



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature  
First Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Advanced Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 12, 2024  
9 a.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-3

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 31st Legislature  
First Session**

**Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future**

Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC), Chair  
Loyola, Rod, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP), Deputy Chair  
Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP),\* Acting Deputy Chair

Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)  
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)  
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)  
Elmeligi, Sarah, Banff-Kananaskis (NDP)  
Hoyle, Rhiannon, Edmonton-South (NDP)  
Stephan, Jason, Red Deer-South (UC)  
Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC)\*\*  
Wright, Justin, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UC)  
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)

\* substitution for Rod Loyola

\*\* substitution for Chantelle de Jonge

**Also in Attendance**

Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)  
Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (Ind)  
Wright, Peggy K., Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP)

**Support Staff**

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Christina Williamson	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Shannon Parke	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

**Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future**

**Participant**

Ministry of Advanced Education  
Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister



9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

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

**The Chair:** It's go time, so I would like to call the meeting to order and would like to welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd like to ask that we go around the table and have all members introduce themselves for the record, and then, Minister, if you could please introduce your staff and your officials with you as well when they're joining you at the table.

My name is Shane Getson, the MLA for Lac St. Anne-Parkland, better known as God's country. We had a bit of a debate last night on that. I'm also the chair of this committee and very fortunate to do that as well.

We'll just start with introductions, heading to my right.

**Mr. Wright:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Justin Wright, and I'm the MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

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

**Mr. Yao:** Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

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

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

**Mrs. Johnson:** Jennifer Johnson, Lacombe-Ponoka, and my assistant, Becky Lees.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Advanced Education, MLA for Calgary-North West.

I'll just introduce my officials. To my right I have acting DM Carmen Baldwin-Dery. To her right is Aaron Neumeyer, ADM for private career colleges and student aid. To my left is Olin Lovely, ADM and senior financial officer. Then to his left is Mike Fernandez, ADM for skilled trades and professions.

**Ms Wright:** Peggy Wright, MLA for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

**Member Hoyle:** Rhiannon Hoyle, MLA for Edmonton-South, critic of Advanced Education for the Official Opposition.

**Mr. Haji:** Sharif Haji, MLA for Edmonton-Decore, critic for immigration and accreditation.

**Mr. Eggen:** Good morning. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West and deputy chair for this committee this morning.

**The Chair:** It's a big responsibility, but I think you're up to the task, sir.

I don't believe there's anyone joining us remotely. Is there? No? Perfect.

I'd like to note the following substitutions. We do have the hon. Mr. David Eggen, as he so introduced himself, in for Member Loyola as deputy chair, and Mr. Wiebe is going to be covering for Ms de Jonge.

A few housekeeping items before we turn to the business at hand. Keep your hands off those microphones. *Hansard* staff will be running those for us, so we're very fortunate to have them here

today. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV online. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Assembly website. Members participating remotely: there are none. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Speaking rotation and times. We have a placemat for the folks that are sitting at the table, so it should be easy to follow along with that. However, we'll go through the preamble here. Apparently, we have to read this on the record so that everybody knows the rules of the game.

Main estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education shall be considered for three hours. Standing order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies, as I mentioned, are placed on the tables in front of you. For each segment of the meeting, blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk, catch his attention. He's off to my left here.

With the concurrence of the committee I would like to call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. The three-hour clock will still continue. Of course, it's a biobreak. Honestly, folks, I don't know who can sit through a three-hour meeting without getting up. I know the chair can't. He would, honestly, really like a five-minute break at the halfway point. Is anyone opposed to taking that five-minute break? I thought you raised your hand for a second. We were going to cut you off. Seeing none, we'll just carry on with that. I appreciate that.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone, and we'll ask you to introduce yourself for the record before you speak.

Pages are available to deliver notes and materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block time will continue. The three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material required for responses raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. In other words, no heckling in here, guys. It's a business meeting. Let's treat it as such.

Debate flows through the chair at all times, including in instances when speaking time is shared between members.

One other thing I would like to ask for the benefit of those following along at home and for the chair and the folks in the meeting room. We have a strategic plan, we have the government estimates, we have ministry business plans, and we have a fiscal plan. It would be awfully gosh darn nice if you guys could reference these when you're asking your questions. Typically what we've found is that it helps with decorum, minimizes the number of points of order, those types of things. Honestly, for folks following along

at home, they'll understand why you're asking these questions and where you're going with that.

With that, Minister, you have the opening remarks, and I will turn the floor over to you, ma'am.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Thank you. Thank you for that, Chair. Good morning, everyone. It's such a pleasure to see you all. It's a pleasure to be here today. Thank you for inviting me to provide an overview of Advanced Education's estimates and what Budget 2024 will mean for Alberta's postsecondary learning system.

Budget 2024 aims to maintain Alberta's position as the economic engine of Canada through a focus on job creation and attracting investment. In support of these goals Budget 2024 invests in Alberta's world-class postsecondary learning system so that we can prepare our students to meet the challenges that Alberta faces.

As our economy and the world around us evolve, our postsecondary learning system plays a critical role, equipping our graduates with the knowledge, competencies, and skills they need today and for the future. Budget 2024 recognizes this role by maintaining a stable base of funding, managing affordability for students, and continuing support for high-demand programs. Increased funding for skilled trades and apprenticeship education and modernization of key apprenticeship programs will help meet the needs of industry and help Alberta students make the most of available opportunities.

Budget 2024 supports accessibility and affordability for those who choose to pursue postsecondary studies while providing more assistance for vulnerable adult learners. Budget 2024 boosts training spaces for mental health professionals and will train more doctors, particularly in rural areas.

Key strategic capital investments in Budget 2024 will build and upgrade learning facilities all over our province. By expanding system capacity and creating modern learning environments, these capital projects will help graduates to boost our economic momentum. Budget 2024 addresses the needs of today and keeps us moving towards the goals of the Alberta 2030: building skills for jobs strategy.

In brief, Budget 2024 investments in Advanced Education are as follows: a consolidated budget of \$7 billion in expenses; \$6.4 billion for postsecondary operations, an increase of \$410 million from Budget 2023; a three-year capital plan investment of \$1.3 billion, including PSI-funded capital; and \$1.4 billion for Alberta student aid.

Postsecondary education is not just a major economic driver; it helps to build vibrant and inclusive communities while also removing barriers and promoting greater equality. A well-run postsecondary education system comes at a cost, and the benefits of the system must be balanced with responsible fiscal management. Inflationary pressures over the past few years have shown us that flexibility is key to ensuring that postsecondary education remains accessible and for campus communities to function sustainably.

While inflation seems to be heading in a more manageable direction, Budget 2024 again allows postsecondary institutions to access up to 15 per cent of their reserves for one-time expenditures so that they can address short-term inflationary pressures. Budget 2023 included this measure, which saw postsecondary institutions access \$43 million of their accumulated reserves in the 2023-24 academic year. We will be working with publicly funded postsecondary institutions over the coming months to guide them in the process of accessing a portion of their reserves for the 2024-25 year.

**9:10**

Students have also been hit hard with affordability challenges in the past few years. We are committed to ensuring postsecondary

education is accessible and affordable. Student aid is an effective tool to reduce financial barriers for the most affected by these rising costs. Student aid not only focuses on those with low or no income but also takes into consideration costs students face beyond tuition. To help keep their education accessible, we are budgeting more than \$1.4 billion in student aid, including more than \$1.2 billion in student loans – that will help an estimated almost 140,000 students – \$113 million in scholarships and awards to approximately 57,000 students, and \$69 million in grants to almost 19,000 students.

Although it was passed in Budget 2023, Alberta's 2 per cent tuition cap comes into effect for the 2024-25 academic year. Capping tuition increases at 2 per cent helps institutions continue to improve the quality of their programs while making tuition increases predictable for students and their families.

We are also investing in programs that help vulnerable Albertans develop job-ready skills to build rewarding careers. The foundational learning assistance program supports adult education in basic literacy, numeracy, and skills development and assists unemployed, underrepresented, and underemployed Albertans to successfully join the labour force. Foundational learning assistance also supports approximately 1,600 students aged 16 and older who need support to complete high school. Foundational learning assistance will see a \$17.7 million increase in Budget 2024 to \$116.9 million.

The community adult learning program, which provides literacy and foundational learning to Albertans living with learning difficulties, disabilities, and mental health challenges, will see an increase of \$1.7 million in Budget 2024 to \$21.1 million. To ensure these programs remain sustainable, we will work with community partners to ensure funding is distributed equitably, fairly, and to those who are most in need of support.

Alberta's economy is booming. Skilled trades are in demand, and apprenticeship registration numbers are on the rise. Budget 2024 will see us add 3,000 new apprenticeship seats, with an additional investment of \$24 million per year through the apprenticeship learning grant. That's \$78 million per year, or \$234 million over the next three years.

We are also investing \$10 million per year, \$30 million over the next three years, to update our high-priority apprenticeship education programs. Modernizing apprenticeship programs ensures our world-class apprentices continue to enter the workforce with cutting-edge skills that support industry needs.

Providing health care to Albertans is a top priority for Alberta's government. Our province is experiencing a shortage of physicians and medical specialists, particularly in rural and remote areas. Through Budget 2024 Advanced Education is taking action to address this issue with increased support for Alberta's medical schools, support for mitigating the rural physician shortage, and measures to encourage more physicians to live and practise in rural settings. We will invest \$56 million over the next three years to train more physicians in rural areas by partnering with local postsecondary institutions. We are creating regional health professions training centres to improve access to physicians in rural and remote areas with an investment of \$55.6 million over the next three years.

An additional \$6.8 million over three years will increase seats in the doctor of medicine programs at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. When we add this expansion to the previously announced support from Budget 2023, it totals nearly \$38 million over four years for more doctors in Alberta. We are also investing \$10 million over three years to increase the number of mental health professional program spaces at postsecondary institutions.

Through Budget 2024 Advanced Education will continue to work with our postsecondary institutions to address their infrastructure

needs. We are investing almost \$117 million this year to help create modern learning environments, and we are forecasting \$360.5 million for capital projects over the next three years. A total of \$199.8 million over three years will support crucial capital projects, including planning work for the advanced skills centre at NAIT, the rural medicine teaching school at the U of L, the W.J. Elliott Building expansion at Olds College, the CIM-TAC east campus expansion at Red Deer Polytech, and the multidisciplinary hub at the U of C. The importance of postsecondary education to Alberta's economy and society cannot be overstated. Through Budget 2024 we are building and improving our world-class system so we can prepare students to meet the challenges Alberta faces now and in the years ahead.

The allocations for Advanced Education in Budget 2024 are investments in Alberta's competitive advantage that will help businesses and industry continue to thrive, to innovate, and, of course, to create jobs. They will also help our people to make the most of the opportunities at hand and to find their own role in building a future that we can all be proud of.

Thank you so much to all of you for giving me this opportunity to share the highlights of Budget 2024, and now I'm very pleased to take questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister, for that. That was spot-on on the timing.

We'll now turn it over to the Official Opposition. Again, there are the options between combined or block time. Both members have to agree, the minister and the member, and then if it is block time, no more than 10 minutes of speaking time at a time. I'll turn it over to you.

**Member Hoyle:** Yes. Thank you, Chair. I'd be willing to do back and forth if the minister is willing to do back and forth here today.

**The Chair:** Up to the minister.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** My preference is block time today. Thank you.

**Member Hoyle:** Okay. Thank you. Yeah. Thank you so much, everyone – the minister and the chair and all committee members – for being here today to ask some questions and discuss, you know, the budget in relation to Advanced Education. I know we're all here because we value postsecondary in Alberta. This is my first estimate, so please bear with me. I really want to emphasize that my questions here are coming from various stakeholders that I've met with over the past nine months, industry experts and leaders in advanced education. I'm here to really share their perspectives and concerns and ask questions about the budget. I know this is not question period. I'm here to gather information.

You know, as we all know here, the government has spoken at length about the fact that the advanced education system plays an important role in our province's future, yet there are pressing concerns that this government is divesting of advanced education. Since 2018-2019 there's been \$1.2 billion taken out of postsecondary education, and Budget 2024 seems to continue with the government's approach of underfunding for postsecondaries based on population growth and inflation.

According to the fiscal plan 2024-27 page 110 specifically states, "Our colleges and universities are vital to developing, attracting, and retaining the talent which will sustain Alberta's growth and prosperity." My first question, through the chair: can the minister share what she has planned to create space and capacity for postsecondary institutions considering this goal?

I'm also hoping the minister can provide further clarity to this question as pages 110, 111 of the fiscal plan, the capital plan tab,

lay out several infrastructure initiatives. We see 5,000 seats are being added for MacEwan's business school over three years, over 1,000 for the University of Calgary for STEM programs. But I would like to note that on Monday, March 11, during question period the minister stated the same statistic for the U of C STEM program but said that it would create over 2,000 spaces instead of over 1,000 spaces. So I'd love some clarity on that as well.

I'm also wondering, through the chair: what is the total number of seats that will be added to increase capacity for postsecondaries across the province, and what supports will be provided to hire additional instructors for these spaces? Challenges with capacity are deterrents for students when they feel they won't be able to get into the program of choice, and we've seen the results of that. The Alberta Economic Dashboard shows that between Q4 of 2022 and Q4 of 2023 we saw roughly 4.4 per cent population growth. At the same time, open data shows that the total number of postsecondary students enrolled in 2022 to 2023 only grew by about 1.6 per cent compared to '21 to '22. Through the chair, does the minister have insights as to why enrolment growth does not match our population growth, and how will Budget 2024 reverse this trend while not providing funding for population and inflation?

