



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Advanced Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 17, 2025
7 p.m.

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The 31st Legislature
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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participant

Ministry of Advanced Education
Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister

7 p.m.

Monday, March 17, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

**Ministry of Advanced Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Welcome, everybody. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026. I'd like to ask that we go around the tables and have the members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, if you could introduce yourself and then your officials that are joining you at the table as well.

Please note, everybody, *Hansard* is running the microphones, so fingers off those mics. They will go as they go around the room.

I'll kick it off here. I am Shane Getson, the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. I like to call it God's country. I am the chair of the committee tonight. We'll start with introductions to my right.

Mr. Wright: Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, MLA, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Ms de Jonge: Good evening. Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul

Mr. Stephan: Jason Stephan, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Mrs. Sawhney: Good evening. I'm Rajan Sawhney, MLA for Calgary-North West and Minister of Advanced Education. To my right I have Shannon Marchand, deputy minister of Advanced Education, and Craig Johnson, assistant deputy minister of finance and SFO. To my left I have Aaron Neumeyer, assistant deputy minister of private career colleges and student aid, and Carmen Baldwin-Dery, assistant deputy minister of program engagement and innovation.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, great. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Deol: Jasvir Deol, MLA for Edmonton-Meadows.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, Calgary-Beddington.

The Chair: Perfect. We don't have anyone joining us online, so we can skip that. If somebody does pop online, I'll just stop the proceedings and get them to introduce themselves.

I'd like to note the following substitutions: we have Member Deol for Member Loyola as deputy chair, Member Chapman for Member Elmeligi, hon. Mr. Eggen for Member Boparai, hon. Mr. Schmidt for Member Hoyle, and Mr. Wiebe is in for Mr. van Dijken.

A few housekeeping items. We already mentioned that *Hansard* is running the mics us tonight. Committee proceedings are live-streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream of the transcripts of the meetings can be accessed via the Assembly website. Members participating remotely, which there are none, if you are, turn your cameras on and your microphone; turn them off when you are not speaking. Participants who wish to be placed on the list are to e-mail the committee clerk or throw your hand up on the screen there, and then in the room just get my attention, and I'll throw you on the speaking

list over here. Please put your cell phones to the least disturbing setting as possible for the evening's events.

Speaking rotation and time limits. I know it's the second week, so it might be old hat for some of the committee members, but for the minister at the table and everyone else joining at home, the main estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education will be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website. A hard copy has been provided to ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both member and the minister speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry estimates are deemed to be considered for the time allotted on the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process. If anyone is confused, it's the gentleman sitting to my left.

With concurrence of the committee I will ask to call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, if we do that, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break midway?

Seeing none, I appreciate that. The chair being 53 years old appreciates that consideration quite kindly.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the meeting, obviously at the podium over there. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table, and attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. If you're not called upon, then you can't come up here. Space permitting, opposition staff caucus may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times. If there are any other members that float in in person, too, we'll stop proceedings to get them introduced, et cetera.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise. Individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting will continue to run. Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members. Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to both hear the questions and answers without interruption during the estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between the member and the minister.

What helps us keep decorum here and kind of the rules of the road is this is a committee meeting. There's lots of other stuff that we do in the House. What we found that really works well is when we keep the decorum in place, when we refer to the strategic plan, refer to the ministry business plan, refer to the government estimates. You've heard of the fiscal plan. That all keeps it within the calendar year; that keeps it on the rails. Then the chair will give some latitude if you're building a case for consideration for years gone by or something like that, but keep it within the decade, and we're usually pretty good. Does everyone kind of agree to the rules that we will run it here today? Perfect.

With that, minister, we'll open it up to you. You have 10 minutes. The floor is yours.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. Good evening, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to provide an overview of Advanced Education's estimates. Through Budget 2025, Advanced Education is meeting the challenge of a rapidly growing population with continued investments in

postsecondary education and supporting a sustainable postsecondary education system that's preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow.

Budget 2025 recognizes the crucial role postsecondary institutions play in meeting the needs of our economy by addressing labour demands, creating jobs, attracting talent and investment, and driving the economy. I am pleased to outline these investments for you today with the assistance and expertise of senior officials from my department. Here at the table with me, as I had mentioned earlier, are Shannon Marchand, deputy minister of Advanced Education; Craig Johnson, assistant deputy minister of finance and SFO; Carmen Baldwin-Dery, assistant deputy minister of program engagement and innovation; Aaron Neumeyer, assistant deputy minister of private career colleges and student aid.

In the room we also have ADMs Crista Carmichael and Jamie Curran as well as communications director Carla Jones and Allan O'Brien from Student Aid. Also in the room are members of my office: chief of staff, Sarah Amiry; policy advisors Jordan Porfon and Alysha Wishloff; and press secretary, Varun Chandrasekar.

Alberta's government remains focused on ensuring our province remains the best place in Canada to live, work, and raise a family. We are home to world-class postsecondary institutions, including the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. The University of Alberta is in the world's top 100 universities and ranked in the top 6 per cent of institutions according to the 2025 QS World University Rankings and the 2024 Times Higher Education World University Rankings. The University of Calgary is ranked eighth in Canada, is one of the top research universities in Canada according to the 2023 Centre for World University Rankings and research information.

Now, Budget 2025 is meeting the challenge of a rapidly growing population with continued strategic investments in education. This budget maintains a stable base of funding, manages affordability of postsecondary education for students, continues support for high-demand programs, and delivers on-key priorities. Budget 2025 also supports the skilled trades and apprenticeship, helping connect Albertans with opportunities to acquire or build their skills.

Budget 2025 continues to help make postsecondary studies accessible and affordable while investing in crucial capital projects that expand student capacity and learning environments, contributing to a strong foundation of graduates that help build the future.

In brief, Budget 2025 investments in Advanced Education include a consolidated budget of \$7.4 billion in expenses; \$6 billion for postsecondary operations, an increase of \$375 million from Budget 2024; a three-year capital plan investment of \$1.5 billion, including PSI funded capital; and \$1.2 billion for student aid. Budget 2025 provides stable funding from Budget 2024, and includes an increase of nearly \$9 million per year in support for adult learning to provide additional funding for independent academic institutions; an additional \$500,000 per year to support Indigenous colleges, bringing annual base funding for Indigenous colleges to nearly \$4 million; and an increase of \$5 million for the Alberta student grant program, which supports low-income students.

Alberta's postsecondary education system plays a crucial role in our economy and society. Alberta is funding postsecondary education in a responsible way that respects taxpayer dollars, provides students with the most value for their investment, and ensures we continue to produce a skilled workforce for the jobs of today and tomorrow. In fact, the over \$312 million investment in targeted enrolment expansion funding we have provided to postsecondary institutions since 2022 represents the largest one-time injection of postsecondary funding in Alberta's history.

Budget 2025 also invests a total of \$1.5 billion over three years to support crucial capital projects, including planning work for the advanced skills centre at NAIT, lab and classroom spaces at Keyano

College, expansion planning for NorQuest College, skilled trades expansion planning for Northwestern Polytechnic, and funding for the life sciences innovation and future technology centre at the University of Alberta.

Budget 2025, once again, also allows postsecondary institutions to access up to 15 per cent of their reserves for one-time expenditures so they can address short-term inflationary pressures. These measures were also in place in budgets 2023 and '24.

Going forward it is crucial that we explore ways of maintaining and improving the strength and sustainability of Alberta's postsecondary system. That's why we established the expert panel on postsecondary system funding and competitiveness, chaired by renowned economist Dr. Jack Mintz. The panel is examining funding allocations, federal immigration policy impacts on Alberta's postsecondary institutions, administrative and regulatory burdens, and the overall competitiveness of Alberta's postsecondary system. The panel's work commenced on December 2024 with a report expected later in 2025.

The rising cost of living continues to be a challenge for many Albertans, including students. Budget 2025 is helping to meet this challenge by working to ensure postsecondary education is accessible and affordable. To assist students, Alberta's government has capped tuition increases at 2 per cent for domestic students, starting in the 2024-25 academic year; rejected applications for exceptional tuition increases; reduced the interest rate on Alberta student loans; extended the payment and interest-free grace period for loans to 12 months after a student completes her studies; increased eligibility for the repayment assistance plan to make student loan repayment more manageable; and modernized student aid shelter allowances to better reflect the actual renting housing costs faced by most postsecondary students.

Student aid programs can help reduce financial barriers for those most affected by rising costs and take into consideration costs students face beyond paying for tuition. Budget 2025 provides nearly \$183 million to help keep education accessible and affordable for students in Alberta through scholarships, grants, and awards. This includes \$113 million in scholarships and awards to approximately 57,000 students, with \$59.5 million of the \$113 million coming from the heritage scholarship fund, and \$70 million in grants to about 19,000 students.

Budget 2025 also includes \$991 million for student loans to support basic learning and living costs for nearly 122,000 students this year. In June of 2024 our government announced policy measures in alignment with other provinces to stabilize the increasing costs of student aid for Alberta students attending private career colleges while also strengthening protections for them.

While we're on the topic, I'd like to take a moment to highlight some of the other work we are doing with private career colleges. These for-profit colleges play a very important role in Alberta's adult learning system and offer a diversity of learning approaches and vocational training. There are many excellent private career colleges meeting the needs of Alberta students but, unfortunately, there are a few bad actors. My department has increased oversight over private career colleges to ensure they are following legislative requirements, and meeting their licensing obligations, and delivering quality programs in a competent manner.

As the world around us evolves, Alberta is committed to helping students get the skills and knowledge they need to enter the workforce and meet the labour market demands of tomorrow. Budget 2025 is investing \$78 million per year over the next three years to create more seats in apprenticeship classes across the province. And Budget 2025 introduces a brand new \$5 million dollar grant program that will empower union training providers to deliver important apprenticeship classroom training.

Apprenticeship programs are generally more affordable as well than other options and offer a wide range of opportunities within our province.

To keep up with demand, Advanced Education continues to work with postsecondary institutions to expand high-demand postsecondary programs throughout the province, allowing students to upgrade skills or retrain for a new career closer to home. This includes creating over 760 spaces for training mental health professionals at 12 postsecondary institutions across the province, creating over 1,800 new seats in nurse bridging programs for internationally educated nurses at postsecondary institutions also across the province, growing the bachelor of aviation management program, creating more than 3,100 additional seats in technology programs.

The Chair: All right, Minister. It goes by really quick.

Now we're into the first 60-minute block. The Official Opposition will start off with that. I know it's going to be redundant at the front end here, but every time you go into that, you have to ask if the minister wants to go back and forth or block time. That way we can set the shot clock up here. Then you'll notice on there as well we'll have the meeting time running and speaking time and the block time.

With that, I'm looking for who wants to go first. Member Eggen, I recognize you. The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Eggen: I would like to share time, if possible.

Mrs. Sawhney: I'd prefer block time. I'm going to do that consistently with the other members as well.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks. No problem.

Thank you. I appreciate the introductory remarks. Indeed, His Majesty's Official Opposition does share many of the values that you did espouse in your introductory remarks, but always I think we can only judge a person and a political party and a government on their actions.

What we've seen not just in this fiscal year but since 2019 when the UCP did form government is that there is a consistent pattern of underfunding postsecondary education here in the province of Alberta. The first couple of years were the most brutal, and quite frankly we haven't recovered yet. Almost a third of postsecondary operational funding was lost in those first two years, and then the subsequent budgets that were brought down by the other minister and now this minister again did nothing to provide recovery for that very significant loss of operational funding and also capital funding and all other parts of our postsecondary system here in the province of Alberta.

You know, I mean, it's a system. We talk about institutions, and we talk about numbers here a lot tonight, but it really comes down to people and values. It's no coincidence that the province of Alberta's first bill that was passed into law in 1905 was to form . . .

The Chair: Member, we got 1905. I said at the front end that if you can keep it within even a decade, I'm usually pretty good. The other one I'd ask is that if you could just reference one of these documents here That would make the chair just tickled.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I'm just providing some introductory remarks.

The Chair: Okay. We're at 1905, so if you can bring it back within . . .

Mr. Eggen: So you don't want me to do an introductory . . .

The Chair: No. Feel free. I'm just trying to see the relevance at this point of 1905 versus the 2025 or '26 estimates.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Okay. Well, that's fine.

What we are building here each year in our budgets, in our business plans, in our fiscal plans, is a commitment, or lack thereof, to the values that are foundational to Alberta as a province and our commitment to postsecondary education in general.

We've gone from, as I said, the very first bill passed to form the University of Alberta more than 100 years ago to now in these last five budgets a significant loss of funding to our postsecondary institutions, a loss that has been totally out of keeping with both the population increases that we've seen here in the province of Alberta over the last number of years and also the inflation rate and even what the government has used in their business plan and then in their fiscal plan to calculate the cost of living. The consumer price index plus population is about a 5.1 per cent increase in any budget, not just the postsecondary budget but any budget, to meet those inflationary pressures and those population pressures.

