



## Unpacking the Government's Narratives and Plans for Alberta PSE2030 How the Government's plans will affect faculty, students, and Alberta's future.

### Panelists:

- Lee Easton, Department of English, Languages and Cultures (MRU) and Faculty Association President (MRFA)
- Marc Schroeder, Mathematics and Computer Science (MRU) and Advocacy Committee Member (MRFA)
- Marc Spooner, Department of Education (University of Regina)
- Roberta Lexier, Department of General Education (MRU)
- Spirit River Striped Wolf, Students Association President (MRU)
- Moderator: Frank Cotae, International Business and Supply Chain Management (MRU) and Advocacy Officer (MRFA)

### Session Summary (full session notes are below)

Post-secondary education serves a public good: there should be politically independent universities not directed by government or corporate interests. The PSE 2030 sector review, and related performance metrics, will force post-secondary institutions to focus on specific things (i.e. “building skills for jobs”) at the detriment to other aspects of their purpose (i.e. liberal education building engaged life long learners capable of participating fully in the modern democracy and the ever changing economy and workforce). PSE2030 will limit the collegial governance which is required to achieve our academic mission, to protect the quality of our programs and to protect our academic freedom in the pursuit of knowledge that will benefit society now and in the future. The Alberta government plans to destroy what it is we are about as academic institutions of higher education, and what happens here could spread (much like a virus) to other jurisdictions in Canada.

### Quotes from Panelists

“The government wants faculty to produce more with less resources while removing some of the supports that are in place for faculty” - Lee Easton, MRFA President

“What is really happening is a significant transformation of post-secondary education that is being driven by ideological and political reasons and is aimed at transforming the idea of PSE and its role in the province” – Roberta Lexier, General Education

“What students learn in class now will be obsolete in a few years; therefore, we are not building skills for the specific jobs of the current economy. Students need to learn how to learn, students need to know how to adapt and think critically and they need to engage fully in their environment and in society” – Roberta Lexier, General Education

“The education we are providing is needed for the citizens of the future to solve the big problems that we will face. We need to battle against the idea that we are just training students for jobs.” – Roberta Lexier, General Education

“As student tuition goes up it makes universities more inaccessible and Alberta is in desperate need of an educated workforce” – Spirit River Striped Wolf, SAMRU President



“[AB PSE 2030] is a coerced and fundamental shift to the traditional university mission. The government will only provide money to institutions when they meet performance metrics which will necessarily reduce the amount of funding provided. The intent of PSE is to educate students to communicate, become lifelong learners, to become full citizens in a modern democracy. AB PSE 2030 is about turning the university into a corporate training centre where sponsored research will be incented and academic freedom will be restricted” – Marc Spooner, Department of Education (University of Regina)

“AB 2030 is not just about reduced spending on public education, although the plan to cut funding by 20% from 2019 through 2023 is a tactic to render institutions compliant. This is a full systemic transformation of PSE so that it serves private interests and short-term government policy objectives. The government wants a PSE system that is subordinate to an economic vision the government sets for the province.” – Marc Schroeder, Department of Mathematics and Computer Science (MRU)

## What we need to do to defend Post-secondary education in Canada

We need to communicate outwardly about what we do and the value of post-secondary education in terms of the real long term societal benefits, not just in terms of the economic impacts.

While the current attack on public services is unprecedented in terms of its breadth, scope and impacts, we have faced similar challenges in the past. We can oppose this if we stand together collectively in defense of public services, the public good and the future of Alberta.

### What you can do now:

- [Send a Letter](#) urging the government to reverse the cuts to post-secondary!
- [Respond to the Survey](#)
- [Get a Lawn Sign](#) to show your support
- [Post on Social Media](#) - feel free to copy any content below in your posts

The public facing advocacy (actions noted above) is good start and we need to continue this work; however, this will not change the end result. We need to ensure that all academic staff in Alberta are speaking with one voice and that all faculty are prepared to undertake job action in the way that it will have real impact on the government.

## AB PSE 2030 - The Government's Rational and Directions

### Lee Easton, Faculty Association President (MRFA)

#### Major considerations driving the government's agenda:

1. Structural unemployment related to the downturn in the oil and gas economy, the impact of automation in that industry reducing jobs by one third, or more, and these impacts being compounded by more recent economic losses and the global pandemic,
2. An assumed mismatch between education and jobs,
3. Very low participation rates from students leaving high school. Typically enrollment in PSE is counter-cyclical to the state of the economy; that is, enrollment should go up when the economy is not doing well and this has not happened in the current economic downturn and that is concerning for the government,



4. There are people with post-secondary credentials that need to be tweaked in some way to meet current demands; thus, leading to the government's emphasis on micro-credentials.

These are some of the forces pushing a particular way to solve the problems identified.