**9:20**

The Business Council of Alberta just released a report highlighting a few areas of our labour market that are seeing exponential growth and demand for employment. One area, as we're all aware of, is health care, and they found that job postings for nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants increased by 170 per cent. Both the U of A and U of C along with others are saying they don't have the space to train these folks, so through the chair to the minister, where in this budget can we find the increase in funding specifically to address this? And can the minister please provide specific details on how this funding will be allocated and where?

As we're well aware, we must position Alberta postsecondary institutions for success, and the ministry's business plan on page 5, outcome 2, key objective 2.1, has a very strong emphasis on student attraction and retention. According to the Alberta Post-Secondary Network 35,000 new students are expected to enter the postsecondary system here over the next seven years. Through the chair, is the minister ensuring that funding for new spaces is rolled into base funding? Can the minister also explain how she intends to achieve outcome 2 and build capacity when on page 7 of the ministry business plan, under capital investment, the postsecondary infrastructure line shows a decrease of \$54.8 million, a 12 and a half per cent decrease over three years?

Many stakeholders in advanced education have clearly stated to me that institutions need predictable funding, stable funding to provide students with the highest quality of education in postsecondary. The current performance-based funding model has been highly criticized because the results in the system-wide funding are being cut. On pages 27-28 of the annual report of 2022-23, section 2.2, it states that postsecondaries entered a three-year investment management agreement from 2022-25 containing three performance metrics related to work-integrated learning, domestic enrolment, and graduate outcomes tied to 15 per cent in funding. Through the chair, can the minister share what key performance indicators and metrics are being used by this funding model to distribute the remaining 85 per cent of funds to postsecondary institutions, and are these metrics being shared with postsecondary institutions and stakeholders consistently?

On page 4 of the ministry business plan – and, of course, you can see I'm asking here quite a few questions on capacity and funding – for Advanced Education outcome 1 shows a plan to invest \$2

billion in operational funding for postsecondary institutions through the operating and program support grant for 26 institutions across Alberta, but when we look at these numbers, we see this is really a cut, taking into account inflation and population, and will likely result in the erasure of critical programs and resources on campuses for students and staff.

Page 82 of the fiscal plan states that “in 2022-23, own-source revenue of Alberta [postsecondary institutions] averaged 53 per cent . . . by 2026-27 [years] this share is projected to increase to 58 per cent, reducing the share funded by government to 42 per cent.” Through the chair, how will the minister, you know, address this projection? How would this projection align with the goals set out on page 19 of the strategic plan, which states, “Government will build post-secondary education as the foundation of a strong Alberta economy and a vibrant province”? How does this compare to other jurisdictions? And can the minister please elaborate: of the \$2 billion investment over three years, how much of that will go to delivering education to students and how much will go to executive compensation?

You know, when I think back to the government also speaking at length, as I said, and saying advanced education is very important to our economic future, when we look at the annual report on page 11, which lists Alberta 2030: building skills for jobs initiative, one of the goals is to “Improve Access and Student Experience [by ensuring] all Albertans have access to high-quality post-secondary [education] opportunities and that the student experience is coordinated and integrated.” So through the chair, can the minister please tell us how this underfunding helps to achieve access and how this aligns with the needs identified with leadership of postsecondary institutions? If the minister has worked with postsecondary institutions to determine what an appropriate level of funding would be for each institution, can she share how the ministry is allocating this funding in order to align with this goal?

You know, as a previously elected senator at the University of Alberta Senate for five years, I've seen many hundreds of students being turned away with excellent grades, and the Alberta Post-Secondary Network has stated that in 2021 alone 11,000 students left Alberta. So through the chair, can the minister share how she intends to keep students in Alberta despite institutions not having proper funding to meet the growing capacity demands?

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you, Member Hoyle. For being new at this, well done. I know the chair is supposed to be unbiased and everything else, but, kids that are following along, that was well done: pointed out all the references, kept a business candour. Excellent.

Minister, I turn it over to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the member for those series of questions. I've made some notes here, and we'll try to address everything that was raised. A lot of the answers that I will provide will address several of the questions that were posed. There's some overlap there. But let's just start at the beginning in terms of the funding for postsecondaries.

We know that when we were first elected in 2019, we were given a very clear mandate to look at all areas of spending within government to identify those areas that were outliers in the system, meaning areas where the Alberta government was spending far more than other jurisdictions across the country. Certainly, advanced education was one of those areas that was identified in the MacKinnon panel report. At that time my predecessor undertook some serious work with the postsecondaries in terms of understanding where this overfunding was existing and taking

measures to make sure that Alberta was no longer an outlier. Now, I know that was a difficult exercise. I know that the postsecondary institutions had a back and forth with the ministry at the time to indicate some of the potential challenges that it posed, some of the actual challenges it posed. But, ultimately, it was an exercise that was very important, and this particular budget has kept the funding flat. We have not undertaken any reductions.

But I do take the point that the member has made, that there is a question as to if we are funding population growth and inflation. I'm going to borrow from the words of the Finance minister when he was recently at a chamber of commerce event and said that in an ideal world we would always be, you know, funding every single program up to population growth and inflation, but no governments do that. We certainly have a fiscal framework that outlines parameters in terms of what we can spend on programs in government: we have to put a portion away in the heritage savings trust fund and also pay down debt. And what he said at that time is that this is not a floor; it – well, I don't want to actually misquote him. His comments, essentially, were that there should be no expectation that every single program should be funded to population growth and inflation, and certainly in Advanced Education I will say that that is not the case.

However, having said that, we have made quite a number of investments in targeted enrolment expansion. Even though the base operating grant is flat, we have through two rounds of TEE is what it's called, a targeted enrolment expansion, invested more than \$225 million into the postsecondary system, which has added an additional 12,500 spaces in a variety of programs through institutions all across Alberta. That is something that is not readily talked about. It's not readily shared, sometimes, by postsecondary institutions. It's not something that you can readily see in the line items in the estimates, but that investment is there. It's critical. It's designed to fund those programs that are in high demand in the labour market. We had requested RFPs from institutions to let us know what they were seeing in terms of their collaboration with the industry and their local stakeholders. And I'm very proud to say that, you know, these programs are going to make sure that we tackle that labour market shortage.

**9:30**

Just to provide some more details on that, Advanced Education received 131 program proposals from 23 PSIs as follows: in health care we had 35 proposals, in construction we had three, in energy we had two proposals, in technology we had 23 proposals, and in business we had 13 proposals. This was in a targeted enrolment expansion for round 2.

Now, I also know that there was a question around the University of Calgary investment for the multidisciplinary hub, and that investment will indeed open up 2,000 spaces. I know that 1,000 was a number that was mentioned or previously quoted. That was an error. We had a correction that was received from the University of Calgary. Obviously, that's good news because it's double the seats that were announced originally. Of course, what that means is that we're going to have so many more students who are going to be able to study in science, technology, engineering and math disciplines.

The MacEwan investment, \$125 million: again, a phenomenal investment that will open up 5,000 seats. I've already mentioned that the targeted enrolment expansion is going to open up 12,500 seats.

There were some questions around job postings. The Business Council of Alberta is a partner of Advanced Education and many other ministries in government. I know that we do consult with them and other stakeholders to try to understand: what is that demand that



we're seeing out there in the economy? Based on that, based on that feedback, based on feedback with industry, because we also liaise very, very closely with our industry partners – particularly in apprenticeship we've got a number of industry tables set up. Postsecondary institutions have their own industry tables set up.

Based on their feedback we design and fund new programs, and that is why this investment of \$24 million per year in apprenticeship, bringing the annual investment up to \$78 million per year to \$234 million over three years, is a phenomenal investment of meeting that labour market challenge. It is predicated directly on the feedback of industry, of new entrants coming into Alberta, like the Dow folks, for example. They have been very vocal and clear that they are going to need more than a thousand welders. They're going to need steamfitters, pipefitters, all kinds of persons in the trades. We welcome this feedback, and certainly the demand far exceeds the supply. We know that. We know that this is a challenge. It's not only a challenge in Alberta. It's a challenge in Canada. It's a challenge in North America and in Europe. We are short on qualified and talented labour.

There were some other questions regarding the fiscal plan, and certainly I will address some of those in more detail if I don't get to all of them at this point here, but I do want to talk a little bit about institutional autonomy. These are elements that, again, you don't necessarily hear about in the media or in news articles, but Alberta 2030, the strategy that we had put together – my predecessor had done that, actually – talks about more institutional autonomy and allowing for opportunities for postsecondaries to find their own sources of revenue. I can tell you that there are several postsecondary institutions who are working very vigilantly and diligently in terms of finding ways to innovatively create their own sources of revenue. That was, again, in direct feedback and discussions with postsecondary. They are looking for that type of autonomy, and that, in turn, will help fund their operations.

I do want to talk about our capital projects because I do know that that was a question. It looks, according to our consolidated statements, that the numbers are decreasing, but from a consolidated perspective the amount that PSIs are investing with their own-source funding has reduced and is due to the timing of their investments. Ministry investment has increased from \$233 million in our forecast to \$250 million in Budget 2024.

I just am very quickly – because I'm looking at the time, and I do think it's worth while going over some of these projects that we're investing in. We've mentioned the MacEwan School of Business, a phenomenal investment that's going to open up thousands of spaces. We're still investing in Mount Royal University for the repurposing of their existing facilities. I might want to add that I've been to all of these institutions, and I've had the opportunity to look at exactly what they're doing in terms of capital investment, so again, this is all going to be in the benefit of students. NAIT, which was announced. Northwestern Polytechnic: I was just there not too long ago, and I see my colleague here today. A phenomenal investment in power engineering and instrumentation. Olds College. We have a great CMR budget this year, and we're using a portion of that CMR budget to fund the building envelope at the Butterdome. SAIT: that project is still under development. That's a John Ware redevelopment on campus. University of Calgary: they seem to be rock stars in this budget. It just happened to be the case. We've invested significantly in their veterinary medicine expansion. University of Lethbridge: destination project 2 planning was funded earlier and is still on the books. Their rural medical teaching school: again, another phenomenal investment which is going to help tackle the physician shortage in our province.

I know there are other questions that I haven't addressed completely, but happy to provide some written responses as well.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you, Minister. Time goes by really quick. Back to the Official Opposition.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you, Minister, for those answers. I really appreciate that, and I also appreciate the opportunity for written response as well.

I'll move on to tuition and affordability. The gap in investment in postsecondary institutions is not just felt by institutions but also students. I've spoken at length to students, including those with families who are feeling the impacts of the strain placed on postsecondary institutions. Page 9 of the 2023-26 fiscal plan proposed capping tuition at 2 per cent annually, effective 2024-25, and while I do appreciate the ministry acknowledging the need to address affordability through tuition, Alberta has had the highest tuition increases across Canada over the past two years, with some seeing rates increase as high as 26 and a half per cent.

I've spoken to hundreds of students who couch surf, skip meals, take out payday loans, and even drop out of school altogether to afford the basics. Stats Canada has shared that Alberta undergraduate students now pay \$800 more per year than the Canadian average, and under this current government Alberta's tuition has increased by more than 31 per cent compared to the Canadian average increase of 11 per cent. Through the chair: can the minister maybe give some perspective on why she didn't consider freezing tuition, and can the minister confirm that this current tuition cap will hold and not increase?

You know, there are some concerns that this government isn't investing in its people enough and it's not investing in students enough and therefore is not investing in our economy in the long term. Page 5 of the strategic plan states that the

government is focused on ensuring Alberta remains Canada's economic engine. A strong economy, access to world class services, and an environment for good paying jobs will continue to attract people to Alberta [making it] the best place to live, work and raise a family.

Through the chair, can the minister please explain how not taking a more aggressive approach to dealing with affordability like freezing tuition is adhering to this priority in the strategic plan? Again, you know, why did the minister not consider moving to maybe an inflation-based model of funding to ease tuition constraints for students and especially students with families as well?

I'd like to point out that despite the government's 2 per cent cap page 66 of the fiscal plan shows that postsecondary institution fees are estimated at \$1,999 million in 2024-2025, an increase of \$74 million from '23-24 year, and are projected to grow to \$2.14 million by '26-27. This looks like more will fall on the backs of students as we see tuition and mandatory noninstructional fees increase. We're already seeing an example of this at the U of A, where they've proposed a tuition increase for domestic students in 2024-25 and a 5 per cent increase for cohort-based international students of '25-26. Tuition from students is expected to increase by 11 per cent while operating funding will only increase by under 8 per cent over the three-year plan. So through the chair to the minister: how does this increase participation and ensure we have the skills we need for the future?

**9:40**

You know, the Council of Alberta University Students reported that between 2019 and 2024 student debt is forecasted to increase by \$1.87 billion, and another \$1.1 billion is expected to be added by 2026. This means that the average Alberta student has over 30 per cent more debt than students in any other province in Canada. I mean, this is an affordability challenge and crisis. So through the chair to the minister: can the minister explain and share what the total amount of loans that were repaid in 2023-2024 was?

When we look at students who are relying on these students' loans, this doesn't just cover the cost of tuition and books; to support them, you know, these students' loans also help with critical expenses like rent, food, and other necessities. So through the chair: does the minister have a strategy in place to reduce student debt levels to match the national average, and if so, what does this plan entail? Does the minister plan to keep the interest rate of student loans at prime, and will the interest-free grace period of 12 months after graduation hold?

You know, at this point I think what I would love to do, Chair: I would like to pass and cede time off to the Member for Edmonton-Decore. Is that okay?