So while the minister says that they are making an increase to the budget, in fact, with those two factors involved, we see – if you have anything less than 5 per cent, if it's flat, then in actuality it's a 5 per cent cut. That's what we're seeing again here in this Budget 2025. My comments generally this evening will be around how we can both turn that around and how we can meet the population pressures and the expectations of Albertans for postsecondary here in the province of Alberta.

7:20

The UCP has acknowledged that we have a very large cohort of grade school kids in our K to 12 education program right now. Lo and behold, many of those students, hopefully the majority of those students, will choose to access a postsecondary program here once they graduate from grade 12. Right now because, as I said, of that loss of a third of operating funding and now sort of a stagnant funding over the last number of years, including 2025, we're just not building capacity to meet the needs of that growing population that's coming down the pipe – some of them are here right now – that need an affordable and accessible and high-quality position for them to forward their dreams and aspirations for postsecondary. Our economy depends on it. Our population and population retention depends on it, too.

Of course, while we do have a lot of people moving into Alberta at this point in our history, they can just as quickly move out of Alberta. In fact, we are seeing, unfortunately, the beginning of that in postsecondary students or with postsecondary education moving out of the province at an alarming rate here in these last number of years as well. We have to think of all of those things together. We have to make sure we work together – I always offer my assistance and constructive criticism – in ways by which we can turn that corner and, in fact, build a postsecondary system that we can all be proud of.

My first questions. I just will get a couple in, and then you can reply at your leisure. Alberta has lost more students than it's gained since 2007 in postsecondary. Since 2007 we've lost more than 14,000 students. Postsecondary graduates, we know, pay the most of Canada's personal income tax, are less likely to require social assistance, and are more likely to start their own businesses. Has the government of Alberta calculated the loss to Alberta's economy due to the emigration of Alberta's postsecondary students away from the province? That's a reference to the government estimates, page 31.

Another question. Many student jobs are, of course, low-paying and offer limited relevance to career goals. Furthermore, access to work-integrated learning opportunities is crucial for skill development and postgraduation success. I would ask how the government is incentivizing employers to offer students better wages, benefits, and work experiences that are relevant to their field

of study. When will this government re-establish something like the STEP program or something equivalent to the STEP program?

May I say through the chair that I canvassed some of these questions from postsecondary students and faculty and just people right across the province. That last question came from Mount Royal University, and they were very concerned. It's all around this affordability issue that the minister did reference in her opening comments. It's affecting everyone, but it's affecting our students a lot because, of course, they have limited income. They have limited means by which they can earn money while they are studying, and they need the access to integrated learning opportunities like the STEP program that used to be around for them to be able to pay the bills, to stay in school, and to find relevant employment that can help them with their careers down the road.

My last question that I'll put in to end this first block is around the government estimates again on page 26. That's around student aid, 3.3. Tuition is up, access to student loans is down, and STEP, as I said before, has been cancelled. We have quite massive cuts to universities, colleges, and polytechnics base funding. We see no tangible increases for the student loans, scholarships, and awards as well as student aid grants reflected in lines 3.2, 3.3, of the estimates.

Now, considering population increase and inflation, these actually are flat numbers. In fact, they constitute a reduction. You know that we need to buttress. Students will get some work to help to pay for their schooling in the summer or even working part-time during the school year, but they also need to access student aid. You know, the debt rates for students in Alberta, I mean, are amongst the highest in Canada. Indeed, a lot of that debt rate, in fact, is crushing for students. It resulted in people making choices about just simply not going to school.

That's my block.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Member.

We'll turn it over to the minister to respond, please.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Well, thank you very much for the commentary and the series of questions. I know there were some remarks made about values, and essentially the remarks were that our values are not aligned with the values of most Albertans. I will have to strongly disagree on that.

In 2019 when we were elected, we were elected with a strong mandate to review government finances to ensure that we were making prudent use of taxpayer dollars. At that time, as everyone in this room is well aware, the MacKinnon panel report was commissioned. It was a report and a study that looked at all of the expenditures within government, and it really highlighted those areas that were significant outliers in terms of providing more funding than other jurisdictions in the country.

At that time I was the minister of community and social services, and we were not reflected in that report, but Advanced Education was. As I mentioned, it was a significant outlier, the ministry and the department, in terms of expenditure, way higher – way, way higher – than the national average. There were some measures undertaken by my predecessor at that time to right-size the grants that came to the postsecondary system.

I think we also have to recognize that base operating grants are one component of funding that goes to the postsecondary institutions. We can't forget about capital expenditures. Budget 2025 actually outlines almost \$530 million of capital expenses that will go to creating additional seats at a variety of institutions across the province. That, in essence, is going to create almost 30,000 seats by 2030. That's what we're looking at. I'd be happy to go over some of these capital projects, but I might save that for later on.

Just going back to the values component again, we understand that particularly now in this day and age when we are looking at geopolitical shocks from south of the border, it's more important than ever to make sure that we are very prudent and responsible with our funding.

Of course, we want to have world-class institutions here in Alberta, and we do. In my opening remarks I talked about the rankings of the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. Despite reductions to those base operating costs, they are still some of the top research institutions in the country and the globe.

I also want to mention that Advanced Education, unlike other ministries, does have a consolidated budget. If you look at our consolidated budget numbers, you will see from the postsecondary institution side that expenses have gone up. So there is more funding that is going into the system. Through those budget documents we also know that the institutions will have more than 600 FTEs that they're bringing on to try to manage some of that enrolment growth and demand.

7:30

I know it was mentioned that we are investing significantly in the K to 12 system. Of course, \$8.6 billion was announced by the Minister of Education and the Premier. Of course those kids are going to go into the postsecondary system, but one thing that was very apparent was that we don't have enough teachers. We're going to have a lot of schools, and we need to have teachers and teachers' aides to make sure that they can work there, and that is why we increased funding to our independent academic institutions like St. Mary's University, for example. I've heard from the Calgary board of education that the teachers that graduate from that particular institution are outstanding. So there are measures within Budget 2025 to address some of those enrolment pressures that we're seeing on the horizon.

Now, in answer to the questions, there was the one question on lost students around emigration. I've heard these statistics before as well, that we have the greatest number of students who leave the province to study elsewhere, and there's a variety of different reasons as to why that happens. Average incomes are a bit higher in Alberta, so students and families feel like they have more opportunities to actually leave the province and go down east or down west. There are more reasons than just what might be implied here, that we're losing students on a regular basis. That's actually not the case. It's more complex than that.

I also know that when we look at acceptance rates here in Alberta, we find that when students apply to programs, there is a very high degree of acceptance into those programs, almost 89 per cent. Other statistics that I can cite according to recent data include an 85 per cent graduate retention rate and a 92 per cent apprenticeship retention rate. So that's just a little bit of a commentary around immigration.

Of course, we know that postsecondary education is very important in terms of increasing potential wages for students. It makes a huge difference, and their contribution to the economy is vital. There's a multiplier impact as well. The question was around work-integrated learning opportunities. We do invest almost \$12.5 million in work-integrated learning programs, and there are six associations that we are working with right now. They include the Alberta Construction Association, BioAlberta, Technology Alberta, Archaeological Society of Alberta, Alberta Food Processors Association, and Alberta hospitality association.

This is a very important initiative, and I know that through my travels overseas – actually, I was in Ireland and Germany in September – it was very apparent that the apprenticeship-style learning system in Ireland and Germany is prevalent and very successful. It's also, I mean, interchangeable with work-integrated learning, and my desire is to see

more opportunities for this. When I sat with a table of very powerful stakeholders not too long ago, that was their number one suggestion: more co-op programs, more work-integrated learning, and more apprenticeship-style learning, so a strong supporter of that.

It also is a metric that's included in our investment management agreements. We know that work-integrated learning does prepare graduates to seamlessly enter the workforce after graduation, contributing to a growing Alberta economy, which is, obviously, something that we both agree on.

Okay. There was a question around element 3 in terms of student aid. We did increase the Alberta student grant by \$5 million, and that is based on demand. That will actually serve about 17,400 students, which is almost 1,500 more than last year. We know that affordability and cost of living are on top of mind for Albertans and Canadians and, obviously, students, and that is why in Budget 2025 Alberta is expected to invest nearly \$1.2 billion to help Alberta students to access a postsecondary education. Now, that \$1.2 billion does include \$991 million in Alberta student loans that will help an estimated almost 122,000 students, \$113 million in scholarships and awards to support approximately 57,000 students, and \$70 million in grants to about 19,000 students. I know I had mentioned this in my opening remarks, but I felt it was important again to emphasize how much we do have in our student aid.

Then the other thing I'm going to mention here is that I find that when I'm speaking to students when I travel across the provi they actually don't have a really good understanding of some of those scholarships and awards that are available to them. So I will take the opportunity to, first of all, very quickly talk about the grants, which are nonrepayable. I've mentioned the Alberta student grant, grants for disabled persons, Alberta part-time grant, new beginnings, bursary, international educated nurses bursaries, and aviation bursaries. Again, these are grants that are available to students.

In terms of scholarships and awards we've got the Rideau Hall Foundation, Jason Lang scholarship, Alberta graduate excellence, Indigenous careers, Alberta athletic award, Alberta Innovates graduate, Alberta graduate students travel, Lois Hole humanities and social sciences, and there are a few more. I would encourage anybody, particularly students who are looking to enrol in postsecondary studies, to please take a look at our website to examine some of these scholarships and awards in more detail.

Now, going back to student loans, we did undertake some work this past fiscal to look at the private career colleges, and we did make some policy changes that actually resulted in the numbers going down for the demand for student loans. That is why you will see in element 3 that there is actually an increase.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. It goes by quick.

I'm just looking to the opposition members to see who's going. MLA Eggen, the floor is yours, sir. And just ask that question again.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, yeah. The back and forth thing? I think that's fairly obvious. We could do back and forth. Anyway, we'll get three hours to figure it out.

Well, thank you, Minister. I'll take the questioning just from your last comments around student aid. We know that the students in Alberta are carrying some of the highest, in fact, the highest debt rate of all Canadian students for paying back their student loans. You know, this can be a crippling burden to carry for students when they do graduate. Some people will have student loan debt repayments for many years after they graduate. In fact, the stories around student loans, which are quite real – it's not just happenstance – are a deterrent for many people to even choose to go to school. They say: why should I bother going to school for two, three, four years and

have this debt that's around my neck for the rest of my life when I can just start working?

You know, we all lose as a result of that. As I said in my opening comments, university, college, polytechnic graduates will earn a higher standard of living. They're much more likely to start businesses. They have better health rates than other parts of the population, and it just helps to contribute to building a more robust and healthy community. I would venture to say it improves the quality of life for people, too, to be able to go to school, complete a degree, and carry on in a chosen profession.

If we could reduce the student interest rates on student loans – almost every other jurisdiction in Canada has removed that interest that the provincial government charges on their portion of the loan. I mean, this is not a significant decrease to revenues. I would say that it has a multiplier effect by investing in students' education, increasing the likelihood of students to choose to go to school and be more likely to stay in Alberta and contribute to Alberta's economy and community afterwards as well. I mean, this is an issue that is brought up a lot by student unions and groups across the province, and I, you know, feel compelled to bring it up here again today.

7:40

Another issue that I would like to comment on stems from your business plan on page 5, key objective 1.2. It says, "Enhance the accessibility of post-secondary education programs by providing supports to strengthen the participation of adult learners from diverse, under-represented, and vulnerable populations." I will reference this part of the business plan for a number of questions that I have around choices that this UCP government seems to be making around, you know, getting adult learners into classes, getting Albertans back into school so that they can retrain, perhaps improve themselves, and learn a language better and get ahead, basically.

You know, part of this was a concerted effort by universities and colleges and polytechnics around this province to use a policy of diversity and equity and inclusion initiatives to open doors for students to study that might not normally study or have space or have an opportunity to go to school. I know, as Minister of Education, that many of the dual credit programs that we had set up were very successful because it got students in the door of a postsecondary institution while they were still in high school, where they normally would never even think of going, right? Their family had never had a history of going to college or something, and here they were, in grade 10, 11 or 12, in a postsecondary and picking up some credits that they could use for a degree after they graduated.

You know, building a solid foundation of diversity and equity and inclusion includes those students. It includes the older people that want to go back to school after maybe they didn't finish high school in the first place. It includes people from our First Nations populations and from new Canadians and so forth. I'm just watching all of these things unfolding both here and in other jurisdictions and in the United States especially, and I can't help but go back to the University of Alberta choosing to dissolve their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives after a certain board member moved that they should do so on their board. Now, that board member was Janice MacKinnon, the same person who recommended these quite significant cuts to postsecondary. The UCP had appointed her to the board of the University of Alberta, and she brought forward a motion to dissolve the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at that same university.

