

Better Way Alberta: **POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

Author: **Ricardo Acuña**

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Context

Alberta's post-secondary system was founded on the vision and understanding, articulated by Henry Marshall Tory, that, "the modern state university has sprung from a demand on the part of the people themselves" and "that knowledge shall not alone be the concern of scholars. The uplifting of the whole people shall be its final goal."

Albertans know that the development, viability, and long-term sustainability of the province depends on a thriving post-secondary education system: a system that includes cutting edge polytechnics, strong community-based colleges, country-leading teaching universities, and world-class research universities.

Today, Alberta finds itself in a time of flux and change where significant creativity, innovation, and change will be required to ensure the province's viability and sustainability for the long-term.

The province's economy and employment outlook have changed significantly over the past decade. The 2009 and 2015 downturns in the price of Alberta's oil and gas resulted in tens of thousands of lost jobs across the province. A [recent study by the Parkland Institute](#) highlighted that increased automation and the industry moving from its growth phase to its mature phase mean that, even despite the recent war-fueled boom, a majority of the province's lost jobs will not be returning.

The global climate crisis is placing further pressure on Alberta to fundamentally restructure its economy and end its dependence on the extraction of fossil fuels, or face the economic chaos that will result from a failure to envision, plan, and execute a thoughtful and just transition.

Furthermore, the recent pandemic has laid bare serious problems with how our essential services are organized and delivered, and has significantly exacerbated income inequality, precarity, and mental health issues in our province.

However, despite all of these significant challenges to the long-term viability of our province as a whole, recent governments from Klein to Kenney have turned away from the vision of Alberta's early legislators and inflicted decades of neglect on the province's post-secondary education system.

After some modest reinvestment (primarily in buildings and infrastructure) in the boom-fueled early 2000s, the default government approach has been austerity budgeting for post-secondary education. Even between 2015 and 2019 when there were no nominal cuts to post-secondary education and tuition fees were frozen, the extensive cuts of the previous decade were not fully reversed and funding growth failed to keep up with inflation or the growing student population. And, beyond funding challenges, virtually all provincial governments in the last 30 years have completely failed to produce and operationalize a concrete and meaningful vision for a viable, accessible, and sustainable post-secondary system—one consistent with the goals of fundamentally benefiting the public good and uplifting the whole of the people.

A thriving and vibrant post-secondary system is a necessity to envisioning and planning a new economy: one that builds on the creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and civic responsibility already found in our province. A strong system of universities, colleges, and polytechnics will provide the educated, critically thinking, and well-trained workforce we need to grow our economy and build up all of our citizens.

In this section, we propose evidence-based solutions for a better way:

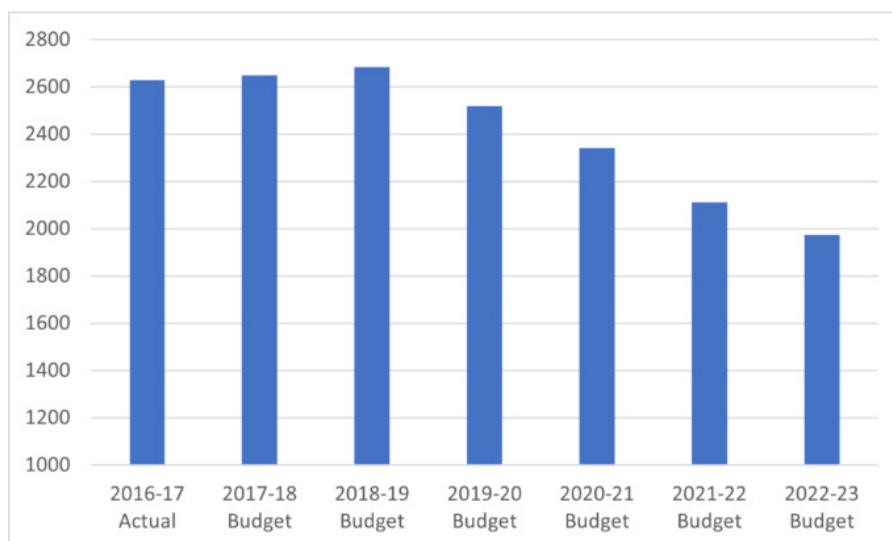
- Restore the approximately \$500 million in funding cuts of the past four years and direct those funds to the front lines of teaching, research, and support for students and staff. Implement a post-secondary education funding formula that ensures adequate funds to cover enrollment growth, inflation, and infrastructure maintenance and renewal going forward.
- End reliance on precarious employment for both academic and support staff.
- Increase existing funding for peer-reviewed research, including funding for graduate students.
- Eliminate performance-based funding.
- Reverse the 21% across-the-board tuition increases of the past three years and the exceptional tuition increases for specific programs. Put in place a tuition calculation formula that maximizes affordability for students and limits year-over-year increases, with the ultimate long-term goal of working toward a tuition-free model.
- Increase accessibility and equity by reversing changes to Student Grant for Full-Time Students, increasing funding for a variety of non-repayable student grants and bursaries, and ensuring all Albertans have access to high-speed telecommunication infrastructure to facilitate upgrading and distance learning.
- Embrace academic freedom and a public interest mandate for post-secondary education.
- Stop government overreach and political interference in post-secondary governance.

