



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, October 27, 2021

Day 119

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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New Democrat: 24

Independent: 2

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, October 27, 2021

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 74

Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Minister of Advanced Education has risen to move second reading, I believe.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and a good evening to you and a good evening to all colleagues. It's my privilege to rise this evening to move second reading of Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021.

I want to take a couple of minutes, of course, to talk a little bit about the bill and what's contained within the legislation, but before I do that, I think I need to provide a little bit of background and context. One of the important pieces of Bill 74 is that it's seeking to help move us down the path of further implementation of Alberta 2030, so I want to use this opportunity to talk a little bit about Alberta 2030, what it's intended to be, how we got there, and why it's so important. A lot of this goes back to, actually, 2019 and to the beginning of being appointed as Minister of Advanced Education.

One of the things that I noticed early on was that there appeared to be a lack of overall strategic thinking or strategic vision within the postsecondary system, and this was subsequently validated from other sources as well. I recall reading some older reports from the Auditor General, who for a number of years has been calling on Advanced Education to develop a strategic plan to help strengthen co-ordination within the postsecondary system. Furthermore, in the summer of 2019 the MacKinnon panel also made a similar conclusion.

The MacKinnon panel noted specifically – I'm paraphrasing, but I believe they said something to the effect that the Alberta postsecondary system lacks an overall strategic plan and lacks an overall strategic direction and that the Ministry of Advanced Education, in consultation with its stakeholders, should work on developing a strategic plan. As a reminder for members of the Assembly, I believe that three out of the five members of the MacKinnon panel if I'm not mistaken – I stand to be corrected – were members who had either previous experience in an academic role or were in an academic role at the time, so the insight that they brought from a postsecondary lens I think was particularly strong.

I took those different recommendations and ideas, be it from the Auditor General, my own observations, and that of the MacKinnon panel, to heart, and we embarked on an effort to try and do this, to actually try and develop some essence of a strategic plan for our postsecondary system. You know, I'm sure it's not perfect. I'm sure there are other areas where we can continue to improve, but I think it's an important first step and a step in the right direction.

As we began that process, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that was critical for me was that we build this plan in a truly collaborative way with our stakeholders, and I knew that was going to be very challenging because, of course, we have a wide range of diverse groups within our postsecondary community that have diverse interests. The needs and desires or interests of students sometimes don't match the needs and desires of university presidents or leadership at a postsecondary institution or with the faculty

associations and with government. So trying to find a way to develop something that we could hopefully all land on the same page on, bringing all these diverse interests together, I knew was going to be challenging; nonetheless, I believed it was essential for us to begin that effort.

So away we went and engaged in a very robust and a very thorough consultation effort. People can say what they want about Alberta 2030 and the recommendations and conclusions that it draws, but I really don't believe anyone can say that we did not engage or consult in an adequate fashion. Just to highlight some of that engagement for the Assembly, Mr. Speaker, we conducted over 100 one-on-one interviews. That was with, for example, postsecondary presidents, with student leaders, with industry leaders, with government representatives, and other key stakeholders.

We also held over 31 round-table discussions to bring, again, a cross-section of individuals – student representatives, faculty representatives – to the table to discuss a particular issue, whether it was on access to postsecondary education or whether it was on research and research commercialization, to help make sure we had all the right ideas and perspectives at the table. We also established a guiding coalition to help lead the entire effort, and we appointed student representatives, faculty representatives, representatives of postsecondary presidents, and other individuals to this guiding coalition to help lead the entire process and help steer the ship.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews and the 30 round-tables, we also published a number of different surveys that we made available online. I believe we collected over 5,600 responses to those surveys. We also developed a workbook so that different interested parties could take the workbook, could sit down themselves at their own table and work through some of the big questions we were asking in the engagement process. We received over 200 workbook submissions. I met with student leaders and other organizations who told us that the workbook was very helpful for them. Even boards of governors of some of our institutions were able to take the workbook, have a specific session of one of their meetings dedicated to discussing the topics there. Subsequently to that, we as well had other engagement efforts.

Again, while I'm sure everyone doesn't agree or can't agree on maybe all of the pieces that Alberta 2030 highlights and draws attention to, I really believe that we can agree that the attempt at engagement and consultation was very thorough and very robust. Now, we spent the better part of a year, in fact, going through that, having those discussions, having that engagement.

I neglected to mention – I knew there was a piece I was missing there in the engagement puzzle – there were also six publicly available town halls, and I believe over 1,500 individuals attended those town halls. They were virtual, given COVID, but we still had great participation, over 1,500 attendees, to those different town halls. We broke them up a little bit differently. We had one just for students and focusing on student issues. We tried to break them down thematically so that people who had particular interest in a particular topic could attend that very focused town hall.

Through all that effort we then had the very challenging exercise of having to bring all of these different stakeholder interests, needs, and concerns into a single strategic document that everyone could agree with. I had always said from the very beginning that there's no point developing this strategic plan if there's no buy-in. If our students don't support it, if our postsecondary presidents don't support it, there's no point in us actually doing this entire exercise. Again, I believe we landed there.

I was very fortunate that on the day that we launched the Alberta 2030 final strategy in April we had President Flanagan from the University of Alberta there speaking at the announcement, we had

some student leaders speaking at the announcement, and subsequent to the initial announcement we also received very positive statements of endorsement from many of our student leaders, many of our university presidents, industry groups, and other representative groups. I recall, and I can dig it up in detail. I believe it was the president of the U of A – I may be mistaken; my apologies – who commented in their student newspaper, saying that it's clear that the government listened through the engagement effort, and they were happy to see some of their priorities and some of their interests reflected in the final document. Again, I may be getting the individual wrong just off the top of my head here, but I'm happy to provide more clarity for the Assembly.

7:40

Again, that's not to say that it's absolutely perfect, and it's not to say that the plan shouldn't change. Indeed, it should change, and it must change. A lot happens, of course, over the span of 10 years, and any strategic plan worth its merit needs to be adaptive, needs to be nimble and adjust with what's happening at that time.

One of the important pieces that was highlighted in Alberta 2030, which connects me back to Bill 74, was a discussion that we had around governance. In fact, the topic of governance emerged as one of the key pillars of Alberta 2030. We identified, at the end of the day, six pillars that Alberta 2030 should focus on; that is to say, six pillars that our postsecondary system should focus on over the next 10 years.

Just for quick clarity, I'll backtrack a bit. The first pillar of Alberta 2030 is to improve access and strengthen the student experience. Within that pillar we've indicated that the government of Alberta should be more proactive in looking at things like OERs, which are open educational resources. I'll give a shout-out, if they're listening, to ASEC and other student leaders who have been advocating for greater implementation of OERs for a number of years, at least two years with me directly.

As well, we've also highlighted, under the first pillar of improving access, the need to improve our transfer system. One of the things that I heard loud and clear from our students was that if you're transferring from perhaps one of our community colleges to another institution, you sometimes don't receive full credit for what you've just learned when you transfer to another institution. It's a matter that I know concerns many of our students and I believe is something that we need to pay more attention to and work at finding some more solutions to. There's more there, but that's a quick snapshot of just the first pillar, about improving the student experience and working to increase access.

The second pillar focuses on developing skills for jobs. I have it here, and I can bring it up, but survey after survey clearly indicates that for our students their primary motivation and drive for attending postsecondary education is career oriented. Either they're interested in getting a job in a particular profession or they're looking at changing their career or finding success in a particular career. The number one reason that students choose the program that they do and choose postsecondary is because there are some career aspirations associated with that.

I want to be clear because there was some misconception, I believe, around that term. When we talk about building skills for jobs, some people – I received some criticism to say that, well, you're just going to train people for very specific jobs and that's it. But that's not the intent or case at all. The intent behind the idea of skills for jobs is to ensure that every student, every graduate regardless of their career path and career profession, whether that's in the arts or in oil and gas or in renewable energy, has the skills, knowledge, and competencies that are needed for them to succeed in that occupation. That's what it's fundamentally about. It's not

about getting more people in one area and fewer people in another area; it's about ensuring that whatever they choose, they're equipped with the skills that are needed for success in that occupation.

That's the second pillar of Alberta 2030. There are a number of initiatives within that pillar. One of them, which I'm particularly excited about, is a very ambitious goal to become the first province in Canada to offer every undergraduate student a work-integrated learning opportunity. Now, that's not to say that every student must take a work-integrated learning opportunity or needs one before they graduate, but we need to ensure that our programs are designed and contemplated with a work-integrated learning placement in mind. Now, there's a lot that we're going to need to do to get there, of course. We recently announced a pilot, a work-integrated learning pilot voucher, that we're making available to a small number of industry associations to help encourage those businesses to bring on a co-op student, to bring on an intern. We'll evaluate the success of that, but there's more that we need to do there. I could spend probably half an hour just on that topic alone, which, of course, I won't unless anybody is interested.

The third pillar of Alberta 2030 has to do with strengthening research and commercialization. I think we can all agree in this Assembly that our institutions are home to groundbreaking new research, groundbreaking new discoveries, and where possible, I believe we need to put more emphasis into helping those incredible new research discoveries translate into new business opportunities or into new products. The results, of course, and benefits of doing so are clear as day. It helps to diversify the economy and helps to give students access to cutting-edge, new industries.

The fourth pillar, Mr. Speaker, has to do with improving the internationalization of our postsecondary sector. Now, this doesn't just mean being a stronger jurisdiction when it comes to international student recruitment. Indeed, that's an important part of it. Many international students choose Canada as a destination. They look to Canada to pursue their studies, but what we're seeing is that they're actually not choosing Alberta. Again, I think we can all agree that we're home to incredible institutions, and when those students are looking to come to Canada, I want to see more of them choosing Alberta. That is an important part of it, but improving the internationalization of our system also has to do with recruiting high-quality international faculty and researchers to come and pursue their studies here in Alberta.

The fifth goal of Alberta 2030 has to do with improving sustainability and affordability. We have some challenges when it comes to the financial dynamic of our postsecondary sector, and there's work that we need to do there. As well, when it comes to affordability, over the last two years I've been fortunate to announce new scholarships and new supports in student aid, but we need to continue to take a close look at that to ensure that our suite of student aid offerings is meeting the needs of learners that are becoming more dynamic today. With more adult learners, more part-time learners, we have to take a look and ensure that what we're offering from a student aid perspective is meeting the needs of those learners.

Finally, which I mentioned earlier, the sixth goal is to improve system governance. It's around that pillar particularly that brings us back and connects us to Bill 74. One of the things that is happening in Bill 74 is the establishment of a new body, which is the minister's advisory council on higher education and skills. For complete clarity, this is strictly an advisory body; it doesn't have decision-making power or authority.

What's interesting about this is that this was originally contemplated to exist – and it did exist – within our postsecondary sector under the development of the idea of Campus Alberta, which

laid the foundations for our modern postsecondary system. What was actually built in legislation was the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee, and as you can imagine, it was supposed to do what its name dictated, to help provide strategic direction for the postsecondary system. But it didn't work, and it didn't work for many reasons. I've talked with many of our postsecondary presidents and former ministers to find out why exactly it didn't work, and they highlighted what they believed, in their opinion, were some of the reasons associated with that.

The new advisory council on higher education and skills is version 2.0 of the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee, and its job will be to help provide the minister of the day and the government of the day independent, strategic, and nonpartisan thinking about how to move our postsecondary system forward. We always need to keep moving forward. We always need to keep thinking about the future. Part of my thinking around this was as well: if we don't have Alberta 2030 or if we've concluded the key objectives within Alberta 2030, what's next? Are we thinking about the next strategic plan? Are we thinking about the next strategic vision? I truly believe and hope that this body can help that range of thinking.

With that, Mr. Speaker, again I move second reading. Thank you.

7:50

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any hon. members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and respond to the minister's introduction of Bill 74. It's quite clear to me from the minister's intervention in this debate that he spent probably a little bit too much time in the academic settings, is used to giving hour-long lectures, and isn't used to the incredibly intense time limits that are placed upon us, because he only got to a fraction of what was actually in the bill, which is a shame.

There are a number of things that I want to respond to in the minister's speech as well as in the text of the bill. The first thing that I'd like to say is that, you know, the minister went on at great length about the Alberta 2030 strategy. Now, first of all, let me just air that one of my grievances with the whole process is that he paid McKinsey consulting firm \$3.5 million to conduct this study. Now, an independent analysis of that report conducted by Alex Usher quite decisively shows that the minister was taken to the cleaners by McKinsey and that he overpaid for that report to the tune of approximately \$2 million, so I would like the minister to tell us how we're going to get that money back.

It's quite clear to me, Mr. Speaker, that he did in fact overpay McKinsey to do this study because the six pillars that he laid out could have been written down on the back of an envelope and left in the drawer in the Minister of Advanced Education's office by me, or in fact I could have inherited that envelope from the previous minister who inherited it from the minister previous to him. The fact is that improving access, developing skills for jobs, strengthening research, improving internationalization, improving sustainability, and enhancing governance are age-old problems in Alberta's postsecondary sector. They were certainly things that we dealt with when we were in government and, like I said, our predecessors tried to tackle as well when they were in government.

He didn't have to pay McKinsey 3 and a half million dollars to tell him this. He could have just walked across the floor and asked me for my opinion. He said that he talked to former ministers of Advanced Education. Perhaps they had forgotten in the time since they'd left that office what the problems were.

I want to, second of all, just point out that Bill 74 doesn't actually deal with any of those pillars with the exception of governance, so it is unfortunate that the minister didn't have enough time to explain to us how it is that he attempts to achieve the objectives that have been set out in the other five pillars.