**The Chair:** Yep. Please go ahead.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you.

**Mr. Haji:** Thank you, Member for Edmonton-South, and thanks to the minister for the introductory notes. Outcome 2 of the business plan, which is page 5, outlines the three key objectives, and I have a couple of questions under objective 2. Key objective 2.1 on page 5 indicates: to strengthen and streamline the professional regulatory environment to reduce timelines and barriers for registration. The performance measure for this key objective, 2(a), which is on page 6 of the business plan, only measures the processing time for domestic applicants. Through the chair: how is the minister going to measure Albertans with foreign credentials, and why is there no performance metric for such an important file? Through the chair: does the minister intend to have other ways of measuring government performance on this file, and can that be provided to Albertans?

Staying on the same, metric 2(a), that only measures domestic applicants, seems to have worsened, from six days as a medium in 2020 to eight days, which means that it takes now longer in 2021. Through the chair: can the minister explain why the deterioration? It also shows that there is a lag in terms of data availability. Now we are in 2024. That would have been great if the minister could provide that information as well.

Under the same key objective 2(b) measures out-of-province applicant certification. Is this meant to measure the Labour Mobility Act that was recently passed? And again through the chair to the minister: why has it gone down from 30 per cent of the applicants coming out of the province to 26 per cent? In fact, it would have been the other way around, to increase. Again, the data that we have available in the business plan is 2021. Through the chair: can the minister provide updated data that could provide more appropriate information on this?

I will jump into the government estimates. Page 26 of the government estimates shows the allocation of \$490,000 for the fairness for newcomers office. Through the chair: can the minister provide the breakdown of this \$490,000 and how it is allocated?

The government passed the Fair Registration Practices Act in 2019. Mr. Chair, in March 2020 the government opened the fairness for newcomers office. The purpose of this office was to improve government commitments to fair, objective, impartial, transparent, and timely processes. Apart from a December 2020 – four years ago – baseline survey, which was published in 2021, are there any other deliverables that the minister can share with Albertans?

Over the past four years, Mr. Chair, there is limited information available for the public on the performance of this office, where we're spending \$490,000 every year. The business plan doesn't show. How will Albertans know the allocation and the value of the return on investment of close to half a million dollars every year that is spent on this office?

So those are the few questions that I will pose to the minister, through the chair, for clarification both in the government estimates as well as the business plan. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Perfect. We'll turn it back to the minister. Minister, you have the floor.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both members for their questions that are relating to very, very important topics indeed. Of course, affordability is on top of mind of Albertans and Canadians and not just in the postsecondary space but across every realm of society. But as it relates to postsecondaries here in Alberta, I just want to also state that I've extensively engaged with students as well and have really heard their concerns. I really understand the challenges that they are facing on campus and have taken that to heart.

I just want to go over some of the affordability measures that are currently in place. They were already stated by Member Hoyle, but I want to go over them again. We have capped tuition increases for domestic students at 2 per cent at most public postsecondary institutions starting in this academic year.

Now, there was also a comment about international students, and I do want to be clear that we do not set tuition; that is set by postsecondary institutions. We know that those rates of tuition are higher than domestic. That's always been the case. What we do in Advanced Education is to make sure that those rates do not change for international students – we do oversee that component – so there is some predictability and some protection around that.

We have reduced the interest rate on Alberta student loans to prime, and the question was: are we going to hold on this? At this point I have every intention to do that.

We've extended the payment and interest-free grace period for loans to 12 months after a student completes their studies, and that is going to remain in place. There is a cost associated with that in our loan provision line, so it's not something that is not taken into account when we put our financial statements together. Again, it was very important for our government to demonstrate that we understand it's a difficult time for students, and we are responding by lengthening that grace period.

We've also increased eligibility for the repayment assistance plan to make student loan repayment more manageable, and that was a significant increase in the eligibility component.

It's also worth mentioning that these changes were implemented as a result of feedback from students. I've been engaging with them, my predecessor engaged with them, and the reduction of the interest rate to prime was actually in response to a direct ask from students. I continue to keep a close eye on this file to ensure that if there are other opportunities to introduce some more affordability measures, that is something that we can take a look at.

Okay. I do want to talk a little bit about low-income learners and vulnerable learners because, again, when we're talking about affordability, not everybody is impacted the same way. We have a number of grants. The Alberta student grant, for example, which is available: it's nonrepayable for those students who are in the low-income category.

We also have many, many programs that are available for students who are more vulnerable. We have grants for students who identify as persons with disabilities. The foundational learning assistance program, which I had mentioned we have increased the budget in by almost \$17 million, is a very important program that helps those who need ESL training or skills development. The community adult learning program is a \$21.1 million program that is also available to help those who need additional supports.

9:50

We are also funding some ethnocultural communities in the order of \$2.25 million over three years, and that's a very important investment because sometimes you have folks who are new to this country who tend to fall through the cracks, and they don't necessarily have the capacity to be able to understand all of the government programs that are available. That's why it's important to fund grassroots organizations so they can provide that communication and that pathway to help individuals understand what they have a right to and what supports are available.

We talk quite a bit about Women Building Futures. They are a very strong partner in government, not just with Advanced Education but with many different ministries. Again, they provide pathways for underrepresented groups – women, women of colour, Indigenous women – to find ways to enter the labour market. Trade Winds to Success is a great program that helps Indigenous Albertans. We have a youth apprenticeship connections program. Momentum Community Economic Development Society does incredible work with all kinds of underrepresented individuals.

The point of me sharing all of this information is to ensure that Albertans understand that there are supports available, particularly for those who are barriered or who are in the low-income stream.

I do have some other items that I would like to talk about. We do have a nurses of Alberta pilot project, and this supports both domestically and internationally educated nurses. The objective of this project is to create a site in Alberta to enable internationally trained nurses to have competency assessments conducted simultaneously against three potential nursing occupations, including registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and health care aides. This is an excellent program. We also have bursaries associated with this for nurses who are internationally educated to help them with their educational expenses.

I do believe I have covered the questions around affordability. Certainly, my colleague in Seniors, Community and Social Services is also very focused on the housing piece to make sure that we have more opportunities to provide housing for all Albertans, not just students. Advanced Education: we don't fund postsecondary institutions directly for housing, but always happy and willing to look at any proposals that they might bring forward.

Okay. I know that there was a question on the amount of loans and student debt. I will have to get that question in writing, and we can respond in writing. I can tell you that the average debt for students – I believe this is undergraduate programs right now – is at about \$32,000.

There was one other item as we were talking about this, and that was the average tuition. I just wanted to go over that because, again, we know – there is no doubt – tuition has increased in Alberta at a greater rate than it has in other provinces. Again, that is the responsibility of postsecondary institutions, and we understand why that happened. However, we are not by any means a jurisdiction that has the highest tuition in Canada. I think it's really important to note that. In fact, if you look at other jurisdictions like Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and even Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan tuition is more than \$1,000 per semester more expensive than what we have in Alberta.

I know that that doesn't necessarily provide a whole lot of comfort to students who might be struggling with tuition fees right now, but it's important to know because I think Albertans are not really aware of how heavily subsidized our postsecondary education system is. We're proud of it and obviously are always looking for more opportunities to help students where we can.

One of the things that I'm particularly happy about – and, again, it came from direct feedback from students – is the fact that we're

investing in mental health spaces. It's part of my mandate letter. We're investing \$10 million to have more mental health professionals in the system who understand the importance of cultural sensitivity in counsellors and psychologists and therapists. So, again, directly from the students.

I'm just looking at the time, and I want to address some of the comments around the fairness for newcomers office. I know there are questions around some of the metrics in the business plan and as to why those numbers decreased from one year to the next, and I will respond to that in writing. For the fairness for newcomers office the budget is almost entirely salary and wages. We have about – I can get the exact number of FTEs, but it's a very busy office, and the work that they've done is actually consequential. We have really significantly moved the needle on getting more people through the regulatory process in terms of getting their credentials assessed than we have ever seen before. Like, this government really did take a very concerted approach, that was never done before, when they passed the fair registration act in 2020.

I also want to mention that public reports have been released out of this office for 2020 and 2021, and we are working on releasing a 2022 report.

**The Chair:** Right to the wire, Minister.  
Back to the Official Opposition.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you once again, Minister, for those answers and also once again providing written documentation. That's much appreciated.

I do have a question here, still under tuition and, you know, students' fees. I know that when the minister and I had met, I brought up specific concerns raised over mandatory noninstructional fees. On page 44 of the annual report the total revenue for 2023 was \$4.01 million, an increase of \$259 million from the previous year and 5 per cent more than the budget. This means that students are heavily subsidizing the cuts put forth in the budget since 2019, and with the 2 per cent cap and budget cuts putting tight restrictions on postsecondary institutions, many of these institutions will rely on the mandatory noninstructional fees to supplement their operational and staffing costs.

Currently there are no caps on mandatory noninstructional fees, and the average that each student pays is about \$1,100 each semester. Through the chair, can the minister share where in the budget are the amounts collected for the mandatory noninstructional fees, how much of the revenue from tuition is from mandatory noninstructional fees, and is that under tuition or own-source revenues? Like, student organizations across the province have told me that they're concerned with the transparency around mandatory noninstructional fees, and they're not aware of what these fees are really going towards. Through the chair, would the minister be able to share what these mandatory noninstructional fees are going to specifically? Staffing? Facility maintenance? Operational spending? It would be great to have some clarity on that.

I'll move into skilled trades questions next. According to a new BuildForce Canada report the province will need 20,000 skilled workers to support \$22 billion worth of resource value-added projects between now and 2030. Page 2 of the mandate letter includes the initiative: "in the context of skilled trades, taking a leadership role in meeting the evolving needs of the economy with a focus on ensuring journey persons obtain needed skills for the modern economy." Through the chair, my first question to the minister is: what has been done to achieve this initiative so far?

I'd also like us to take a look at page 82 of the fiscal plan, which stipulates funding increases totalling \$102 million over the next three years, for an additional 3,200 apprenticeship classroom seats

in high-demand areas and to support needed curriculum updates to the apprenticeship program. Through the chair, how much of this is going to the spaces of NAIT, SAIT, at Red Deer Polytechnic, and others? Can the minister please provide a breakdown of the number of seats at each institution and the increase in each program? Also, how many new instructors will need to be hired to run these seats and educate students, and how much is going towards curriculum development? Can the minister also share which high-demand areas the ministry is focusing on in particular?

**10:00**

I think it's important that industry professionals and stakeholders are collaborating with the ministry and guiding Alberta's skilled trades and ensuring that training aligns with the changing needs of the province's economy now and in the long term. In fact, the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters estimated \$13 billion was lost across Canada last year in the manufacturing sector alone due to labour shortages. Through the chair, has the minister spoken with industry professionals and polytechnics to decide how this funding will be distributed?

The ministry's mandate letter also directs the minister to collaborate with the Minister of Education "to develop and promote career educational scholarships in areas of labour shortage for Alberta's K-12 students." Through the chair, I'm wondering: what scholarships have been developed to support this, and who is the ministry working with to develop these scholarships?

Another important focus for skilled trades, as we're all aware, is to ensure that there are pathways for underrepresented groups like women and Indigenous communities and new immigrants. Through the chair, can the minister please share what is being done to ensure that women and folks of equity-seeking minority groups enter these programs and stick with them through to completion?

For existing seats, what is the completion rate? If funding is provided for, say, 20 seats, what accountability measures are in place to ensure those seats are filled?

We know that across the country governments utilize union training centres to support apprenticeship training. In fact, Ontario's budget of '23 had \$224 million for training centre supports, including capital to train 1 million workers. I don't see any funding listed in the current budget for these union training centres in Alberta, but if we utilize them, we could double the apprentice output by utilizing the state-of-the-art infrastructure that already exists. Through the chair, can the minister point to the line in the budget where these union training centres will be funded and tell me how much funding is set aside for these training centres? Trade union centres also provide an important pipeline to connect prospective apprentices with employment and jobs. Where in the budget can we see support for this?

If it's okay with you, Chair, I would love to cede my time to the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

**The Chair:** Please feel free to do so. Thank you, Member.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you.

**Ms Wright:** Thanks very much to my colleague and to the chair. My questions actually have to do with the Alberta Board of Skilled Trades, specifically having to do with the key objectives in the business plan on pages 4 and 5, key objective 1.2, which is about creating a modern, flexible, and efficient skilled trade certification and ensuring that we have a high-quality adult learning system as well as professional regulatory bodies.

Certainly, the Board of Skilled Trades has an incredibly important job, particularly since they're that group that will be advising the minister. Their responsibility is to promote the value

of certification in designated trades, to consult with industry and other stakeholders to, as I say, make recommendations on which professions should in fact be designated as skilled trades, and then, further, to establish some of those details of the skilled trades.

What I'm wondering, though – and I did note that in the ministry's annual report on page 15 that there was a three-paragraph summary in terms of what the Board of Skilled Trades have done, but I also note, Chair, that the Board of Skilled Trades has never put out minutes or an annual report. They do have newsletters on their website available for folks, one in July 2023, another in August 2022, along with a message from the chair from April 2023. I'm quite frankly worried about the lack of transparency and the lack of information, particularly for those folks involved in the trades as well as those folks who are in charge of the trades. I'm wondering when we can expect to see a stand-alone annual report or if there will be a more fulsome report included with the ministry's annual report and then, further, when we can expect more information to be communicated to the public as well as to the folks who are involved in trades professions right now.

Further, through the chair, I'm wondering if the ministry and the minister meet with the board on a regular kind of period of time, if they've spoken about their mandate and work plan, particularly in terms of actually getting that information out to the public. I'm wondering, too: what are their plans, in terms of the board's plans, to continually engage with stakeholders, and who might some of those community partners be?