I just wanted to ask the minister and her other people, officials here: what is the view of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Alberta's postsecondary institutions with the UCP government? You know, I just want to know if these views were communicated either through

this board member, who was appointed by the UCP government, or communicated directly to an institution like the University of Alberta. I know this is happening not just at the U of A. The U of C has also made changes to their diversity, equity, and inclusion programming initiatives. It just feels like a bit of a trend, you know, through the chair. Of course, we see it writ large south of the border since last November, where the new American government is really on a serious attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. I just want to note what the policy is of this ministry and the government on these issues. Do you see the value, as I had described, of getting students in the door of our colleges that wouldn't normally go there and the economic benefit and the societal benefit that comes from that as well? That again is the business plan, 1.2.

Thank you.

I think I've got a couple more minutes here. I just wanted to talk briefly about the comparison between population increase and participation rates in our postsecondaries. We still have a stubborn problem – we all know it – that participation rates in postsecondary in the province of Alberta fall below the national average for participation rates for students.

If you don't go to postsecondary, maybe get a college program or, you know, pick up a trade or apprenticeship in the first few years after you get out of high school or you didn't even finish high school, then the likelihood of someone continuing later is greatly, greatly reduced. This is only exacerbated by, you know, a shortage of spaces, which is a deterrent for students to be able to go to school in the first place. I know the minister has talked about some of these targeted programs that they have realized in certain trades and in certain areas, and I appreciate the sentiment, but the reality is playing out quite a bit different on the ground.

Because we have an acute shortage of those spaces still, the expectation or the average you need to get in for some of these programs is through the roof, right? To get into a nursing program right now at the universities of Alberta or Calgary, you know, you need a 93, 94, 95 per cent average, higher than you could possibly need to actually go to an RN program. I mean, these are professional, trained nurses, and it's of the highest quality, of course. Alberta produces some of the best trained nurses in the world, but do you need a 95 per cent average from high school to get into the program? Absolutely not.

It's completely as a result of a shortage due to lack of spaces that has been ongoing for quite a number of years here in the province of Alberta. I know the minister will say, "Well, they're going to build lots more spaces," and so forth, but you need to fund those things, and you need to make sure that they are affordable spaces that students can access for now and for the future as well.

I'm just looking at my time. I'm just going to save that one because the second part of that question is really good, and I don't want to lose it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. You've got the chair all trembling with anticipation for the next part. I'm sure the folks at home are, too.

Minister, with that, the floor is back to you for a response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Well, thank you very much. Again, a series of questions there that I'm happy to answer. For that for the first question around students carrying the highest debt here in Alberta, I don't believe that that is necessarily the case. When we look at other jurisdictions, I know that we had reduced the interest rate to prime in July of 2023, but provinces like Saskatchewan and Ontario are still at prime plus 1. In terms of where we land as compared to other jurisdictions, I would say that we're still better off, at least compared to Ontario and Saskatchewan. But the point is well made

that, you know, it's not fun having student loans, and it does take time to pay down that debt.

We do know that according to our 2022 surveys – it's a little bit outdated – the data does show that when you survey Alberta student loan borrowers, 88 per cent of student loan borrowers agree that they would not have been able to attend postsecondary, and 86 per cent agree that they would not be able to continue their studies without student loans. At the end of the day, student loans are available for students to be able to pursue postsecondary studies, and it's an important part of the system.

Let's move on to the next question, that was actually based on the business plan. The question was around diverse, underrepresented, and vulnerable individuals and how the government supports them. Well, I can tell you that there are a variety of ways that we support them. Not too long ago I announced additional funding for Trade Winds to Success. That's an additional \$1.5 million in funding to help apprentices from Indigenous communities get additional training and connect to the labour market, and it's a fantastic program that has had some great metrics. They also recently received some federal funding. We also partner with Women Building Futures, who are focused on bringing more women into the trades. Again, they do tremendous work.

7:50

We also support children's services. There's a program that is all about supporting at-risk youth to make sure that they also can connect to the trades. We have the foundational learning assistance program, the CALP program. I also want to say that, as I've mentioned before, we have a number of grants and scholarships. We have a grant that is available for persons with disabilities to help them with additional accommodations that they might need on campus or in their postsecondary institution.

I had also mentioned in my speaking notes at the outset around First Nation colleges. When I had done my tour with the five – with Maskwacis, Red Crow, Blue Quills, and the others – one of the common themes that came up was that they had lost some federal funding. As a result of that, we had increased each First Nation college's base operating grant by \$100,000 to make sure that they were able to continue some of that very vital, culturally sensitive support that they were providing to their students.

We've also funded ethnocultural communities to make sure that newcomers who are coming to the province were able to learn more about trades and the apprenticeship programs that are available to them.

Now, I know there was a question around diversity, equity, inclusion. The reality is that there is a cultural shift that is taking place in North America. Obviously, as the member had mentioned, there is lots happening south of the border, and certainly there are conversations that are happening here in Alberta and across the country as well about the merits of DEI or EDIA, as it's called here more commonly here in Canada: equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

In my conversations with many members in the postsecondary sector asking them about their thoughts around this, they said that, well, they didn't really have too many metrics. I mean, a lot of these initiatives came about as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement and the George Floyd episode, when he passed away. That's when we started talking more about equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

In my conversations with these individuals, they said that they didn't keep track of the metrics and they weren't sure that they were actually accomplishing what they had set out to do in terms of providing more equity. They felt that – and keep in mind, I'm not going to name names. These are presidents and board chairs of postsecondary institutions here in Alberta and some in B.C. as well

who said that they felt that they were sacrificing meritocracy for some of these initiatives, and that's an interesting conversation. Of course, the University of Alberta has made some decisions on dismantling that particular office and setting up an accessibility, community, and belonging office as well to make sure that they're still meeting the needs of students in terms of providing mental health supports.

One of the, I guess, mandate items – I mean, it wasn't explicitly set out – for the expert panel that is headed by Dr. Jack Mintz is also to examine some of these offices in the postsecondary institutions to understand the efficacy of these programs and how much funding is going to these offices as well and come back with some recommendations.

This is a little bit of information around the comments around DEI, and I am expecting that the boards of governors of the various postsecondary institutions across the province will be having some conversations on how they want to move forward. Certainly, I'm looking forward to the report from the expert panel that will describe some of these programs and also provide recommendations.

Moving on to the next question around population increases and the fact that we are still not seeing the requisite number of students that we want to see enrol in postsecondaries. We did take a look at that. We dug into that a little bit more to try to understand why. The good news is that since 2014 we have seen an increase, a 28 per cent increase, in domestic enrolment, so things are moving in the right direction.

I believe the education and the outreach that we're undertaking in the K to 12 system articulating the various opportunities that are available in high labour market demand occupations or in the trades is having an impact. There is more of a desire to think about postsecondary after grade 12, so things are looking good.

I had mentioned the acceptance rate earlier as well. We're finding that when students apply for a program, it's generally about an 89 per cent acceptance rate into the program of their choice. That's also a really, really good metric.

In terms of limited seats it's very competitive. Nursing is a very competitive program; so is medicine. Yes, I will talk about the additional capital investments that we're making to open up more physical spaces, but we're also working with the University of Alberta to look at more seats for nurse practitioners. I know Athabasca University has also indicated a desire to examine that further, and I think Portage College as well is doing some work with the University of Alberta to understand what those opportunities could look like. Of course, we will invest in the physical capacity as well, and when the time is right, we will look at maybe targeted enrolment expansion funding to take a look at how to fund those seats. The expert panel as well will provide recommendations in terms of how funding allocations should look.

I'm being reminded that in T rounds 1 and 2 2,100 nursing seats were funded, for almost \$38.5 million. Please do know that we do very closely look at the labour market trends to understand which occupations are in high demand, and we use a variety of different sources to do that. We consult with postsecondary institutions. We consult with Jobs, Economy and Trade. They have an Alberta occupational outlook report which actually outlines those high-demand occupations. Then we talk to the postsecondaries to determine how we can fund those seats. That's how targeted enrolment expansion works. It's a very successful way of funding those areas that really require more people studying in those particular occupations.

I do believe that I have answered all three questions. I know there might be a desire for some more information. I do know that with the population increase, with record migration into the province, with the fact that the international student file has also been impacted and that impacts revenue lines of postsecondary institutions, the time is now

to really understand what the future looks like for postsecondary in terms of a funding model.

Going back to the expert panel that is headed by Dr. Jack Mintz . . .

The Chair: Now you're doing the cliffhangers, just like the last member.

Opposition members, I'm not sure – MLA Eggen, it's all yours.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to further my questioning. I note that the minister is referencing this expert panel, headed up by Jack Mintz, quite a lot. You know, that I think fills me and lots of other people who follow postsecondary, are involved in it, are teaching in it, or are students studying with some trepidation. Of course, the last expert panel we had took the largest cut to postsecondary education that we ever saw in the history of Alberta. The government seemed unapologetic about it and thought that it was, quote: bringing Alberta in line somehow. As a result, we are losing programs here in the province of Alberta. We're losing our ability to be nimble in our research capacity, to build programs to not just fill the jobs of today but to be open to filling the jobs of the future, too.

I recognize the value of our energy industry. It is the biggest industry by far we have, and it's very important, but really the most valuable thing that we have is our people, right? I know people say that as a truism, but now more than ever it's very, very important. We are under attack economically. Even our sovereignty has been put into question. For us to invest now in our local population, especially our young people, is not just smart business, but it's an imperative.

The last round of expert panel came through, you know, like a prairie wildfire in our schools and cut a third of the operating budget. We haven't recovered yet, and now there's another one coming. But Albertans are much better organized to talk about this, and they've provided me with lots of questions here this evening to help to make sure we don't make that same mistake twice with the second so-called expert panel coming through.

8:00

I have on page 26 – I think this is from a college up north. It must be page 26, I'm guessing, from the estimates, line 2.3. It noted that Indigenous education funding on this line item has been flat for the last three years running – right? – while the numbers of Indigenous students in our colleges, universities, and polytechnics is actually rising considerably, which is great. I mean, it's in keeping with the general population that's growing, too. People are wondering, you know, why you have this as a flat number for three years. Really, it's a cut, because, as I said, the combination of the consumer price index and population growth is more than 5 per cent, so a zero is really a negative five. People are asking in what areas they expect our schools to make cuts around Indigenous education.

You know, as you mentioned, we do have dedicated schools for Indigenous education here in the province, but we also have places like Portage College – right? – in Lac La Biche, and I think they have a satellite in Bonnyville, too, right? Four. Okay. Yeah. We have Northern Lakes College as well, which has many campuses all through Northern Alberta, a large Indigenous population.

You know, what I've been getting from them – I've been trying to canvass all over – is that a lot of these cuts to foundational learning programs are directly affecting people's ability to go to school in some of those places, Indigenous and Métis students especially. Like, in Northern Lakes College, they've had to cut programs because the foundational learning programs have been cut quite significantly. I know there is an issue around federal funding that changed about a year and a half ago or more, but,

through the chair, the provincial government knew about that a year and a half ago or more. They knew that it was coming down the pipe and chose not to compensate or to instead just leave a lot of these programs out in the cold.

Indigenous education is flat, foundational learning is down in funding, and lots and lots of students in, like you say, Northern Lakes and Portage College and other places, University of Alberta, University of Calgary, they're left out in the cold. That's a question that I had around Indigenous education and, you know, just this notion. I know you're referencing other people, maybe. I hope you were, anyway, because this whole idea that diversity and equity and inclusion somehow started when the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter thing sort of came about – Mr. Chair, I think that the foundational part of diversity, equity, and inclusion started from many, many dozens of years ago when, for example, black students weren't allowed to go to school at all. They were excluded from being able to attend postsecondary institutions. Right? When women were excluded from certain faculties as well.

I mean, it's not something that's in fashion or out of fashion. These are foundational fights to ensure that people get inclusion and are included in being able to go to school just like everybody else. So we have to look at – I know people would say: is that not from the 2025 budget? No, it is, because it's something in the business plan here, but it started a long time ago when people fought for equal rights, and, you know, the best way to get ahead is to go to school. We need to make sure that those doors are always open and always available to everyone who has the ability to study and who has the desire to do so as well. I just wanted to make that point because, I mean, it's important.

I mean, I notice there's certain people that are using this as a political thing, where they get a little foothold, and then they try to make it bigger. Right? You know, it can be really damaging, and you don't know who they're going to be coming after next. That's the thing with some of these people attacking, you know, minorities being able to access postsecondary education and stuff like that.

The Chair: Just to be clear, Member, I've given tons of latitude on both sides here.

Mr. Eggen: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: I'm trying to weave this back together. There's a bit of a pulpit going on right now.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Okay. That's good. I just wanted to make the point. I mean, obviously it's in the business plan, diversity, equity – you know, having disadvantaged people being able to access school; I just want to keep it that way. That's what I believe in.