I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that we shared the goal, that is set out in pillar 1, of improving access and enhancing the student experience. There were a couple of things that we did to concretely move Alberta's postsecondary education system towards that objective, the first among them being to freeze tuition rates for the four years while we were in government. In that time we moved from being one of the most expensive jurisdictions for postsecondary education to one of the most affordable jurisdictions in Canada for postsecondary education, and in the process over those four years we saved individual students thousands of dollars of tuition increases.

I can tell you that I was incredibly upset to see the then UCP opposition vote in favour of the bill that we introduced in 2018 that would limit tuition increases to a cost-of-living increase and then months later come back into this House as government and repeal it. Now we see tuition costs going up by hundreds of millions of dollars across the province. In fact, I saw that the University of Calgary students are protesting exceptional fee hikes for a number of professional degree programs, including engineering.

Mr. Speaker, I would love to hear the minister's explanation as to how increasing tuition to the tune of almost \$400 million in total across the province enhances access and improves the student experience unless he seems to think that being crushed by debt that you will never pay off is a wonderful part of the student experience.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, we did a number of other things to enhance access to university and college education in this province. We put Red Deer college and Grande Prairie Regional College on the path to university status, something that Bill 74 actually undoes.

Now, my friend from Red Deer-South will remember because he was there and he was incredibly irate with the comment that I made. In May 2019 I was pleased to attend an event at the campus of Red Deer college. I had just been freshly removed from my position as Minister of Advanced Education, but the community of Red Deer college was grateful enough for the work that I had done to advance that institution that they invited me to participate. I told the crowd there that day – this was May 2019 – to mark my words: the government will tell you that they cannot possibly turn Red Deer college into a university, and they'll come up with some weak-sounding excuse as to why they can't do that. The Member for Red Deer-South was spitting nails – he was so mad – at me for daring to suggest that the UCP government would go back on the word that he had given that Red Deer college would maintain that status. Well, here it is in black and white.

Bill 74 makes sure that polytechnic institutions, which the minister has designated Red Deer college and Grande Prairie Regional College to be, can't even offer their own degrees. They can only collaborate. Well, it's right here in the bill . . . [interjections] I see that the minister is disagreeing with me. I encourage him to stand up and correct me or have his colleagues on the executive benches stand up and correct me.

The Acting Speaker: Just for the record, as the second speaker there is no opportunity for interventions, so if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar could please continue. The floor is yours.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Well, I appreciate . . .

Mr. Stephan: Keep making things up.

Mr. Dang: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, a point of order has been called. I believe it's going to be at least initially debated by the hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very clearly, one of my colleagues here on my side, on the opposite side here, just heckled: he's making things up. I think that's very clearly making an allegation against another member under 23(h), (i), and (j). I think that would be out of order, and I would encourage whoever made that to either refrain or withdraw.

The Acting Speaker: Sorry. If I could just please get a point of clarification with regard to this. From my perspective, it sounded like the individual who said something perhaps along the lines of, "He's making things up" may have actually come from a member of your own caucus.

I will at this moment see the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika, then, with a potential rebuttal to your debate. [interjections] Again, all I'm doing is that I am expressing what it sounded like from this perspective, not necessarily from where you guys sit in the House.

The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

8:00

Mr. Schow: My, my, my, Mr. Speaker. What a lovely evening we have ourselves going into a half-hour in. I did not hear the remark, and the hon. Deputy Opposition House Leader did not indicate which member he was referring to that allegedly said these words, so I would be in no position to suggest whether or not this is a point of order. But if a member did in fact say something to that effect, I would hope that member would recognize that it might be unparliamentary and apologize.

The Acting Speaker: I'm comfortable with that perspective.

Are there any members – from this perspective, I think it's fair to say that based on the debate that has happened with regard to this point of order, I can't pinpoint who stated this statement if it was fully stated. With that, I think the Deputy Government House Leader – I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore is rising.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you require any clarification, I heard it as clear as day from the Member for Red Deer-South.

The Acting Speaker: I can't rule on something that I didn't necessarily hear, and I think I'm seeing some nods there as well from all sides. If the hon. Member for Red Deer-South feels like there is something that he should apologize for, then I will give him the opportunity.

Mr. Stephan: Well, it's a fair comment. He was making things up, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: What I will ask is that the hon. Member for Red Deer-South please rise and withdraw and apologize for the comment as it would be unparliamentary to make that comment again.

Mr. Stephan: I'll withdraw the comment.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

We are back to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar with about 11:56 remaining.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schmidt: It is a red-letter day, Mr. Speaker, when I stand up to speak and somebody ends up apologizing to me. So this is . . . [interjections] Yeah, yeah. You know, we're off to a good start.

As I was getting to my feet, I heard the Minister of Advanced Education say that it's on page 10. The section that I'm referring to in the bill, of course, deals with section 102.6, in which a polytechnic institution shall provide classroom instruction as part of an apprenticeship education program, provide diploma and certificate programs, and collaborate with other postsecondary institutions to support regional access to polytechnic education.

Now, perhaps the minister can clarify for me or have some of his colleagues clarify for me. You know, it does happen from time to time that I make mistakes, but it is my understanding that the minister has designated Red Deer and Grande Prairie as polytechnic institutions. Is that correct? I see the Minister of Advanced Education agreeing with me. According to the amendments that he is bringing forward in this legislation, then Red Deer and Grande Prairie will not be able to offer degrees under their own name but will only be able to collaborate with other institutions to offer degrees under the names of the collaborating institution. Okay. I think the minister has agreed with my statement somewhat.

Well, I really hope that we can get into this during the debate because it is important, Mr. Speaker. I know that I heard loudly and clearly from the communities in Red Deer and Grande Prairie that they did not want to collaborate with institutions across the province to offer their own degrees; they wanted to offer degrees under their own names. I certainly hope that this section does not prevent those institutions from being able to grant degrees under their own names because that's really important.

It's also really important, Mr. Speaker, that those names be universities. I'm incredibly disappointed to see that the minister has not allowed Red Deer and Grande Prairie to use the name "university" because, as everybody who is involved with the postsecondary sector knows, the name and reputation of an institution have an incredible amount of bearing on the value that people give that credential. I am afraid that a credential from Grande Prairie polytechnic or Red Deer Polytechnic will not be regarded as highly in the world of work or in the world of academia as a degree granted by Red Deer university or Grande Prairie university.

I know that we have had this issue in the postsecondary system in the past. Even though Mount Royal University and Grant MacEwan University have been called universities for more than a decade, they're still not ranked by *Maclean's* university ranking guide. I've heard first-hand from students who have graduated from those institutions that they have more difficulty than they expected in having their degrees recognized by postsecondary institutions outside of the province because they just aren't familiar enough with the kind of institution that Mount Royal and Grant MacEwan are and they can't assess where they rank in terms of reputation compared to their peers in Alberta and other jurisdictions. Now, that's a problem that time will hopefully solve. Mount Royal and Grant MacEwan have done tremendous jobs in providing excellent undergraduate education to students in Alberta for a long time, and I'm sure that as that work continues, their reputation will continue to be enhanced.

But it's incredibly important, Mr. Speaker, that the minister doesn't hobble those institutions out of the gate by giving them a name that sets them back a pace. I look forward to the minister talking about that, because it goes back to what he claims are the pillars of the Alberta 2030 strategy that he was talking about, you know, improving access and enhancing the student experience.

Well, students want to get degrees from universities that are well regarded by their peers in the academic world. I certainly hope that what the minister has done here with Red Deer and Grande Prairie hasn't hobbled those institutions and handicapped those students in a significant way.

With respect to governance, you know, it was – the minister told us that there were problems with the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee, but he didn't tell us what they were, and he didn't tell us how this new committee will fix it, nor did he tell us why it had to be enshrined in legislation. The minister has incredible power, and people will meet with him, well, mostly at his request. He doesn't need to use legislation to create this kind of committee. He can just strike it by requesting that such a committee be formed.

It's incredibly distressing to me, Mr. Speaker, that we are wasting – not wasting; we are spending our valuable time here in the Legislature talking about creating a committee that will provide direction to postsecondary education while the province is on fire. The problems that the province faces are incredibly urgent and incredibly dire. The Legislature should be turning its mind to things like addressing COVID and getting Albertans back to work and dealing with climate change, and here we are giving the minister the legislative power to create a committee. This is not what the people of Alberta want the Alberta Legislature to be spending its time doing right now.

I would urge the – you know, it's too late now, but the minister could have struck this committee on his own without coming to the Legislature and using up our valuable time. I'm sure that the committee will provide him valuable advice. It doesn't need to be enshrined in legislation.

With respect to urgency, I don't understand why we also need to urgently deal with term limits of boards of governors' members. This is something that is in the bill that the minister didn't get a chance to address in his speech. We are limiting members of boards of governors of universities and colleges to two terms of three years each, if I understand it correctly, and they will not be eligible to be reappointed ever again if they complete a six-year term. That's fine. I guess that could be also just done in practice. I'm not sure why we have to set it out in legislation. The minister could just say that it is his policy to not reappoint people who have served two consecutive three-year terms on boards. Again, why are we dealing with this issue of board term limits right now when we have serious and urgent problems that the Alberta Legislature needs to spend its valuable time on?

8:10

I want to also talk about some of the other things that the minister has talked about in terms of improving access and enhancing the student experience. Of course, we've already talked about the almost \$400 million that tuition has increased in aggregate across the province. He also wanted to improve sustainability and affordability. The minister needs to tell the people of Alberta how the sustainability of our institutions is enhanced by cutting their budgets by over \$700 million. I know that the University of Alberta has been hit incredibly hard by these budget cuts, and its sustainability has been deeply threatened.

In fact, some of the major parts of the University of Alberta are under such severe threat that the minister himself has been taken to court to protect them. I'm talking, of course, about Campus Saint-Jean, which is in my riding. The minister is talking about improving sustainability. Well, the members of the Campus Saint-Jean community in Gold Bar are wondering: what about the sustainability of that institution? Cutting hundreds of millions of dollars from the University of Alberta's budget does nothing but threaten the sustainability of that institution, and the minister hasn't

come up with a good answer to the community that supports Campus Saint-Jean about the future of that institution. I certainly hope that he takes the opportunity during debate on this bill to address that incredibly important problem.

He also talked about strengthening research and commercialization. Well, Mr. Speaker, again we saw the minister – Jobs, Economy and Innovation, I believe, is where it currently sits – cut Alberta Innovates to the bone in its first budget. The minister should get up and tell us how he's dealing with strengthening commercialization and research when his own colleague the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation is cutting out the legs from underneath the very institution that supports that goal. Alberta Innovates is a shadow of its former self. Universities are scrambling to find the research dollars that have been taken away by this government. I respect the fact that the minister says that he's interested in achieving that goal, but we need to recognize that the things that this government does, in many cases, are the exact opposite of the things that it says it does. That is the case with strengthening research and commercialization.

You know, in the little bit of time that I have left, I want to go back to this issue of enhancing access, because I remember as minister of advanced . . . [Mr. Schmidt's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a few words here. Maybe as we get used to the new format, the minister might intervene and answer some of the questions raised by the previous member if that was to work out.

It is my privilege to rise today and speak to Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. This bill makes several amendments to the Post-secondary Learning Act and the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act. These changes will help facilitate the implementation of Alberta 2030 and Alberta's first 10-year strategic plan in over 15 years and help us respond directly to stakeholder feedback.

I believe the member opposite was looking at section 102.6, that was amended, from my understanding of the reading of the bill, in subsections (2) and (3). Striking out "An institution assigned to the Polytechnic Institutions sector" and substituting "A polytechnic institution" does two things on the following page, which also remain. One, in subsection (2), is that a polytechnic institution "shall not provide graduate level programs." But right below that, in section (3), a polytechnic institution, the substitution language, may "provide approved foundational learning or undergraduate degree programs."

If the minister would . . .

Mr. Nicolaidis: Would you like me to intervene?

Mr. Neudorf: Please intervene.

Mr. Nicolaidis: I'd be happy to intervene.

Mr. Neudorf: I'm happy, too.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Thanks for giving way. I'd be very happy to intervene on that point. I think that's probably one of the best interventions I've seen yet. Apologies; I was reading.

Yeah. How interesting. The member is bang on. You know, if you look at that section, which is section 102.6, (b) makes amendments to subsections (2) and (3). It just makes a language change there, but the rest of it remains, so in the new act it'll be

102.6(3): a polytechnic institution may provide approved foundational learning or undergraduate degree programs.

Just a quick comment there to the member that polytechnic institutions will certainly be able to continue to offer degree programs. In fact, many of them do. Red Deer College has been approved to offer their first degree, and I know they have several applications with the Campus Alberta Quality Council and, I'm sure, more to come.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for that intervention. I hope that does help the member opposite on that aspect of it. As we, again, learn the new format of the language here without 29(2)(a), it is a little different in the application of how members can speak.

As our economy continues to recover from the global recession and COVID-19, our institutions need to be able to react and have the ability to train the next generations of workers of the jobs ahead. Since the pandemic completely changed everyone's daily lives, it also changed the way our businesses operate and how we learn and develop our skills. Our postsecondary legislation needs to change to keep up with it. This pandemic had fundamentally changed so many things, especially with education, as we need to ensure that they have the tools to take advantage of these changes and catch up to them and succeed and thrive in them.

One of the most significant developments this bill will introduce is changing the number of categories of postsecondary institutions from six to two. I know that the two institutions within Lethbridge, the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College, are both very willing and active participants in that change and their roles going forward. There will be one category for universities and another for colleges and polytechnics. Making this change will help similar institutions work more closely together and reduce unnecessary red tape in their co-operation. In that same vein, independent academic institutions will now be enshrined within the Post-secondary Learning Act rather than through regulation.