Status Quo: Funding Cuts and Neglect

After the slash-and-burn funding and salary rollbacks by Ralph Klein in the mid 1990s, funding for post-secondary education (PSE) in Alberta grew significantly in the early 2000s. Funding almost doubled (on an inflation adjusted per student basis) between 2001 and 2009 (when it peaked). Between 2009 and 2014 the system as a whole (and universities in particular) were subjected to a series of funding cuts, which eliminated most of the growth from the previous decade (<http://higheredstrategy.com/pse-in-alberta-part-2/>). The NDP made a very modest reinvestment in 2015 to reverse the previous year's cuts, but after that funding essentially flatlined until Jason Kenney and the UCP took office in 2019.

Between 2019 and 2022 the UCP cut operating support for the province's post-secondary institutions from \$2.43 billion in 2018-2019 to \$1.97 billion in 2022-2023, a cut of almost 20%. In real terms (adjusted for inflation) that's a cut of 26% over just three years.

Figure 1: AB Government Support to Post-Secondary Institutions, 2016-17 to 2022-23 in millions of constant \$2022.



Source: <https://higheredstrategy.com/explaining-the-alberta-budget-again/>

These cuts were not, however, evenly distributed across the sector. The University of Alberta was by far the most impacted institution, having its operating grant cut by a total \$222 million, or one third. Most of the province's private institutions, on the other hand, went largely unscathed.

Institutions, who are forbidden by the province from running operating deficits, have dealt with the cuts by laying off thousands of people (primarily support staff), increasing privatization of campus services, increasing reliance on precarious contract teaching staff, and increasing class sizes. Some of the results of these actions include:

- loss of supports for students, teachers, and researchers;
- increased workloads and burnout for remaining staff;
- lower quality of maintenance and cleanliness (even in highly sensitive lab areas);
- inability to attract the best and brightest in terms of students, faculty, and staff;
- more crowded classrooms with fewer personalized supports and accompaniment for students;
- faculty and researchers burdened by downloaded administrative and bureaucratic tasks, leaving far less time for teaching, research, and professional/academic development of our students;
- increased reliance on contract teaching staff is having serious impacts on research, student supports, creativity and innovation, and the general attractiveness of the academy as a place for employment; and
- loss of job security and increased workloads for support staff have a direct flow-through effect on procuring research grants and the quality of education being offered to students.

The impacts of funding cuts have been exacerbated over the past two years by the pandemic and the need for teaching, research, and student supports to pivot repeatedly and with minimal notice from in-person to on-line to hybrid delivery and back again. Having to be prepared to teach in multiple formats has greatly increased instructor workloads. Support staff have had to scramble to meet growing needs throughout the campus community, while students are flung back and forth between teaching formats. All this with already reduced capacity and no extra compensation or reduction in tuition.

At a time when Alberta's current post-secondary seats are not being properly funded, demographic projections from the Government of Alberta show a spike in university-aged population over the next decade. That means there will be between 53,000 and 113,000 more 18–25 year-olds in Alberta than there were over the past few years, and the post-secondary system will need to increase capacity to accommodate between 12% and 26% more students starting in the next two to five years. (<https://www.su.ualberta.ca/media/uploads/1143/UASUAlberta2030.pdf>) For context, the resulting post-secondary enrollment increase (at national average levels) could require the equivalent of 2 additional schools the size of the U of A.