I'm wondering, specifically, how skilled and currently certified journeypeople and tradespeople can become involved in that process. I'm also wondering, because of the lack of information and transparency: would some of those issues perhaps have to do with an issue of a lack of dedicated FTEs? Perhaps that might have something to do with it.

I'm wondering as well what work the board and therefore the ministry have done to ensure that we have the skilled tradespeople that my colleague mentioned in terms of the massive shortages that we're dealing with now and will to 2030. What crossministry work has been done with Education, particularly with respect to the registered apprenticeship program in high schools and, again, whether those unions and union training centre folks have been consulted in this process? Again, what is the overall plan for any other additional information and plans, moving forward, to be communicated not only to the public but all of those stakeholders, including folks in the building trades unions themselves? We do want to make sure as government and the people responsible for the money of Albertans that we're spending it wisely, and they deserve to have the information in a timely manner.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** There are 13 seconds if you want to use them. Are you good?

**Member Hoyle:** I think I'm good at this point. Thank you.

**Mr. Stephan:** You're not an auctioneer.

**The Chair:** Exactly.

It makes my heart very glad, you know, as the chair, hearing about the \$22 billion investment in that prior life of working in those industries. Yeah, it's a good position to be in, to be wondering where we're going to get all the folks for the work.

Minister, back to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both members for some really, really great questions. I'm actually really glad that you asked those questions because it gives me an

opportunity to talk about the significant work that we've done on the apprenticeship file.

But starting from the beginning, on mandatory noninstructional fees, this is something that many student organizations have brought to my attention, and in fact I recall vividly sitting in a boardroom at Olds College talking to one of the student leaders at that time. She had some very good points and very pointed questions in terms of exactly what was asked today: what are these fees used for, and how can students have an impact in determining their own destiny in terms of having access to some of those resources that are funded by these fees?

I'd first like to say that this is an area that I'm looking at. I'm doing some policy work right now just to try to get a better understanding of the space and to see if I can work with the postsecondaries to provide some sort of measure of stability around this particular line item to be able to help out students. So that's policy work. It's under way. No promises, no commitments, but I think that it's important to express that I have heard the voices of the students, and I am taking that seriously, and we are looking at it.

Just to talk about what MNIFs are, for those who might not know, they are fees charged by institutions that students, including apprentices and international students, must pay for specific goods and services that typically enhance the student experience. They are not related to instruction in a specific program and are not optional. Of course, we don't mandate what that fee level is to postsecondary institutions, but we are going to be having some more conversation.

The mandatory noninstructional fees. If we are looking at the ministry's financial statement, the statement of operations, you will find those fees embedded in tuition and noncredit courses. I do believe that was a question, and that's where you can find that information. I also want to say that mandatory noninstructional instructional fees are meant to be for cost recovery only, meaning that institutions cannot charge students more than is needed to offer the goods and services. Again, it's designed for cost recovery.

We were talking about the fact that we have a labour shortage, that we have a tremendous demand and we don't have the supply. The question was around: well, what exactly is Advanced Education doing? I've already outlined the funding that is going into the apprenticeship program, \$24 million per year. If you add that to what was already there, there's more than \$234 million over the next three years, and that's significant. That still has to be allocated, those dollars, right? We know that there are many institutions across the province who offer programming for electricians, for heavy equipment technicians, for automotive service technicians, and for welders. These are the high-demand occupations, and we have heard this, as I'd mentioned earlier in my response, from industry.

**10:10**

We have our own industry table that we engage with. My ADM Mike Fernandez meets with them regularly to understand their needs. Postsecondaries have their own industry tables. So it really is a cross-dissemination of information amongst many stakeholders to make sure that we're hearing that voice and that we're investing appropriately to make sure we're meeting that demand.

We've also invested in curriculum updates, and that is in direct response to what industry told us. That's \$10 million a year, \$30 million over the next three years. We're going to start with the electrician program – updating labs, instructional materials, et cetera – to make sure that, you know, as times change and technology changes and the way things are done changes, we are keeping up, that our programs are keeping up. So that is a very, very important investment.

I am going to be working closely with the Minister of Education on some of the items in our mandate letter. We have a very important partner in Careers. They get millions of dollars every year from the ministry to be able to talk about parity of esteem and provide work-integrated learning opportunities for young people in high school. That work is going to continue. The Minister of Education and I are going to sit down together and really understand what more we can do. The scholarship work we're discussing right now, as we speak, but nothing has been operationalized or put together as of yet. But it is part of our mandate letter, so obviously we're very motivated to do what the Premier has tasked us to do.

Unions and the role of some of our friends in different unions who provide programming for the apprentices: I do want to say that we are still looking at how to allocate all the funds. We do have some partners that we work with. But there is one partner that we are going to be forging some relationships with, and that's the operating engineers, again, a tremendous group. We are going to be looking at putting together a pilot project to provide some funding to have more training opportunities for Albertans to get into the trades. I will have more to share about that in the future.

I also want to say, as we're talking about how we're going to meet this labour demand, that Advanced Education has a significant role to play. Obviously, we have to fund the seats and the programs, but it's a multipronged approach across government. We've got our jobs and economy minister, who is working hard to bring investment into the province and to get more interaction and participation from industry. We have our minister of immigration, who's got all kinds of pathways in the Alberta advantage immigration program that open up nomination spaces for people in tech, people in health care. So it is a multipronged approach across government, and we do understand that that is going to be what is required.

All right. I know there were some questions on the Alberta Board of Skilled Trades, and I'm very, very grateful that this question was asked because they are a significant partner in government. The membership is multidisciplinary in nature. I've heard from other stakeholders that we need to widen the participation in the membership on that board, so that's something that I'm looking at, because we want to make sure we have a diversity of voices at the table and in the work that they do in terms of looking at credentialing and parity of esteem. I think it's really important to mention that here, to talk about the fact that the value of a postsecondary education in apprenticeship and trades is just as valuable as any other type of training. They are most certainly tasked with that role, to ensure that that's communicated.

They also work directly with their industry counterparts. They do provide an annual report, which was mentioned, each year detailing the board's activities, effectiveness, and board competency measures. They will also be releasing a multiyear strategic plan detailing their priority initiatives and multiyear goals in the spring of 2024, so that is imminent. I'm waiting eagerly to see that report to understand exactly what their priorities are going to be, and I know they're going to be in alignment with what's in my mandate letter.

I do meet with these organizations frequently. In fact, I just had a meeting with the Alberta Board of Skilled Trades, with MACHES, the minister's advisory council on higher education, and with the Premier's Council on Skills, just to make sure that we in the ministry and department are engaging with them frequently and to also ensure that the work that they are doing on behalf of government is fully in alignment with the vision that has been articulated in my mandate letter.

That vision is all around workforce development. We want to make sure everybody is focused on understanding where our labour

market shortages are, and of course I talked about parity of esteem and making sure that Albertans understand the tremendous opportunities that are available for all people, all students of all ages in the skilled trades.

I do believe that I've answered all the questions around the Alberta Board of Skilled Trades. Again, I mentioned I meet with them quite often. The chair I've actually met with one on one a few times and do have another meeting set up again in the future.

I will end off by saying that in the ministry and the department we're very particular about having an evidence-based approach to understanding what the labour market needs are. We have a lot of information and a lot of tools at our disposal to make sure that we are laser focused on those areas that require investment.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that, Minister. Some great responses.

Now we'll turn the block time over to our independent member. Go ahead, MLA Johnson.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Can we go back and forth?

**The Chair:** We'll leave that up to the minister if you want back and forth or block time.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Let's go for block time so I can just write down all your questions and respond appropriately.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Super. All right. Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister. It is a great honour to just be able to be at this table today with my esteemed colleagues and all of you. Thank you to my colleagues for the wonderful questions and thoughtful research that they've brought to the table this morning.

I'll continue with some more questions, some of them rather simple, and maybe we'll get a couple of those out of the way first. I noticed the veterinary medicine expansion on page 1 of the capital plan by ministry. There are new spots perhaps for the veterinary medicine expansion. Could you explain how many new spots will be made for students in that program?

Under capital investment on page 7 of the ministerial business plan postsecondary infrastructure is lower than in the previous years. Could you explain the reason for that?

Then I want to tell you about a family and business in my constituency. They are east of Lacombe. They're farmers and recognized the need for some expanded machinery needs on their farm, so they met the need. They were very resourceful, and they developed a straw chopper for their combine. It was such a hit that they started to go into full-time production of this. It is now an international company and one that we're very proud of in our area.

But one of their greatest needs is qualified tradespeople. They need engineers, machinists, and operators, and as you know, you probably heard the story a thousand times across the province. Additionally, the population of Alberta is growing. As we all know, housing is limited but also growing, creating a tremendous need for skilled people in our trades in every area of that industry.

On page 4 of the ministerial business plan it states that the ministry will invest an additional \$102 million over the next three years to create 3,200 apprenticeship classroom seats in high-demand areas and to make critical updates to the apprenticeship programs. I heard you say that these are still to be allocated. I'm assuming it relates back to that statement there. Could you clarify that again? And can you explain, if you can, where that \$102 million will be invested and into what specific trade programs to meet this tremendous need that we see?

Another reference to trades is that the apprenticeship expenses are expected to rise nearly 20 per cent in the budget for '24-25. Is this related to that \$102 million for the 3,200 apprenticeship

classroom seats, or is this unrelated? Could you explain the relationship there?

On page 6 – and I think this was referenced earlier – of the ministerial business plan there is a chart to show the percentage of out-of-province applicants for postsecondary study. There was an increase of almost 50 per cent from 2019 to 2020. Could you explain that increase? That is really significant. Are there any follow-up data on long-term employment for these out-of-province students after graduation? Are they staying here for employment, or are they leaving our province upon graduation?

**10:20**

On page 7 of the ministerial business plan postsecondary operations are over \$6 billion, and they are forecast to increase more than 10 per cent. Could you explain the nature of these operations and why this number is so high and increasing? Is this sustainable?

On page 7 of the ministry business plans it states that postsecondary debt servicing is about \$34 million. That's about the cost of a new school for our students in Alberta. Can you address the nature of this debt referred to here and if there is a plan to have this paid down so the debt-servicing money can go to schools rather than big banks?

Similarly, the yearly net operating deficit is growing to nearly \$3 billion. Can you explain the nature of this deficit and what plans are in place to manage this deficit?

Finally, what, if any, capital investment is occurring in the riding of Lacombe-Ponoka by the Ministry of Advanced Education? I know of one university in particular that at one time was set and prepared to institute a full nursing program and for whatever reason – and we can go over that later – was halted. This is a few years back, but they would be ready to go if they could. So is there any investment occurring in Lacombe-Ponoka at this time or any future plans?

**The Chair:** Just a quick note to the member: you're doing a fantastic job, but every once in a while cast me a glance this way. It's through the chair.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Yes.

**The Chair:** I know it's in proximity. It's closer to the minister . . .

**Mrs. Johnson:** She's a lot better looking, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Yeah. Yeah, I agree. You're not locking horns, so it isn't a problem, but every once in a while just cast me a smile over here, too.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Oh, sure. Thank you for the reminder.

I'll check my time. I've got a couple more here, and it has to do with the student loan debt, Mr. Chair. I liked to hear that the Minister of Advanced Education is going to be working with the Minister of Education on several programs, and one of these programs that I think might be considered is financial management. Student loan debt bears a heavy burden for everyone – I think nobody would argue that – upwards of, like, \$5,000, \$20,000, \$50,000, \$100,000, or more. Wouldn't it be great if, when our students come out, there's no debt but they can just start saving for a house? I wonder if the minister is willing to talk with the Education minister on financial management for our high school students and how to manoeuvre through these programs and even possibly without debt when they come out.

I know what's happening. I know it's difficult, but I also talk to students in my constituency who are paying their way through, even in private institutions, and they're doing it with their summer jobs,

and they're coming out not only debt free but with savings in the bank. So I know it's possible. Are there measures being put in place, even at the high school level, that are going to prepare our students for this journey ahead?

As far as the scholarships, what are the metrics being used to decide who gets these scholarships and to which groups or students these are going to go, to ensure the right students get the right loan or the right scholarship or grant?

My last one. I heard reference to this earlier about executives at the university. I understand there is a cap put on for our executives at our postsecondary institutions. But to the Minister of Advanced Education. We are aware that the executives at least at one of our larger universities in the province are each making about half a million dollars, and the president is making almost a million dollars. Is this reasonable, and in which budget line item would this reflect our executive salaries?

That's a lot, but if the minister could address some of these, I would really appreciate it. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Perfect. With that, back over to the minister.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the member for those questions, particularly the vet med program at the University of Calgary, again, a phenomenal investment. It actually was a result of extensive engagement with a few of our MLAs, with industry, with other stakeholders in the province who indicated that we, obviously, have a very severe shortage of veterinarians in the province, and the desire to invest in more seats was palpable, so I was very pleased to be there at that announcement for additional seats. We have expanded this program at the University of Calgary from 50 seats to 100 seats, and we have also invested by providing \$8.4 million over three years in targeted enrolment expansion funds to support this program. There is also an additional \$59 million that was announced for infrastructure for next year. Is that correct? Okay. So that is the vet med program.

I did want to comment about your questions around the fact that we have a severe shortage in the skilled trades and apprenticeships. Thank you for sharing your story of your constituents who live east of Lacombe and their success in terms of being innovative and creating new technology to help them in their operations, but of course they are looking for skilled labour. That's why we are making this significant investment of \$102 million in this sector just to make sure that we can give them a hand and that they will be able to find the folks that they need to be able to fill those positions. Again I just want to say that some of the high-demand occupations are for electricians, for heavy equipment technicians, for automotive service technicians, and for welders. Even though this funding has not been allocated as of yet, that is going to happen imminently.