To clarify, this change does not change the role or mandate of the independent academic institutions but instead reinforces their importance to the overall makeup of Alberta's postsecondary system by improving and prioritizing transferability, student access, and choice. When we moved the majority of postsecondary education online, we saw many students and even alumni begin to look at alternative methods of course delivery and other institutions that could better facilitate that alternative delivery. Improving the co-operation and communication between institutions prioritizes students' overall education and gives them an enhanced level of freedom to choose which institution or delivery method best suits their learning style.

Mr. Speaker, this approach fits in with the spirit of Alberta 2030, which is, to quote the official release, a plan to "equip Albertans with the skills, knowledge and competencies they need to succeed in their lifelong pursuits." This plan is a key pillar of Alberta's recovery plan and will strengthen job creation, economic growth and diversification, and individual and community prosperity. The 10-year strategy will bring in new initiatives to innovate programming, anticipate and meet labour market needs, and prioritize excellence in research. Additional initiatives include expanding work-integrated learning, new microcredential opportunities, and expanding apprenticeship education, all in the effort of cutting red tape for postsecondary programs. As I said before, COVID catalyzed this change, and we are using this opportunity to meet the needs in front of us through our postsecondary programs.

Also, as part of this bill we will see changes to the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act. The proposed amendment will refine what was introduced in the spring to ensure that several key

features of the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act continue under the new legislation once proclaimed. If they pass, it'll provide the authority to make regulations to allow apprenticeship wage rates. I know, having gone through the apprenticeship program myself as a carpenter – I believe this will be a guideline for that discussion to happen – that as a first-year apprentice you made 70 per cent of a journeyman's wage; second, 80 per cent; third, 90 per cent; and fourth, 100 per cent, and you became a full journeyman after you passed your fourth year.

As a piece of knowledge just for the House, I don't mind sharing that I had to get a new card for my journeyman carpentry because I misplaced my original, which I did find, actually, after the fact. The original was signed by the late Clint Dunford, who I gave a member's statement about yesterday, and my replacement was signed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

8:20

Mr. Schmidt: Personally signed.

Mr. Neudorf: Personally signed.

It would also provide the authority to make regulations to set apprentice-to-mentor ratios. This is one that in apprenticeship in carpentry and many other trades is a source of constant conversation. I believe the ministry will find a very heated and robust debate on that, whether journeymen should be able to in some settings train 1 to 2 apprentices or 1 to 1 or whether in some circumstances they might expand it to 1 to 3 or 1 to 4. I believe there are scenarios that may be helpful for the minister to allow some flexibility in that.

I do think that it would be wise not to have one journeyman training, for instance, 10 or 12 or 15 apprentices as I think we could all understand that that would probably limit the efficiency and effectiveness of that training. Many of the skills needed and taught during apprenticeship are very repetitive, so that number could be expanded beyond 1 to 1. I hope the minister has good feedback when we come to make those regulations and those discussions.

Thirdly, it will amend provisions respecting the designation of new trades to eliminate any conflict between the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act and the Professional and Occupational Associations Registration Act that would have prevented new professions from being regulated under either act. I am glad that this new proposed legislation takes that into account so that as we grow, as we have burgeoning new economies, whether it be hydrogen or carbon capture or whether it's a continuation of wind turbines or other renewable resources, we continue to develop, understand those trades and skills and can continue to adopt them and regulate them under this new legislation.

Mr. Speaker, as we climb out of the economic recession we experienced in 2020 and continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, preparing for the future has taken on a whole new meaning. To secure the future, we need to secure today, and one of the best ways to do that is to equip our postsecondary programs and students with the skills, knowledge, and competencies they need to compete and succeed in the world beyond their education. Through this legislation, specifically the points I hope to focus on here, we are setting up the province's next generation of business owners, entrepreneurs, skilled trade workers in anything else they choose to do and to be successful at that and give them the best tools to compete in the global market.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I actually just saw that there perhaps was an intervention possibility prior to the end of that speech. I will therefore open it up to the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland

for that intervention, and just so you know, I'll find out how much time you have left between now and the end of the next minute.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker. Again, I'm getting used to the new rules here. To the Member for Lethbridge-East: I really appreciate your oration on this, and I like the fact that you brought up a couple of points that kind of jumped out of the bill. The first one was the ratio of the apprentices. I just want to make sure that with the change in the legislation – and I'm looking from the owner's perspective on a site – there isn't too much overreach that would be coming to the site and dictating what I might have.

The other one was actually on the wages. My understanding currently, as yours was prior articulated, is that everything was based on a journeyman rate and everything was pro-rated from there, that we weren't actually going to be setting those rates as a ministry or anything else. That still allows the market to dictate depending on the labour contracts that we have, site conditions as well as union agreements.

The Acting Speaker: Nine minutes. It was seven, but that was the second intervention.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. First off, on the mentorship ratios, as I understand it, this act will provide the authority to make the regulations. They are not preset at this period in time. [interjection] I'm looking at the minister. He can't speak but . . .

The Acting Speaker: Yeah. There is an opportunity for a third intervention should you open it up to . . .

Mr. Neudorf: I will make way.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you to the member for giving way there. Indeed, the amendment that we're making there gives the minister the authority to establish regulations, to establish wage rates, and to establish apprentice-to-mentor ratios. There is no intent on changing current wage rates or ratios. We realized in the new Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act – we passed that act in June and, of course, have been in consultation with our stakeholders as we develop new regulations. We had agreed with our stakeholders that we would still need to continue the practice of having regulations on apprentice-to-mentor ratios and wage rates. That's why the amendment appears here, so we can ensure that the minister has the authority and the power to develop those regulations and keep those ratios. At this point we're not contemplating any significant changes to the wage rates or the ratios at all.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you to the minister. Thank you to the member. Again, to summarize what we just heard in this challenging new set of speaking, this legislation, if passed, will do these two things: provide authority to make regulations, not that they're going to be changed at this point in time but to set those apprenticeship-mentor ratios, which would be included in that regulation as an obligation of sponsors to ensure that sponsored apprentices are employed in an on-the-job learning environment that complies with the appropriate ratio for the relevant apprenticeship education program, which may be reviewed with stakeholders but not anticipated to change; and it would also provide the authority to make the regulations, which again would adopt what's currently there – but they could be changed with discussion with stakeholders – to allow apprenticeship wage rates to be set to ensure that existing wage rates continue after the

Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act is repealed, which it would be as this replaces that, and ensure that wage rates may be set for new apprenticeship education programs when and if appropriate.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that time to speak.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud as we work our way through interventions. We're still all learning. Thank you again for your patience. Please, the floor is yours.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am getting used to the new interventions. It's a lot more popping up and down, but that's okay. I need to still get my activity ring going on my watch.

I'm pleased to speak in second reading here on Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, and to hear a little bit of back and forth. Actually, I find it very constructive to hear from the current Minister of Advanced Education as well from the former Minister of Advanced Education about the consistent challenges that our postsecondary system is facing and what strategies can or may be effective in addressing them.

Now, my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned that, you know, it is a little bit frustrating to have so many discussions in this Legislature, to be back here debating things that aren't dealing with a number of things that are a crisis right now in our province, namely COVID as well as our economic situation. He rightly raised climate change as well, and I agree with that. However, I will say that the issue of postsecondary and the effect of this government's choices around postsecondary – namely, the decision to cut \$700 million from our postsecondary institutions – is actually an issue that I hear about quite a bit in my constituency.

I'm fortunate to represent the beautiful constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud, which has many people who have attended many of our great postsecondary institutions in Alberta. Many are employed at the University of Alberta. We have many families with children in my constituency, including young adult children who are in postsecondary. Over the summer I got to, you know, safely attend the farmers' market in my riding and talk to folks, and a consistent issue that was raised by my constituents was the concern about the cuts to postsecondary institutions by this current government.

There were concerns from two fronts. One, of course, was, absolutely, concerns from parents or students themselves saying that postsecondary is becoming out of reach, it's becoming unaffordable. It was also coming from the people who had seen their jobs being cut, their colleagues being laid off. It was also from a perspective of: what are we doing when we cut postsecondary institutions? What are the implications of that for our economy going forward? Not only does it mean that many students in Alberta will simply choose to go elsewhere for postsecondary education, but we're also failing to attract people to Alberta.

8:30

I think Bill 74 is a good context to have that conversation. We had the Minister of Advanced Education talking about Alberta 2030 and all of the goals that were laid out in there. I think it is important to see, you know, that this bill is supposed to be the implementation by legislation of some of those objectives from Alberta 2030, but, as my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar indicated, it's a very small step on the somewhat easiest piece to address, I suppose, which would be the governance, and it fails to address the very profound impact that the decisions by this government have had on the very survival and future of our postsecondary system in

Alberta; namely, around accessibility and affordability and who it's attracting. It's really an issue about brain drain, Mr. Speaker. It's Albertans saying: "Do I even see a future in this province? Will I choose Alberta as the place to do postsecondary learning? I don't know that I want to stay here." It breaks my heart when I hear those conversations, but I heard it far too many times over this past summer. [interjection] Yes, I'll give way to the Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and with apologies to *Hansard*. I know we're going to be going back and forth with me and the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. It can be a little bit fast here.

Certainly, I had the opportunity to attend at least once or twice the farmers' markets with my colleague here, and I did hear similar things as well. I think one of my comments around that would be that I have similar concerns, and I want to perhaps ask – you actually talked about postsecondary here, but in the grand scheme, as we move forward into growing our economy and trying to have a diverse set of jobs and economic platforms for the future and Alberta's future, really, is there a concern that because we have this massive brain drain, we have this inability to attract talent? Is there also a concern – I know I'm hearing from my constituents – that we're going to have trouble attracting talent to stay in the province even if they do end up graduating in Alberta? Maybe they're in institutions right now; maybe they're looking at graduating soon. I know I've been hearing from many, like, medical professionals and otherwise, who are thinking about leaving the province. Has my colleague heard similar things?

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I would agree. It's a concern of not only attracting people but keeping people here. As I mentioned, it's heartbreaking to hear young people say: "I don't want to stay here. I don't want to stay in Alberta because I don't think I can continue on my postsecondary education." So if they're doing a first degree or a diploma, they may not see any reason to extend that here. But mainly a lot of them are saying, "I don't know if this is where I would want to work, whether the jobs and the work that I want to do are going to be available in this province because of the direction this current government is taking."

Not only that, but I think it's important to note that it's not only keeping our talent here in Alberta and attracting talent from outside of Alberta to our postsecondary institutions and to stay here and to work here and to innovate here and to create here, but they need to feel that there's a great quality of life in being in Alberta. Right now I think there's general consensus that in two years under this government the quality of life has diminished incomparably in this province. It is not a place where people are saying: I think that there's great support for innovation. They're not saying that they feel that they'll have access to a great quality education system for their children. They're seeing that proposed curriculum that's coming forward. They're seeing the attack on teachers and, of course, the implications for our health care system.

I think we've learned one lesson very profoundly over the pandemic, which is that we can't have a strong economy without having a strong health care system because they go hand in hand. Our health care system has been decimated under this government. I feel like right now a lot of young people are saying: is this where I want to stay? And add on to that the lack of affordability for postsecondary.

I want to mention that I was fortunate to attend the University of Alberta here in Edmonton for my first degree. I had the opportunity to also study at two other universities, one in Ontario, at the University of Toronto, and as well an opportunity to study at the

University of Cape Town in South Africa. So I had an opportunity to kind of compare. My experience at the University of Alberta was actually my favourite experience out of all of those experiences. I truly valued my time here at the University of Alberta. It was an incredible opportunity to develop the skills and my passions and to determine what steps I wanted to take next in terms of my growth and my career and my professional choices. It challenged my thinking. It got me exposed to a whole bunch of different ways of thinking that really made me question and try to study and provide the evidence for the values that I held. We have a beautiful and wonderful thing in this province in many of our postsecondary institutions. I can speak to my experience at the University of Alberta and know that that's the case.

But I want to share an experience from when I went to the University of Toronto for law school. I began 20 years ago, and in that year, 2001, at the Faculty of Law they were having a profound discussion about tuition increases at that time. The decision was made at that time at that school to do an enormous tuition increase, that was really prohibitive. When I started law school, it was not how much I thought I was going to be paying. A comment that came from a student there has stayed with me for 20 years. During the debates that we were all having as students and with our faculty and with the dean about what was a fair tuition to charge for students in the Faculty of Law there, I remember a student saying that if you can't afford to go to law school, don't go to law school. I remember being absolutely shocked by that because it absolutely said that those who should have access to postsecondary of any learning – this was law, but it could have been any faculty. The implication was that you should only have access if you can afford it, that it's not our job to make postsecondary accessible to all, and I believe, unfortunately, that that is the same approach that this government has been taking. [interjection] Yes, I'll give way.

Mr. Dang: Thank you to my colleague here. One of the things that I've noticed that's so interesting about that is that we're talking 20 years ago when you attended law school, but just this year the Faculty of Law, for the JD program anyways, here at the University of Alberta has a 45 per cent tuition increase request, right? We're talking over 5,000 additional dollars. That's almost half as much as the deputy House leader here is going to get a raise of, but not every single law student is going to get that much of a raise.

Certainly, would you have expected that 20 years ago you'd be having the same debate but perhaps an even more egregious tuition increase as we move forward here? Would you have expected that we would be seeing such significant hardships being put on students? Is this something, accessibility, that is going to price students out of programs they have legitimately entered and legitimately qualified for? Is that something that you think is fair? I think that if I was a student, a \$5,000, 45 per cent increase in tuition could end the program for me.