A Better Way: Adequate, Stable, and Predictable Funding

The starting point must be the **restoration of all funding that has been cut over the past four years. That's approximately \$500 million.** In order to ensure maximum impact, funding must be directed at the front lines of teaching, research, and adequate supports for students and staff. That includes rehiring thousands of staff members that lost their jobs due to cuts, and properly funding long-promised programs in the areas of long-term mental health supports and addressing sexualized violence.

Going forward, the province must implement **a budget formula that ensures adequate funding for enrollment growth, inflation, and infrastructure maintenance and renewal.** Any funding formula that ignores these factors will only entrench the long-term erosion of programs, job security, and infrastructure.

Institutions need to take meaningful steps to **end the reliance on precarious employment for both academic and support staff.** Beyond ensuring fairness and justice, job security improves mental health, reduces staff turnover, and makes for a much more positive and productive learning, teaching, and research environment.

To improve innovation and the ability to attract and retain top students and researchers, the government should **increase existing funding for peer-reviewed research, and build a research funding agency exclusively for graduate students.** This would enable graduate students to launch their own research earlier in their studies, rather than rely exclusively on support and funding from supervisors, and existing research programs.

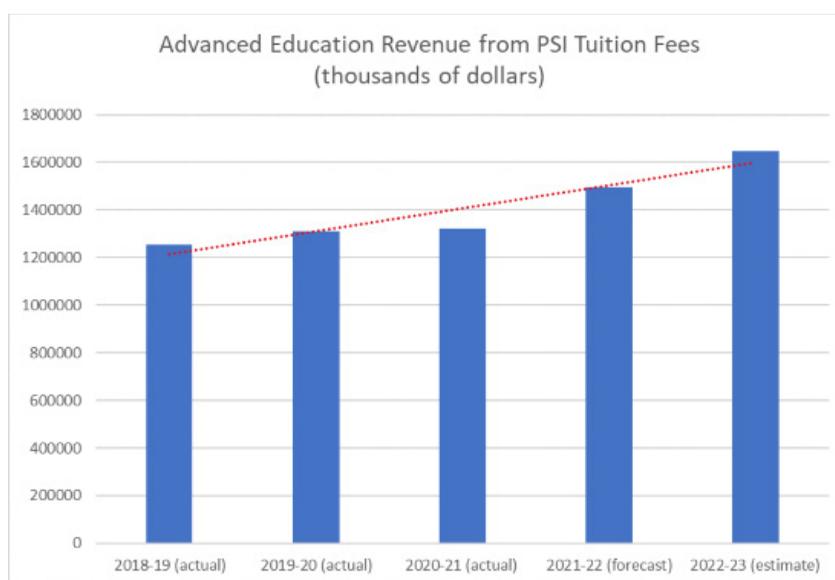
In order for these funding initiatives to meet their goals, the government must first **completely eliminate performance-based funding.** Basing some (or all) of an institution's funding on arbitrary metrics does nothing to improve the quality of education and research at an institution, nor does it guarantee better outcomes for staff and the community at large. In fact, the academic research on performance-based funding does not demonstrate that this punitive funding model produces the results that governments are seeking.

Those goals are only achieved when properly governed institutions are able to operate in the spirit of academic freedom and be secure in the knowledge of adequate, stable, and secure funding. This is the premise upon which the very idea of public post-secondary institutions was based, and it is the premise upon which they have thrived for hundreds of years.

Status Quo: PSE Only Possible for a Privileged Few

As funding cuts impact the ability of institutions to offer high quality education and student supports, the government has been simultaneously increasing the cost of education to students. In 2020 the UCP ended a freeze on tuition that had been in place since 2015 and allowed institutions to increase tuition by up to 7% a year in each over the following three years. In addition, some universities were granted permission to implement special tuition increases for some programs. At the U of A, for example, these increases ranged from 16% for the AP dentistry program to a high of 104% for the master in counselling program in the faculty of education. For both the 2019–2020 and 2021–2022 academic years, Alberta recorded by far the highest year-over-year tuition increases of any province in the country.