I just do want to talk about this \$102 million in more detail. There are two components in this \$102 million of new investment that we're making in trades within this budget. The first over the three years is \$72 million, as I had mentioned before, \$20 million per year in new seats. These seats are going to be delivered through the upcoming '24-25 academic year and are based on enrolment demand and wait-lists, how the seats contribute to meeting the labour market demand, which is exactly what you were talking about when you mentioned your constituents, and with consideration to trying to serve regional catchment areas in a way that meets regional needs. We also have to keep that perspective in mind. It's not just about one city or one area; we have to look at the region.

We are also going to invest \$30 million over three years – I mentioned that before – in curriculum updates, and it's worth

saying that apprenticeship education is unique from other forms of postsecondary in that it is the government of Alberta that owns the program. A lot of folks don't realize that, but it was very interesting information for me when I first came into this portfolio. The government owns the program, not the postsecondary institutions, so when there are updates that need to be made to learning outcomes, to curriculum, to guides, to shop equipment and the certification exams that we deliver, those costs are ours. There's a lot of expertise in the government in this file that will actually articulate and dictate exactly how this money is going to be spent and where.

I know that you had also asked about operations. Well, let's talk about compensation for executives. First of all, everything related to postsecondary operating support is in element 2.2. It's in element 2, just so that we have some clarity there. The Public Sector Employers Act applies to the public postsecondary institutions that were previously subject to RABCCA, which has now been repealed. Treasury Board and Finance issued ministerial orders to maintain current compensation parameters while new compensation policy frameworks are developed.

In early 2024 the provincial bargaining and compensation office will be contacting public-sector employers and stakeholders to engage in discussions to develop the new compensation frameworks. It is anticipated to take 12 to 24 months for each public agency to have a new compensation framework in place. So that work is under way as we speak. We have a number of members from the postsecondary institutions who are part of that table, which is very, very important because it's not only related, this framework to postsecondary, but postsecondary is a subset of it. So I'm proud to say that we have at least three members from postsecondary that will help develop this framework.

**10:30**

There was a question about increase in operational expenses. Budget increases are a result of inflationary pressures and increased student enrolment. Despite what may have been communicated earlier, what's out in the media, we do actually fund inflationary increases and increased student enrolment. PSIs' own-source revenues are growing to off-set these costs as well. Budget 2024 represents an 11.5 per cent increase in own-source revenue from Budget 2023.

All right. I just wanted to talk about Burman University, but before I get into that, I know that there was another question around borrowing guidelines. I'll just quickly answer that. Long-term borrowing guidelines: all borrowing requests need to be approved and include a review by the Minister of Infrastructure and Treasury Board, used for infrastructure purposes or refinancing. So there has to be that interaction with these ministries. The benchmark view is that the debt should not exceed two times revenue, and existing debt has interest costs of about \$34 million on revenue of \$7 billion. This reflects debt-servicing costs of under .5 per cent. Thank you for that question. I'm glad I had the opportunity to address that.

All right. I do want to talk about Burman University. Fantastic institution. I spent some time there. In fact, the president, Loren, was here for Budget 2024. They do great work. I know the question was: is there any capital investment in your constituency? There isn't. That is the only postsecondary institution in your constituency, but I'm a strong believer in the work that they do. They do receive \$3.2 million every year in operational funding as well as some funding for targeted enrolment expansion. They do some great work there. I know you were talking about a program in nursing that they may potentially be investigating as well. I always encourage institutions to keep in close contact with the department and to make sure that that engagement is there.

Now, I appreciate your comments around – sorry. Give me a second. It's dry in here. It's time for some water. As I was saying, as a mother of four I do appreciate your comments around financial literacy. I know that in the high school system and curriculum this was something that was introduced, and there are high schools that have courses in financial literacy. It's important for everybody to know a little bit about accounting and financial management; I'm a strong believer in that. Certainly, we continue to have those conversations.

I know that there were questions around student loans. Again, I appreciate your comments around the potential to reduce student loan debt if there is more financial education and literacy. I appreciate that comment, but I also know for a fact that funding postsecondary education is expensive, and those who incur student loans and debt should feel no shame about that whatsoever because that's just a reality of life. If you want to access a postsecondary education and you are from a low-income family or you're barriered, Alberta has some great supports, thankfully, in place through our student loan program, through our scholarships, through our grants that will assist in helping students achieve their dreams on their educational journey.

In terms of eligibility for student loans there is no income testing. That's that \$1.2 billion line in our financials that supports student loans. Loans may be for full-time or part-time studies, and criteria are essentially need and the resources that they have. That's for student loans, but keep in mind we also have grants, and we have scholarships as well. The grants: many of them are nonrepayable. I've already mentioned the Alberta student grant. We have the international educated nurses bursary and several more. I would encourage Albertans to please visit our website to learn more.

**The Chair:** Perfect. With that, we have a minute 37 left in the block. If the MLA would like to continue, please go ahead.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Yes, please. Thank you.

Thank you, to the minister through the chair, for ending on the scholarship grant program. I do have a question around that still. Is all of the money that is in that pot being used every year? There is maybe \$1.2 billion, if I understand correctly. Is that all being used, or is it there to be accessed and we're not actually using it all? What is the demand for that, I guess, is my question.

To the medical schools, the rural postsecondary medical schools: how many spots are currently available, and when will we see the first grads coming out of that? In this program are they guaranteed to stay in Alberta and especially rural Alberta, or is it sort of up to them? What are the parameters around that?

If I have a few seconds left, you mentioned the postsecondary revenue, which was new to me, and I was delighted to hear about that and the creativity and the entrepreneurship that's happening in our postsecondary institutions. Can you give some examples of what some of that revenue looks like? How many institutions are doing that, and what does this look like? I'll end with that.

**The Chair:** With 14 seconds, Minister, back to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. I'll be quick. Student loans are based on demand. If we are forecasting more demand, we will increase that budget.

We introduced 120 new medical seats across the province.

**The Chair:** With that, if everyone's comfortable with it, a five-minute comfort break or bio break; whatever you need to do.

[The committee adjourned from 10:37 a.m. to 10:42 a.m.]

**The Chair:** That five minutes goes by real quick.

With that, we're into the block time for government caucus. Is there a member from the government caucus who has a question? I recognize MLA Yao. Please continue.

Everyone else, please take your seats. We are back live, so the chatter in the background is no longer allowed. We're back in business.

MLA Yao, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you so much, Chair and through you to . . .

**The Chair:** Sorry. Did you want to go block time or split it?

**Mr. Yao:** Yeah. Minister's choice, but I'd love to continue our conversations that we've had and just go back and forth if that would be possible.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** My preference is to keep it consistent for everybody in the room and not to change the rules of the game halfway.

Thank you.

**Mr. Yao:** Certainly. Through the chair to Minister Sawhney, again, thank you so much for all your hard work in this file. Thank you to your entire team, from your staff in your office to all your deputy ministers and all the administration. This is a difficult file. It's a file that demonstrates – well, it's the epitome of some of the things that we have to invest in here as a province that help attract and make the livability here so much more.

To that effect, thank you for a lot of the attention you've been providing to my local community college, Keyano College. Fort McMurray: we have a very unique dynamic there. I know we continue to press you to perhaps invest disproportionately more up into Fort McMurray, but our reasons are just.

Fort McMurray, as you may know, is an economic driver, one of the economic drivers in our province, and it contributes billions of dollars to our economy. According to the oil sands community alliance, which has now turned into the Pathways Alliance, there are over 30,000 people that commute to Fort McMurray to work. Of that 30,000, one-third of those are from out of province. We have approximately 1,300 that come in from Newfoundland, about 1,000 from New Brunswick, about 1,000 from all the Maritime provinces, about 4,000 or 5,000 from British Columbia alone, and one of the things we hope to aspire to is to be able to have a community that's attractive enough that these people will consider living in Fort McMurray. It's an endeavour. But even if we could target 10 per cent of that 10,000 that fly in, you know, 1,000 people is a phenomenal success.

I'm reminded of this by some of the folks that are originally from the Maritimes who chose to come to Alberta, chose to come to Fort McMurray because of the things that we provided that weren't available for them back in their home provinces. They felt that their kids had better opportunities here in Alberta, specifically in Fort McMurray. To that effect, certainly we've been asking for a lot of investments in Fort McMurray, including to build up our long-term community, and to support this, I've been glad to work hard with yourself and other ministers to advocate for Fort McMurray.

I see in your business plan that key objective 1.1 states that new initiatives are being implemented under the Alberta 2030 skills for jobs strategy to transform the adult learning system for Alberta's future. I'm wondering if you could share with us some of the things that might be considered to be innovative happening with our local college. Secondly, I'm wondering if you can expand on the efforts with other rural institutions to accomplish this very same goal.



Again, it's not about just attracting people to Fort McMurray; it's about attracting people to Alberta. If we have robust postsecondary institutions right across the province, I feel we can really try to target those 10,000-plus people that fly in from out of province to work here in Alberta.

My second question to you is under outcome 1 of the Advanced Education business plan. It states that your ministry is going to invest an additional \$102 million over three years to create apprenticeship seats in high-demand areas. Certainly, one of those areas is the capital region of Edmonton, which is a hub for the north. Albertans are always excited for new apprentices and skilled working opportunities because they know that this will allow these people to be rewarded with good, high-paying jobs here in Alberta. As you know, we have a bit of a deficit in regard to construction workers and other trades. I'm wondering if you can expand on the existing funding that is currently available, and what do you anticipate will be the impact that these dollars have towards training the workforce of tomorrow here in Alberta's capital?

Again, I believe these questions have been asked by other members here, but certainly on page 4 of your ministry business plan it says, "In 2024-25, the ministry will allocate \$182 million in student aid through scholarships, grants, and awards." I see on page 26 that there are different line items for different grant programs. I'm just wondering if you can go more in depth into what scholarships you're increasing and introducing into our province.

Another aspect I wish to ask you is on our health programming. As you may know, some of the things that our government has been looking at is training physicians and other health professionals rurally, with the intent that if we can train them in a rural or remote environment, these people are more likely to consider staying in these environments because they become accustomed to it. Right now the reverse happens. Kids from rural communities come to Edmonton or Calgary to enrol in medicine, and they become accustomed to the lifestyle, the amenities here in these large centres. They meet their partners here in these big cities, and quite honestly they decide that they want to live and be a specialist in these larger centres. As you can imagine, that becomes detrimental to our rural communities.

I know that our government is committed to ensuring that all Albertans have access to the health care that they need when and where they need it. In Ontario they have the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, which has actually recently graduated into a full-fledged university. They're the epitome of training people in a rural environment. One of their finest examples is an Indigenous woman who went to Toronto to take medicine. She was absolutely overwhelmed by the lifestyle in Toronto, and she was about to quit the medicine program. She discovered the Northern Ontario School of Medicine. She transferred up there, and she graduated. To this day the Northern Ontario School of Medicine has demonstrated that if you train people in that rural or remote environment, they're more willing to consider staying in that environment.

I see on page 4 of your ministry business plan that in '24-25 the ministry plans to "invest an additional \$6.8 million to expand access to physician education to address critical shortages for physicians and medical professionals." I see that the government is planning to spend \$126 million over three years for the rural physician expansion program to provide rural, Indigenous, and other learners with increased access to medical education.

**10:50**

I'm wondering if you can provide more details on this program as we endeavour to hopefully educate more physicians in rural and remote environments, and I'm wondering if you can also give us a breakdown by each year as to the number of students that we're

currently producing through these programs in order to understand how we are achieving these goals of, again, trained physicians in rural and remote environments. As you can imagine, this is a key aspect. The entire nation actually has a bit of a drought when it comes to attracting physicians currently, so to have an idea of what you are doing in your ministry would certainly give Albertans a lot of comfort in understanding these things.

Just a final question I have. Outcome 2 of your ministry business plan is "Alberta's high quality adult learning system and professional regulatory environment attract, develop, and retain a skilled and talented workforce." Again, we seem to be in an era where we have a lot of deficits in a lot of different areas in our workforce, and I certainly just want to understand how your ministry, how our government is working towards achieving these goals of ensuring that we have the programming available as well as making it attractive enough for people to come to Alberta to train in these postsecondary institutions. My question is, again: how does Budget 2024 support your key objective 2.1 to "strengthen and streamline the professional regulatory environment to reduce timelines and barriers to registration within professional occupations . . . in Alberta while maintaining a high standard of quality"?

Again, I want to ask that you reflect on our health programming. I just received a letter from a lot of Alberta-born students who are training in Ireland right now to become physicians. I know they've been lobbying our entire caucus right now to see what we can do to work with the professional groups like the College of Physicians & Surgeons, like the Alberta Medical Association to ensure that they have the ability to train here in Alberta. These are people that are Albertans. They were able to get their medical training in Ireland. I'm hoping that maybe you can expand on that.

Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thanks.

Minister, the remaining part of the block is back to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Well, thank you very much for that series of questions, MLA Yao. Certainly, you are a tireless advocate for your constituency. I've had the opportunity to work very closely with you in the various ministries, and I probably made at least seven trips out to Fort McMurray, actually, over the last five years. Most of them were when I was in community and social services. I would probably say that the most fun trip I had was recently when I visited Keyano College, a tremendous institution and very pleased to be working closely with them. I know that you had asked me about some of the innovative work that's happening at Keyano, so I would be very happy to share with you some of the highlights of what's happening.