The Acting Speaker: Though I'm sure the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud knows, there were an extra two minutes also added on, so it's now nine and 19.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. I saw the news, for example, that at the University of Alberta Faculty of Law they were looking at a substantial – I think exceptional is what they call it – tuition increase. Actually, I believe they sent it currently to the Minister of Advanced Education for his approval. You know, I understand there's been a little bit of back and forth, but, yes, the amounts that they're talking about increasing in terms of law – and, again, this is

just one faculty; it applies to so many others – did kind of hit me personally because I remember that. I remember that experience.

Unlike many of my fellow students at the University of Toronto, I did not go to law school with any financial support from any family. I had to pay for it all through student loans, and, you know, that was a debt that I carried for many years, 15 actually, paying off that debt. I think we have to talk about accessibility in a number of ways. Not only are we asking students – and this government has been asking students – to pay so much more money to afford their degree or diplomas. They are actually also – it acts as a barrier to prevent students from even considering accessing postsecondary. [interjection] No.

It just seems that simply knowing what the tuition costs are going to be is going to end up actually ruling some people out. It will actually result in some people saying: I'm not even going to apply because I couldn't possibly pay that amount of tuition.

It's also a barrier, you know, when we talk about student loans and student debts. Like, I appreciate that in the Alberta 2030 plan it talks about bursaries and grants, but let's be clear that that is usually a very small portion. Bursaries and grants: the benefit of them, of course, is that they're not required to be repaid by the student, but they're usually just a small fraction of what the overall tuition cost is. That certainly was my experience when I had access to some bursaries and grants. They were helpful, sure, no doubt, but the vast majority of my tuition costs – and that is the case for postsecondary students right now – still have to be repaid. Student loans still have to be repaid. While I took on the debt for 15 years of paying off my law degree, that's going to be daunting for many individuals, who will simply not want to do that.

Not only that, but I think it also affects their career path choices. We're talking about postsecondary as allowing students to have the autonomy to choose their career path, but when their career path is sometimes, you know, affected by the massive amount of student debt – and that certainly was the case for me. Again, I'm going to speak from my own experience in the law faculty, which was that you come out of law school, in my case, almost \$100,000 in debt. You're not going to choose the public policy work. You're not going to choose to go and work in a poverty law clinic. You're not going to choose that kind of work. You're going to feel obligated to do certain kinds of work. I made that choice myself of going and working in a big law firm. That wasn't my chosen career path in terms of the work I wanted to do. I realize that that's just one example, but it's about accessibility, even that daunting level of debt.

8:40

I also want to say that I've had the privilege of, you know, hearing every year since I've been elected, as I'm sure many of the members in this House have, from the students' union representatives from various postsecondary institutions. Almost on a regular, clock basis I get to hear from the University of Alberta Students' Union. I recently met with them, actually just a couple of weeks ago. It's interesting, when I look at this Alberta 2030 plan and I look at Bill 74 and the contents that are in there, that none of them match up with what I was hearing from the students' union representatives that I've heard from.

You know, the things that were top of mind for them – some of them are consistent – are about youth and student employment, right? At the time they were talking about saving the STEP program, which was a really critical way for students to get paid access to work that's related to their field of study. Employers got a benefit to be able to hire on those students. I heard even the minister in his comments today talk about this pilot voucher system

to hire co-op students. I think we had that. It was called the STEP program. I don't know exactly the details of the voucher system he's talking about, but we had the STEP program, and this government ended it.

Another consistent theme that comes up from the students' unions – it's come up three years now that I've heard from them since being elected – is issues around mental health, issues around sexual assault accountability and mechanisms to address complaints on campus, unfortunately an issue which continues to raise its head. We just simply saw some really disturbing, you know, stories in the media recently out of Queen's University, an ongoing issue, obviously, at all levels of all institutions, including our own. [interjection] Yes, I'll give way.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I guess one of my comments and questions here is that in just a few days I'll also be meeting with the students' associations from across the province. We hear consistently from so many of these organizations the same asks year over year. I know that last year I heard many of these asks, and the minister basically did nothing on these asks. I know this year I'm likely to hear those same asks if you've been hearing those same asks, my hon. colleague here from Edmonton-Whitemud. Of course, we know that these are priorities that are going to have significant impacts on students and their experience in postsecondary.

I guess one of my big questions is: what type of message do you think that this sends to students? What kind of message does this send to postsecondary students and institutions when nothing that they're asking for, none of the priorities they're listing are actually being listened to by the minister? When this government continues to ignore the requests, continues to ignore the consultations, and continues to ignore the priorities, what kind of message does that send to students?

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. You know, I think that's exactly the point that I was hoping to make, which is that those repeated asks aren't reflected – not only are they not reflected in Bill 74, but I will note that it maintains the provision in the preamble that talks about accessibility and affordability in postsecondary institutions. However, it's just in the preamble. Again, if we compare that against the actions that the UCP has taken around accessibility and affordability, it's certainly not meeting either its ambitions in its stated preamble, nor is it meeting what's being asked for by students.

I want to mention, of course, that a consistent theme that's come up in the last year or two – this, I believe, is the second year because it was identified last year as a potential threat – is the impacts on Campus Saint-Jean. That is also something that is of deep concern in my constituency. While not located in my constituency, many of my constituents care deeply about, have attended Campus Saint-Jean. They are professors. They care deeply about preserving the French language. You know, my own children are in French immersion, and if they continue on and succeed in it, I would like to think that Campus Saint-Jean is an opportunity for them as well in terms of postsecondary learning. So that's come up a lot.

Then one other piece that is obviously very near and dear to my heart, that actually the students' union representatives have brought up every year that I've met with them, is access to affordable child care. That is a consistent ask for students. When we're talking about access, again, to postsecondary, we have to think about how students aren't all generic. They don't all look the same. They come from different backgrounds and different needs. They need access to affordable child care, more so, you know, during that period of time when they're in postsecondary. So that is a consistent ask.

I think I've been very clear in my disappointment in this House as to how the current government has not only undermined access to affordable and quality child care consistently from day one along with, then, the ending of the \$25-per-day pilot program, which was really just a foreshadowing of exactly the opportunity that's before Alberta right now with \$10-per-day child care, supported by billions of dollars in funding from the federal government. Once again we are still one of the last provinces – I still have hope that we are going to be signing on to the agreement shortly. However, this is something that Albertans and Alberta families and Alberta postsecondary students need. It's something they're calling for, they've been asking for repeatedly.

You know, we didn't get a chance to hear a great many of the details about the actual contents of the act from the Minister of Advanced Education himself. But I think, more importantly, I don't – my understanding and my reading of the bill is that it's not actually meeting the dire needs even within our postsecondary system, which is significantly struggling as a result of the hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts to it. I have to say that it seems to be – it's hard not to take notice of the fact that some institutions are bearing those costs more than others. I will admit to being incredibly disheartened that the university that I graduated from, the University of Alberta, seems to be hit hardest, because the University of Alberta is not just an Edmonton-serving university. I imagine many of the members here in this House and from across the province, across the country, and across the world attended the University of Alberta. It's hard to understand why it has been singled out more so than any other university. Perhaps its location in a city that is predominantly held by members of the opposition was part of an influence. I don't know.

But I do know that it is a prize and a jewel of Alberta that has always done some incredibly leading-edge research work. We should be very proud to have this in our province and to nurture it. It's had a great reputation internationally, nationally, and within our province. It's hard to understand why such a reputable institution should be taking the brunt of these cuts more so than others. It does directly impact my constituents, it does directly impact me as a graduate of that university, and it does impact our future economy. Our postsecondary institutions, not just the University of Alberta but many of them, attract people to Alberta. If it is weakened, as it has been, if it no longer becomes a place that's held in high regard and high reputation, we will not attract people here. Not only that, we will lose young people from our province, and we should all be deeply concerned about that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join debate? I believe the individual who caught my eye was the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, it's a pleasure to rise today and speak about Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. Before I go into my comments, I do want to thank the members of the Chamber. It is fascinating to hear about the different educational experiences that many members went through to get here, and it just allows I know for myself as a member to understand many of the backgrounds a little bit better of many of the legislators here in the room today.

First of all, I just want to thank the Minister of Advanced Education for his great work that he's put into this bill. Bill 74, if passed, will make several amendments to the Post-secondary Learning Act, or PSLA, and the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship

Education Act, or STAEA. These proposed amendments are a fundamental part of implementing the Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs strategy. The Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs strategy is a key pillar in Alberta's recovery plan and the future of our economy for decades to come.

[The Speaker in the chair]

As a private-sector union liaison for the Minister of Labour and Immigration and a dual-ticketed tradesman I'm excited about the future of the strong efforts our government has made and continues to make to ensure that our postsecondary education systems are modernized and ready for the ever-changing jobs and labour market. The goals of Alberta 2030 are to improve access and student experience, develop skills needed for the jobs of the future, support innovation and commercialization with postsecondary research, strengthen internationalization, improve sustainability and affordability, and, lastly, to modernize and strengthen system governance for better collaboration and outcomes. The amendments in Bill 74 will support the implementation of the Alberta 2030 strategy and reflect the broad stakeholder feedback gathered through the strategy development phase and the system governance feedback sessions held last June.

8:50

These proposed amendments to the PSLA will align the preamble of the act with Alberta 2030, eliminate the two consecutive term limit for board members and replace it with a limit of six total years of service with a three-year cooling off period, and establish the minister's advisory council on higher education and skills. The proposed amendments will also transfer the authority to set apprenticeship tuition fees from the minister to the board of governors of the public postsecondary institutions beginning in the 2022-2023 academic year. Then, of course, it would change the number of postsecondary institution categories from six to two, one for universities and another for colleges and polytechnics, which will reduce unnecessary red tape.

This legislation will also make amendments to STAEA and will provide the authority to make regulations that will allow apprenticeship wage rates to be set, which will ensure that existing wage rates continue after the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act is repealed and also that wage rates may also be set for new apprenticeship education programs when, of course, appropriate. Bill 74 will also allow regulations to set apprenticeship-to-mentor ratios and amend the provisions respecting the designation of new trades in order to eliminate a conflict between the STAEA and the Professional and Occupational Associations Registration Act that would have prevented new professions from being regulated under either act.

Mr. Speaker, this is an important legislation for the future of advanced education in the province and especially for our tradesmen and -women. Bill 74 will give our tradesmen and -women the recognition they deserve for the education that they receive, and I encourage all members to support this bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I believe the hon. Member for St. Albert had risen just as I was on my way. The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 74, Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. One of the first things I noticed – well, obviously, I had to read the preamble before I could read the bill. Actually, the two first pieces I thought were quite interesting and obviously I certainly agree with and was happy to see them here. "Whereas the Government of Alberta is committed to ensuring that Alberta's post-secondary education system is accessible, affordable,

accountable and co-ordinated.” It goes on to say, “Whereas an accessible system is one in which all Albertans are able to plan a career path and receive post-secondary education regardless of their location or barriers.”

So, obviously, I want to talk about this. I looked through this, this act. I looked through the Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs 10-year Strategy for Post-secondary Education and didn't really see anywhere with an eye to actually creating inclusive postsecondary education, which is incredibly disappointing. Once again, there is no specific effort to include students with disabilities. Now, the reason I'm going to focus on this is because we hear in this Chamber and committees, certainly in budget estimates, all the time about justification for cutting different programming, different supports for people with disabilities, whether it's in school, whether it's, you know, after they're 18 years old, and there's always a focus on employment. This government is talking about, “Well, unemployment in people with disabilities is so high; we really want to do everything we can to make sure that they get jobs and they can be independent and they can support themselves,” which is great, which is fantastic, which is the goal, but you have to do the work.

Once again you see just this little piece of legislation and this report. Once again this government has failed to even acknowledge that. For those of you that don't know, inclusion requires some work. It requires an enabling environment. I think that for us in this Chamber what we do is that we work on legislation. You write the legislation. You put it together. We debate it. It passes. It becomes the law, and it sets the stage for what happens in the future. This is another group of people that will continue to be left behind because there is no focus on what they need or even to create an environment where they can flourish. That's the first thing I want to say about it.

I do want to talk a little bit about – you know, since the minister did stand up earlier this evening and talk about the Alberta 2030 Building Skills for Jobs report, I actually in the short time that we've been sitting here was able to read through the document. It's only, I think, about 32 pages long. Then I saw the price tag for it. It's \$3.7 million for this 32-page report. Now, I certainly don't know all the time that was involved, the consultation, the meetings, the travel. I mean, you know, for a government – I hear these members all the time, Mr. Speaker, stand up and talk about, “This program is not sustainable; we need to cut this because it is not sustainable,” yet they have no problem just paying for these reports and these consultations that, really, often just seem like a rubber stamp for what they've decided to do anyway. That they will cut these massive cheques for these consultations is truly mind-boggling.

On the one hand, they'll tell us, you know, “We have to cut these benefits; we have to sustain these programs; we have to make them sustainable into the future so everyone can get access to these programs,” yet they'll pay \$3.7 million for this report, and I hear . . . [interjection] No. I hear the member talking about the vision, the direction that this sets. Really, the six pillars, certainly they are important pillars, but I don't see the value in this particular document. I just want to remind people. I think that we lose sight of what \$3.7 million is. We talk about billions, we talk about tens of millions, but let's think about what \$3.7 million does.