Okay. Good. I would like to change gears then. I talked to the University of Calgary Faculty Association, and they led me to understand that the University of Calgary has submitted for ministerial approval a large group of program suspensions in the areas of classics, in religion, the School of Languages, Linguistics, Literatures and Cultures, and the School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Calgary. That's where it's from.

These are as a result of operating cuts to the University of Calgary. The University of Calgary has told me that and confirmed that, in fact. They have to make a submission for ministerial approval to suspend these programs. I'm just asking if you have received this submission, and are you approving these suspensions? In deliberations around this, how many students are enrolled in these programs at the University of Calgary? How many people are employed in these same programs? What's your position on that as the minister in the ministry?

The University of Calgary is very concerned about cuts to their operating budget. You know, they took some of the biggest hits of any institution in Alberta, and they're just not recovering. I mean, they're a very innovative and entrepreneurial school. They've worked into the community quite a lot. They've built up their foundation quite a lot, and they've built up the profile and the value of postsecondary education in the city of Calgary quite a lot, too.

I mean, I know you are from there. You live there. You've seen their good work. The University of Calgary has made lots of connections with the Calgary board of trade and the Downtown Business Association and so forth. They've all come out expressing the value of the University of Calgary, not just to improving the quality of life for people in Calgary but for the economy in the figure of many billions of dollars.

You know, when I see cuts to things like classics and religion, school of languages, literature, art, culture, I mean, these are all things that are not just nice to have; they're part of the culture of the fabric that makes Calgary what it is. Are you going to cut them or what?

The Chair: With that, Minister, it's over to you to respond, please.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Well, thank you for those questions. I've narrowed it down to about probably two questions and some commentary around DEI. In terms of the expert panel, I don't think that people should view this panel with trepidation. We know that the landscape has changed. I've already talked about the international student file. That whole revenue line has really impacted postsecondary institutions across the country. Alberta is in a very good position. We are not impacted the way Ontario and B.C. has been.

Those federal policy changes that impacted the number of students coming into Canada has really changed the economic landscape, and it requires an examination. That is one of the pieces that the Mintz panel will be looking at.

They will also be looking at various other jurisdictions to understand how funding models look across the country and internationally. We also know that, as I've mentioned before, there's record migration and what's happening south of the border in terms of the tariffs has really, really changed the outlook for budgets for all jurisdictions across this country, not just budgets, but how we think about the economy and how we're going to think about reducing interprovincial trade barriers and barriers in labour mobility. I think the fact that we have had no cuts to this budget is excellent because everything was on the table as we were deliberating through Budget 2025. Obviously, the postsecondary sector has undertaken reductions in base operating grants, which played a factor in that.

8:10

Yes, I have talked about the expert panel quite a bit. I just want to mention that there are other individuals, not just Dr. Jack Mintz, but we have Ms Charlene Butler, Dr. Ray Block, Ms Joan Hertz, Mr. Peter MacKinnon. These individuals all have diverse experience in executive and administrative roles at many of Alberta's publicly funded postsecondary institutions. I can safely say that they are champions for the sector, and they are not going to go in considering, you know, slashing and burning postsecondary. They've obviously worked in the sector and are champions for Albertans and Alberta students.

In terms of getting ready for jobs for the future, there is a significant investment in the trades. In Budget 2024 we actually increased that budget line by \$78 million. There are lots and lots of shortages that are coming up on the horizon in terms of skilled trades, persons, and apprentices, and that's why this investment is

really important. We know that there are more people retiring than are coming into the pipeline.

Now, I just want to move on to Indigenous education. I think the comment was that we've actually, because the line is flat, cut funding. Actually, it's not flat. We have increased funding by \$500,000 for those First Nation colleges. As I've mentioned before, when I visited them – so that's Maskwacis Cultural College, Old Sun Community College, Red Crow Community College, Blue Quills, and Yellowhead Tribal College – they all mentioned to me that they had lost federal funding. That is why we increased their funding by \$100,000, so that those great programs that they were offering would still be offered to their learners. So there was an increase in that particular line item.

In regard to Indigenous education we also provide \$1.14 million annually in Indigenous initiative grants across all the First Nation colleges. There are also Indigenous postsecondary mental health grants that provide \$400,000 annually across First Nation colleges to support nonclinical, culturally responsive mental health and well-being supports for Indigenous learners. We also provide \$275,000 from the Indigenous initiatives budget. That's also annually provided across treaty organizations and tribal governments to support activities under provincial protocol and relationship agreements.

I guess I do want to reiterate that the supports are there. We have increased the supports for Indigenous learners across the province. Of course, the FLA program was impacted by the reductions from the federal government. And it is debatable as to who knew what. I know the opposition has said many times that the government was aware of these impending reductions. That's not actually the case. The ministers across the country who were sitting at that table were advocating to keep that funding in place. It wasn't really known until the last minute what that impact was going to be. Make no mistake, that was a reduction from the federal government, and what it meant for us is that we lost \$34.7 million that was allocated to the FLA program. It was difficult to ensure that we still maintained that funding for the most vulnerable. In essence, that loss of \$34.7 million meant that we had over \$82 million that we could still offer in FLA funding, and as part of that we prioritized our Indigenous learners, high school students, and persons with disabilities.

Now, speaking of persons with disabilities, when I think about equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, I really focus on the inclusion and accessibility component. I know that when I was minister of community and social services, the disability file was something that impacted me deeply. It doesn't matter what portfolio I go into now, I always look to see: what does inclusion look like for persons with disabilities? What does accessibility look like? I think that is a component that is incredibly important in the postsecondary system. We provide grants. We provide funding, not through my ministry but through other ministries, to organizations like Inclusion Alberta. In fact, when I went to visit Concordia University and I saw the Inclusion Alberta office there, I was actually really touched because it said to me that there's a strong focus with this particular university in ensuring that persons with disabilities have those opportunities, the same kind of opportunities that other students have. They're included the same way.

So those kinds of programs are a priority. Inclusion of veterans as well: we find that sometimes there are a lot of veterans who attend postsecondary institutions and find it very difficult to also experience accessibility and inclusion. That's why I was really proud to provide funding for Helmets to Hardhats. That was a recent funding allocation. We know it's important to support our veterans, those individuals who sacrifice so much for our country, for our rights and freedoms that we enjoy today.

Moving on to the classics at the University of Calgary, I find those comments really interesting, because I had an opportunity to ... [Mrs. Sawhney's speaking time expired]

Oh, another cliffhanger.

The Chair: You guys are good at these cliffhangers.

Mrs. Sawhney: I'm going to have to answer that one, though.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for that.

We're over to the government caucus. MLA Wright caught my attention first. Again, the rules in this round are nobody speaks longer than 10 minutes, and you can also share time and cede time with your other fellow members at the table, and you have to ask the minister if she wants block or shared.

Mr. Wright: Well, I'm going to respect the minister's request previously of block time when she said she was going to do block time for both sides. Minister, block time?

Mrs. Sawhney: Sorry. Yes. Block time. Yes.

Mr. Wright: Through the chair, Minister, I thank you for being here with your team and the great work that's being done at the Advanced Ed ministry. I'm going to be speaking to outcome 1 of the business plan, showcasing the ministry's focus to ensuring Albertans have the education and skills required to secure rewarding careers in their current and future labour markets.

Alberta's workforce continues to evolve. Making sure that all Albertans, including our veterans, have access to skills and training career pathways is essential. Minister, you brought up something that's pretty near and dear to my heart, the program of Helmets to Hardhats and the great work that's being done for our veterans and those transitioning out of active duty and retiring and transitioning back to the civilian system. This is a great program that provides fundamental skills to bridge the gaps from their former military experience into a new program, helping them to transition back into civilian life, particularly into the skilled trades.

Given Alberta's commitment to expand opportunities for adult leaders and your previous mentioning of this program, there's a potential to integrate veteran-focused learning initiatives with the broader adult learning system. Can the minister please elaborate on how programs like Helmets to Hardhats currently fits into Alberta's workforce strategy, and is there a potential to expand those efforts? Also, maybe if you could expand on the Helmets to Hardhats program? Also, has the ministry considered incorporating targeted initiatives for veterans into adult learning systems such as dedicated funding, training opportunities, or even partnerships with postsecondary institutions? This becomes rather relevant when we look at programs like Coding for Veterans, which is designed to help veterans get into the evolving and ever-changing industry of coding and computer sciences.

You know, I'm going to transition to another question and topic here, specifically, Mr. Chair, when we look at item 3.2 of the government estimates. We talk about postsecondary education and programming that helps Albertans achieve their desired learning outcomes, and I want to talk about this from a rural lens focus. Myself, in my riding we are home to the Medicine Hat College, and I have to say that this ministry has been really great at helping them expand program offerings at the Medicine Hat College. When we look at the postsecondary ecosystem, comprehensive community colleges have a place within that system, and it is vital that they expand on what they can do. Most recently the Medicine Hat College just got approved for their pharmacy tech programs, addiction counselling programs, kinesiology programs, and an expanding offering that's available. Now, I think this is important

and will help benefit all of rural Alberta when we can really look at how we can keep these folks in that more rural setting.

8:20

Around the table I think we can all understand the importance of ensuring that Albertans have a postsecondary system that remains competitive and provides students with a high-quality education, allowing them to pursue meaningful careers in high-demand fields. I think that we can also throw in the rural aspect of that, being able to stay rural for those that come from that area. One of the priorities for this government and for any government is to ensure Albertans can access postsecondary education. I see under line item 3.2 of the government estimates that student aid grants are increasing by more than \$4 million in total to almost \$70 million in 2025-26. Could the minister provide some added detail on this funding and how it will be distributed?

As I mentioned earlier, another one of the priorities is to ensure Albertan graduates find meaningful employment. To this end, I want to switch over to the business plan on page 5. Performance indicator 1(a) shows that 95 per cent of recent postsecondary graduates in Alberta are employed as of 2024 as part of an upward trend since 2016. Can you also discuss the reasons that are leading to the higher degree employment and whether you expect this to continue into future years?

With that, I will cede my time to the Member for Chestermere-Strathmore.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms de Jonge: Chair, just a question about process. Is the minister able to answer those questions and then we'll . . .

The Chair: No. It's just running on the block.

Ms de Jonge: Okay. Sounds good.

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here tonight and to all members of the committee and your officials. I want to focus a bit on apprenticeship and trades. As you know, I'm a trades grad myself. I'm a proud SAIT alumni, and I found a very rewarding career in the trades prior to my calling to public service. Right now there's this great demand for skilled trades and apprentices in Alberta, and a part of that has to do with our growing population and the need to build critical infrastructure in all sectors. I know you've been doing some amazing work on this file, and I really commend your leadership on this. I remember last year I saw a commercial on TV, and I thought it was fantastic. Thank you for that initiative.

I want to start by asking about apprenticeships. I see on page 5 of the business plan that performance indicator 1(b) shows the percentage of employed apprenticeship graduates. That's some fantastic news right in that line. In fact, I see that since this government took office, the percentage of recent apprenticeship graduates who are employed has continued to rise from 88 per cent in 2018 to 91 per cent in 2020 to 93 per cent in 2022 and an incredible 96 per cent in 2024. Can the minister speak to the factors that have led to this success?

I also know that apprenticeship registration has continued to rise in Alberta in this time frame. You know, in my last question I touched on the postgraduate employment percentage that is increasing, and I'm wondering if the minister can compare that to the change in the actual number of grads entering the workforce?

Also on the topic of skilled trades, as part of Budget 2025, Minister, you announced a brand new union training grant. That will empower union training providers to deliver important apprenticeship classroom training, and if I'm not mistaken, I believe this is the first grant of its kind from the Alberta government for union training providers. Congratulations on that milestone. I know it's appreciated across the

sector, and I've heard that from members in my constituency as well. My question is: is that grant part of that \$10 million increase to apprenticeship grants on page 26 line 5.2 of the government estimates? If it's just part, can you elaborate on what else is included in that \$10 million increase? While you're discussing that, I'm interested to know what, in fact, is included in that entire line item of \$100 million? Minister, can you also speak to the rationale for creating this new union training grant and the particular strengths that union training providers bring to this space?

I've got time for maybe another question if I can sneak it in there. I'm going to jump to page 5 of the business plan. You know, this has to do with increasing seats across the province for these high-demand sectors both in trades but in other programs as well. Outcome 1 states that "in 2025-26, \$105.5 million in funding is allocated to increase seats in high demand post-secondary programs through the Targeted Enrolment Expansion program." Minister, can you please share with the committee how many seats are being supported as a rule of this funding?

And, you know, what sectors are these seats in? Is it focused on trades? Is it focused on other programs? How are we deciding which program will receive this funding, and which institutions are they located at? A lot of my constituents from Chestermere-Strathmore are commuting into Calgary for their postsecondary endeavours, whether that's at a trade school or at the university, and I know they'd be very interested to know how that targeted enrolment expansion program will benefit them as well.