They have been approved to offer eight new programs of study or specializations which, again, are responsive to the needs of the community and employers, because that's how we design these programs in collaboration with the institution. Some of these include economic sectors, including hospitality and tourism, health care, technology, and business, and a further six new program proposals are under consideration.

Some very exciting news as well: you may already know this. We are currently considering two proposals from Keyano College which, if approved, would be the institution's first stand-alone degree program. That is pretty monumental. We're working on that right now, and of course we'll be working closely with the institution and obviously keeping you and your colleagues apprised of the situation.

We're also reviewing proposals for diplomas in child and youth studies, emergency medical responder, and environmental technology.

Of course, these programs will help ensure that more young people stay in the community because that is a significant concern of many different communities, not just Fort McMurray. We're seeing a lot of young people who have left the community, but when we invest in postsecondary, it's actually an incentive for young people to stay. Hopefully, these programs will also attract new students to the community and support community services.

You had mentioned health care. I've got a lot to say about health care. Keyano College was funded through the targeted enrolment expansion initiative, and in the first round they received nearly \$1.3 million to create 50 new seats at the institution's health care aide program and 46 new seats in the primary care paramedic program. Beginning in 2023, through a second round of targeted enrolment expansion, we've committed nearly \$1.2 million over three years to expand the college's primary care paramedic program by an additional 45 seats and its collaborative bachelor of science and nursing program by 48 seats. That's a partnership with another postsecondary. There's more that is happening at Keyano College.

I know that the other part of that question was: how are we expanding on efforts with other rural institutions to accomplish the goals of innovation? I'll give you an example. Olds College Centre for Innovation operates a smart farm, which is a testing and proving ground for autonomous agricultural equipment, sensors, data utilization, technology development and validation. That's an example at Olds. Lakeland College is conducting applied research to advance real-world agricultural productivity and sustainability in key commercial crops and livestock sectors.

There are more examples, but I do know that you had some other questions. Of course, when we're talking about apprenticeship and the investment that has been made, this is going to be a game changer in the province. I know that the Premier is a strong advocate and champion of the trades, and that was fully reflected in my mandate letter. My job is to help actualize her vision, and certainly it's not only her vision; it's a vision of our entire caucus and many, many Albertans at large.

I've already gone through the funding that has been allocated to these programs, but one thing that I didn't mention is that we had more than 60,000 registered apprentices this year in Alberta alone, and that's a 28 per cent increase from last year. The demand is there, and we are seeing that the interest levels are starting to increase. The \$102 million that you had mentioned is all about apprenticeship education, again, \$24 million per year that has yet to be allocated, and that's on top of the existing \$54 million that was already in place in the previous budget, so that brings us to \$234 million. That translates to 3,200 additional seats per year at the 11 postsecondary institutions that offer apprenticeship training.

At this point I just want to talk about parity of esteem. I feel like we've talked about the numbers and how important this is, but we still have an issue with a stigma that is associated with the trades. I always say that that is not my value statement or my judgment. This is what I'm hearing from stakeholders, I hear it from industry, and it's really incredibly unfortunate because there's so much dignity and value in this kind of work that is done.

When I was in a Grande Prairie, somebody said to me: of course, we need physicians and nurses and technicians and radiologists and hospitals, but we also need electricians, we also need somebody who knows how to run the boiler room, we need carpenters, we need plumbers. All of these facilities, every facility in the country, in the world, cannot run unless you have tradespeople who are involved in putting it together or maintaining it.

When I talk to young people especially – and I've been doing this quite a bit, actually, in every circle. My kids are sick of hearing me say this. When you talk about electricians, for example – and that's the first program that we're going to look at with our \$10 million

investment in curriculum updates – electricians have an average salary of over \$80,000 a year, and that's average; it's not even the 75th quartile. They have a 90 per cent employment rate.

We have a significant labour market shortage. There are so many opportunities and a great way to earn a living at a very low tuition cost. Like, tuition, I believe, was around \$5,000 the last time I looked for a full training course for an electrician. I think it's really important to articulate these messages, and that's why I'm taking the opportunity to share that message here in estimates just so that I'm doing my job in terms of enhancing parity of esteem and articulating again that this is a high-demand area. So that is, I guess, a long answer to your question around the investment in apprenticeships.

**11:00**

You had also asked about scholarships, again a very important question. We have a number of student aid programs – student loans, grants, scholarships, bursaries, and awards – that help a wide range of students across all forms of postsecondary education in Alberta. Again, this is really important, especially for those individuals who are low income. We have lots of grants that are available for them. Student loans: they would be eligible for that as well. Student loans are repayable, and they are needs based to support eligible students to attend postsecondary studies. Grants are nonrepayable funding sources provided to eligible Alberta postsecondary students with the highest financial need who meet specific eligibility criteria. Alberta student aid actually includes over 50 scholarships and awards, each with its own unique eligibility criteria.

I'm not going to go over all of them, but I'm going to go over some of the key ones here in terms of the grants. Again, it's important for Albertans to know that these are available, and they can find more information on our website. So \$54.4 million for the Alberta student grant in this budget. We have \$7.8 million for the bursary for internationally educated nurses, and that will support 400 internationally educated nurses. You had talked about health care and the deficit of qualified individuals. This will help underemployed Albertans to actually enter the labour market. We have a \$5 million budget for the new beginnings bursary to support approximately 1,000 students. We have \$1.4 million for the air access bursary. We have \$250,000 for the Alberta grant for students with disabilities, and there are more supports for students with disabilities. These are some of the elements of our student aid program, but I would be happy to share more.

I'm just looking at the time, and I just want to very quickly move on to question 19. This is a very important question, and I will pick this up again. It's about the rural physician expansion program and the breakdowns by year. Again, Albertans want to know. The government has invested significantly in this program and will continue to do so to meet that shortage of physicians in our community.

**The Chair:** Perfect. Well, thank you very much for that, Minister. In the famous words of an old construction manager mentor of mine: before construction there was nothing. That puts in context how much we need to work together on all those elements: postsecondary, trades, inclusive of engineering, et cetera.

With that, we're into the fire round, if you would, 10 minutes back and forth. Over to the members from the loyal opposition.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you. Yeah, those were fantastic questions – thank you – and thank you for your answers. You really gave some perspective on some follow-up questions that I do have here. There are some pieces that I'd like to address.

I'm going to touch on a question that relates to affordability and tuition, one that I didn't ask earlier. You know, one of the things that I've been hearing for years but in particular as a member for quite a few months is from U of A student groups. They've made it very clear. Recently I know this was discussed broadly in the media, but student groups are really upset. They said that they're upset and frustrated with the affordability piece. We're all well aware that the problem, the root of the problem, of student affordability is the loan-to-grant imbalance, with only 5 cents going to the needs-based grant for every dollar allotted to student loans. The president of the University of Alberta Students' Union said that Alberta is falling behind. We also have at the U of C these similar types of comments coming forward.

If we look at page 4 of the business plan, it indicates that the ministry will allocate \$182 million in student aid through scholarships and grants and awards and \$1.2 billion through student loans. I do notice that there's a disparity between loan funding and nonrepayable funding, and it's stark. Developing a focused financial assistance initiative for students with the greatest need, nonrepayable grants offer an efficient approach to tackling significant affordability barriers. Through the chair, Minister, if you could explain why you chose to reduce funding to grants, as seen on page 26, line 3.2 of the estimates. Will this mean less are available, and how will this increase access and support low-paid Albertans?

Also, according to the estimates, section 3, any increases over last year's budget are attributable only to administration increases and the addition of private colleges into that section. Through the chair, why have private colleges been combined into the student aid budget area? Can the minister explain the program or programs covered under line 6.2 of the estimates?

You know, when we are looking at other issues related to – I asked a few questions on trade unions and specifically on skilled trades, and I wanted to kind of bring it back to this question that I asked earlier. It's wonderful to hear that the minister was talking about that she's collaborating with the operating engineers. I met with those folks as well, and there's a lot of great work there. But what I would like to ask the minister about what other union groups you will be working with within this area of: how do we bring union trade schools into the picture? My two previous questions from earlier on – and I didn't believe I got a specific answer to that – are: can the minister point to the line in the budget or where or how these union training centres will be funded and tell me more about how much funding is set aside for these training centres along with the other union groups that the minister will be working with? How and where in this budget could we see support for this?

Another piece of the skilled trades that I'd like to talk about is the topic of microcredentialing. We know that microcredentialing offers a promising pathway for journeypersons and skilled trades to expand their skills and grow their careers, that journeyperson tickets are essential in so many ways. You know, when we look at – and I've spoken to many stakeholders who've brought it up – the issue around the use of microcredentialing, a single skill outside of the broader apprenticeship or trade program, there are many concerns within this for apprenticeship versus how we're going to get apprentices to a journeyperson position. Through the chair, I would like to also ask about the trend in education around microcredentialing. When we look at page 4, outcome 1.2, it identifies the evolving needs of the economy. I think we need to look at finding efficient means to train our workers. Does the minister have any comments on how she would approach microcredentialing and advancing the careers and also some of the concerns that the stakeholders have for what this means for certain – and she talked about electricians, things like that.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Minister, back to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you, Chair, and thank you so much for those questions. I will try to be very quick because I do want to get to all of them.

I have also been meeting with students, and I do understand the frustration that is expressed. I certainly have met with students all across the province, not only U of A and U of C, and there are messages that are consistent around affordability. But I do want to say that Alberta is not falling behind. Our student aid program is actually very robust, and it's very comparable to and better than in many jurisdictions across the country. We do have \$182 million in funding in student aid. About \$68 million is related to the grants, and \$113 million is in scholarships as well and then that \$1.2 billion in student aid.

What's not included in that is the funding for foundational learning assistance and CALP. That also goes towards vulnerable Albertans to help them upskill and train, whether it's ESL programs or anything else related to obtaining a high school equivalent program. It tends to deal with some of our more vulnerable Albertans. We also have a lot of Ukrainian temporary residents who avail themselves of this funding envelope to make sure that they can focus on ESL or any other elements of the program. So when we're talking about student supports, please do factor in the fact that there is significant investment in these two programs as well.

**11:10**

I do want to talk about element 3 because this has been a bit of a topic of controversy, and there is a misunderstanding of what actually is involved in that element. First of all, I want to say that Advanced Education does not provide any funding to support the operational costs of private career colleges. We never have, and there's no plan to do so. That needs to be very clear because I know there are a few student organizations who are saying: wait a minute; why are you funding private career colleges? We are not providing them any operational funding, so element 3, private career colleges and student aid, should not be mistaken for the notion that we're providing operational funding to them.

There are, however, two areas where the Department of Advanced Education does provide dollars to private career colleges to deliver programming. I want to be very transparent about that. The first is in foundational learning, and the second is in delivering the hairstylist apprenticeship education program. We have some really good partners who help deliver the FLA program. Columbia College is one of them. They do fantastic work. Currently two entities providing that training for Advanced Education on a fee-for-service basis happen to be a private career college, and that is for the hairstylist and barber apprenticeship education program. I just wanted to provide some clarity around that.

In terms of union groups that I will be working with, I met with the operating engineers, and they were kind enough to actually host a round-table for me with a variety of different organizations representing different unions. I know that there are two organizations that we work with already in terms of our partnerships in apprenticeship, but we are working right now with the operating engineers to develop a grant agreement. I can't provide more details than that, but that will be coming out of the apprenticeship funding that has been announced. It will be included in that.

I know that there were also some questions around – I'm just going back; I kind of jumped ahead of myself. There was a question around student loans. The average assistance, that is repayable, is about \$12,716. The nonrepayable average per student is \$6,701. That is a really, really good ratio, particularly as we compare to other jurisdictions.

Microcredentialing. There is a lot to say about microcredentialing. As you know, they are shorter term and lower cost training opportunities. Postsecondaries are collaborating right now with industry partners to make sure that the microcredentialing is relevant and really does address those labour market gaps. They are offered in new and evolving industries as well, where traditional credentials might not be in place, such as drone piloting, automation, and applied machine learning.

I also want to mention – I'm just looking at the time, and I won't be able to get into this program in detail, but hopefully I'll get a chance to speak about this sometime in the future.

**The Chair:** Okay. With that, we're back over to our independent member for 10 minutes.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister and staff. It's been a little while we've been here already, and you just keep on going. You've got lots of energy, so we'll continue.

I'll come back to a couple of the questions that I had before, when we ran out of time, and it had to do with rural doctors and mitigating the shortages of rural doctors. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what the ministry is doing with that? To come back to the question of, "How many of these rural doctors from this program do you see that are going to be staying in Alberta?" and even going back to the question of out-of-province students that are coming in, where it jumped from 21 per cent to 30 per cent, how many of those out-of-province students being educated in Alberta, Mr. Chair, to the minister, are actually staying in Alberta with their skills and serving in this province? If you could have an answer for that, I'd appreciate that.

I just have two more questions. Coming back to the postsecondary revenue, which is very interesting, one is about: could you give us a couple of examples of where this is happening and what that looks like and how that is working for those institutions?

Then, coming back to microcredentialing, which, again, is such an interesting program, can you expand upon what the costs are with this at this point? We understand that costs are low tuitionwise for our trades students. It's a good salary, and it's a good living and meeting a really important need in the province. Our microcredentialing could meet that to even a higher level. What is the cost if a builder wants to get plumbing or electrician as microcredentialing? What does that look like? How many schools are currently offering this, and what is the plan forward to expand upon this program?

I'll stop there.