I'm going to tell you about one disability program. It's called PDD. It's persons with developmental disabilities. It's people that are over 18 years of age. Basically, this program pays for staff so people that cannot live on their own or need assistance, perhaps with grocery shopping, making meals, taking medication – some people need staff 24/7; they cannot live by themselves for whatever reason. Some people need support to be able to work. Some people need support for any variety of things. There are currently about

2,000 people on a wait-list. They are on a wait-list, they've been approved for services, they've met all the criteria, but they linger on a wait-list because there are no new dollars for support. Now, these new dollars may only be a thousand dollars a month that they need, \$12,000 a year in staff support they need, but that is a difference for them between a life truly worth living and one that is incredibly difficult and that puts them at risk.

These are decisions that this government is making, all of you are making. You are making decisions . . . [interjection] Go ahead.

Member Irwin: Yeah. I just think it's really interesting and quite timely for that same member. I was just chatting with someone earlier about AISH and about the fact that this is a government that chose early on in its term to deindex AISH, something that this Premier said was not onerous. Again, let's think about what that \$3.7 million would do to support folks who are struggling on AISH, right? I obviously interjected and interrupted you, but that's exactly your point, right? These are pointed decisions that this government is making that are actively hurting people: \$3.7 million on a report. I'd be curious to know why that company was chosen, too. Who is benefiting from this? That's a whole other conversation. Again, it speaks to the priorities of this government, the misplaced priorities, and the fact that they continue to choose to hurt those who need the most support.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. That is a great point. I think sometimes we take for granted the amounts of money that we talk about. I heard chuckles when I said, you know, \$3.7 million. They seem to be quite proud, Mr. Speaker, of spending that much on a 32-page report that – I'm sorry, and no offence to the writers and no offence to any of the people that gave their time to consult on this, but \$3.7 million for this? I think that we look at these numbers, billions and tens of millions of dollars, and it's a bit insulting when I constantly hear members standing up and just talking about how unsustainable particularly human service programs are and why we need to cut things like AISH. Make no mistake; you all cut AISH when you deindexed. It has been a number of years now, and people are falling further into poverty.

But, in any event, let me get back to Bill 74. One of the things, you know, that Alberta 2030 talks about is improving accessibility, student experience, developing skills for jobs, supporting innovation and commercialization, strengthening internationalization, and that made me laugh. Let me tell you why. This is just a personal reason why I laughed. I didn't laugh at the idea. I laughed because one of the things that this government has done in two short years is drive people away. This government, this UCP government, has literally driven people away. You've driven doctors away for sure. I think we can all give examples of people that we've heard of leaving: other professionals; teachers, I've heard of; nurses, I've heard of; students, so new graduates; and researchers.

9:00

I'm going to give you my example. I know that I've talked about it before, but it bothers me. It has been one year since my son moved away. My son was a researcher at the University of Alberta. My son is a paleontologist. I kind of wanted him to be a useful doctor; he turned out to be a doctor of, you know, dead things, fossils. But he studies teeth, dinosaur teeth. He is a researcher. He does all kinds of research, but there was no future for him here. His wife, who's also a PhD, was also a researcher. There was no future for her either. They're currently in the United Kingdom. They live in London. He's at King's College, which is a really great place. He's doing research there. That university is benefiting from the education that, for the most part, he received in Alberta and in Ontario, but for the

most part he received his education here, and we could have kept him here, someone like that, in a province like Alberta, known for, obviously, dinosaurs, things like that.

But that's just one example. It's one family that has experienced what this brain drain really is. The policies that this government, this UCP government, has brought in, particularly the cuts to postsecondary education here, the loss of hundreds and hundreds of jobs, the loss of funding; that means a loss of research capacity. That means you are not attracting the research dollars. You are sinking in ranking. There is not the same amount of respect for the . . . [interjection] Go ahead.

Member Irwin: Yeah. It's exactly that. It's more than just the brain drain. One of the pieces that I'm really fearful of is just the fact that we had – you know, you can look at Alberta as being a place that people wanted to come to, attracting new talent, attracting folks in postsecondary. I've been chatting recently with someone who's a professor at the University of Alberta, and, like, there are a lot of conversations that are happening right now amongst faculty about the fact that they're not able to attract folks and that people are wanting to leave as well. I think this alone should be enough for the minister to really reflect on the direction that this province is heading. There's a real opportunity to make investments and to get Alberta back to that place, to get our postsecondary institutions like the University of Alberta, a world-renowned research facility, research institution, back to that place. Instead, he's making other decisions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Absolutely. I think it does diminish the standing of the postsecondary institutions here. What I didn't realize before – I think that I had a member of my family involved as an academic, as a researcher. I didn't realize, like, how small those communities are and how much people talk and how much they understand about what's going on in different institutions around the world, not just in Canada. People are noticing. You can scoff, and you can ignore, and you can say: no, we're not really doing anything. But this government: these decisions that you are making, these massive, deep cuts to postsecondary education are harming not just a reputation but harming our future. I mean, you have to know that investing in education, whether it's K to 12 or whether it's postsecondary, is one of the most important things that we can do for our future. Unfortunately, the target that this government has put on education is really quite sad, and then to hear them rationalize things is also very sad.

But going back to this piece of legislation, I want to talk a little bit about inclusion as well. You know, I was really hopeful. I was hopeful that Alberta 2030 would see a future for students that are disabled or not included for some other reason, that there would be a focus, because I think we have learned or we should have learned or we should know by now that without concentrated effort to include people, to address the need for diversity – to reduce barriers takes effort, and it takes legislation. It takes investment, and we haven't seen that.

One of the things I was really hopeful for was that at least in terms of apprenticeship there would be an acknowledgement that this is really a unique opportunity for inclusion. Just thinking about people with disabilities, they have a lot of barriers to begin with in terms of employment. It's not just the employer that perhaps, you know, misunderstands and thinks perhaps that hiring someone with a disability will cost them more, will be more difficult, will result in absenteeism or things like that. Those are all myths. That's not true. But I think apprenticeship programs offer really unique opportunities for workers or for students with disabilities. It is a practical approach, and it's an effective learning transfer that works really

well for people that have different learning styles. There is time to prove abilities, engage potential. It is, like, the perfect environment for someone who might need a different way to demonstrate their worth as an employee.

People, you know, students or potential workers with disabilities: I would hope at this point that we all are at a place where we understand the barriers that they face, whether it's prejudice, isolation, exploitation sometimes, an inaccessible world. I bring this up frequently. This Chamber itself is not accessible to people even with wheelchairs or people that perhaps are deaf. We don't have ASL translators that are at the ready. It is an inaccessible world, and until we actually make the investments and do the work, we are not going to make those changes. It's sad, but I'm not too surprised.

Hopefully, we're coming out of COVID for good, and hopefully we aren't going to have another surge in cases, and hopefully we can start to focus on a future where we move away from this. But that means building and investing, and at a time where we're so ripe for real growth and leadership and investment, we get, like, a really limp bill that doesn't even address the six pillars that are in the Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs report. You know, my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar pointed this out earlier. Why? Was there not enough time? Did you not believe in the pillars? Was this just the fastest thing you could come up with?

But this is what we see time and again from this government. We see pieces of legislation that just miss the mark. They just miss the mark. It's missed opportunity, so we spend hours and hours in this place talking about what's missing. It has not been my experience until now, but it's my sincere hope that going forward, when we have the opportunity to make significant amendments and changes to this legislation, the government will actually listen. You know, I'm not going to bet that that's going to happen, but it is my hope that perhaps one day they'll say: "You know what? We just missed that. We didn't think about that." Let's create this legislation that enables, that creates a framework for real change going forward. Again, I am hopeful that that will happen. [interjection] Oh. Go ahead.

Member Irwin: I think, you know, one of the things that we had chatted about earlier was just around the fact that this government is making life so much more unaffordable, right? I know you haven't touched on it too much yet. I've really appreciated what you've presented, especially when it comes to folks with disabilities, but I'm hearing from countless constituents. I know that our colleagues who've spoken to this bill have said the same thing, particularly around tuition and just how inaccessible it's becoming. Again, we think about – at a time when we should be investing in people and we should encourage our young people in particular to seek higher education of any form, whether it's trades education, whether it's university, whatever it might be, many of them are unable to do so, and it's just becoming more and more challenging. I think, to the comments from my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar just talking about the affordability as well and the fact that – listen, of all the things we could be talking about right now, why couldn't we be talking about a bill that would make tuition more affordable?

9:10

Ms Renaud: Thanks. Yeah. I mean, you know, sadly, this government's record on making tuition affordable is sad. I think they also increased the lending rate for student loans. I mean, one of the first things they did is – yeah; way to build a future for all of us. Let's just jack up the prices for tuition, and – you know what? – we're going to charge people to borrow money to attend. Again, short-sighted as usual, not very surprising.

But some of the things that I hope, going forward, as we continue to debate this bill – and hopefully this government genuinely wants to make this better. I'm hopeful still. You know, even something like the minister's advisory council on higher education and skills: there's a lot of effort in this particular piece of legislation to determine who can't be on it and what the powers are. But how about putting something in here, maybe amending this legislation, that actually sets a tone around inclusion and diversity so that anyone looking at this legislation and then following this legislation will understand that that is the goal of this government of Alberta, to create opportunity, to support opportunity, and to invest in opportunity? It begins at the highest level with legislation that will set the standard or set the path forward. I'm not going to hold my breath, but I'm always going to be hopeful that that will happen.

The other simple thing: change the intent in the preamble. It wouldn't take much to add some language in the preamble that talks about barriers and then what this legislation will do to break those barriers down, not just break those barriers down but create opportunity.

Then I find it really sad that ministries aren't talking to each other. There is this Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs going on; no mention of learners with disabilities.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, and then we'll follow that, to go back and forth and create some parity, with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure the hon. member can be on deck for a couple more minutes. I won't be long. It's a privilege today to stand up and speak to Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. The proposed Post-secondary Learning Act amendments are part of that implementation of the Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs strategy.

I'm very happy to be able to stand up here today and say that as our economy comes out – as our economy comes out – of and from underneath a global recession and, of course, the impacts of COVID-19, our institutions are going to need to be able to react. They're going to have to be able to have the ability to train the next generation of workers. I mean workers. We've seen some of the best rebound in Alberta history in the last year or so in the number of jobs that have been created partly, maybe primarily, as a result of the policies of this party and the lowering of corporate tax rates, et cetera, that have allowed businesses to see Alberta as a province in which they want to invest, in which they want to come and create jobs and bring prosperity back to this province.

I'm glad to see that our Minister of Advanced Education has anticipated this, that our party has anticipated this, and that we are taking our universities and our polytechnics and we're changing the way that they do business. If anything, COVID has taught, I'm sure, everybody in this House and most of the businesses in this province that we can do business differently and that the skills that are acquired and that we may need going into the future may have to change, so our postsecondary legislation needs to change in order to keep up with it. Many of these things were changing anyway, and we are going to usher them in forward with this piece of legislation.

I want to take a couple of minutes here just to thank the minister. I know that my community – it's a resource-based community, Drayton Valley – and many of the small towns in my constituency depend on agriculture. They depend on forestry. They depend on oil and gas. It's a resource-based economy, and the jobs that we have are skills and trades jobs. It's really important that we have an advanced education system that's

flexible, that can meet the needs of these small rural communities. You know, it really is critical because there are communities across this province that have been – when I talk to my people, they say that they've won the lottery. They've got a polytechnic in their community. But a lot of the smaller communities across this province just don't have access to that. Their students have to move away. Their students have to incur the costs of finding a place to stay and of finding food and being able to pay for the university education or the polytechnic education, and it's very difficult on those smaller communities.

It's very difficult on the businesses that are in those smaller communities because often if they want to have their workforce upgrade, they have to move away and they have to be away from that job and they have to be able to find the money to be able to have those people no longer in the community, no longer in their jobs. I want to thank the minister because I know that he's worked with us. We have an advanced education committee in the town of Drayton Valley, and we've worked for the last two years, two and a half years probably, pretty close, from the very first day that we became government, and it was so refreshing to the town of Drayton Valley and to the advanced education committee to be able to come and to speak to a Minister of Advanced Education that was saying: "You know, we want you to think outside the box. We understand that your community has to look at this differently, as almost all of the smaller rural communities have to look at this differently."

It's nice to be able to look and see and enact a bill, that will hopefully become an act upon the passing of it in this Legislature, should that be the case, where in the preamble it says it is "highly responsive to labour market needs and, through innovative programming and excellence in research, contributes to the betterment of an innovative and prosperous Alberta," that idea that our postsecondary institutions have to be focused on helping to create workers that are employable in the communities that they live in, that meet the needs of the businesses in their communities. Again in the preamble:

Whereas an accountable system is one in which all Albertans have access to clear information about linkages between labour markets and post-secondary education programs and in which post-secondary providers are effectively governed, financially sustainable, fiscally responsible and collaborative with their communities, government, and each other.

You know, it's never easy to bring advanced education into a smaller rural community. Mr. Speaker, I know that in my community, we've struggled, and I don't think we're different than most smaller communities. Finding the numbers of students for a particular course over a number of years that will attract a postsecondary institution into that smaller community is always very difficult. You're looking at the pressures of having to be responsible fiscally to be able to deliver that program but also, at the same time, to meet the needs of the businesses and the resource economy that are in many of these smaller communities.

It's a tough thing to do, yet I'm very proud of the fact that our government is prepared to start looking at being creative, looking at being flexible, looking at helping postsecondary institutions to co-operate with each other and to look for their needs that are within the local communities that we live in and serve. You know, I think we see shadows of that in some of the pieces of this legislation. When I look at that 102.4(1), where

a comprehensive community college shall . . . collaborate with other post-secondary institutions and community and industry organizations to support regional access to foundational learning, diploma certificate and undergraduate degree programs.