With that, I'll cede my last few seconds to you, Minister.

Thank you.

The Chair: Over to you, Minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I'm very pleased to answer some of these questions. In particular, I know MLA Wright had asked about the Helmets to Hardhats program. It's also a program that's very near and dear to me. I don't have as much experience as MLA Wright does with the veterans community. Certainly, when I attended the Canadian Building Trades Unions Conference last year, I came in contact with the executive director from Helmets to Hardhats and had a very long conversation. He told me a little bit about the metrics and the stories and the success stories and how important it was for veterans to have a learner pathway to get into the trades. From that point on, it was something that was always in the back of my mind.

Then my good friend Monte McNaughton, who used to be the former labour minister in Ontario, talked at length about some of the investments he made when he was working as a minister, and again Helmets to Hardhats came up time and time again.

That is why last year we announced our first-ever partnership with Helmets to Hardhats, making a significant step in supporting veteran transitions into civilian careers. We did announce over \$300,000 over 18 months to support a pilot of a Helmets to Hardhat skilled pathway program here in Alberta. They never did have a presence here before. That prepares veterans for careers in Alberta's designated trades. It is a targeted part of the ministry's commitment to improve access to and awareness of apprenticeship education and careers in the skilled trades.

In terms of the second part of your question regarding incorporating targeted initiatives for veterans into Alberta's adult learning system, I think that's a really good question. I thought I would just tell you a little bit about what we're doing already. One, we know that Alberta is a national leader in recognizing trade certifications issued by the Department of National Defence. That is a little piece of information that many people don't know, so it's really important for me to highlight that here today.

Essentially, veterans holding recognized DND certifications in 13 Alberta designated trades can transition directly into Alberta's workforce without the need for additional examination or fees. These skilled trades are automotive service technician; carpenter; cook; electrician; heavy equipment technician; heavy-duty equipment mechanic, off-road; heavy equipment technician, truck and transport mechanic; heavy equipment technician, transport trailer mechanic; industrial mechanic; or millwright, and there are several more. I would encourage anybody who might be listening to these particular initiatives to contact AIT, contact my department to get some more information. Essentially, these initiatives help accelerate veterans' entry into skilled careers and demonstrate our commitment to reducing barriers, again, our commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

8:30

I also want to mention that Alberta Student Aid offers the Alex DeCoteau award of honour, which recognizes and rewards Canada's armed forces and their immediate families by supporting their pursuit of postsecondary studies in Alberta. Again, this is a scholarship offered by Advanced Education that many people aren't aware of. I would say that people who want to learn more can most definitely go on our website to get some more information, but just as a summary there are 200 awards of \$5,000 each available annually. To be eligible, the applicant must be a Canadian Armed Forces returning soldier who actively served in designated military operations in the Canadian Armed Forces, regular or reserves, or was permanently disabled as a result of participation in the Canadian Armed Forces training.

Just to wrap up this particular question, recently the Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium Alberta Network became an affiliated committee under the Alberta transfer system. Affiliated committees, just to give you some more information, have independent governance that partner with the Alberta transfer system to share data, research initiatives, working groups to enhance learner mobility and pathways for admission and transfer purposes. There are a number of initiatives that are under way to help veterans find that pathway to different programs and courses within the postsecondary sector.

Now, the second question that was posed was around how to keep rural folks in rural communities. I know that Medicine Hat College has obviously been doing a lot of work in getting their courses approved. One of the things that is very important to me as I look at different programming across the province is that we want to make sure that quality programs are available to all students in Alberta. It doesn't matter if they're living in a big city or in rural and remote areas; they should have opportunities for a variety of different programs.

We know that the population has grown quite a bit, and we know that we've had lots of people, obviously, moving to urban centres, but we have lots and lots of capacity in the rural areas as well. When I talk to our Campus Alberta Quality Council – they're the folks who do all of the degree approvals – I constantly reiterate that it's important to move quickly, and even within Advanced Education, when we're approving programs at private career colleges or at the polytechnics or at the comprehensive community colleges, I do talk to them about speed to make sure that we are addressing those labour market demands and that students across the province have rapid access to some of these programs. Speed and efficiency is something that we speak about quite often. I'm glad that Medicine Hat College had these programs approved, and it is going to make an impact in keeping more rural students in those communities. The research does prove that out. If you are studying in a rural community, you're most likely to stay there and work there.

I also know that you had a question around – I think it was around the priorities of government and student aid grants. I had mentioned earlier that the Alberta student grant, it was introduced in 2020, and that was designed to help more lower income students pursue one-year programs, apprenticeship programs, or graduate-level programs, and we have seen quite an increase in demand for the Alberta student grant. That's why we have increased the budget for almost \$5 million for this particular program.

Let me talk about the new beginnings bursary as well. That provides nonrepayable financial support to eligible low-income learners studying in programs that align with economic priority sectors who might otherwise be unable to attend postsecondary studies due to financial constraints. Again, these nonrepayable grants speak to accessibility for students who are low income and might have a difficult time accessing postsecondary education if it wasn't for these grants that are available.

I think I have covered most of those questions, so I'll just go on to the second set of questions from MLA de Jonge. Really, really good questions around the trades. I think I'll just jump into the funding that was announced for the private-sector unions.

In addition to visiting all of the postsecondary institutions in the province, it became very apparent to me that there were a number of unions that were doing incredible work in terms of training. They had great facilities. We know that we have some waiting lists, and the numbers that we're seeing in terms of enrolment and registration at the polytechnics is quite high. I think we are at, well, 73,549, to be exact, apprentices registered in the system right now with AIT, and our record is just slightly higher than that. It was around 73,600. So we're approaching record numbers, and that's why it was very important to examine alternative service providers.

The unions actually fit that bill. Just to give you an idea of some of the unions that I visited, that included elevator constructors local 130, the boilermakers local 146, bricklayers local 1, carpenters local 1325, Construction Maintenance and Allied Workers, electricians local 424, and the list goes on. Essentially, I was very impressed by the work that they were doing and the fact that they were also serving a group of very diverse learners. You saw people of all ages. You saw people that were coming from the Educational Partnership Foundation, that also focuses on Indigenous learners. I thought: there has to be a way to partner with these unions so that we can open up some more training seats.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're back to the opposition, but we're in the lightning round. These are going to be 10 minutes, and I'll just go through the rules on these ones: no longer than five minutes at a time; time cannot be ceded to another caucus member; if time is not combined, the member and minister may only speak once.

With that, MLA Eggen, you caught my eye.

Mr. Eggen: Sounds great. Thank you. I have a number of questions to just follow up from my previous . . .

The Chair: I know it's redundant, but just so we're up front, Minister, are you looking to share time or block time?

Mr. Eggen: Always.

Mrs. Sawhney: It's block time.

The Chair: Block time? Okay. Good.
Good to go.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. On page 8 of the business plan performance indicator 3(a) shows a very big increase since 2020 for the average

processing time for first-time Alberta applicants applying to a regulatory body, an increase of 133 per cent between 2020-2022, which is the most recent year reporting. Obviously, I'm not just curious but everybody applying for this is wondering why there's such an enormous increase. It's a problem.

Similarly, on page 8 of the business plan again performance indicator 3(b) shows, well, quite a massive decrease in the number of Canadian citizens and permanent residents who are certified through the trade qualified work experience program, a 50 per cent drop. We're just wondering why there's such a large drop for Canadians around this, you know, considering, of course, that a big priority for Alberta should be getting trades qualified work experience through to help with the looming shortage in Alberta.

Further to that looming shortage and, you know, trying to turn lemons into lemonade maybe is that the unstable political situation between the United States and Canada is a huge problem, right? But there is an opportunity for colleges, universities, and polytechnics, especially in research and specific skills. There are literally thousands of top-quality researchers who are Canadian citizens who conduct their research and work in the United States, who could very well desire to move back to Canada if the right opportunity was presented to them. With a firm and long-term commitment to research in key certain areas Alberta could make significant gains that would make big returns and pay big returns to our overall economy. Certainly, part of this message to researchers we might want to recruit to practise in Alberta must also be the freedom for them to conduct their work without interference.

8:40

We know that, of course, we had a big kerfuffle with Bill 18, where the government was talking about compelling researchers to submit to the ministry their research for approval, right? Now, that went over really, really badly in our schools around the province. You know, the government had to backtrack. I know that the minister has in regulation determined that the people are free to do their research without impediments, without having to submit to a tribunal or something like that here in the province of Alberta, but that is a change in regulation. The law still stands, and the law is still on the books. So if we want to pursue this very good idea – I won't take credit for it because lots of people are talking about it – we can help to encourage to repatriate a lot of our Canadian talent that does work in the United States right now that might want to choose to move back to Canada and Alberta specifically if we make it easy for them to do so. That includes making sure that they're reassured by rescinding Bill 18 so that people know that they are free to conduct their research in science or technology, whatever it is without the fear of government somehow restricting or impeding their ability to do their work.

I think it's a great idea. I think there are lots of people out there that we could plug in to, and you can extend that idea, I would say, to other professionals that we need here in Alberta's economy. I see other jurisdictions doing this already. We want to get in on the ground floor here, which is to send a message out to health care professionals especially who might be Canadians or Americans who might be interested in moving to our province to set up practice here because of whatever is happening in the United States. I think that, again, we're feeling it with these tariffs, but there's a way for us to turn the lemons into lemonade, so to speak.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt.

Minister, your turn to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. I will try to be really quick because I know we don't have a lot of time.

In answer to the first question around first-time applicants trained in Canada but never certified: the number of business days went from eight business days to 14 business days. Yes, that was an increase, but keep in mind that these are days and not months and years. There are a variety of reasons as to why it could take extra time for those first-time applicants. It could range from confirmation or completion of supporting documents, the volume of applications received – that would make sense if we are looking at that time horizon between '21 and '22, that there could be an unexpected volume of applications received – the availability of staff, committee members to process and make application decisions, scheduling, and marking of a jurisprudence exam. Those are some of the reasons why you see that disparity in the number of days taken between 2021 and 2022. Nonetheless, the point is taken that we do have to try to bring that down.

In regard to attracting top-quality researchers, I'm wondering if MLA Eggen read the higher education strategy note from Alex Usher this evening because that was one of the points that was made. All of the actions being undertaken by the Trump administration in the United States mean that there are significant reductions to the postsecondary sector and colleges and universities, and there are going to be a lot of layoffs. One of the points made was that perhaps we can attract some of those individuals into Canada, or we might not even have to attract them. If they're out of a job, they will be looking for opportunities in other jurisdictions. That's something that I find intriguing. I think it's an opportunity. We'll keep a close eye on that, because labour attraction and retention is always a significant component of what the postsecondaries undertake as well.

In regard to the Provincial Priorities Act we've had a lot of discussions around this. In fact, we did undertake significant stakeholder engagement last summer and into the fall to make sure we heard from all of our postsecondary partners. We met with the presidents, with faculty members, with boards of governors as well, and, as everybody is well aware, most of those agreements with federal entities are exempt, and that has been communicated broadly. The postsecondary sector is very pleased with that. We certainly listened to their feedback and made sure that it was implemented in regulation. So I think in terms of that presenting any kind of a barrier to attracting qualified individuals in research capacities into the province it shouldn't be a factor any longer because those federal agreements are going to be exempt, particularly the tricouncil agreements.

There are some interesting opportunities on the horizon as a result of what is happening in the United States, in terms of finding or attracting labour, whether it's health care professionals, or professors, or researchers from the postsecondary sector. That is something that I will be keeping a close eye on, because we do have a labour market shortage for health care professionals. We have created additional seats, but I don't think we will have the doctors and the nurses that we need in the coming years, just based on what we're doing here in the province, which is why this is a multipronged approach when we're talking about investing in labour and attracting individuals. I mean, certainly Immigration has their immigration pathways that they're looking at to try to attract people into those high labour market demand sectors.

We are also working with an organization called ABIE on international education, and they do receive funding from Advanced Education. They receive \$1.5 million a year, and part of their mandate is to look for those international education opportunities. We know that the international student file is on pause right now, but this is something that we could have a conversation with this particular organization about. What are the opportunities? What are we seeing in terms of potential labour migration from the United States into Canada? How can we fill those desperately needed spots that we have here in Alberta?

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Members, if it's good with everybody, we can take a five-minute pause. It goes by fast, so being back here probably in four minutes, 30 seconds would be handy. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 8:48 p.m. to 8:53 p.m.]

The Chair: Welcome back, members, and as suggested, that break goes by really quickly.

We're going over to the government caucus. MLA Cyr, are you aware of the rules?

Mr. Cyr: I am, sir.

The Chair: Then the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you.

Minister, would you be able to do block time?

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, I thank you and your staff for being here today. I know this is a long night and there's a lot of material that we're getting through. Minister, I was keenly listening to MLA de Jonge's last question there, specifically about the \$105.5 million in funding that was allocated to increase seats in high-demand postsecondary programs through the targeted enrolment expansion program. Would you be able to touch on and just finish up your thoughts on that? I would love to hear some more about that because it's an important program, especially for us up north.