Figure: AB Advanced Education Revenue from Tuition Fees (in thousands of dollars)



Source: https://www.parklandinstitute.ca/retelling_the_story_of_the_ucp_governments_budget

These increases in the cost of post-secondary education have not been accompanied by any significant increase in the amount of funding available for students via grants and bursaries. The only options available to students and their families are to assume devastating amounts of student debt (for which the government recently increased the interest rates), work multiple jobs, or, most likely, some combination of both. This is especially the case at a time of skyrocketing inflation and its impact on food and housing costs, all of which carry serious implications for the mental health, stress, and non-completion rates of students.

The inevitable impact of this dynamic is post-secondary education becoming less and less of a viable option for anyone but the economically privileged. As always, this lack of affordability has a disproportionate impact on those populations that are already underrepresented in post-secondary institutions, and thereby reinforces existing structures and dynamics of economic and social oppression.

A Better Way: Affordability and Accessibility

A thriving post-secondary education system can only serve the public interest if it is accessible to the greatest possible number of people. Alberta has historically had some of the lowest post-secondary participation rates in the country, and recent increases to tuition and reductions to student grants only make it more difficult for Albertans to continue their education.

The government **must immediately reverse the 21% across-the-board tuition increases of the past three years and the exceptional tuition increases recently approved for specific programs.** These rollbacks in tuition must be accompanied by adequate operational funding so that, at minimum, institutions can cover the reduced tuition revenue and not pass increased costs on to front-line supports and services. Going forward, **Advanced Education Alberta must put in place a tuition calculation formula that maximizes affordability for students and limits year-over-year increases.** The government must also put an end to the practice of institutions bypassing limits on tuition increases by increasing non-instructional fees instead.

This should be done with the longer-term goal of building **a tuition-free model of post-secondary education for Alberta.** This would put the province in a stronger position to adapt to a rapidly changing global economy, and completely remove existing barriers to advanced education, especially for underrepresented groups—a “New Alberta Advantage”, as suggested recently by Parkland Institute researchers. For too long post-secondary education has been seen as a cost to the public purse rather than an investment that will pay off with increases in innovation, creativity, and democratic engagement in the future. For perspective, the cost of replacing all of the current revenues from post-secondary tuition and fees could be met by raising the provincial corporate tax rate by just 3.26%. This tax increase would amount to less than a total reversal of the UCP’s 4% cut to corporate taxes, and it would still leave Alberta with the lowest corporate tax rates in the country.

Tuition affordability is only one of the barriers stopping students from succeeding in advanced education. Recently, despite high inflation and living costs, the Alberta government cut the amount of the Student Grant for Full-Time Students by a third and tightened eligibility for the grant. **This change not only needs to be reversed, but the original amount needs to be increased and eligibility broadened to ensure any student in need of financial support is able to receive it. Increasing funding for a variety of non-repayable student grants and bursaries** would enable students to complete their studies without having to juggle two or three jobs and without facing a mountain of debt upon graduation.

Albertans learned during the pandemic that accessibility to communications infrastructure can also impact the accessibility of education. Currently, 67% of rural Albertans and 80% of Indigenous communities do not have access to reliable high-speed internet at federal target speeds. The province needs to **ensure that all Albertans have access to quality high-speed telecommunication infrastructure to facilitate upgrading and distance learning.**

Status Quo: Ideology and Overreach

The UCP government's policies and funding decisions with regard to post-secondary education in the province have served to put advanced education in the service of the market place rather than the common good and public interest. The driving force has become a view of the system exclusively in terms of vocational skills training and job preparation rather than the higher level problem solving, critical thinking, and democratic citizenship skills that tend to accompany curiosity-based research and study.

To this end, the government has based its priorities for the minimal reinvestment it is making on the immediate and short term needs of the employment market rather than on the long term needs of the province and its communities. Funding post-secondary spaces for skills training related to the oil and gas industry will do nothing to drive the research, innovation, and creativity required as the province works to recover from the pandemic and transition away from its current economic and societal dependence on the fossil fuel industry. For the government to decide arbitrarily which programs are worthy of support serves neither the needs of students nor businesses, especially given the poor track record of governments in predicting what fields will be in need of workers in four years' time.