**The Chair:** Turning it over to the minister.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Well, thank you for those questions. I know that when MLA Yao had posed a question on how we're going to manage the critical shortages for physicians and medical professionals, I wasn't able to answer that completely, so I'm going to take the opportunity to do that right now.

One of the items in my mandate letter is actually to work with Alberta's med schools to examine ways to increase the number of physicians working in Alberta particularly in rural areas by partnering with other postsecondary institutions. Many of you have heard about the rural physician expansion program. This is something that we should all be very proud of. It's work that is under way. It's work that other jurisdictions have done, and they've done it successfully. It's a way to make sure that we have more people studying in rural areas, because studies and the research and data show that if an individual studies in a rural area, the chances are that they will stay in that area to further their career, to put down roots, and to stay there. That's what those rural communities need,

right? There's just such a shortage not only for physicians but in other sectors as well.

We are working with Health, and I'm working very closely with the Minister of Health as well as Northwestern Polytechnic, University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, and the University of Alberta to develop these rural health professional training centres in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge.

Now, you will note that as part of our Budget 2024 capital investment announcement we are providing additional funds to the University of Lethbridge to help them develop that facility. These facilities, when fully developed, will offer doctor of medicine education through a distributed medical education model. That's what it means when you have these seats opening up in rural spaces. This is a substantial long-term investment in Alberta's health care training capacity, and, as I had mentioned before, these models are used widely across Canada and have been shown to increase rural physician recruitment and retention.

Now, another announcement that was made last year and which we are continuing to fund this year is to provide additional seats for medical students. The University of Calgary has already opened up, in addition to the University of Alberta, an additional 10 seats this past year. We had announced 120 seats overall in the next three years. So they'll be opening up another 20 this year and another 30 the year after. These are all seats for domestic students. I know there were some questions around how many students are taking up medical seats that are out of province, but this new announcement is all for domestic students.

So those are some of the answers provided around how we're going to tackle the shortage in medical professionals.

I know that there was a question around how the funding that has been provided breaks down by year. Through Budget 2024 Advanced Education is providing \$55.6 million to cover the operating expenses of the rural physician expansion program: 13 and a half million in '24-25, \$18.6 million in '25-26, and 23 and a half million in '26-27.

All right. Now I'm going to jump right into the microcredentialing question. I had answered some of those questions earlier in a response, but I just want to talk about a new and exciting opportunity, which I didn't get to share with Member Hoyle earlier but I'll talk about now. It's in IP commercialization. We are looking at about 10 proposals that will offer microcredentialing to Albertans to learn more about IP commercialization. We're partnering with Tech and Innovation. It's a \$1 million investment and a very exciting opportunity for Albertans who want to look into learning how to do IP commercialization but don't know the ABCs of it. That is under way. Microcredentials overall: we funded 56 new ones in 2021-22, 73 new microcredentials in '22-23, and across a range of different disciplines and to multiple postsecondary educations.

**11:20**

Quickly. The tuition for an electrician is under an apprenticeship, and an electrician participates in four periods of classroom education. Tuition is set by the postsecondary institutions, but we can assume that for each period it's around \$1,200, and tuition for that student comes in at about \$5,000, so it's in alignment with what I said earlier.

**The Chair:** Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

We're back over to the government caucus. Just note that in this round, folks, there is no ceding time. It's the fire round. MLA Wright.

**Mr. Wright:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the minister. You know, it was a great honour to be able to showcase all the great

things happening at our comprehensive community college, the Medicine Hat College, during your visit when you were down. I have a handful of questions that I'd just like to ask that I think are pretty relevant. Some of them are building off some of the colleagues' on both sides of the room here today.

If we start taking a look at health training in rural Alberta – and I just want to say that I'm incredibly thankful, as somebody who lives in southern Alberta, to see the investment that's being made into the rural medical teaching school in southern Alberta. It's in Medicine Hat's sister city of Lethbridge. I am, however, greatly interested to see what the breakdown of dollars would look like for this kind of set-up with the Medicine Hat College. Could you expand on both of the following topics so that I can tell my constituents back home why this is continuing to be important, to grow these rural health care training facilities, specifically around doctors, and what even the future funding would look like for the Medicine Hat College? That would kind of be the first one.

When I take a look at the capital plan, I see that there is the lion's share of all of the funding really tied up in the universities and polytechnics, and while they do make up a good chunk of where the students are, our comprehensive community colleges throughout the province play a vital role in the ecosystem of providing excellent postsecondary education. So I would ask, both in this budget cycle but also the strategic plan that goes out to 2027, what our comprehensive community colleges around the province would be able to see so that we can again see folks trained locally and stay in the rural areas. I think that this is vitally important for us to be able to grow and sustain rural Alberta.

When we take a look at one of the mandates around collegiates and dual credits, I'm wondering what the financial impact is going to be on dual credit programs that are being offered in the K to 12 ecosystem and what that's going to play in regard to potential loss of funding of programs due to students getting credits not at the postsecondary institutes but, rather, in the K to 12 institutes. In my region we've got an absolutely remarkable collegiate program, where folks are able to get their firefighting certification, private pilot's licence, credits towards the aircraft maintenance engineering program with postsecondaries. I am a huge proponent of this program, and I get an opportunity to really stand on a soapbox and talk about it anywhere I go. But it does raise the question of if at the high school level we're receiving postsecondary credits, what the impact could be in the long term to our postsecondary institutes.

And then the last one I've got is just: as we continue to see across Alberta a really large investment into aviation and aerospace – I know, speaking from Medicine Hat, we are seeing a rapid expansion of aviation and aerospace where our goal is really in the region to rival that of the Quebec corridor for aerospace and aviation. So with this, what steps are we taking to really develop the workforce through our postsecondary institutions to ensure that we are meeting the needs of that future workforce, meeting the needs of the rocket scientists and engineers and developers that are set up here in Alberta? I would maybe tie it back, Mr. Chair, to even highlight the success we're seeing in this realm to the recent announcement in Calgary of a Calgary-based organization winning the right to retrofit the F-18s. This begins to highlight a new and emerging industry, really, for us, which is aviation, aerospace, and defence. And, really, how can we – you know, as it was mentioned before, Alberta owns the program – set our postsecondary folks up for success in owning a part of an emerging industry that requires extensive training and certification at the postsecondary level?

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to be asking these questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, MLA Wright. You even cast me a couple of glances there towards the end; that was awesome. So thank you.

With that, Minister, over to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Well, thank you, Chair, and thank you, MLA Wright, for the series of questions. I feel like I've spoken about the rural medical teaching school in southern Alberta – again, a phenomenal model. We were very pleased to be able to provide additional investment for the University of Lethbridge. And, of course, we're working very closely with the Northwestern Polytechnic to see what their proposal is going to look like. Ultimately, again, to reiterate, the idea is to make sure that we have more physicians trained in rural settings to make sure that we meet that challenge of a lack of family doctors in some of these areas. I feel like I've addressed that question, but I do want to talk about comprehensive community colleges.

You're right. We tend to talk a lot about the universities at times, and we have also talked a lot about the apprenticeships, and trades, and polytechnics. But the comprehensive community colleges play a tremendously important role in terms of providing programming locally to students who want to be able to study in a wide variety of programs. The importance that they play in our economic system and in our social fabric is reflected in some of the programs that we have funded as of late. You'll be interested to know that Medicine Hat College did receive funding for practical nurse spaces in a targeted enrolment expansion, in the order of almost \$2.1 million. That is an indication that there is demand locally for these programs, and, of course, we know that we have a shortage of nurses across the province.

Lethbridge College is not in your neck of the woods, but it is in southern Alberta. In the same idea we've invested in their bachelor of nursing program in the order of almost \$2 million in expanded funding.

I think it's important to talk about Medicine Hat College a little bit. Let's talk about some of the base operating funds that they receive. Well, let's start with capital first. Their base CMR funding is \$1.3 million that is going to them. I also know that there is going to be some investment in a very particular project, and I should let you know right now. It's the sanitary sewer renewal replacement and asphalt infrastructure renewal. That's a \$3.15 million investment. It's not a very glamorous sounding investment, but it is most definitely required to make sure that we have safe spaces for students to study. This project would enable the college to evaluate and replace portions of aging infrastructure and execute associated restoration work. Those are some of the investments that are made in Medicine Hat College, and, again, a very important partner with Advanced Education in ensuring that their programming is meeting the needs of our economy.

I did note your interest in learning more about what is happening in aviation, so I'll just tell you a little bit about some of the investments and programs that we have. In terms of pilot training, we know that there is a significant shortage. I have heard this from WestJet and from other stakeholders across the province, and that is why we provided some funding to Mount Royal University to expand their pilot training program. That investment is in the order of \$5 million in capital funding for an aviation hangar, \$2.1 million for new aircraft, and \$1.06 million in operating funding to add 40 new seats to its aviation diploma program.

I know that your interest is more so in: what kind of investments are we making in your neck of the woods in aviation? We're going to be, certainly, talking more to Medicine Hat College, but I also know that there are additional investments that have been made at other institutions across the province other than MRU. An additional \$1.5 million was allocated in last year's budget, and \$1.8

million has been earmarked in this year's budget. That funding will include 58 seats at SAIT, 93 seats in SAIT's aircraft structures technician program, which is a fantastic program – when I was in transportation, when I held that ministry, I actually had an opportunity to go and take a look at some of these programs – 60 seats in University of Calgary's bachelor of science in electrical or mechanical engineering degrees with a minor in aerospace, again, a very innovative program that not too many people are aware of, so happy to actually be able to mention that program here today in estimates.

I know that my ...

11:30

**The Chair:** It goes so fast when it's only five minutes.

Over to the Official Opposition.

**Member Hoyle:** Thank you, Chair. Yeah. I'm going to do a bit of a rapid fire here, just kind of jumping off some of the questions that the members all brought forward today in relation to things like aviation in Medicine Hat, Lethbridge aviation, and those types of topics. I have, you know, spoken to folks who are air traffic controllers and who have literally left Alberta because of challenges with those jobs. I have met with a student who is from Lethbridge, here studying medicine, wants to go back to Lethbridge but doesn't see an incentive to do that and is, in fact, just at the end of graduating and looking at leaving the province.

I notice, Minister, it's stated in the mandate letter that the Minister of Advanced Education will then work "in coordination with the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance, designing and implementing an up to \$10,000 Graduate retention tax credit for Alberta's post secondary graduates." While I recognize that this doesn't directly help with tuition or affordability, this could have been a really easy thing to apply to retain those who are graduating currently and keep them here in Alberta. Through the chair, I'd like to ask the minister: you know, where in the budget can this tax credit be found, and if it isn't in this budget, when can graduates expect to benefit from it, and will this credit apply to all graduates from all postsecondary institutions?

Just moving on to mental health, if we look on page 4 of the ministry business plan, outcome 1, we know that many students don't have access to experts they can talk to that have cultural competence. They're away from their culture in a new academic system. Budget 2024 also allocates \$10 million over the next three years to create additional mental health professional spaces in Alberta postsecondary institutions. This is \$2 million less than what is needed to help run counselling and critical services as existing resources are barely triaging the most severe cases.

This question actually came from a stakeholder, and they wanted to know. Despite the pushes for increased mental health funding from student groups and organizations in postsecondary such as CAUS, ASEC, and APSN – this includes a broad scope of those involved in postsecondary leadership – it appears that the amount for professional spaces for mental health in 2024-25 is only \$2 million, half of the \$4 million promised in the mandate letter on page 1. While the minister confirmed that the mental health grant will stay, it has not grown, to our knowledge. Why is this the case? This is a question coming directly from stakeholders.

I have one for disabled folks. We know that, you know, students with disabilities have great challenges in postsecondary. Last year I was lucky to have a good conversation and meet with two students on major challenges. They have disabilities that require their textbooks, lectures, and exams to be transcribed through their computers, and this support literally hasn't happened. These were honours students who had to go from full-time classes down to one

or two because postsecondary institutions haven't had the funding and capacity to provide transcription. I mean, these are basic needs for students to succeed.

This particular student shared that because of these inconsistencies with operational funding – and this is what he was told – there's been a reduction in available services to support their learning. If we take this number, which is distributed among all 26 publicly funded postsecondary institutions, and allocate what is allocated to each postsecondary student who currently has a disability in postsecondary, that would work out to about \$582 per student.

Through the chair, I'm hoping the minister can clarify, you know, how this funding is sufficient given the increasing cost of living and the already incredibly high burden placed on students with disabilities and the challenges that postsecondaries are having to provide basic needs.

My last question will be on gender-based violence. You know, this is a real, serious issue at postsecondary institutions. It affects all genders on campus. Development and implementation of the Alberta postsecondary sexual and gender-based violence survey across – all 26 postsecondary institutions have issues with this. Can the minister, through the chair, please explain if this survey will be administered regularly in order to have an updated understanding of what students are experiencing on campus each year?

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Over to you, Minister, for your response.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you. That was great timing. I know there were comments around the aviation sector, and I provided some dollar amounts for some of the investments that we're undertaking. We also have a MOU signed between our government and WestJet. That includes further funding commitments that are under the purview of several ministries. Under this MOU WestJet doesn't receive direct funding. Investments will benefit the aviation industry in Alberta as a whole. That MOU is on public record, and there's lots of information around it in terms of what the multiministry activities are around it.

I do want to talk about the graduate retention tax credit. You are correct in saying that it is in my mandate letter. We are currently doing some policy work on this as we speak, and it is not ready. It's not fully cooked as of yet, so you won't find this as an item in Budget 2024. It is a policy question, and it's actually out of scope when we're talking about estimates, so I won't really comment on much more than that other than that work is being done as we speak.