This government wants a bigger role in directing PSE and is doing so in several ways:

1. Using performance-based funding
  - These metrics would be used to incent certain programs and KPIs which will restrict academic freedom and institutional autonomy
  - They want to capitalize on research and patents and stimulate corporate/private funding of research.
2. Investment management agreements
  - These would be signed by PSIs and the Government
3. Sectoral super boards
  - Sectoral Boards would be fewer in number and easier for the government to manage.
  - These will offer opportunities for consolidation and increased efficiencies through HR/Purchasing/maintenance etc. However, these changes would increase complications and red tape and cause uncertainty about employer/employee relations and obligations.
4. Online/distance delivery as a way to address low participation.
  - The government believes that if there are more opportunities for students to participate online this may increase participation; however, recent student survey data suggests that students do not prefer online learning. Students value synchronous, face-to-face, education.

If all these changes take place, who is going to be our employer? How will GFCs operate within a super board system and what kinds of powers would these GFCs have? Related to that, how could quality control be maintained in terms of micro-credentialing. Academic apparatuses (e.g. GFC) have to be involved to ensure quality in micro-credential development. While we need to ensure that micro credentials do not threaten the integrity of academic programming, we need to also consider the problem of unbundling knowledge and administering education in small bursts.

## **AB PSE 2030 - A Complete Transformation of Post-Secondary Education**

**Roberta Lexier, Department of General Education (MRU)**

### **Post-Secondary Education is Adaptable (when changes are initiated for the right reasons)**

What is really happening is a significant transformation of post-secondary education that is being driven by ideological and political reasons and is aimed at transforming the idea of PSE and its role in the province. Stakeholders do not necessarily want everything to stay the same: academics and students are not resistant to change and are often the driving force behind social, scientific and economic change and innovation. Historically, there have been changes in the structure of universities over time, and it is important that higher education has the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In this sense, there is a lot of change perhaps which needs to happen, but these are not the changes that the government is proposing.

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*There is a higher purpose to post-secondary education, and the government is chipping away at what we do.*

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## The Purpose of PSE is to Educate, not “Build Skills for Jobs”

In the modern large university structure, wherein a broad range of disciplines are incorporated, it is hard to provide a simple definition of what it is exactly what any specific university does. Universities expose people to culture and traditions and ways of seeing the world. Universities prepare students for lifelong learning by engaging them critically in the learning process and teaching them how to engage in the world around them as full participating members of society. Universities are incredibly complex institutions and so it is hard to pinpoint why we exist and what our role is in society.

We need to focus on what it is we are trying to deliver to our students. We are facing a utilitarian sense of higher education – that we are training people to succeed in the workforce – where we are really training them to think, to engage and to question and challenge authority. We have bought into the language of hard and soft skills, meeting rubrics, showing consistency etc. we have become part of this way of framing higher education. We need to understand the fundamental shift that is being proposed here in terms of what our real purpose is in society – the only focus the government is considering is in terms of preparing training people to work in the workforce. Performance based funding is based on this focus of PSE.

What students learn in class now will be obsolete in a few years; therefore, we are not building skills for the specific jobs of the current economy. Students need to learn how to learn, students need to know how to adapt and think critically and they need to engage fully in their environment and in society.

We need to reframe our arguments – we have been trying to assign economic utility to the ‘soft skills’ which are provided through PSE – what we are doing in education is bigger than that. The education we are providing is needed for the citizens of the future to solve the big problems that we will face. We need to battle against the idea that we are just training students for jobs.

## **AB PSE 2030– Downloading Costs to Students and Damaging Quality Education**

### **Spirit River Striped Wolf, Students Association President (MRU)**

The issue of tuition is an issue being brought to students by the government. When student tuition goes up it makes universities more inaccessible and Alberta is in desperate need of an educated workforce. We need Alberta to be a competitive province and we need PSE in Alberta that is desirable for potential students and we cannot punish the system or the students who want to further their education

The government is cutting funding and creating a revenue gap for institutions. Institutions can only do two things, increase tuition or cut staff: universities have no other real option for revenue generation. So, the pressure is put on students to make up for the funding shortfall caused by the government. Then the pressure is put on faculty to increase class sizes and adjust their pedagogy due to workload demands.

Students at MRU appreciate the small class sizes and the ability to interact with professors and they do not want to lose this learning opportunity due to budget cuts.

We need to stop the cuts to PSE and we need to start by showing the Albertans value the PSE system we have and we need to highlight the perspective of students in this process.



## AB PSE 2030 – Predetermined Outcomes: Not an Objective/Consultative Review Process

Marc Spooner, Department of Education (University of Regina)

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*The fight within Alberta is a fight for all of Canada. The model here will be exported: Alberta is at the forefront of what could happen to across Canada.*

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When you bring in large consulting firm, like McKinsey, the process generates what seems to be neutral objective advice. This is a well tried technique that does not actually lead to the generation of an objective report. The outcome was a foregone conclusion.

This process creates a veneer of objectivity to mask what is an ideological and political exercise for the current government to achieve the outcomes it wants. The hiring of the consulting firm also

serves as a shield from freedom of information requests: we cannot call to see the report or the changes that ministers made to as opposed to what was actually proposed in the report.