Also, Minister, I'd like to thank you as it looks like you're going to be coming up to our neck of the woods sometime this summer, both Cold Lake and St. Paul. It's great to see that we have a minister that's going out and actually putting her feet on the ground, if you will, and visiting some of our institutions, so thank you for that, Minister. I'm very thankful that you're making it up to my area, and I'm looking forward to it, as I know that everybody in my constituency is.

Now, as you're aware, I share a college, Portage College, with Minister Jean, and I'm very, very proud of that college. I also have Blue Quills. So I have two remarkable colleges up in my constituency, and, you know, hearing some of the initiatives that the colleges are working on, that brings me pride, that I hear how open your office is to working with them. One of them is the pilot training program over at Blue Quills. That one there I think is a great program, potentially, if it moves forward. And I'm looking forward to seeing what our First Nations can do to get that level of training that their members need.

We're working on a lot of things over at the Portage College, some that you've already noted. The nurse practitioner program: I would love to see something happen up in our area when it comes to the nurse practitioners. I believe that when it comes to rural health, for now we are short of doctors, and nurse practitioners really are that avenue to fill that void that's there. Now, I'm not discounting the importance of doctors, but I am saying that nurse practitioners are a remarkable avenue for RNs to be able to go down and actually open clinics. So, again, when it comes to the U of A and where they've gone with their program and what is available, I am hoping that we can start to train RNs up in my area, out in rural, and through my local college. Again, I believe this would be a huge benefit to Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, especially if we started, say, training the nurse practitioners up in the entire northeast for my area.

Now, we also have the grow your own teacher program that the local Portage College is doing. When it comes down to our area, it always is a challenge, and you've kind of already alluded to it,

getting these professionals up to rural areas, especially at the end of highway 28. It is not the first place that somebody would go, but once you're there, you never want to leave. Like, it's so beautiful up in my area. What happens is that this grow your own or training our local kids so they don't leave our communities. I heard you already saying that, and that brings me a lot of faith in the direction that you're going, Minister. Again, I could talk all day, and unfortunately five minutes just isn't enough.

One of the things that comes forward, too, is the FLAP funding, or FLA. I've heard the NDP on our side here. For me, what we've seen – and we need to remind ourselves that the federal government really is the one that has created a crunch. Now, that's going to be impacting 180 students up in Portage College that we aren't going to be able to have in this session. You know what? That's really created a huge loss of revenue, about \$1.1 million in loss of revenue, about 63 per cent.

Now, there are some things that we can blame the NDP for from past, but this place we can actually blame the federal Liberal and NDP coalition for a hardship on our colleges, especially when it comes to rural colleges. I guess, whenever I hear the NDP starting to say that it's really Alberta's fault, we need to recognize the federal government is the one that's responsible.

The Chair: Thanks for that, Member.

Minister, over to you to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. Thank you for those questions and your comments. I know that Portage College, first of all, is a beautiful college. They have a beautiful art exhibition. I was very pleased to take a lot of time when I visited them, and I had promised to go back. I know I've been having conversations with Nancy Broadbent about a visit in the future, so I will be, as I embark on my rural tour in June. I will take some more time to have a further look at campus and have some more conversations.

I know that Portage is in discussions with the University of Alberta about a potential nurse practitioner program. In fact, I may have even spoken about that at our last RMA, indicating that I'm looking forward to hearing more. I haven't had the opportunity to discuss this with the folks at the University of Alberta, but certainly the administration at Portage, namely Nancy, has asked to have a conversation about this further.

Athabasca University has also indicated an interest to expand their program. They already have a large nurse practitioner program, and they want to be able to have something that allows people to learn at home while also gathering some work experience. So that is something that is on top of mind in terms of what these additional seats could potentially look like.

I just want to go back to targeted enrolment expansion. That was actually the first question that you had asked. In regard to – I have the numbers right here. We have invested \$312 million in TEE over the years, and that is going to result and has resulted already in thousands of seats, but ultimately it will create 15,500 seats in total. Just to give you some more information around that, TEE round 2 is providing more than \$5.5 million over three years, so from 2023-26, to support 726 seats in technology programs, including 3-D animation, advanced visual effects, and data science.

9:00

I was very interested in what you were saying about grow your own teacher, training kids locally, because certainly the rural medical education training program that we had announced earlier, where we are partnering – well, the University of Calgary medical school is partnering with the University of Lethbridge; the University of Alberta medical school is partnering with Northwestern Polytechnic

– to make sure that we can create more medical seats for rural students. I've said it before, that the data and evidence indicates that when students from rural communities are able to train and work in their communities, they are most likely to stay there. There are ways to take that template for these medical schools and shape them so that they're looking at different occupations as well.

I know somebody did bring up the idea to me about having something similar for law school, so essentially distributed education or satellite campuses, to use another term. That is something that we will look at within the ministry to see if we can find further opportunities to have more training in place in communities.

In regard to FLA funding, yes, it is very, very unfortunate that the federal government made that cut. As we're looking at what the tariffs are going to look like from the United States, from the Trump administration, one of the things that we will ask the federal government, if they want to support workers here in Canada that might be impacted, is to try to invest again into the LMTA funding to support Canadians and Albertans to upscale.

I know that Portage was impacted by the reduction in FLA, and we're keeping an eye on it. I will be speaking to administration at Portage to see how we can further support vulnerable learners, whether they're Indigenous learners or persons with disabilities. We did try to make sure that as we looked at our limited dollars as we lost that \$34.7 million: how were we going to take the remaining \$82.2 million to make sure that they were targeted to the most vulnerable? We will be taking a look at this year's budget again to see how we can leverage it to make sure that we can even add more learners to the total that we have already.

We also do . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Members, I apologize for the chair. In the last statement there, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, just easy on the language. There was some of that stuff that crept in from the House that might cause a little bit of difference in decorum here in the room, so members could be cautious. I apologize, members. I should have brought it up quicker. I was literally leaning into my coffee with eight seconds left and didn't get on the microphone quick enough.

With that, back over to the opposition. MLA Eggen, you have the floor.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. Appreciate that. Yeah. I mean, just picking up on the very last thing that the minister was speaking about in regard to trying to mitigate the damage from the loss of that federal funding for foundational learning, it's really important to do so. It's not just Portage College where programs are being cut but, as I mentioned before, Northern Lakes as well but also down, you know, in everywhere from Bow Valley College in Calgary, where you reside, to NorQuest up here in Edmonton.

So many of these programs are essential for people who want to upgrade or new Canadians that want to, you know, either change professions or pick up the foundational learning skills that they need to practise the profession that they brought with them from the country that they came from in the first place, right? It's that old story that rings true still, where you have the nurse or the doctor who is having to drive cab or Uber or whatever because they don't have the upgraded skills or the language skills to be able to function in their trained profession here in Canada. A tiny investment in foundational learning can just change that person's life, that family's life but also help to provide the professionals that we need that already live here in our province. They're amongst us. If we can give them a hand up through foundational learning, then they can to practise the profession in which they had been trained in the first place. Thanks for bringing that up, and let's carry on.

I just want to go back to some of the earlier comments that I had about targeted enrolment growth. This is from page 6 of the business plan, performance measure 2(a). As I mentioned, performance measure 2(a) shows zero targeted growth for unique domestic learners enrolled in approved programs in Alberta's publicly funded PSIs. If we were to hit these targets – no higher, no lower – does the ministry have a projection of how many Albertan students would be forced to pursue studies in other jurisdictions? Does the ministry have a projection of how many seats the province will need to accommodate all future Alberta students? I mean, this is a large calculation, but it's a very important calculation. What metrics or data does the ministry track in regard to Alberta students studying here in Alberta versus other provinces or abroad? Is it pooled in certain types of programs or types of study?

The minister in her first block of questions this evening said that one reason that Alberta sees a net loss in students every year, adding up to a loss of more than 14,000 students, was because Alberta incomes are higher, so students and their families are more able to seek opportunities elsewhere. Hmm. My question is this: does the province track how many Alberta students that leave for their postsecondary education ever come back? If so, can she provide those numbers?

I mean, this is a very real and existential thing for families and young people. We see it played out all the time. Of course, people want to make choices and they want to study in a different province or even another country; that's great. But if they're compelled to do so because of a shortage of opportunities here, then that is a problem. We want those people to be here, we want them to be studying here and making futures here in Alberta, too.

My second question for this rapid-fire block is that it's being reported that medical residency positions are being unfilled here in the province of Alberta despite a desperate shortage of physicians, especially family doctors. How much money does Advanced Education pay to train medical students? I don't know, but it's got to be thousands, a lot of money for sure. Then if those same medical students decide to take a residency position in some other place besides Alberta, we lose that investment in potential doctors to practise here in Alberta.

A major reason for medical students choosing a residency position outside of Alberta is the ongoing confusion that has been inflicted on health care in the province of Alberta. You know, that has direct downstream effects, which include now residency positions being left empty because of students choosing to do residencies elsewhere.

What has the Ministry of Advanced Education done to communicate this problem to the Ministry of Health? It looks like there's a similar problem, I would say, looming for the filling of positions in nursing schools here in the province.

The Chair: Minister, your turn to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. Well, let's talk about FLA first. Again, I do want to reiterate that we were happy with our original budget that we had in place. I think it was around \$117 million in Budget 2024. It was very upsetting and shocking to us within the ministry and the department when the federal government made those cuts. Let's just be very clear as to how those cuts came about.

It did have an impact on learners and postsecondary institutions, as MLA Eggen had mentioned: Bow Valley College, NorQuest, Portage, Northern Lakes. Again, that was a situation that we found ourselves in through no fault of our own, and we did do our best to mitigate the impacts to ensure that those who are most vulnerable, which includes high school students, which includes Indigenous learners, persons with disabilities, did not lose their supports.

9:10

If we're talking about foreign credential recognition, I think the example was given of a doctor from a foreign jurisdiction. That individual would not be looking at FLA programming in terms of upgrading their language skills. There are other programs that are available. There's the IQAS, the international qualifications assessment program, as well that is in place to help determine what programs could be available to support individuals who are looking to upgrade, and that assessment program actually does the assessment and compares them to Canadian standards as well.

The question around the tracking of students in terms of how many students decide to leave the province for postsecondary studies and don't come back: that is not something that the ministry tracks or the department tracks. It's an interesting question. I know that there are some statistics around students who go study in other jurisdictions and come back, but in terms of those students who leave and never come back, that is not something that we're tracking but certainly could look into understanding how that could be made possible.

In terms of the medical residency positions I know this was in the news lately. There was some commentary around that family residency positions were not filled in Alberta. But if you read this article – and I'm just going off memory – this is a common problem. It's not just an Alberta problem. There are spaces in other jurisdictions as well. So blaming it on the current situation here in Alberta as it relates to health is completely inaccurate, and it completely misses the reality that this is something that happens from time to time.

In terms of some of the questions around, "How much does it cost for medical students?" this is a reality that we see across the country. Medical school is very competitive. I think the last statistic I read was that over 1,700 applicants who applied for medical school in Alberta actually didn't get a seat, so if they want to continue with their aspirations to become a physician, oftentimes they do have to leave the province. But it's just a reality everywhere across the country. That is why we are investing in creating more seats, particularly for rural students. I know that the latest numbers we were looking at earlier today was that through our investment of \$30 million in 2025-26 towards physician expansion we will see that we will have 210 students enrolled at rural training centres by '28-29, which is going to be the full year of implementation, and that's for the University of Alberta and Northwestern Polytechnic.

In terms of additional investments into medical schools I would be very happy to go to Treasury Board and ask for additional funding, but the limiting factor, as I've been told by the deans of medical schools at both U of A and U of C, is preceptors. We don't have enough physicians who are able to teach students or who are willing to teach students in this province right now, so that really does limit the amount of funding that we can allocate towards additional medical seats. That is why I often say that, yes, we are doing what we can in terms of providing funding so that we have more seats in our medical schools here.

The Chair: With that, I appreciate it, Minister. The time goes quickly. MLA Wiebe, you caught my attention.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here to answer some of our questions. Minister, block time or shared time? What is your preference?

Mrs. Sawhney: Block time.

Mr. Wiebe: Okay. While we're on the topic of capital investments, I just want to talk a little bit about some of the main takeaways from budget documents. There is quite a significant amount of capital

investment in the budget for Advanced Education. On page 107 of the fiscal plan it shows that the University of Alberta's Biological Sciences centre is getting \$30 million in capital investment in '25-26 as part of a \$100 million investment over the next three years. Obviously, this is quite a significant investment, and that will no doubt be appreciated by the University of Alberta and its students. One of the questions to the minister is regarding the details of this project. Will this investment result in the creation of more seats or spaces for students to pursue education in biological sciences? Are there any details that the minister could share about this project and how it will benefit the postsecondary landscape in Edmonton and beyond? What would the time frame be for this project?

