



## AB PSE 2030 Panel Notes

March 18, 2021

### Speakers:

- Duane Bratt – Economics, Justice and Policy Studies
- Lee Easton – MRFA President
- Lori Williams – Economics, Justice and Policy Studies
- Michelle Logullo – MRSA President
- Spirit River Striped Wolf – SAMRU President
- Tim Rahilly – MRU President

### Overview of PSE 2030 from MRU President Tim Rahilly

The post-secondary education (PSE) system review was considered first over a year ago. Then, instead of going with a block grant, the government decided to move to an investment management agreement where there would be deliverables and metrics and certain tolerances for performance at post-secondary institutions (PSIs). In this model, also known as performance based funding, there would be core metrics for all PSIs in Alberta with specific deliverables for certain PSIs. When an institution failed to meet targets the funding would be redeployed in the PSE system to make improvements.

When the PSE 2030 review was launched this investment management agreement proposal was reframed and rebranded into Building Skills for Jobs. The review is meant to build stronger outcomes for students to build and diversify the economy and to create jobs. The goals were to:

- develop a highly skilled and globally competitive workforce,
- bring down costs and eliminate duplication,
- strengthen PSE participation,
- strengthen and commercialize research,
- explore the governance models required to meet these aims, and
- to enhance innovative practices around research.

The government hired McKinsey to conduct the consultation on this process with anticipated deliverables. The inclusion of lifelong skills and living meaningful lives is part of the vision provided by McKinsey and the goals were around improving access for students, developing skills for jobs, ensuring financial stability, and reforming governance etc. A series of recommendations have now been made to the Minister from the guiding coalition and the Minister will choose how to follow up on the recommendations of the Coalition.

### Duane Bratt – Economics, Justice and Policy Studies

The following is a high level political analysis to explain where this review and direction comes from.

1. The fundamental change to Alberta's party system that started in 2015 when there was the first election of a social democratic party since 1913  
The NDP were defeated in the last election but they still won 25 seats. This means that there is a two-party system in Alberta now, similar to the rest of the country. However, the next election is very important in continuing the emergent two-party system or entrenching the UCP again.
2. This government is very much Premier led.  
The cabinet ministers do not have as much power as we may think. The staff members in these cabinet offices are appointed by the premier.
3. Autonomy / Jobs / Pipeline – this was the election platform.



The UCP promised to cut back the size and expense of the public sector (see the McKinnon report) and implemented a “fight back” strategy where they focused on defending the oil and gas sector against criticism, establishing the war room to defend oil and gas, and fighting back also against UCP critics.

#### **Lori Williams – Economics, Justice and Policy Studies**

There is, in the early days of neo conservatism, a lack of understanding what Post-secondary can offer. We need to meet the government where it is, and we need to respond to the goals they have laid out to show how the PSE sector can meet the goals set.

We need to recognize that lifelong learning and liberal education can sit side by side with training for the workforce. MRU Career services provides a lot of help for our students in finding employment over the summer or near graduation. We need to emphasize the benefit of job and career preparation, but we need to work as an institution to try to get funds from the government to improve upon what we are doing well.

We have to clearly communicate the need for a different economy in Alberta than what we have had in the past. We need diversification and for that we need to invest in the future: an educated population leads to a diversified and stronger economy.

We need to focus on foundations for lifelong learning because we do not know the future: we do not know what jobs and skills will be needed. We cannot identify the usefulness of a course or a program we need to look at student skills in the future. We need to look at the importance of investment in a more speculative way.

