of your institution?

CAFA strongly believes that the Government of Alberta needs to stay out of our governance structures to promote the institutional autonomy that is the bedrock of the academy. We also think that the collegial bicameral governance structure is working in our institutions, and this form of governance is well suited to our universities. While both of these statements are true, we do acknowledge that there are a few places where the provincial government could make meaningful contributions to governance in the PSE sector: specifically, in the makeup of Boards of Governors (BoG), how those government representatives are trained, and maintaining the academic integrity of General Faculties Council (GFC).

Another serious issue is how to indigenize the academy at our institutions. CAFA believes that there must be indigenous voices on both the BoG and the GFC—such inclusion cannot be one “representative” on the Board nor one "representative" on the General Faculties Council. Processes to bring these voices to the university must be done with appropriate consultation and participation from local Indigenous consultations. Legislation could also direct all institutions to have Standing Committees on Indigenization at the GFC level.

Improving the Board of Governors’ Understanding of Their Role

We feel that each post-secondary Board of Governors (BoG) in Alberta must have multiple members who have been academics at the type of post-secondary institution that the particular Board of Governors is responsible for. These can be academic emeriti of PSE institutions from within or outside the province. The point is that the Boards have arms-length members with strong academic backgrounds who understand how PSE institutions run, are familiar with best practices, and support the collegial governance culture of PSE institutions generally. Boards are currently overpopulated with those from the corporate world, a culture that is not innately supportive of collegial governance practices necessary in PSE institutions. Only one or a small minority of members of the Board with a corporate background would be required.

As well, Board members and Board chairs need to be better trained for their roles and functions in the academic environment. Often BOG members are under the impression that the BoG and the office of the president are identical: that the BoG is responsible to the president and see their role as rubber stamping the president's plans. When in fact the reverse is true: the BoG is supposed to oversee the actions of the president and senior leadership—making sure the senior administration is responsible to the people of Alberta and can fire the president if that individual is acting irresponsibly. The provincial government should institute a mandatory training program for all government appointees that outlines the BoG's roles and responsibilities to the institution and all Albertans.

Maintaining the Integrity of General Faculties Council

Regarding the General Faculties Councils (GFCs), CAFA is concerned that there is a tendency for these bodies to be constructed in a manner that always acquiesces to administration wishes and this is compromising collegial governance at our institutions. At the heart of the issue is that the university president typically chairs the GFC. This creates a structure where the university executive generally believes that the GFC and BoG should serve its interests, rather than Albertans and the academy. Since the GFC is responsible for the academic matters (program, requirements, credentialing, etc.), one suggestion would be that the GFC is chaired by an experienced academic at the university and not the University President. This should be considered since experience shows that when a University President presides, they can and have controlled debate at times, where they pass over voices at GFC they do not want to hear, or prematurely end someone's contribution. With relinquishment of the GFC chair, the President would still be a full participant at GFC, and share the same obligation as other GFC members to abide by meeting rules. A additional suggestion would be to include more academic staff representatives on the GFCs through dedicated positions for their important roles at the university—for example, there are often specific roles for tenure-track faculty (i.e. statutory faculty members and the appointments that represent academic staff associations) but there are far fewer roles for sessionals, lectures, librarians, professional officers and trust researchers. Individuals in these categories and GFC positions would serve on a term basis, replaced by others in their category with relevant expertise at end of term. This type of changes to the PSLA would balance out the GFC to represent all members of the university community. Collegial governance is best served by a strong deliberative body such as GFC making important academic decisions. To further strengthen GFC, specifically regarding the Board, a simple legislative change could be to remove the words "Subject to the authority of the board" from the powers of the General Faculties Council in the PSLA, making it conform with other Canadian jurisdictions.²

Both of these trends have created a situation where the university executive (senior administration) has been gaining increasing power over the actual governing bodies (BoG and GFC). Reducing the power of the university executive and returning it to the BoG and the GFC would greatly increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of the collegial governance structure of the academy.

² PSLA Section 26(1).

5. Your organization's top 3 'asks' of the provincial government

1st: Long Term & Stable Funding

The Government of Alberta needs to introduce stable and adequate funding in the university sector. Over the last 5 years, the current level of funding through Alberta Campus Grants has been flat (not accounting for inflation) or has decreased every year—this has led to an inadequate amount of funding at our universities. This model puts additional pressures on our students as their tuition increases and is often used to make up the difference from the falling Alberta Campus Grants. The current Government's desire to implement performance based funding³ further puts the stability of funding at risk since there is no way to plan for yearly fluctuations in the amount of the Alberta Campus Grants. In general, forcing universities into a self-funding model (or forcing them to raise more funds from tuition and NGO/corporate partners) makes the institutions more dependent on these sources and over time removes institution autonomy—as the universities develop programs to suit the needs of third parties and not the students, the university or the province. Adequate and stable funding also needs to be applied to our provincial research grants across all fields in the academy. Diverse and stable research funding would create a better learning environment for our graduate students, enrich society, and be a source of economic development towards the province's goal of a diversified economy.