The government has accomplished the imposition of its vision on the advanced education system by overstepping its historic and established roles and responsibilities. It has directly interfered in the last two rounds of staff bargaining by imposing monetary mandates on the various boards of governors. According to a [recent Parkland Institute report](#), the government has consistently removed any board members that might not agree with its vision and filled all post-secondary boards with ideologically-compatible members from the corporate world.

The legislative changes coming out of the government's Alberta 2030 vision for advanced education, like performance-based funding and the establishment of a Ministers Council for Advanced Education, also make it easier for the government to interfere directly in the research, program, and course priorities at the institutions. The changes also give the province's corporate sector an even greater say in governance, funding levels, and decision-making across the system.

A Better Way: Public Interest, Academic Freedom, and Collegial Governance

Post-secondary institutions have historically functioned as communities of academics where the schools themselves were empowered to determine course, program, and research priorities based on collegial decision-making, academic governance, and student demand. This method of decision-making helped ensure that the system as a whole was contributing to the long-term needs and interests of the entire community rather than the short-term whims and imperatives of the governing party and its donors.

Returning to this state requires improving governance policies at post-secondary institutions to **strengthen the decision-making autonomy of General Faculties Councils** (the historic academic decision-making bodies at post-secondaries) so that senior administrators cannot push through plans without the consent of students, academic staff, support staff, and faculty. Where General Faculties Councils do not exist, other avenues must be put in place for academic staff, support staff, and students to have a strong and meaningful voice in shaping the future of their institutions.

In this same vein, the government must **end the practice of prioritizing certain programs for funding based on its ideological imperatives, especially through the use of short-term temporary funding windows. The government must also stop making new student funding available only to students in certain programs.** Students in all programs at all institutions must have full access to non-repayable student funds. Operational funds must support programs based on the institution's priorities, not the government's.

Research funding should be adequate to meet demand across the province and should be peer reviewed based on academic merit. Research funding should not discriminate based on concepts like marketability or entrepreneurship and should not be focused solely on one or two industries (i.e., the oil sands and agriculture).

The practice of appointing people to institutional Boards of Governors based on partisan and ideological interests must end. In its place there should be **a competency-based system and process for board appointments that prioritizes academic backgrounds and community service over backgrounds in corporate leadership.**

The Minister of Advanced Education recently established a hand-picked **Minister's Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills** to help set tuition and funding levels as well as advise on priorities for the entire sector. This body is explicitly designed to provide cover for politicians looking to impose their partisan priorities and funding cuts on post-secondary institutions. It serves no useful purpose, provides no added value to the system, and **should immediately be eliminated.**

Likewise, the government must **eliminate performance-based funding and separate the finances and balance sheets of post-secondary institutions from those of the government** (also known as de-consolidation). Both of these practices are simply in place to allow the provincial government to exert greater control over institutional spending and budgets. These practices have even been used to stop institutions from accessing reserve funds and accumulated surpluses for strategic short-term investments. Self-governance means that the institutions themselves should be responsible for their spending and priorities, with accountability to government coming by way of annual audits and annual reports.

Another expectation for self-governing institutions is that there be **no interference from the government in the process of collective bargaining between the institution and its faculty, academic, administrative, and support staff**. The last two Alberta governments have directly interfered in post-secondary bargaining by setting secret mandates for boards to abide by in salary negotiations. This practice is contrary to established principles of labour relations, collective bargaining, and institutional autonomy and governance, and needs to end immediately.

CONCLUSION

Because of its historic reliance on fossil fuels for employment, economic well-being, and funding for public services, Alberta desperately needs the innovation, creativity, and democratic engagement that only comes through the existence of a thriving and sustainable post-secondary education system. Thanks to the province's early political leaders (and more recent visionary investments by people like Peter Lougheed), we have the building blocks for a post-secondary system that could serve Alberta, its people, and its economy for generations to come. This is a government that spends billions on corporate handouts and subsidies, and has foregone billions more on royalties and corporate tax cuts that created no jobs. It's not about lack of finances. It's about political will and ideological priorities. With the will to embrace the system's public interest mandate and make the necessary investments, we can make Alberta's post-secondary education system the envy of every other province in the country. That's the better way for Alberta.

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