Continuing on. On page 107 of the fiscal plan the MacEwan University School of Business is receiving \$20 million in '25-26 as part of a \$110 million expenditure over the next three years. I recall that this project is already under way. Just wondering if the minister could tell us the total scope of this project in terms of investment as well as timelines for completion and if there are any updates regarding the construction progress on this project.

I know that there are a number of areas in high demand in Alberta education. Education and medicine are two examples, but business schools aren't something that gets discussed that often. Can the minister speak to the rationale for providing a significant chunk of funding for this project and maybe elaborate on the need for this new building for the business school in downtown Edmonton? Are there growth pressures that have necessitated this new building?

Moving on to the next questions. Page 107 of the fiscal plan shows that the University of Calgary's multidisciplinary hub is receiving \$125 million over the next three years. This project has also received some funding in previous years. I've heard at least 2,000 seats to the science-related programs at the U of C. Evidently, this is a significant expansion that will benefit students in Calgary and across the province. With the ongoing need to diversify Alberta's economy and the opportunities that are open in the tech and STEM and AI and other related fields, can the minister please explain how this investment will support innovation and the prosperity of Alberta as mentioned on page 3 of the business plan in the ministry's fact sheet?

I think I have time for one more question maybe. Page 102 of the fiscal plan, under capital maintenance and renewal, CMR: over the next three years \$439 million of funding is included for postsecondary facilities. I know that we have gone over a few of the postsecondary infrastructure projects, but I'd like to understand more regarding the capital maintenance and renewal. Can the minister also provide additional details on CMR funding and why it is important? It seems like it's a similar contingency fund for general cost reduction and emergency repairs to critical education infrastructure.

Thank you.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you so much, MLA Wiebe, for your series of questions. In regard to your first question, the investment that we're making at the University of Alberta's Biological Sciences centre is a very important investment. I had an opportunity to tour the centre, and it was very obvious that if we didn't do something very quickly, it was going to be a very difficult situation for them. Yes, we are investing \$30 million for a total of \$100 million over the next couple of years, but \$30 million for Budget 2025. Through this investment we will expect to see an increase of over 2,500 full-load equivalents in undergraduate programs and over 700 full-load equivalents in graduate programs. We know that there is tremendous demand for STEM-related occupations, so this investment is going to really make sure that we are meeting that demand in the future.

9:20

The other component that you had asked is: how will this investment benefit the postsecondary landscape in Edmonton and beyond? Ultimately, this project will transform the old Biological Sciences Building into a world-leading centre to help tackle some of society's most critical health and science-based challenges.

I had a long conversation with administration at the University of Alberta because I was asking them these same questions, so I'll just give you a little bit of history. The biological sciences complex is long overdue for a building renewal. I saw that with my own eyes. It was built in 1969, and the building systems are now beyond their useful life. Through this very important investment we will see ground-breaking life sciences solutions coming out of Alberta. This project gives renewed life to an aging facility and has the potential to bring and build some of the best minds in the STEM field. The project will start this year, and it's expected to reach completion in 2028-29.

The second question that was posed was around the investment for MacEwan University School of Business. They are receiving \$20 million in Budget 2025-26 as part of a \$110 million investment over the next three years. I am very pleased to say that this project is on schedule and on budget, very important, and the province is providing \$125 million of the \$190 million in total for the project cost. This project will increase enrolment by about 5,000 FLEs in key areas, mainly in business, and it will create more entrepreneurs in Alberta.

The School of Business project: I know that was one of the questions. You know, we're talking about high labour market demand occupations. Is business one of them? It is, actually. The School of Business is one of MacEwan University's flagship and original programs, and the students comprise close to one-quarter of the university's enrolment and the highest percentage of MacEwan's international students.

The School of Business is actually quite strong at MacEwan University. They have very strong connections between education and jobs. Their graduates are ready for the workforce and are highly employable. I'll give you an example. MacEwan scores strongly in most skills and labour market outcomes, key performance indicators with 92 per cent of MacEwan graduates employed within two years – these are really, really impressive metrics – 72 per cent within six months, and 84 per cent in a job related to their educational program. That is what you always want to see. You want to see these kinds of high metrics when you're assessing graduates.

Now, another defining attribute of the school is its growing focus on developing and supporting student entrepreneurs. I also had a chance to visit MacEwan University and was very impressed with some of their labs, their 3-D printing labs, and their entrepreneurship programs. Again, very vital to our economy and our growing ecosystem for entrepreneurs.

Now, I think you had also asked about the University of Calgary's multidisciplinary hub. You are right. The investment in the University of Calgary's multidisciplinary hub project is going to create over 2,000 seats in STEM-related fields. Again, another very, very important investment. When we look at publications like . . .

The Chair: Minister, I apologize.

Back over to the opposition. MLA Eggen.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Great. Thanks. I'll try to liven things up here a little bit here, eh? My first question is on schedule 5 of the fiscal plan, talking about the core operating expense for the ministry forecasted at \$6.628 billion. The estimate for '25-26 is \$6.635

billion. Now, considering how high Alberta's inflation rate has been over the last year, couple of years, really, higher than most other provinces, and considering the unprecedented population growth here in Alberta as well, the 2025-26 budget really represents an actual cut of more than \$300 million.

More specific to the day-to-day operations of our universities, postsecondary operations expense is estimated to rise only \$40.7 million on a budget of \$6.85 billion, representing an actual cut of \$284.4 million, 4.2 per cent. That's from page 31 of the estimates.

Back when the minister made her opening remarks, she talked about, you know, our universities and how amazing they are, and I concur absolutely. The University of Alberta is one of the top 100 universities in the world by certain measures, but how does the minister expect that universities in Alberta hold on to their global reputations while they're being starved for funds in the province? As I said in my opening remarks, too, we saw a historic cut to postsecondary funding since the UCP government became the government. How are postsecondary institutions expected to compete against the other top institutions from across Canada and around the world when they're struggling to keep up with the growth here in our province?

I met with the University of Calgary recently. You know, they said that base operating funding from this government is only a bit more than 25 per cent of their budget. How do they move on in a constructive way? I mean, well, of course they are. As I said, they're very innovative there, working hard to look for other funding sources, but it's sure not coming from here, from this government. That's a message that Albertans do not want to hear, right? Did you get elected to cut postsecondary? Absolutely not.

We know we have our investment in our children and postsecondary that pays. You put a dollar into postsecondary and you get, like, \$5 back – right? – or more as contributing to the economy. The University of Calgary provides billions of dollars to not just educate people, young people, but to the overall economy. We saw the board of trade and the Downtown Business Association talking about how this is their number one issue, and it will continue to be so.

These are numbers; these are real. These are the numbers that come from this budget, and I believe that we can do better. That's an area that we need to invest in specifically.

These are some questions from the Alberta Students' Executive Council, that represents 20-some colleges, universities, and polytechnics around the province, and they reflect a concern that I'm sure the minister has heard and that I have heard all the time, and that is the mental health of students and staff in our colleges, universities, and polytechnics.

In the past there was provincial assistance to enhance mental health supports on campuses, but this money was not necessarily disbursed while taking into consideration the student population of any given institution. As a result, postsecondary institutions with larger student populations were unfairly disadvantaged. I need clarity; I think all universities and colleges in the province need clarity. What is the formula that the ministry is using to distribute mental health funding to each school? Last year it was certainly not proportional, and I think that that's an important change. Maybe you've made that change, and you can tell us now, and that would be great, but everybody wants to know.

Another question I got from the Alberta Students' Executive Council is around increasing the cost of living and enrolment for domestic students . . .

The Chair: Just out of time.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, man. That wasn't much.

The Chair: Save your powder for the next one.
Minister, your time to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. I'm just going to look at page 31. I know there were some questions around the expense summary. On page 31, if we look at the consolidated total and we compare the 2024 budget to the 2025 estimate, you can see that there is an increase. I think we roughly calculated it to be at almost 5 per cent. That is indicative of the fact that there are more funds that are within the system, and these are consolidated numbers. I had mentioned that earlier, that the expenses are going up with the postsecondaries. They are investing more into the system, and they have also indicated that this will result in more than 600 full-time equivalents that are going to be hired within the system to provide more supports to students through that investment.

9:30

I know that there was a comment made around MLA Eggen's conversations with the University of Calgary. How are they going to hold on to their global reputations? Well, one key investment was the investment in the multidisciplinary hub. I've been told time and time again from faculty what a significant investment this is, particularly from the dean of science at the University of Calgary, who said that this is going to result in more attraction of professors and academic staff from across the country in addition to providing 2,000 seats.

I think one thing that we have not talked about today is Alberta 2030's plan about really getting out of the way and allowing postsecondary institutions to find creative and innovative ways to increase their own-source revenues. I know that the University of Calgary has their university properties trust, which is very focused on that in terms of increasing own-source revenues, and I can give you several examples. Northwestern Polytechnic, for example, is looking at building a health care centre in partnership with the city. Bow Valley College has done some innovative work as well in terms of increasing own-source revenue. The reality is that postsecondary education has always required students, the postsecondary institution itself, and government to come together to provide funding for learning for students. Certainly, I've seen that many of these institutions are really focused on finding innovative ways to increase that revenue.

There was a question around mental health supports. We have been providing \$8.7 million for the last couple of years, and that certainly is maintained in Budget 2025. The other part of the story that I wanted to mention as it relates to mental health is that we know that there are not enough professionals in this field within the province, and that's why we had announced \$10 million in funding for additional mental health seats across the province. This year it's \$10 million in total, but in Budget 2025 it'll be \$4 million that will be allocated to a variety of institutions across the province to create additional mental health seats so that we have more professionals working in our economy and in society to make sure that we have those supports for those who are needing mental health supports and addiction support as well.

I know that the Canadian Mental Health Association as well, as we're speaking about additional funding, the Alberta division, and the Centre for Suicide Prevention also receives from Advanced Education \$300,000 to ensure that there are additional supports there as well. In regard to mental health supports on campus and with postsecondary institutions, I will have to say that my colleague Minister Williams for Mental Health and Addiction is also undertaking some significant initiatives that will provide supports to all Albertans, which includes students as well.

That is a quick summary of some of the supports that are available through Advanced Education.

Mr. Marchand: In terms of how that funding has been allocated, it's largely by enrolment.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yeah. Just going back to the question around, "What is the formula in terms of how mental health supports are allocated, that 8.7?" it is based on enrolment numbers. You know, just to give you a quick overview of...

The Chair: We'll have to come back to that.
MLA Stephan, you caught my attention.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Chair. To the minister through you, I've got a confession to make, and that is that I absolutely love block time. It is, like, the very, very, very best. I'm just wondering if we can do block time, Minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: You bet.

Mr. Stephan: You have made my evening. Thank you very much. Appreciate that.

Very grateful to be here with you, Minister, talking about a great ministry in Alberta. I think many of us in this room can think about our own postsecondary educations and how they really provided a very important launching pad as we each embarked on our own individual unique careers, unique career paths. I would speculate that very few of us ever thought that we would be here. But that's the way life is. It takes us on different paths.

Certainly for myself, I'm very grateful for the education, the intentional education, that I was able to have at Red Deer college and then completing my business degree at the University of Calgary and my law degree. It was just such a wonderful, positive experience. As it relates to Red Deer college, which is in my constituency, I'm very grateful for the UCP government, the Alberta government, for really leveraging off the competitive advantages of Red Deer college and supporting it in transitioning to become a polytechnic, which really provides opportunities for young adults to get both degrees or trades education. Both of my sons have certainly benefited from the trades education opportunities at Red Deer Polytechnic.

Minister, just to refer to the business plan, I have three questions, and they're going to reference to page 3 of the business plan, the first sentence of it: "The Ministry of Advanced Education is responsible for empowering Albertans through an adult learning system and professional regulatory environment that support an innovative and prosperous Alberta." My first question relates to the economy. You know, I think about our own education, yourself, Minister, those of us who are here. Obtaining a postsecondary education requires time and investment and sacrifice, deferred gratification, working very hard. It would be very demoralizing for these young men and young women to work very hard in their education and then to graduate into a weak economy. I know that we're so blessed in Alberta. We often lead the country as a land of freedom and prosperity, often leading in economic growth. I'd like to hear from yourself: how important is a strong economy with jobs to support our graduating young adults? That's my first question.

My second question again relates to this, and that is in respect of the impact of artificial intelligence in our educational offerings. As I mentioned, I went to law school, I became a lawyer. AI certainly will be disruptive to many different professions, including the legal profession. I also became a CPA, a professional accountant. Likewise, AI will be disruptive there. I don't mean that in a bad way, but it will simply disrupt and evolve. How is our educational programming evolving with the realities of AI, both in helping our young adults be conversant with AI and adapting our programs to take into account this new reality?