#### **Spirit River Striped Wolf – SAMRU President**

SAMRU was engaged in consultation with the government on the AB PSE 2030 Review. SAMRU submitted the following recommendations based on student centered principles:

1. Students first – student needs must be met in terms of program diversity and breadth of programming and graduation rates etc.
2. Including key stakeholders to facilitate successful change and provide for potential alternatives,
3. Keep it Simple – have relevant and attainable performance indicators (reducing bureaucratic process, reducing administrative costs and enhance and ensure transparency)
4. Prioritize learner outcomes over cost savings – increase access to diverse academic programs, focusing on this versus the supply of learners to the workforce: this would facilitate student success.
5. Stable and consistent funding – to allow institutions to focus on their missions and having a sustainable future for PSE and minimize tuition increases in the face of declining provincial funding. Where tuition does increase at MRU, SAMRU has tried to redirect some of the additional revenue to bursaries based on financial need to try to continue to make education at MRU accessible.

#### **Related Comments:**

- It is important that we work together to approach these difficulties ahead as a united campus community.
- It is a good thing that funding and supports for mental health have not been cut as students continue to face difficulties around mental health and safety on campus (especially in relation to sexual violence).
- The province and PSIs need to recognise the importance of student associations and their contributions to university policy development which has significant impact on students.
- Students are concerned about jobs: there is anxiety there. Cuts to PSE makes the students feel that the government does not care about their future. We are on the precipice of seeing more and more young Albertans leaving the province due to these perceptions and the lack of support of students and PSIs.



### Lee Easton – MRFA President

It is important to note the very flawed nature of the PSE 2030 review process which was rushed from the outset and improvised, despite the McKinsey road map, and the consultations were perfunctory and mainly served to provide cover when the government decides to move forward in alignment with its ministerial prerogative.

Some of the main problems with the Review are as follows:

1. Vocationalization of AB PSE
  - Focus on skills-based education is problematic as it is normally geared toward male dominated areas such as trades and engineering etc.
  - The economy is changing, trades are changing, and the number of people employed in these fields is declining. The Kenny government has pivoted somewhat to considering skills-based education in the IT sector but this is belated and without full buy in.
2. Offloading Private Sector Training to Public Sector PSIs
  - This lets the private sector offload its training needs onto the public sector and if we do not meet these private sector training needs we will be punished through the new funding agreements.
  - This would also disproportionately effect PSIs that have more offerings for female dominated disciplines.
3. We cannot tie our PSE system to jobs – we do not know where jobs will be in the future
  - We need to equip learners with the capabilities they will need to exist and adapt to the changing economy of the future.
  - MRU is already meeting the lifelong learning needs of today's students while providing "skills for jobs". At MRU, we have foundational general education, we have strong liberal arts programming, and we also have the programming in Business and Health and community that provide profession-based skills.
  - The government wants to see work integrated learning – we are not opposed to this, but this approach can affect those in arts programs the most. These work integrated learning opportunities are hard to find for arts students.
4. Vocationalization of PSE misses the point of ongoing diversification of Alberta through immigration
  - There is little to no concern about how the PSE system will address problems of representation of BIPOC individuals – how will we ensure that our PSIs are welcoming places for a more diverse student population and professoriate?
  - Students need to be equipped with an improved awareness of social differences and the histories impacting all of us.
  - The perfunctory nod to lifelong learning in the stated goals coming out of the review is not enough to support the education to equip learners with the aptitude to navigate diverse needs and perspectives in our workplaces and communities.

### Question and Answer

**Q:** To meet the UCP and their base halfway, can we advance this narrative: "yes universities are elitist – there is unequal access to education. If we zero in on improving access and community-based learning can we meet the needs of more Albertans?"

**A:** PSE is now the minimum level of education needed to get a decent job in today's labour market; however, the financial barrier of obtaining a university education is insurmountable for many Albertans.