Now, in terms of the mental health spaces I know that it's been a very difficult time for students, particularly postpandemic. We know that the mental health crisis has been called an echo pandemic, and it permeates all levels of society. Certainly, students are finding that they are not getting those culturally appropriate supports that they're looking for, especially as our demographics become more diverse in Alberta and on campus, and that is why we announced this \$10 million investment over three years. It does take time to actualize and operationalize this funding into seats, so we're working with our postsecondary partners to determine where these seats are going to be and what it's going to look like.

Look, this is an initial investment. I know that my colleague the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction is also taking a keen and critical eye in this space to determine if any other additional supports will be required, but I also think it's incumbent at this point to mention that we have these seats that have been mentioned in the budget. We also have an \$8 million grant that is disbursed to the various postsecondary students. I know the criticism is always: there's never enough; there's never enough funding.

In addition to that – and this is not perhaps well known – I do want to also say that we have an Indigenous postsecondary student mental health grant, and that's \$80,000 per year that goes to First Nation colleges, and it's \$400,000 across the five First Nation colleges. This funding, obviously, has been maintained. We also have the Healthy Campus Alberta grant. It's a three-year grant for \$900,000, and we also provide \$300,000 for the Canadian Mental Health Association. So there is more investment in this space than just those two items that were indicated earlier.

I will just talk about – I'll jump to the gender-based violence issue. This is a very serious issue. It's a very serious issue in society. We are seeing rates of domestic violence increasing over time, and certainly I am deeply concerned about what's happening on campus. I've had multiple conversations, and I know that we had offered initial funding to student organizations to put together a survey and to do an assessment of what was happening on campus. We had provided funding to ensure that additional supports were provided within that funding allocation, and there was an assessment of needs done at that time.

11:40

Advanced Education is supporting PSIs through the gender-based violence prevention grant, which provides, as I mentioned, \$2.5 million to Alberta's 26 publicly funded PSIs over two years. I know that an additional \$625,000 was also disbursed to the postsecondary institutions as well to help with gender-based violence initiatives.

Now, moving on to the disability grants, we do have grants within element 3 that are provided for persons who identify as persons with disabilities. And I would encourage anybody who is listening to this section of the estimates to please take a look at those grants, because they have been undersubscribed in the past. They are there to help vulnerable Albertans and to help those in need. We also provide more than \$11 million in annual funding.

**The Chair:** Thanks for that.

We'll turn it over to, it looks like, the government caucus. MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

**Mr. Wiebe:** Well, good morning, Mr. Chair. Thank you for this opportunity to speak, and thank you to the minister for being here to answer some of our questions. I just want to thank you for the announcement in the last couple of months with the power engineering degree that's going to be offered in Grande Prairie and also the expansion of the rural physician expansion program. Those are going to be very, very valuable in attracting doctors to rural Alberta and, hopefully, get to stay there.

There are a few questions that I have, and one of them was already touched on a bit from the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, and it's got to do with veterinary medicine. The U of C veterinary medicine capital expansion will be accelerating funds in Budget 2024. This is fantastic. Alberta and the country as a whole struggle with the lack of vets who work in agriculture, with family pets of citizens across Alberta. To the minister: when will you see this expansion be completed? Additionally, how large and what year will the first cohort of veterinary students be expected to enter the Alberta labour market?

Then also I want to thank you for the time here as well. As you know, students have raised concerns with the budget, specifically line items detailing \$391 million for private career colleges and student aid contained within the expenses. As with everything, the members across the table continue to engage sometimes in baseless fearmongering about this topic. To the minister: could you please share with us and provide additional details on what this line item actually means and where this money is being spent? Additionally,

is there any other major work happening with the private career college sector to protect students and support the public interest of Albertans?

Thank you.

**The Chair:** And if the member – I'm not sure if you're aware, but if you give this time up, it doesn't come back. Use it or lose it.

**Mr. Wiebe:** Okay. Well, I'll go back again. No. I guess some of these other questions that I have will have already been answered, so I'm giving that up.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you, Member.

Over to you, Minister.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Well, I don't get that time, unfortunately. I could have used it.

**The Chair:** No, you don't get it. It's gone.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** But thank you for those questions. Very important questions. The U of C veterinary medicine capital expansion program: again, it was a very happy announcement, very welcome because we have such a shortage of veterinarians in the province. To answer your question, expanding this program will improve veterinary medicine across the province. Construction actually began on December 1, 2023, and it's expected to be complete in the '25-26 academic year. Once it's complete, the University of Calgary will be able to expand the program by an additional 50 seats for a total of 100 seats. I'm very pleased to say that this project will receive an additional \$10 million in funding in Budget 2024, because we know that investing in veterinary medicine will not only create jobs, but it will maintain animal health and further support Alberta's world-class agricultural producers. Thank you for the opportunity to be talking about that investment once again.

Now, in terms of your second question I know that this has caused some concern with students and with some media outlets. I really wish that they had reached out to the ministry to ask more about this because it is not what they think it is. I'm going to actually read this answer out to provide a lot of detail around the particular elements of element 3, which is going to include a description of what that line item includes and also some dollar value amounts.

Here we go. As you note, Budget 2024 includes nearly \$391 million for private career colleges and student aid. The \$391 million is allocated as follows: \$41 million for private career colleges and student aid program delivery support; \$113 million for scholarships and awards – we've spoken about that extensively today – \$69 million for student aid grants, which includes the Alberta student grant of \$54 million; \$192 million for the student loan provision – you can find that in our financial statements for more information – less \$24 million in consolidation amounts. Budget 2024 also includes \$1.2 billion in Alberta student loans that will help an estimated 139,600 students. To be very clear: this budget does not include direct funding to private career colleges. Just going to repeat that: it does not include direct funding to private career colleges.

Budget 2024 includes nearly \$41 million to support private career colleges and student aid program delivery. This provides for student loan administration services, division staffing costs, PCC compliance audits, Treasury Board and Finance's Crown debt collection services, and general supplies and services. The private career colleges and student aid division administers a variety of student aid programs, helping a wide range of students across all forms of postsecondary education in Alberta.

This division is also responsible for licensing PCCs and ensuring PCCs comply with our legislative regulatory policy and process requirements. We recognize that there have been some compliance concerns with a small number of PCCs, arising from the rapid growth in this sector. We are committed to protecting postsecondary students and the quality of education they receive, which is why we have invested more into the compliance aspect of PCCs.

We are currently in the middle of a stakeholder engagement as part of a comprehensive review of the legislative framework around PCCs in Alberta. Student protection is very important to me, to this government, to our entire team, and we are committed to learning from students about their experiences with PCCs and in helping them to make the best decisions about their education here in Alberta. We want to ensure proper student protections are in place while also ensuring legislative and regulatory compliance and good operating practices with the sector.

Again, government does not provide direct funding to private career colleges for their operations. However, I had mentioned this earlier, that we do have partners that we work with in the foundational learning assistance sector. There are several partners that help us deliver this programming, and we've been working with them for a number of years. That is very different, obviously, from providing operational fundings to this sector. So I do hope that clears up any confusion around this element; if not, you know where to find me.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that, Minister.

We'll turn it back over to the loyal opposition.

**Member Hoyle:** Oh, my goodness. Thank you. Yeah. There are a lot of questions, a lot of answers today, but that's very good. It's very good. Thank you, Minister. I'm going to repeat a couple of questions because I know that with a lot being thrown at you in terms of questions, some components may be missed.

**11:50**

One that I didn't get a specific answer from you on was when I had asked about the mandate letter piece in terms of – and I'll read it out again: “in coordination with the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance, designing and implementing an up to \$10,000 Graduate retention tax credit for Alberta's post secondary graduates.” I had spoken about, you know, the aviation piece in terms of an air traffic controller and a young doctor both leaving the province. The question I had asked on this was – even though this isn't addressed to tuition and affordability, this is great retention to those who are just graduating. It is in your mandate in the top four on the mandate letter from the Premier. My question was, you know, is this in the budget, and if not, when can graduates expect to benefit from this? Will this credit be given to all graduates from all postsecondary institutions? So that was that first piece.

You know, the other question relates to disability. We know it's essential for postsecondary institutions to provide adequate supports for students with disabilities so there is equal access to education and opportunities for all. By offering accommodations, students with disabilities can fully participate in academic and extracurricular activities. If we look at page 14 of the annual report, the ministry will invest \$11.2 million in students with disability grants in 2022 to 2023. What is the current amount for this year, if I can ask through the chair to the minister, and where can we find that information?

Moving forward to a couple of questions on autocredentialing. The key objective to this here if we look at page 5 in the business plan: increasing and accelerating autocredentialing for workers

from national and international jurisdictions with similar standards, particularly for those in professions with high labour market demand.

Firstly, to be on the same page so that there's clarity around this, through the chair to the minister: what does autocredentialing mean to the ministry and the minister, just so there's clarity on that piece, and how does the minister anticipate determining the international jurisdictions that have similar standards with Alberta? What would those timelines look like? Also, through the chair, can the minister provide some metric to measure this? I understand it does not show in the business plan, but will the minister, you know, allow some kind of performance measure outside the business plan, and how can that be done?

Another question relating to autocredentialing through regulated professions. Now, we are relating to the government estimates, in particular in the context of the business plan. On page 5 of the business plan, through the chair to the minister, under the initiatives supporting key objectives it is shown that the ministry will invest \$3 million as part of what continues implementation of the international education strategy. However, the ministry allocates \$1.6 million in the estimates. Through the chair, can the minister help the committee understand the clarity around this piece in the government estimates?

I do have one more question – I think that will use up the last bit of time here – and this is coming back to gender-based violence. I don't know if I quite got an answer on this piece. We know that sexual harassment is the most common form of sexual and gender-based violence that students face at 45 per cent. I know there are training programs, like bystander intervention and training for staff on campus to know best practices to support victims for mental and physical health treatments. Through the chair, can the minister share what investment specifically is being made to support resources on campus so they are accessible across Alberta postsecondary institutions?

Thank you.

**The Chair:** And with four seconds to spare.

Minister, over to you.

**Mrs. Sawhney:** Okay. Thank you for those questions. I will be as concise as possible. Yes. A graduate retention tax credit was in my mandate letter. It is not included in Budget 2024 because we are still undertaking some policy work, and that is going to take some time. I'm working in conjunction with Treasury Board and Finance, so you will not find this tax credit within this particular budget.

I was listening with great interest to your comments around the young doctor, or maybe it was somebody in the aerospace industry who left the province. We'll have to talk about that more. I'd like to learn more to understand that particular situation. It's hard to do in estimates. But I do understand what you were saying, that if there was a graduate retention tax credit in place, maybe it would have made a difference. I can't say too much more about that particular piece because it's under development.

On the disability file we do provide \$11 million per year for disability support services, and if you are interested in understanding which element that resides in, it's in element 2; specifically, it's embedded in element 2.2 as one of the items that is provided as part of the block funding that goes to the postsecondary institutions as well. I know that you have some particular concerns around an individual who lost some services, and again, you and I should discuss that offline to understand that a little bit better.

In terms of increasing autocredentialing, we are very much motivated within the ministry to undertake some more work in this



area. I can tell you that we have done some work with Ireland and with our friends down south of the border in the U.S. to make sure that if they decide to come here in Alberta within certain occupations, they can get to work right away. That's what that autocredentialing means, that we have found a way to work with these other jurisdictions through our department, and we've got some good folks working in labour mobility and in the fairness for newcomers office that are going to help with this piece. Again, just to expand on that, it means expedited registration and certification of professionals who are educated and certified outside of Alberta. I have mentioned many times before: this is work that's decades in the making. We have made a dent, and the intention is to accelerate this even more.

We have a number of trades where we have autocredentialing in place already. I'd mentioned that we've worked with Ireland and the U.S., and Budget 2024 will see us expand our foreign credential recognition program. Again, great motivation to make sure that happens. We've also worked with our nursing regulator and now see a number of registered nurses from our nine most applied-from countries. We're working on this particular initiative, again, to expand and accelerate the autocredentialing in that area.

There were some questions around internationalization. Yes, there is a \$3 million budget item to support international education, and \$1.5 million will go to the Alberta Bureau for International Education. We should be having some more information that we can share around that soon. Of course, with the federal announcement of the cap on international students, the postsecondary space is much more motivated and concerned about how to attract international students into Alberta, and I share that concern. The international students that we have here who have

applied for permanent residence are a vital and key part of our socioeconomic fabric, and we want to make sure that we continue to invite qualified and highly motivated individuals to study here. We are also going to be doing some work internally on internationalization as well. Part of that \$3 million funding is for ABIE, and the other part is to continue the work within the ministry.

I just want to get back to the gender-based violence question. Again, 2 and a half million dollars was provided to Alberta's 26 publicly funded PSIs over two years, and institutions have already updated their policies and collaborated on a campus climate survey. An additional \$625,000 has also been allocated, and that was part of the \$54 million funding agreement with the federal government.

**The Chair:** Government caucus, with 20 seconds left.

**Mr. Stephan:** Wonderful. Well, I just want to say with just a few seconds that these have been super-duper estimates. Minister, I honestly will say this: I think you have stewardship over a very important ministry, so thank you for all you do.

**The Chair:** Those 17 seconds go by faster than you think.

With that, folks, we've reached the end of our time together. I apologize for the interruption. Thank you very much for the consideration of the estimates at hand.

I'd like to remind all the committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 13, 2024, at 10:15 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Thank you, everyone, for your candour, your co-operation, and your professionalism. Meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]