2nd: Institutional Autonomy

Alberta universities need more institutional autonomy. Most importantly, Alberta needs to strengthen their General Faculties Council (GFC) system that allows scholars to make the academic decisions of the university: too often, GFCs are becoming rubber stamps for the Board of Governors or the administration. A strong collegial government system ensures that credentialing, program decisions, and pedagogical decisions are being made for academic reasons and not to cater to the current but shifting economic environment. This institutional autonomy needs to be expanded to our collective bargaining process, where the Government of Alberta often interferes with our collective rights. Unlike other governmental fields, academic staff are part of an international labour market and government interference means that our best and brightest researchers will continue to move to (or choose) other jurisdictions to live and work if academic working conditions in Alberta continue to deteriorate.

3rd: Precarity of Academic Teaching Staff (Sessionals). At the end of each academic term, many teaching staff at PSE institutions have no assurance that they will have teaching jobs to perform in the coming academic term or year. This serves no one. This situation results in uncertainty for the stability of academic programs, creates a risk of uneven quality of instruction, plus uncertainty as to whether students can count on completion of their major courses, and unnecessary employment anxiety for sessional teaching instructors. Enhanced stability for sessional teaching is required. We suggest that the Alberta government create a number of "Alberta Teaching Excellence Chairs" that are to be awarded competitively to outstanding sessional instructors in

³ CAFA rejects the performance based funding model because we do not believe that it will produce the desired results. We have attached our recent governmental submission on performance based funding, which outlines the academic and scientific scholarship on the ineffectiveness of performance based funding.

Alberta PSE institutions that provide 5-year contracts, with competitive renewals. This would be a significant step toward enhancing stability in teaching instruction, at least partially offsetting the ills associated with precarious (term to term) sessional teaching contracts. Over the years, administrations have favoured hiring sessionals and instructors over tenure-track professors—this is especially noticeable when tenure-track professors retire and are not replaced. This shift towards low-wages part-time sessionals threatens program integrity and quality for our students: as sessionals do not supervise undergrad or graduate theses, and because they are transitory, they are not around (and not compensated) to write letters of reference for undergraduate students. Along with instituting “Alberta Teaching Excellence Chairs,” CAFA believes that our universities need to reverse this shift away from tenure-track professors and towards precarious sessional work.

6. Your organization’s top 3 concerns for the future of the sector

1st: Online Instruction

The COVID-19 crisis and the tendency to move classes online has produced an acute crisis on the horizon. As academic staff, we support new and innovative pedagogical approaches at our universities including online instruction, but this approach cannot be applied as one size fits all in our PSE system. Transferring existing courses to online delivery or creating new distance learning courses comes with significant costs and time requirements. For example, Alberta’s distance education university, Athabasca University, does not just assign a single professor to develop their online class. Instead there is an ecosystem of employees that develop the course together, including: the professors, academic coordinators, editors, learning designers, copyright officers, and multimedia web specialists. The tendency to move classes online assumes that the university can do more with less funding, but to maintain quality in the online setting often means more funding is needed. Politicians and administrators must understand and accept this fact, rather than seeing online course delivery as a panacea for all problems at the university. CAFA would also like to point out that most students prefer in person instruction or a blended model rather than just online classes: and this is especially the case if their instructors and professors are not properly trained for online instruction or given enough time and assistance to prepare online classes.

2nd: Business Orientated not Academic Based Restructuring

CAFA is concerned that the most recent round of university restructuring is not based on an academic rationale. There is an increasing tendency to carry out reviews and restructuring based on economic reasons and to follow a business model of education delivery. These reviews always predictably provide the same solutions: increase domestic tuition and number of international students; sell valuable real estate; reduce labour costs through layoffs and salary reductions; close smaller programs and departments; find efficiencies in administration (but never at the senior administration level); and further rely on corporate funding for research and infrastructure. While some of these proposed solutions might be appropriate at some lower level at a specific institution, they are not always the best pathways to produce high quality post-secondary education for all Albertans. Our universities are the strongest when academic decisions are made by the academics themselves (through the collegial governance structures of the General Faculties

Councils), and not an economic vision that may not be in place once our students graduate in four to six years. Strengthening the academic mission and collegial governance of the universities will produce a higher quality of education, more innovative research, and preserve our institutions for future generations.

3rd: Accessibility

While currently Alberta's undergraduate tuition is lower than two of our three comparator provinces (BC and Ontario), the removal of the tuition freeze and the ability for institutions to increase tuition above the Consumer Price Index (CPI) means that our Alberta Advantage in the PSE sector is going to be undermined. This will reduce accessibility to post-secondary education for many Albertans, as the cost to them and their families increases over the next few years. The cost of tuition is not the only barrier to accessible post-secondary education. Limited availability of seats in academic programs and loss of student financial supports (such as the Canada Student Service Grant program) also affect accessibility in Alberta. The government of Alberta could improve accessibility by funding an increase in the seats available in our universities and colleges. When the federal government refuses to fund student financial aid programs responsibly, the Government of Alberta could expand its grants and bursary system to help Alberta students struggling with economic responsibilities. Lastly, a robust system of credit transferring would increase accessibility in Alberta: by coordinating transfer criteria between GFCs while continuing to offer a diverse program selection at regional colleges and universities provides students to have more opportunities and flexibility in completing their degrees.

Other Documents

[CAFA's Consultation Submission- Outcome Based Funding Model](#)

[CAFA's Response to UCP's 2020 Budget](#)

[Press Release for Fair Deal Research Funding Announcement](#)