Again in 102.5 . . . [interjection]

Mr. Walker: Thank you so much to the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, Mr. Speaker, just to intervene here, and thank you for accepting. Your comments have really struck a chord with me on this very important bill, as has this great dialogue we've had here tonight on this very important bill, and I thank the minister for tabling it. To the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, I just wonder: could he expand a bit? Being an education professional for decades and decades, he knows the importance of education in Alberta, especially as he's speaking so eloquently as per rural Alberta, such great common sense there, including in his constituency, re-elected with 72 per cent of the vote. That's incredible. Could he just expand, with his background as a high school teacher, on the importance of that transition from high school, ensuring a robust advanced education system, including flexibility, looking at the trades and all of that, and maybe some anecdotal stories?

Thank you.

9:20

Mr. Smith: Thank you to the member for that intervention there. You know, I was a high school teacher for 30 years living in a rural environment and living in a town where we had a mid-sized high school. It was large enough to be able to provide all of the programming that students would need but maybe not as large as the Harry Ainlays and some of the other larger schools across the province. We were blessed. We were blessed that at some point in time, probably, I believe, in the '70s and '80s under a Progressive Conservative government, where our high school, for instance, had some really well-appointed trades shops, whether it was the welding shop or whether it was the automotives or whether it was the woodworking. While there were always times when it was difficult in the middle of a booming oil economy to find the teachers that were capable of delivering the curriculum in those shops, I can tell you that one of the things that I came to understand very early in my teaching career is the value of ensuring that our high school education allows for the trades to be taught within those schools.

You know, I hate to say this but sometimes students, when they came into my social studies class, didn't always see it as their number one priority. They were in my high school social studies class because they wanted to be in that automotive class, and they wanted to be able to get that automotive certificate, at the end of the day. They endured Mr. Smith – okay – but they loved going into that woodworking shop with Mr. Rempel, or they loved going in to see Rocky and being able to go into that automotive shop, or they loved Mr. Hall because he was teaching them how to weld and that was going to get them into the RAP program, and that was going to get them straight into a job in the oil industry in Drayton Valley, where they wanted to live because that's where they'd grown up.

I see this piece of legislation as building on that, building on those strengths that we have at the high school level in the province of Alberta. You know, when I take a look at section 102.5 and I see at the end of that under (c), "collaborate with other post-secondary institutions to support regional access to undergraduate degree programs," I really believe that one of the things we need is an advanced education system that's flexible enough, where even though we may be the regional steward of, say, NorQuest or any other of the postsecondary institutions, that we have the flexibility and that those institutions are co-ordinating and working together to provide the postsecondary education that we need at the rural level in some of our smaller communities.

I'm just so very proud of the fact that in Drayton Valley we've had long conversations about how we want to move forward on that

and that every time we've needed to be able to get some advice from the minister about how to move forward, how to meet some of the – and to help him progress towards Alberta 2030. He's been there, he's been willing to meet with us, he's been willing to give us advice, and there has been an open-door policy.

So it was not a surprise to me when I heard the minister stand up this evening and talk about the engagement that he's gone through with this piece of legislation, and I think I heard him say things like he had over 200 one-on-one interviews – 100 interviews; okay; I got that backwards; it's dyslexic sometimes – and, you know, that there were 31 round-table discussions with faculty and students, that he had 5,000 survey responses, that he had workbooks for some of the people to be able to take home and to work through – amazing, the kind of public engagement that was done in this little piece of legislation that we have before us tonight – with six public town halls with 1,500 people attending, and all of it focusing down to promote a single strategic plan for postsecondary education in the province of Alberta. Minister, I think that you have done an amazing job with this bill, and I want to just give you my congratulations from my constituents to you.

Now, obviously, there are lots of people that have spoken to this bill tonight and have brought forward the pieces of this bill. Obviously, this bill will update the preamble of the act to reflect the changes to the postsecondary system and the principles that will govern and move us towards that Alberta 2030. It will provide authority to establish the minister's advisory council, and, you know, this council will provide advice to the minister. It will help with the strategic goals for Advanced Education. It will help with the metrics for measuring performance of public postsecondary institutions and independent academic institutions in the province. And it will move us towards having a postsecondary advanced education system that will be able to meet the needs of the students and the businesses of this province. Good on you, Mr. Minister, for moving in that direction.

Changing the number of categories of postsecondary from six to two, so, you know, you'll have one category for universities and one category for the polytechnics and the colleges. Changing the way term limits for board members are set under the act from a limit of two consecutive terms up to three years each to a limit of six consecutive years of service regardless of the number of terms. Transferring the authority to set apprenticeship tuition from the minister to the boards of governors of public postsecondary institutions. Hmm, decentralizing of some decision-making. Love it. Okay.

This provides less top-down direction to postsecondary institutions and more of the autonomy that they have been looking for, and of course as a good Conservative we do believe that often the best decisions are made by those people and those institutions that are at the most local level and that best understand the issues that they're going through. [interjection] Go right ahead.

Mr. Schmidt: I thank the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon for allowing me to intervene in his debate. I have a question for him on this very point about decentralizing decisions around setting tuition for apprenticeship programs. In his speech he talked about the importance of maintaining local education for students in their communities. I'm wondering if he shares my concern that by decentralizing tuition rates for apprenticeship programs, the system will allow for creation of competition between colleges as far as tuition rates go and perhaps actually have the perverse result of driving students out of his community to seek more affordable education in other communities. I wonder if the member would like to comment on that concern.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Member, for your question. I guess I would suggest that one of the things that I love about this act is that it does expect postsecondary institutions and advanced education institutions to work collaboratively with each other. I really believe as a rural MLA that when we get those things working together within my local area, my local region that maybe, perhaps, we could actually lower the costs for our students, and that would be the goal because they don't have to move away from our little communities into the big city, into an Edmonton or into a Calgary, but, rather, perhaps with the flexibility that this act is going to be bringing, it will allow them and the businesses to actually reduce some of their costs when it comes to postsecondary education. I think that's the goal for all of us. I think that's on both sides of the House, that what we want to see is a more flexible situation where our students can afford to be able to get the skills and the knowledge and the experiences that they need to become the workers of this province.

We can see, and we've talked about it a little bit with some of the other members in this House, that we've had the capacity to provide authority to make regulations to allow apprentice wage rates to be set in order to ensure existing wage rates continue after the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act is repealed and to ensure that wage rates may be set for new apprenticeship education programs. We've had discussion here tonight already about the fact that perhaps these amendments will give the minister the capacity to set regulations that will govern wage rates, not that we're necessarily looking at doing that right now, but we'll at least be able to address that when it becomes an issue.

9:30

It will provide authority to the minister to make regulations to set apprenticeship-mentor ratios, which would be included in regulation as an obligation of sponsors to ensure that sponsored apprentices are employed in an on-the-job learning environment. Of course, you know, that's an important issue as well when it comes to journeymen and apprentices and trying to figure out what we need. [interjection] Go ahead.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I appreciate the member giving way. I just wanted to comment on – he talked about the decentralization of tuition, and he hit on something that I think is particularly important and a key initiative within Alberta 2030 as well that I think sometimes gets overlooked. One of the things that we established within Alberta 2030 is the idea of deconsolidating some of our postsecondary institutions. This is incredibly significant. I can't understate, you know, how important this is. What this will effectively mean is that we will give many of our postsecondary institutions the greatest degree of independence and autonomy that can possibly exist. It'll be a complete decoupling from government oversight and direction over many of our postsecondary institutions. Why? We want to remove red tape and encourage them to be entrepreneurial and innovative. I thank you for raising that point about decentralization, more autonomy.

Mr. Smith: One more minute? Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll just take a fraction of that time and just say that, you know, it's an incredibly important thing that we do in this Legislature regardless of the bills that we're discussing. As other members have mentioned, when you spend 30 years of your life in education not at postsecondary but at the high school level, you understand that education opens doors and education provides hope and that we can provide that for our postsecondary and advanced education system by helping it to work more collaboratively with businesses to meet the needs of the students and the workers that we have in the future. It's an amazing thing.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, and thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore had caught my eye earlier.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity this evening to join the debate and add some comments around Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. You know, I've been listening very, very intently this evening to the debate, catching a few comments here and there. Of course, some of the stories that I've heard from members – I've always enjoyed that, hearing those different perspectives from people, their journeys along the way and how things influence where they will go, so I may be providing some comments around there.

Of course, as usual, I mean, even though this bill is only before us here in second reading – I haven't had a lot of time to really dig into it – I always quickly zip through the pages, seeing what kind of language jumps out at me, any concerns I have with that, and it's true to form here so far. I usually always find at least one thing when I quickly skim through that causes me some pause around how it's worded. Maybe I will start there this evening, Mr. Speaker, talking about the council that the minister is planning to form.

Well, you know, I think maybe just in general principle I might not really have a problem with this. I certainly remember during the NDP government's time when the Education minister formed the student advisory council and that, in fact, one of my students from one of my schools got a chance to participate for that for the first time. I think it's very, very valuable to be listening to our students, and I mean actually listen, not just hear them but listen to what they're saying and some of the advice that they're giving. That'll become important shortly here in just a little bit.

On page 13 when I'm looking at the powers and duties, one of the comments – just hearing from the Minister of Advanced Education talking about providing the greatest autonomy to institutions: you know, I've heard that a little bit throughout the discussion this evening. I can appreciate where that is important. It's something that they want to bring forward. But then I see something else that seems to kind of just butt heads with that and goes against that thinking. So right off the top I'm looking at this, under powers and duties, 107.02(1).

The Minister's Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills may make rules governing the calling of its meetings, the procedure to be used at its meetings, the conduct of business at its meetings, reporting and any other matters as required.

I mean, that sounds all fine. They're asking the council to manage themselves and whatnot, which would start to line up around the whole concept of the autonomy and allowing, you know, these things to make their decisions.

But then we get to (2). "The Minister's Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills shall hold meetings on matters as directed by the Minister." So here we've gone from talking about forming, you know, rules of how you'll conduct your meetings, when, things like that, to now you're being told what's going to go on. That's now taking away the autonomy, so you see how these are starting to conflict with each other in terms of the language. And with the frequency directed by the minister, that's pretty much just throwing that autonomy right out the window. So you have these two clauses that are conflicting with each other. I don't know if that was just simply a mistake, or was that on purpose? You know, as I've constantly tried to remind the House here, Mr. Speaker, over the course of this 30th Legislature, I sometimes see things in writing but then what I'm hearing isn't lining up, and tonight is yet another example. We're hearing about autonomy being an important thing, yet the language here is showing me that's not the case.

Which now gets me to (3) of the same one, here on page 13. “The Minister’s Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills shall engage with the following groups with the frequency directed by the Minister.” There’s that little catchphrase again. Of course, we have the different groups here: students, academic staff, presidents, chairs. One of the things that I’ve consistently heard over the years – and, you know, in my riding of Edmonton-Decore I have 26 schools, three of them being high schools, all three high schools in the Edmonton area that’s north of the Yellowhead freeway, so I get a chance to talk to my high school students on a regular basis. One of the consistent things I always hear is that students don’t feel like they’re heard. They have a lot to contribute. We really, really need to listen, because at the end of the day the actions that we’re taking here in the House are the ones that they’re going to have to deal with later in the future. Wouldn’t it make sense that we set things up into a position where they would like to see it go?

When I look at this, the language, “directed by the Minister,” it gives me pause, because you could actually skip groups or one group in favour of others. I’ve certainly heard from staff members sometimes that they’re trying to input, you know, how to make the system better, how to make it run better, how to provide education to our young emerging leaders that will help them lead on the world stage. This language actually has the ability to allow the minister to direct the group to skip or pass over or something along that line, and that’s a problem. If you don’t really want to listen to students, you direct the group maybe to pass over. If you don’t want to hear staff members, you might want to pass them over. [interjection] I notice my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar, and I’m willing to give way.

Mr. Schmidt: I thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore for letting me intervene in this debate, and I’d just like to add my own thought on the matter that he’s raising. It seems to me like the minister is setting up a council that allows him to avoid responsibility that he should have for consulting with these groups. As my friend from Edmonton-Decore said, this legislation allows the minister to direct an advisory council to meet with students, academic staff members, presidents, chairs, boards, or anybody else that the minister directs. I certainly hope that it’s the case that the minister keeps meeting with these groups directly himself and doesn’t shift that responsibility onto this council.

9:40

Now, I understand that members opposite are incredibly unpopular these days and that when they meet with stakeholders in their ministries, they probably hear a bunch of things that they don’t like. What I’m afraid of is that the minister is setting up a mechanism for him to avoid accountability and for him to avoid the unpleasant news that the stakeholders have to give him and is instead shifting that responsibility to this council.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar for pointing that out. Yes. I mean, we know right now that tuition rates are going up. Loans on tuition are a lot higher. There are a lot of students that I’m hearing from that have considerable concerns around that, and again they’re not feeling heard to that challenge. I do believe there could be potentially an avenue with which to avoid that accountability to those groups by directing this council to potentially just not get to a specific group.

Now, my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar also pointed out in subsection 107.02(3)(e) – this is what I like to call the catch-all phrase, Mr. Speaker – and “any other groups as directed by the Minister.” I mean, at this point as long as the minister says, “Well, you need to meet with this group,” it might have absolutely nothing

do with postsecondary education, but it’s covered by that sort of thing. When you start utilizing that, “Well, I want you to meet with this group,” “Well, we don’t have enough time now,” – you know, whatever the excuse is, insert there – now you get to start skipping some of these other groups and simply say, “Well, the council didn’t have time to meet with you.”