- Interest rates are increasing and students are trying to avoid loans. This situation, which causes students to work their way through school, impoverishes their education. We need to make education affordable so that students can focus on their education to produce the people who can adapt to the future needs.
- There is also the concern around access for people who already have degrees and have significant living expenses. For these individuals (i.e. adult learners needing to retrain as a result in economic changes), there is a need for micro credentials and after degree schooling that is available on a part time basis.
- We need to meet the government somewhere and the micro credentials is a possibility – we need to create quality micro credentials and we have academic quality control mechanisms, such as GFC, to ensure that these credentials are properly accredited so that they can potentially contribute to further degree planning.
  - These micro credentials cannot only be about skills development they also need to have soft/skills and liberal education integrated in these.
  - We need to think carefully about what we do in terms of Liberal/General Education – these courses stand our learners in good stead when they enter the workforce.
- In light of the abundance of research showing the value of a PSE degree (let alone the broad skills) is there an argument to be made that could convince people that have political views on these matters?
  - Education is transformative and this is accomplished in early education: in liberal arts education.
  - This is a political matter – when you look at the base of support for the UCP they are trying to divide the “real” Albertans and the “non-real” Albertans. They will not try to “diminish” PSE they are trying to “elevate” trades. They are trying to elevate those who got good jobs straight out of high school in the oil fields. These jobs are disappearing, and they are not coming back and this is the problem being faced by Albertans.
    - PSE access is low in Alberta because – you used to be able to get jobs out of high school and the donor class were sending their kids to schools outside of Alberta – so they were not caring about the PSE system in Alberta
  - There is a strong sense that the Public sector in the NDP days were protected by the government where the job losses were rampant in the private sector. The tuition freezes in this period are now seen as causing the tuition increases that we are dealing with now.
  - We do need to use their narrative with them in our advocacy efforts.
    - Students from across Alberta are getting together on March 27 to discuss the changes to the post secondary sector and make recommendations to the government.
  - It is in Albertans’ interest to invest in Alberta’s future: we want our children and grandchildren to be able to stay and study in the province and contribute to Alberta’s future.
    - We need to meet the voters of Alberta and explain to them that this is an investment in the future.
    - We need to communicate to the parents of Albertan students – we need to inform them of the economic benefits of education.
    - We need to appeal to the rancher/farmer/the small town parent and show how investment in education is in their interests and connected to what it is that is important to them.

**Q:** given the explicit and implied rejection of the value of humanities etc. how do we exert pressure and where and how do we pursue this advocacy

**A:** We have to go around the government and we need to speak to people directly. When we talk about the value of liberal arts education (soft skills, critical thinking, interpersonal relations etc.), we need to talk to community groups and explain to them what is at stake for them and for future generations. This PSE 2030 is a 10 year roadmap and whatever comes out of it (which is unclear) will affect Alberta’s future.



**Q:** Do senior administrators and University Boards have the responsibility to be frank with Albertans about the strong impacts on PSIs which are being caused by the changes, the funding cuts, and performance based funding?

**A:** The manner in which boards and senior administrators communicate is important but it is complex. While we do need to be frank, the complexities of government relations strategies need to be accounted for. The way this government deals with dissention can prevent administrators and Boards from speaking out too much.

### Concluding Comments

- Despite the centralization of government and the limited effectiveness of cabinet officials, local MLAs and back benchers do have considerable influence. An effective way to advocate for PSE in Alberta is to connect with local MLAs to talk about the value of PSE and liberal education.
  - This tactic has proven to be effective recently with respect to MLA travel, Coal mining and. Local MLAs does have an impact.
  - You need to communicate with receptive MLAs
- We can be successful in our advocacy efforts if there are enough people who come to recognize their own self interest in investing in PSE in the long term.
  - We can affirm that trades are important but that these are not the solution in themselves.
  - We need a balanced approached and we need to have these conversations with our MLAs – when a lot of people speak up, we can make a difference.
- Unfortunately, despite all efforts it is likely that the future of Alberta will look a lot like the past.
  - We may end up with a two-sector model, which is a shame: our six-sector model was a leader in the country.
  - We will see more government control of institutions.
  - It will all culminate in higher costs for students, less services, and faculty working harder with less.

**Appreciation was expressed for the panelists and it was noted that the campus community would be kept informed as the PSE 2030 process continues to unfold.**