### AB PSE 2030 – Threats and Impacts

- The proposed sector wide governance with local councils will require some form of standardization with common learning outcomes in all foundational courses. **This would be an attack on academic freedom.**
- Cloaked defunding of the PSE sector leading to deregulation of tuition putting a **further cost burden on students**. Students now are already paying more than ever before with the province covering less.
- It is a **coerced and fundamental shift to the traditional university mission**. The government will only provide money to institutions when they meet performance metrics which will necessarily reduce the amount of funding provided. The intent of PSE is to educate students to communicate, become lifelong learners, to become full citizens in a modern democracy. **AB PSE 2030 is about turning the university into a corporate training centre where sponsored research will be incented.**
- This **trajectory will also necessitate moving away from EDI initiatives** because institutions would then need to favour those graduates and students with the most social capital because they will get the best positions (employment rates for minorities are lower and employment stats are also gendered).
- The UCPs plan is to prepare students for the jobs of yesterday – students need to learn to adapt to anticipate and be prepared for the jobs of the future. The skills that the captains of industry are all different – they are not asking for the same skills and even when they are they think differently on these matters

### AB PSE 2030 – An Attack on Public Services and the Public Good

Marc Schroeder, Mathematics and Computer Science and Advocacy Committee Member (MRFA)

It is important to understand the ideology, motivations, and larger-scale plans that underlie and shape the Alberta 2030 initiative. The latter has been launched as part of an integrated array of initiatives targeting public education, other elements of the public sector, and organized public sector labour, all set against the almost singular “jobs, economy, pipelines” and more recent “jobs, economy, innovation” focus. The UCP government has, in fact, been consistent and explicit about its intentions for PSE and



beyond, as evidenced by pre-election statements, the MacKinnon Report, the Government’s Fiscal Plan to 2030, the business plan for the Ministry of Advanced Education. The August 2020 “project overview” slides prepared by McKinsey and Company reinforce these intentions. In short, the Government sees a redesigned system of PSE exclusively as a component within the province’s economic engine.

“Alberta 2030: Transforming Post-Secondary Education” (now renamed “Building Skills for Jobs”) is not just about reduced public spending on advanced education, even though that’s a prominent theme throughout the RFP and budget cuts through 2019-2023. Beyond austerity, “Alberta 2030” is intended as a full, systemic transformation, forcibly rewiring public PSE so that it’s focused on serving the private interests of industry and employers – think PSE subordinated to supporting a provincial “open for business”

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*“Alberta 2030” is intended as a full, systemic transformation, forcibly rewiring public PSE so that it’s focused on serving the private interests of industry and employers.*

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approach. The PSE system’s task will be to operate a “talent pipeline” in the ways it is directed, according to a re-imagined system of governance. Note carefully that “Alberta 2030” is not an independent review, but a highly prescribed plan “co-creation” effort in tandem with government: It seeks to transform post-secondary education so that it can deliver on the overall economic vision and strategy that the government decides for the province. The government explicitly aims to “reframe the roles that all stakeholders need to play” to adapt to this vision and strategy, and to enforce these through “an integrated suite of levers” for compliance (here’s where instruments like performance based funding and investment management agreements, introduced through recent amendments to the Post-Secondary Learning Act, really come alive). Throughout the development of “Alberta 2030”, government will “identify the relevant initiatives” and McKinsey will be “responsible for ensuring they are considered in the development” of the Alberta 2030 strategy and roadmap. McKinsey’s deliverables will provide the cover for the government to spin its ideological, preconceived plans as objectively-determined, global “best practices” tailored to Alberta’s particular fiscal and economic situation

Regarding teaching, the government is clearly interested in digitization strategies and “leveraging changing modes of learning delivery, such as through an online course delivery platform”. Regarding research, the emphasis is on commercialization of research and intellectual property. But, unsurprisingly, faculty are barely mentioned. Governance is to be re-architected, with more centralized control. The current “co-creation” exercise with a private consultancy is held up as an exemplar of what 21st century governance model can look like, i.e., as a model of how private sector “stakeholders” can participate directly in governance matters. Academic freedom, academic staff participation in meaningful shared governance of universities and colleges, and institutional autonomy are seemingly to be dispensed with.



As such, AB 2030 presents a grave threat to post-secondary education, if PSE is conceived in terms of fostering the common good of society in the broadest sense. AB 2030, at its core, concerns the subordination of public PSE to narrowly focused, instrumentalist public policy that is in the ultimate service of private interests and capital. Notwithstanding the well-established economic and social benefits of PSE, universities cannot properly serve the common good of society when particular interests lead them about by the nose. This is something we have to fight.



## Further Reading

### Related Articles

- [Performance-based funding means more red tape, uncertainty for post-secondary institutions](#) - Parkland Institute

### AB Government Documents

- [AB 2030 Engagement Workbook](#)
- [AB PSE 2030 January 2021 Town Hall Presentation](#)

### Campaigns Supporting Public Education in Alberta

- [Alberta Teachers Association Campaign](#)
- [Public Interest Alberta Campaign](#)

### Submissions to Sector Review

- [CAFA Response to NDP Parallel Review](#)
- [MRFA Submission to NDP Parallel Review](#)
- [MRFA Submission to UCP Guiding Coalition](#)