Now, perhaps if there was maybe a suggestion later on of maybe requiring a minimum number of times to meet with each one of these groups in a year – at least meet with the students once a year, minimum – I would certainly possibly feel a little bit better around this kind of language. My hope is that the minister will take that into account and somehow, I guess, provide, as I mentioned earlier, students feeling that they’re not being listened to some way that they know they will at least have a forum a minimum number of times rather than just simply directed by the Advanced Education minister.

Now, some of the other comments that I heard along the way, of course right near the beginning, talking about this path to 2030: well, great that we’re looking towards the future, but as my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar made mention to, when you’ve cut \$700 million out of that budget, your path to 2030 just got a whole lot longer because you just kicked yourself back probably – what? – to 2000 maybe. I don’t know for sure. We’ve just made that journey a whole lot more difficult. With those cuts that’s now come with consequences of rising tuition, the changes that we’ve seen around student loans, and my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud talking about postsecondary education being accessible for people to be able to go and attend. Hence, when I’m hearing about these personal stories, it brought me back to my time.

Now, certainly it was probably a little bit longer than 20 years since postsecondary education. I did not decide to attend the University of Alberta; I ended up going to NAIT. The funny reason I actually chose that was because at the time the University of Alberta Golden Bears first-year players tended to red shirt, and I wasn’t a big fan of that. You’re either on the team or you’re not. Going to NAIT, I knew I was in the lineup. I was dressing, I was out there with the team, so that kind of helped me in my decision in taking engineering design over at NAIT. You know, back at those times my parents didn’t have a lot of money, and that athletic scholarship was actually the difference between me being able to attend and go to NAIT and not. When I look at student – I mean, I can’t even imagine what it was like having a \$100,000 student loan to pay off. You know, I certainly had a few thousand dollars to pay back on my education, and interest rates certainly weren’t at the levels they are now. When I think about Edmonton-Decore and its residents and some of the students there, there’s actual genuine concern about: will they even be able to afford to be able to attend postsecondary education? [interjection] I’m willing to give way again.

Mr. Schmidt: I thank my hon. friend from Edmonton-Decore for allowing me to just offer my comments as well, because I not only share his concern about the effect that rising tuition has had on dissuading potential students from attending postsecondary education, but I’m also afraid of the impact that the rising cost of living in Alberta will have on the ability of students who do decide to go to university or college to pay back their loans. I mean, one of the things that we’ve seen is that wages in Alberta have been stagnant for a really long time, but the cost of tuition is going up. The cost of insurance for an automobile is going up. The cost of electricity to power your house and the cost to heat your house is going up. The cost of gas is going up. The cost of groceries is going up, but wages are not going up.

To add additional student debt on top of all of these other cost-of-living increases that this government is either causing or cares nothing about will further burden students in Edmonton-Decore with debt that they can never afford to repay.

Mr. Nielsen: Yeah. That's very, very true. You know, again, I think back to the little car that I had and the little amount of gas. I still joke to this day that during that time at NAIT I remember a price war going on at the gas stations for gas, and I filled up my little 1981 Dodge Colt at \$17.9. It's pretty crazy to think about where we've come from those times. As I said, it was certainly more than 20 years ago.

One of the other things I wanted to key in on, that I heard from my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud, is around child care. It's very important to think about. When the NDP were government and we brought in \$25-a-day child care, I remember going to one of those child care centres the day that that was formally announced, and it was amazing. You know, the executive director and some of the staff just knew that I knew, but I couldn't tell them until literally the last second, but they did invite me to the chance to introduce that to all the parents. I remember one single mom there came in, found out about this \$25 a day that was now available to her, and she literally broke down in tears of joy because she says, "You guys have just now allowed me to go back to school so that I can get a higher education and I can provide a better life for my child." It's going to be tough. It wasn't like she had a high-paying job, but she thought that \$25 a day was going to make the difference. Without it she was certain she was not going to be able to go.

When we think about these kinds of changes that we're doing to postsecondary – so we have this path to 2030, this vision, but we're already starting from so far back, from cutting \$700 million, the higher rates of student tuition that are climbing, the debt, and, as my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned, also the other rising costs, the rising costs of insurance and all of those costs for the students like me. I was still able to live at home. I really didn't have much for bills except for my little car there. These are all becoming barriers to be able to access postsecondary education. [interjection] I'm happy to give way again.

9:50

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you to my friend from Edmonton-Decore again. He just twigged on something that I wanted to address in my comments, and I didn't get the chance to. This was with respect to the goal of improving internationalization. My friend from Edmonton-Decore talked about staying at home so that he could afford to go to university. I think with the rising tuition that more and more Alberta students will choose to stay at home. While I respect that choice, it goes counter to the minister's goal of improving internationalization, because internationalization is not simply about having more international students come to Alberta. It is also about having more Alberta students go abroad to learn, expand their horizons, and then bring that knowledge and experience back to Alberta to improve our communities. I'm afraid that with the tuition increases – because, you know, Alberta students do go abroad, but they often pay domestic tuition to be able to do that – they won't be willing to take on the additional expenses of going to a foreign country, and we won't achieve that goal.

Thank you.

Mr. Nielsen: Yeah, no. That's a very good point. You know, one of the things I'm worried about with all of these rising costs – and this actually kind of leads a little bit to the comment I heard from the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon around businesses wanting to come to Alberta. Clearly, it has been demonstrated that simply a

low corporate tax rate is not going to do that. We have not seen that movement simply due to that. It's because businesses that are coming here are looking at a whole range of things, not just a low corporate tax rate. They're looking: does it have a good health care system? Does it have good infrastructure? Does it have a solid education system?

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and join the debate on Bill 74, the Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. Certainly, from the comments of the minister early on this evening, he indicated that, obviously, this bill had come out of some extensive consultation, as he described it and others also, and also from a report that they commissioned that has already been noted cost \$3.7 million to the consulting company for them to come up with the Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs strategy.

So I guess I'm just a bit confused because if this is a strategy for postsecondary education – I do have this sort of double-sided sheet that I'm happy to table, Mr. Speaker, from the website of the minister about what the Alberta 2030 building skills for jobs is all about. It says that certainly this is a vision – a vision – for postsecondary education in this province. This is a summary that outlines the vision, goals, objectives, and flagship initiatives for the future of Alberta's postsecondary institutions.

Well, I'm a bit confused by that because if you look at the title it says: Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs. Wow. That's a pretty limited vision for postsecondary. It's just about getting skills for a job. That's not my understanding of postsecondary education, and certainly that's not what I experienced when I went to the University of Alberta in 1979, so that's over 40 years ago. That was a chance to expand my horizons, understand how society works, understand democracy. I did a degree in political science.

Like, this is a vision? This is a technical briefing. This is no vision. This is ridiculous. It's very disturbing to see that this is what the government calls a vision for postsecondary education. It's so limited. If I was a professor in a faculty of arts and humanities, I'd be insulted by this document, and the students should be insulted, too. It's so narrow in its vision, and if this bill is built on that, which is what the minister said, then that is also disgusting. Let's have a vision. Let's have a government that actually includes, you know, all of us and can see the broadened discourses. Let's expand the discourses.

[Mr. Amery in the chair]

But no. Education is about getting a job; that's it. That's not true. That's not true. We know that education and knowledge is a game changer for us. I know it changed my life profoundly. I grew up, you know, in a small community in the north of this province. When I came to the big city of Edmonton to get my first degree at the University of Alberta, my life changed completely. I expanded my view about many things. I understood so many other things than just about getting a job. It was just a whole different thing. To see this UCP government talk about this, that this is what the vision for postsecondary education is, is disturbing to say the least. I just wanted to start my comments by talking about that.

Secondly, I want to talk about just the record of the UCP government since they've been elected. Of course, I have the honour to represent the riding of Edmonton-Riverview and the University of Alberta, which is our, you know, leading institution in this whole province. Tragically, under the UCP they're devastating the University of Alberta. They're expecting the University of

Alberta to bear the brunt of 50 per cent of the cuts they've made this year in their budget. That's, like, over \$60 million. I think it's \$126 million for all postsecondaries, but for the University of Alberta it's \$60 million.

That's a devastating blow to the university. They've been such stalwart, hard-working – the president, the board of governors have worked so hard to be responsible about: “Okay. The UCP government is elected. We need to understand their song sheet. We need to try to understand what they want from us.” So guess what they did? They did a ton of things to . . . [interjection] Yes. I'll give way.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I just want to note for the record that I like to be very proud of the things that are in my constituency, but every single time I attend some amazing institution or organization, I get to hear that they actually reside within the Member for Edmonton-Riverview's, and that includes the University of Alberta. I think the member was about to share – because I mentioned that I had heard quite a bit about some of the parents and people who work at the University of Alberta and students who attend it. As the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, that represents the University of Alberta, I'm certain that you probably have heard a great deal from the organization themselves and, you know, how they have tried to pivot to maintain their reputation and to maintain the great work they do but how challenging that has been given the overwhelming cuts that they have faced, disproportionate, honestly, compared to so many other institutions in this province. I'd like to hear a little bit more about specifically what you feel that they have tried to do but also what challenges they've faced in the University of Alberta.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much for that question. Certainly, we know that the University of Alberta actually has 25 per cent of all postsecondary students attend it, right? So it's 25 per cent, but as I said in my remarks earlier, they have had to bear 50 per cent of the cuts that this UCP government has created in their most recent budget.

[The Speaker in the chair]

That is a significant burden to the University of Alberta, but, you know, they are responsible, and certainly, having spoken to the president, I know that the board of governors has been working hard to understand what this government thinks should happen in postsecondary education. They're trying to be, I guess, responsible and follow sort of the direction. This is what needs to happen.

They've done extraordinary things to shift and to be responsible fiscally. They've decreased their administrative costs, with a total savings of \$95 million. This is just since the UCP government came in. This is, you know, of course, significant, and we know that that means that hundreds and hundreds of people have been laid off. But they've had to do that. They've had to do that because the UCP said: “This is the rules now. This is the game that you need to play with us. This is what we want, and you need to do that.” So they did.

They've also changed the faculties. They've grouped 13 of their faculties into three colleges. Again, that's a huge administrative shift and change that they've done, again, for cost containment, to be responsible. They've changed their procurement process and are rethinking the use of space to create an additional \$32 million in savings.

10:00

These are not simple things you can just do. These are gargantuan. They've been responsible and done that, and guess

what the UCP does? The UCP says to them: oh, no, that's not enough; you've got to actually do more. They were told, “You have to cut,” so they did cut, but then they had an even higher expectation of having less funding. Instead of 10 per cent it was 11 per cent, and as I said, the lion's share of the cuts went to U of A. This is our world-class institution, you know, a top university on the planet, and this is what the current government is doing.

Of course, this bill does nothing to address any of this or even acknowledge the significant work that they have done to try to, you know, better serve people, but it's kind of impossible in a UCP government world. [interjection] Go ahead.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I just wanted to ask the hon. member because I know, too – and I don't want to presume what her comments will be. I've spoken a little bit about my experience when I was in postsecondary, but I also know that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview is herself the parent of three young men who maybe have attended postsecondary or are looking to. I believe that probably your perspective as a parent of students who might be, you know, looking at postsecondary right now and evaluating whether or not Alberta is a place where they want to continue on with their postsecondary or whether or not they feel that this is the place they want to stay – because this is a very important perspective that I hear from a number of my constituents, and I'm certain the Member for Edmonton-Riverview will be hearing it from her constituents as well. But I also believe you likely have some personal experience that you would like to share, and I think all members of the Assembly would benefit from hearing that perspective as they probably are hearing it from their constituents as well. So I'll turn that over to the member.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you very much for that question, the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. Yes. Of course, besides all these really draconian cuts to our postsecondary education system that really are devastating postsecondary in our province – and many of my colleagues have spoken about that, and I'll speak about that again in my remarks – also, you know, individually, students are paying more, or their parents are paying more, as the member suggested.

Yeah. I have three sons. My eldest: he's sort of off on his own now, but, I mean, he got two degrees. My middle: he only took one year, and now he's sort of working in the trades right now, and he's liking that, and that's where his path is, so that's great. But my youngest son is going to be in third year. Oh, he is in third year. It's already – what is it? – October. When I had to pay the tuition for him in the fall, of course it was much greater than last year, and that's that 7 per cent increase. The universities are doing the maximum that they can because, of course, they're in dire straits because of the cuts that the UCP government has had.

We have, you know, one more year of his undergraduate anyway, and, of course, as I'm a single mom still – I mean, obviously I'm a member of the Legislature, and I make a very good salary comparatively speaking, but imagine other single moms. You know, certainly when I was younger and working as a social worker, regardless of that being a profession – that's a low-paid profession – I mean, it was a big struggle. I can only imagine that many Alberta parents and students themselves – when I went to school, my parents didn't pay for my degree. I paid for my degrees. I needed to get big student loans, and that took me many years to pay off, but I knew the value of an education, so I was willing to make that kind of investment.

Certainly, you know, besides my personal experience, I have spoken with the Council of Alberta University Students, CAUS, as they like to call themselves, certainly the chair, Rowan Ley. They have certainly

expressed deep concerns about what's going on. I'm happy to table this document, but this is from a quote from Rowan Ley. It says:

The students at Alberta's colleges, polytechnics, and universities are deeply concerned about funding cuts, rapid increases to tuition, online course delivery, and on-campus supports.

The vice-chair goes on to say:

... funding remains a major issue. This government has cut hundreds of millions of dollars out of the post-secondary sector.