Along that, my third question is online delivery, being able to scale and evolve our education offering so that it is both more accessible to Albertans who maybe don't live by the postsecondary institution but also creating programs and online offerings that take advantage of competitive advantages that maybe you don't otherwise have within a classroom environment.

I'd be interested in those three observations. Thank you.

9:40

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Over to the minister for her response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you so much for your comments around Red Deer Polytechnic. It's also an institution that I've spent some time at. The CIM-TAC investment was, I guess, a phenomenal investment for the community as well as the institution.

I also like block time because it gives me an opportunity to give a really comprehensive answer, so I'm glad we're on the same page as it comes to that.

Your question was: how important is a strong economy for new graduates? Incredibly important. Those of us who have lived beyond five decades have seen the ups and downs of, you know, strong economies and poor economies. When there have been high unemployment rates, we've all been impacted by that. That's why it's important that as government we do whatever we can to create the fiscal environment, whether that's low taxes and other incentives, to make sure that we're doing whatever we can to contribute to a strong economy, that we undertake all of those measures. For students it is the ideal situation to be graduating at a time when there are plenty of opportunities available to them. Again, as government we have to do whatever we can to make sure that we are attracting investment and growing the economy to the greatest extent possible.

Your questions around AI educational opportunities are very timely because I was one of the panelists at a higher education strategy – I feel like they're getting a lot of air time today – conference that they had. I was able to talk about some of the things that we're doing here in Alberta. What was really interesting is that there is a professor of computing science at the University of Alberta. His name is Richard Sutton. He won a version of the Nobel prize, actually, for computer science. It's called the Turing award. He just won that very recently, and it's a very honourable and prestigious award. This individual is very pivotal when we talk about AI in the province of Alberta because back in 2001 or 2002, when he moved to Alberta, that is when the AI research ecosystem was really, really developed. Because of his work he was able to attract other researchers from across the country and across the globe to come to the University of Alberta. University of Alberta, again, is a leader in this space.

I also want to talk about AMII, which is located downtown. You can't miss it. They've got that big bright pink neon sign. It's one of the centres of excellence in artificial intelligence. They do incredible work in terms of supporting entrepreneurs, and they also do something that's very interesting. They support other educators with school boards when they are talking about artificial intelligence and disruptive technology with their students. Because the landscape is changing so quickly, the technology and the language are changing so quickly, it's important to have an organization that actually can speak the language in laymen's terms and educate others so that they can teach their students. Incredibly important work. I would actually encourage everyone to have a tour of that facility. I haven't been there myself. It's on my to-do list, but it's going to be around the corner.

I know that Technology and Innovation through their ATI strategy also provide quite a bit of funding to Alberta Innovates, who also support the artificial intelligence ecosystem. That work is

critical. It's put Alberta on the map. The University of Lethbridge also has significant AI programming, and there are a lot of students that I've spoken to who have indicated that they feel very enriched and very rewarded by the education that they received at the University of Alberta.

My team is reminding me that there are many AI and data analytics postbaccalaureate certificates as well. There's microcredentialing that is available for anybody who wants to – you know, you've done a couple of degrees. You've got a law degree, I think an accounting degree as well. I don't know if you want to go back for a computer science degree, but you don't have to. You can do some microcredentialing. You can look at some certificate programs as well just to learn a little bit more. You're right; it is the way of the world. Almost everything involves artificial intelligence.

I think the final note I would like to make around that is that at the University of Alberta – I think AIMII supports them – they offer a course. It's not mandatory, but it's available to students to learn everything about artificial intelligence.

The Chair: MLA Eggen again. All yours, sir.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks a lot.

I'm just going to move fairly fast because I think this could be my last round. If we don't get to all the answers, then if your department could answer the questions in writing for me, please, I would appreciate that.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Good. Before the budget is passed, right? So that I know, you know, whether I should vote for the budget or not. Right? Thanks a lot.

Mr. Stephan: Our fingers are crossed.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. There you go. There you go.

In regard to page 76 of your fiscal plan own-source postsecondary institution revenue funding in '25-26 is 58 per cent and the postsecondary institution operating expense is up from 53 per cent in 2022-23. Does the minister have a goal in mind for this number? Would she like to see this number climb past 60 per cent or 70 per cent? At what point would the minister consider a public postsecondary institution to become, really, in reality a private institution? As I said, the University of Calgary, now you are only providing about 25 per cent of their operating funding. It's a problem. Then you still want to dictate how they operate and what they do and what they teach and whatnot; then you only give 25 per cent of the money. You know, I don't know if that's sustainable or not.

On pages 26 and 31 of government estimates: more money for PSIs will come from tuition and noncredit courses now, \$2.133 billion, than from provincial postsecondary operations funding, which is at \$2.054 funding. Is this the balance that the minister and this UCP government is aiming for, or is there a ratio that the ministry is pursuing? What mandate does this expert panel have to change this formula or maybe change course on this situation?

Another question on tuition as well. Total revenue funding from tuition is increasing 6.7 per cent from last year's budget. Is the minister comfortable with having tuition increases outpace public funding for PSIs, outpacing inflation as well, and is really pricing many students out from being able to access postsecondary education? The tuition is just too darn high, and people walk away, and we lose everything as a result.

Is the minister able to provide the exact breakdown of tuition increases? For example, how much has it increased from tuition

fees, how much from added seats, and so forth? This is a major consideration when we're looking at overall increases but how individual students are being affected.

The next question I have is in regard to the revenue and transfers from the government of Canada. This is from page 9 of the business plan. Provincial priorities regulations came out a few weeks ago, and I do have a question regarding the federal investment in research. I noticed a partial exemption for research. I did talk about that a little bit. Here is a quote directly from that.

The agreement pertains to research, unless greater than 50% of the total funding being provided under the agreement, excluding any in-kind contributions, is capital funding for the development of those research facilities.

My question is: what counts as a research facility? Does it include research equipment or any other sort of equipment from these facilities? Just the building itself? I'm just hoping for a bit of clarity on what exactly is or isn't exempt from the ministerial approval under Bill 18 when looking specifically at the exemption of research.

Of course I did ask questions around this globally as well in saying that you tried to exclude most of the things in the regulations that you brought forward after consultation. But you still have Bill 18 on the books, right? Again, the chill effect of the initial play on Bill 18, I think, needs to be removed. The bill needs to be removed. The law needs to be removed to pursue, you know, bringing in researchers to our province, keeping the ones that we have, as you described that individual from the University of Alberta winning the Turing award just recently, artificial intelligence, attracting more people like that and building the type of intellectual capital that we need to move forward and help diversify our economy. Again, I'm just down on the — oh, no. I'm not going to make it. That's okay.

9:50

The Chair: Minister, over to you.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. I was just pulling up the page where you had quoted that own-source PSI revenue funding is 58 per cent of 2025-26 PSI operating expense, up from 53 in '22-23. Now, this was a part of Alberta 2030. It was actually written in there that we wanted to encourage postsecondary institutions to look at innovative ways of increasing their own-source revenues.

This wasn't just our idea. This is something that the postsecondary institutions wanted, particularly the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta. They had some projects that they were looking at, and they had come to my predecessor at that point and said that this would be an initiative that they would deem to be very favourable. In terms of what that right number is, that is something that we can examine further, but I think it's moving in the right direction. We want to make sure that we are reducing postsecondary institutions' reliance on government funding.

That is part of the reason why we have this expert panel in place, because at the same time, we understand that we are going to be having significant enrolment growth, and the funding model has to be able to address all those new learners who are coming into the system while also being very mindful of taxpayer dollars and investing at an appropriate level.

In regard to tuition increases, we know that they're capped at 2 per cent. The other aspect of that is that this year, when an exceptional tuition increase request did come to my table, being sensitive to the affordability and cost-of-living issues that all Albertans are feeling at the moment, I did say no to those exceptional tuition increases. That is where we are at right now. It is capped at 2 per cent.

There were some other questions in regard to the revenue transfers, around the capital, around research investments. I think for that particular question, we will respond to that in writing around the

exemptions to give some more clarity around what is included in those exemptions and what is not. That list of exemptions in the regulations was pretty much designed through the feedback that we had with postsecondary institutions, and I know that, when we relayed what we were looking at, there was nothing but accolades, obviously relief, and a sense of, you know, that chill effect that was discussed earlier on, that is no longer there.

I know early on when Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act, was introduced in the House, there was a lot of discussion from our postsecondary institutions around the impact that it could have in attracting research and scholars from around the country, but with these exemptions and the regulations, that has effectively mitigated if not erased that completely. For that particular answer, we will respond in writing. If you could provide the question in writing again, we'll make sure that we get that to you.

I do believe I've answered your questions. I'm not sure if there's anything that I've missed. If there is something that I had missed in regard to anything else that was in the fiscal plan in this round of questioning, please do, again, put that in writing, and we'll respond in writing.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Sure. I've got one more for sure.

The Chair: Okay. It's not back and forth. You guys can't change the rules part way through. It's block.

Mrs. Sawhney: Well, I guess for our next round, we can get into some additional questions. I see that I still have another minute, so I'm just going to talk about Alberta 2030 and some of the elements that were in there. We had talked about wanting to get out of the way of postsecondaries so that they could look at innovative ways to increase funding. We also wanted to make sure that we improved the student experience and we had lots of student aid and loans that were available to them to make sure that they could pursue postsecondary studies. We also wanted to make sure that we were developing skills for jobs, and that's why there's such a tremendous investment in the trades to make sure that we're meeting those occupation labour market demands that we're seeing in the economy.

Other elements of Alberta 2030 also include supporting innovation and commercialization. I wish we had more time to talk about that because that is something that is very important to all of the research that happens in universities. [Mrs. Sawhney's speaking time expired] Maybe next time.

The Chair: With that, I see MLA Cyr caught my attention.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you. Minister, block time, if you would?

Mrs. Sawhney: Sure.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Minister. I'd like to thank you and your staff. It's been a long night; three hours of time. I do see that you had wished to really finish your thoughts here on some of the key points that you're trying to get across, so if you wouldn't mind, I'll cede the last four minutes of this to you to communicate to the rest of the committee and maybe the general public. Thank you, Minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you very much. This is an unexpected opportunity, but I definitely will take it.

I know that when I was originally sworn in as Minister of Advanced Education and I had a conversation with the Premier, she did indicate to me very clearly that she is a champion of the trades. I know that if we are going to grow the economy, we are going to need more heavy equipment technicians, we are going to

need more plumbers, more carpenters, especially if we're going to address a housing crisis, and so on.

As part of my duties as minister, one of the tasks that I was really trying to understand how to tackle in a more systematic fashion was parity of esteem. We know that there is still, to this day, a bit of a stigma around those individuals and students who are wanting to pursue an education in the trades. It's really unfortunate, because when I look at the people who have supported me in my career as a politician since 2019, some of the most successful, affluent people I know have a background in the trades. That is a story I quite often try to communicate with students who are asking questions like: what are job prospects like? What will I do in the future? And what if I want to change careers midway? What if I decide that I don't want to be a carpenter any longer? What are the learner pathways that are available to me?

As part of trying to understand how to increase parity of esteem, we undertook several different initiatives within the ministry and the department. One was the trades and apprenticeship promotion plan, and that essentially entailed putting together a package of commercials. I think MLA de Jonge had mentioned that she did see a really cool commercial around students who had basically looked at careers in the trades. Those commercials and those social media messages permeated across the province.

I also put together a skilled trades youth ambassador. It was a group of youth; I think we had about 12 members who actually helped me in this endeavour. We had a booth at the Stampede, actually, this past summer where some of these ambassadors talked to families and young people who came through their booth to talk about what the education pathways look like, what the opportunities are, what the salaries could look like in the future and, again, what those learner pathways are.

Now, Advanced Education has done some tremendous work within the trades in terms of updating our legislation, the STAEA legislation. We also provide a credential to somebody who graduates from a trades program, from an apprenticeship, and that credential can be used for further studies as well. We are the only jurisdiction in Canada that offers this very unique credential. This is something that I don't often get a chance to talk about, and many Albertans and families are not aware of this as well.

I think this time that you have afforded me to talk about things in my portfolio has been very important for me to, again, talk about the value proposition of looking at a career in the skilled trades; so many opportunities. I would encourage anybody who might be listening to get on our AIT website to understand how to register, to understand all the different programs that are available. Looking at the different salary ranges of the different occupations is very, very eye-opening. I think Albertans will be surprised at what they see.

Thank you.

The Chair: With that, I hesitate to interrupt. The committee has gone through this for the last three hours and considered all the estimates, so our business is concluded.

I would like, from the bottom of my heart as the chair: thank you so much, everybody. Gold stars all around for the decorum. Hopefully, you got all your questions out that you could. Hopefully, the minister got a chance to answer them. Well done. I couldn't be more pleased than this.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 18, 2025, at 3:30 p.m. to consider estimates of Executive Council.

With that, the meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