While many of the priorities in the Alberta 2030 strategy are important, we can't lose sight of the fact that the government keeps telling our universities to do more with much less.

These are just very significant fundamentals, and I think that the UCP is misguided, to speak politely, regarding what they're doing to our postsecondary education.

Like the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, I have many, many, many constituents who are professors at the university, who work at the university, who are going to school at the university, and they're devastated by the cuts to postsecondary and don't see, certainly, this Alberta 2030 strategy as a vision or anything that's going to help our postsecondary. I've spoken personally with a professor who talked, you know, very sort of broken-heartedly about how many grad students are not going to stay. These are bright minds that we want to stay in Alberta. We want them to be working in our communities after they're finished their educations, and they're leaving our province. We know that when people leave to go to higher learning somewhere else, they're less likely to come back, and that's a tragedy for us here in Alberta because, of course, we know that university education does create staffing for a whole diverse workforce, and we in Alberta need a diversification plan that gets us to expand green energy, IT.

I mean, the University of Alberta has an amazing – what's it called? I forget the name of it but just all to do with information technology and things like that, just big leaders in that area. Obviously, that's not my area. That's why I don't have the names for these things. But it's just devastating to see this. This professor who taught for many, many years at the university was really heartbroken. He just said that, you know, this kind of cut, the kind of choices that the UCP government is making isn't something that can be just remedied. Say, perhaps, they're not government in 2023, and there's a new government that comes in and does some things that actually are supportive of postsecondary education and starts investing, but the damage is done. Sometimes it takes 10, 20 years for a recovery to happen because the ship has sailed. Things start moving in another direction.

It's tragic that the choices of the UCP government are creating sort of a deficit definitely here in our province, and we know that, you know, the brain drain, as sometimes it's called, is really tough for our society, and of course it's not going to have us with a workforce that is able to create more diversity of jobs and positions for companies that want to come to Alberta or are here already but they can't get the workers that they need.

If anything – if anything – this is exactly the time to be investing in postsecondary education and not slaughtering it, because it's devastating, and as I said, the impacts are long term. I don't know. I just hope the minister is seeing the sort of narrow perspective that he is leading the charge on, that he's not understanding what an education system really is about. An education system is multifaceted, yet he's sort of, you know, lopped off one of the appendages of it because he sort of sees it only as job skills.

Of course, job skills are important. I mean, I have an arts degree in political science from many, many years ago, and, you know, when I finished that degree, I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do. It wasn't like it took me directly to a job, but it

certainly gave me perspective. It helped me sort of understand how the world works a bit more. I worked in various jobs through my 20s, and then in my late 20s, early 30s I decided that I think I want a professional degree and I want to go back to university. I got my bachelor of social work degree and my master of social work degree. I think I was led in that direction because of the work I had done in my undergraduate degree, and I could see the larger systems issues.

10:10

Like, we know in social work that we're working oftentimes with the resources that are limited, and we know that how vulnerable people are helped is through these larger systems, and governments make a big difference. The types of choices they make, how they support vulnerable people, what they do is a huge impact on the profession of social work. That really was very important, you know, even though I didn't have a job when I finished that undergraduate degree in political science from I guess it was '82. I got my bachelor and master of social work at another important institution in our province, of course, the University of Calgary. I did three degrees in this province and felt very grateful for my education here, and I'm just really concerned about what the UCP government is doing right now to really harm profoundly our postsecondary education system.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to join in the debate this evening? I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West has risen.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to rise to speak to these amendments to the Postsecondary Learning Act. I'm going to begin my comments for this fall sitting with recognizing, obviously, the long hours of the front-line health care workers and the great deal of stress that they have faced in the community of Lethbridge and throughout the province. Certainly, I have heard from so many front-line health care workers – physicians, nurses, LPNs, personal care assistants, and others – about the great, the tremendous strain of the pandemic and of the more than 800 people who have lost their lives since June and since a number of public policy decisions were taken. I just want to recognize the great deal of sacrifice that they have made since MLAs last came together. I also want to recognize the families who have been affected by things like delayed surgeries and the tremendous strain that that has put on individuals across the province. I certainly have heard from a great many constituents in Lethbridge.

Now, we are assembled this evening to discuss some of these amendments to the advanced education act, and I think it's probably useful to go through what the bill actually does in the first instance, which is that it establishes an advisory council on higher education, extends the preamble of the act. Okay. None of that is particularly enforceable in a court or in a regulatory environment of any kind. It's words. I mean, it's nice to have, and it's nice to have an intent for government, but it doesn't actually really change anything.

Then we have the six-sector model, that introduces categories of postsecondary institutions. Okay, fine. It limits the term of board members to six years. Again, okay. Not a whole lot of lightning in the sky there. That's fine. Pretty drumbeat of government stuff. It transfers authority to set apprenticeship tuition from the minister to the boards of governors or institutions. That part I found interesting because the Alberta NDP caucus had, of course, raised concerns that that bill had appeared to facilitate wageless apprenticeships, and this change appears to address our concern, which was dismissed at the time but I think was recognized post facto, so that's

nice to see. Then we have some, you know, apprentice-to-mentor ratios and regulation-making authorities, so that is also fine, too.

I would think, though, that we might, you know, as we move along in debate, want to hear from the building trades and/or others to ensure that the minister has the broadest amount of information possible that comes from a stakeholder consultation, that comes when you bring in new legislation around apprentice-to-journeyman ratios. In particular, that's been a long-standing concern of the building trades and to make sure that folks that work with their hands have the safest education possible.

That's all fine and well. I mean, the minister's advisory council on higher education and skills has a mandate to provide advice to the minister. At this point in the mandate, Mr. Speaker, it would seem to me that the minister should probably have a fairly good oar in the water when it comes to the strategic direction of our postsecondary institutions and the overall system, so I have questions as to the utility of yet another group of people that we appoint to do some of the work that the government should already have its head around.

It is nice that we're bringing in this legislation, but it would seem to me that our time in this House might be also appropriately spent grappling with the very significant issues that are in the postsecondary system, and that lies squarely on the cabinet and the government, who are setting that strategic direction, ensuring that our postsecondary institutions reflect the will of what Albertans are looking for in a postsecondary system. That's on them, not on some council of, you know, high priests or tall foreheads that they're going to outsource their work to.

It would seem to me that at this point in time, especially with the crisis that we now have – I mean, you look at five straight quarters of out-migration, Mr. Speaker. Five straight quarters. More than 15,000 people have left Alberta for good according to Statistics Canada. We have seen a net loss of more than 5,000 people this past quarter alone. What we're seeing now is the anecdotal pieces that were beginning to, you know, bubble out in the media in 2019 and early 2020. We're now seeing the actual statistics to back up some of these stories that we had begun hearing about at that time, which was that young people were leaving this province. In particular, they were leaving because of the state of the postsecondary system, broader affordability questions, and the broader direction of the government and the labour market.

Twenty-seven per cent of young Calgarians say that they'll leave within five years. That is the subheadline on an online news story a couple of weeks ago. ATB Financial, their deputy chief economist, reported that we had a net loss since last April of 16,000 people. The 2020 Calgary Attitudes and Outlook Survey found that among those in the 18 to 24 bracket, 27 per cent will likely move away. In the 18 to 29 demographic there is also significant concern about the future of the economy and whether Alberta is appropriately positioning itself for those who are pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, math for the economy of the future, not the past, whether Alberta has taken the right kinds of steps to attract investment, to incent development, to actually provide a vision for a carbon-constrained future in which climate change is real and is the most pressing issue of our time.

There is no other issue if you do not have a livable climate. That is what young people are telling this government with their feet. They're not even here to fill out the surveys saying: "Can you not blow the mountaintops apart with coal mining? We would rather have drinkable water." They're not here to provide that feedback anymore. They're not here to provide the feedback on the broader strategic direction of this or that or the other thing, whether it's the postsecondary institutions or anything else, to participate in the

government consultations and so on. They've left. [interjection] Yes.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. You know, earlier this evening we had the Member for Lethbridge-East stand up and talk about some of the institutions in Lethbridge, and by all accounts he seemed to believe that things are all rosy in Lethbridge, but I imagine, just from what you're talking about, the out-migration and the severe cuts – we've heard from members talking about the damage being done here in the capital city at the University of Alberta and other institutions in this region. I'm wondering if the Member for Lethbridge-West can just talk about what that's been like in Lethbridge for those institutions under this government.

10:20

Ms Phillips: Well, certainly, when the cuts began – and I thank the member for those specific questions – it was very clear to me that there were going to be significant job losses, because you don't take that kind of a large amount of money out of the economy of a city of a hundred thousand without having some very significant attendant economic effects. You simply don't.

I remember that the first conversation I had that kind of crystallized this for me was when I was talking to an academic whose wife works in the private sector. She said: "Well, we need to replace the minivan, but we're not doing that right now. You know, the kids are getting older. We've done all the sports with it. The minivan owes us nothing. It's got over 400,000 kilometres on it, but it's going to have to do because we don't know what is happening. We've already taken a 6 per cent cut at U of L – he's a senior researcher, right? – and we don't know what the future is."

Well, now we sort of do. There was another 6 per cent that came in the '20-21 budget, so that's a cumulative 12, for a total over the four-year forecast period, at least from what it looks like right now for the University of Lethbridge, of \$20 million being taken out of the local economy. That's a pretty significant amount in a city of a hundred thousand.

Now, lest anyone think that, you know, that's just a bunch of government work, it is not. It is so far from that. It is researchers who are doing amazing research over in science and technology. It is certainly those who are working with the University of Lethbridge's world-leading art collection, which is a fantastic teaching tool, and it's also a research tool as well for many, many historians and others. So the losses have been significant.

Every single time – every single time – I knock on doors, I come across someone who has just lost their job, whether it was at the college or the university. I haven't talked about the college at all, but this last year they also took a 6 per cent reduction. And it's not always academics. It is oftentimes people who work in maintenance. It is people who supply certain goods or services to the university or college. They just look at me like they don't understand what the end game is here. They know the value of what they and their colleagues and their entire institution have given to the local economy and to the economy in Alberta more broadly.

It is understood that what folks in Lethbridge are providing is an affordable education outside of the major centres in a more rural area. It has always been that way in Lethbridge, that kids who were from more modest backgrounds or from farming backgrounds could access some form of postsecondary education in Lethbridge. People were proud of that, and they still are, and they were always proud of the fact that the whole city understood that with the college and the university the role was as a ladder in society, not as a set of large doors slammed in front of people. The idea was that people could move on and do different things with their lives if they wanted to, or they could go and access the kind of new knowledge and

information and contacts that they needed to grow their farming operations, for example, so that they could stay, could go back and stay in those communities.

That is what people understand is being lost, and they don't understand that the university and the college contribute so much in the way of water research and understanding of agriculture and business practices and so on. They don't understand how that's not the future of Alberta, how we could possibly have a public policy environment that does not appreciate, understand, and actually nurture the fact that that is the future of this place. You know, ordinary people are just confused by the trajectory of this government. When they lose their jobs at a postsecondary institution, whether it's colleges or universities, they say: this place wasn't running on a whole bunch of fat. [interjection] Yes.

Ms Renaud: Sorry to interrupt – this is very awkward – but just before we run out of time tonight, I really wanted to go back to something that you started talking about that I thought was fascinating. Just from your experience as well, at this point in the mandate it seems very odd that a minister would use his opportunity to introduce legislation that just is so limp, really. It's not sort of forward looking. It doesn't even, actually, you know, really address the six pillars that he was boasting about in his 2030 report. I'm just wondering if you could just shed some light on that, maybe talk about what you would expect in a minister truly focused on the future and strengthening the future for all Albertans.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you for the question. Really, at this point where we are at, there have been a number of different consultations, and there have been lots of engagements with various boards of governors, with industry and others, and that is all fine and well. I think it has been good work and is the usual work of government, so, you know, a gold star for the job description. But the fact is that at this point, like, let's just get it done, because what has been happening so far is not working. People are leaving. Costs are going up at postsecondaries. There is not that sense of optimism and

opportunity here in Alberta for that very, very important 18 to sort of 29 demographic, when people are making those decisions to put down roots, to have children here, to buy homes, to do all of the things that keep the economy going, and people are continuing to contribute in ways paid and unpaid in terms of our civil society engagement and all the rest of it.

You know, at this point it is incumbent upon the minister to demonstrate some action to, I think, address some of the very serious structural issues that his government's policy has created. There is no question that government policy has created this situation with wave after wave of COVID compounding on job losses after job losses after job losses, with 50,000 jobs lost before the pandemic alone, Mr. Speaker. We have some of these structural issues, and the fact of the matter is that we need to get to work on them, not appointing some more people to sit around a table to talk about the problems. Let's get on with the doing.

Government, you know, is a funny organism in that it's really – you get advice all the time to have more people talk more of the time. But as a government you can also make a very positive and direct effect on people's ordinary lives through affordability, through education, through services like child care, through all kinds of different ways that government, like I said, creates that ladder for people rather than treating your job – and certainly your job is overseeing the postsecondary system – as a series of doors that slam in front of people, cutting off opportunity for so many.

Mr. Speaker, my time is now up. I would like to move to adjourn debate if I might.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Lots of great progress this evening. I appreciate everyone's participation, but with that, I do move that we adjourn the Assembly until 9 a.m. Thursday, October 28, 2021.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:29 p.m.]

Table of Contents

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 74 Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 5773

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For inquiries contact:

Editor

Alberta Hansard

3rd Floor, 9820 – 107 St

EDMONTON, AB T5K 1E7

Telephone: 780.427.1875

E-mail: AlbertaHansard@assembly.ab.ca