Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Advanced Education

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Craig Johnson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Financial Services, and Senior Financial Officer
Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister
Aaron Neumeyer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Program Planning and Student Aid
Anne Ryton, Executive Director, Engagement and Student Supports

9 a.m. Tuesday, November 4, 2025

[Mr. Sabir in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Irfan Sabir, the MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall and chair of the committee. As we begin this morning, I would like to invite members, guests, and a LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves. We will begin to my right.

Mrs. Sawyer: Tara Sawyer, MLA, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Lunty: Good morning, everyone. Brandon Lunty, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

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

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn van Dijken, the MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Ms Ryton: Good morning. Anne Ryton, executive director, engagement and student supports with Advanced Education.

Mr. Neumeyer: Good morning. Aaron Neumeyer, assistant deputy minister of program planning and student aid.

Mr. Marchand: Good morning. Shannon Marchand, deputy minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Johnson: Good morning. Craig Johnson, ADM of financial services and senior financial officer for Advanced Education.

Mr. Curran: Good morning. Jamie Curran, ADM of skilled trades and partnerships.

Mr. Wylie: Good morning. Doug Wylie, Auditor General.

Mr. Driesen: Good morning. Rob Driesen, Assistant Auditor General.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Member Eremenko: Good morning. Janet Eremenko, Calgary-Currie.

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and Committees.

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you. We will now go to those joining us online. Please introduce yourself as I call your name.

MLA Jackie Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Good morning. Jackie Lovely, MLA for the Camrose constituency.

The Chair: Thank you.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating by videoconference are encouraged to please turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. Please set your cellphone and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. Comments should flow through the chair at all times.

Approval of the agenda: Hon. members, are there any changes in relation to the agenda? Seeing none, would a member like to move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the proposed agenda as distributed for its November 4, 2025, meeting? Moved by MLA Rowswell. Any discussion on the motion? Seeing none, all in favour? All in favour joining us online? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

We have minutes from the October 28, 2025, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? Seeing none, would a member like to move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the minutes as distributed of its meeting held on October 28, 2025? MLA Rowswell. Thank you. Any discussion on the motion? Seeing none, all in favour? All in favour joining us online? Any opposed? Thank you. The motion is carried.

I would like to now welcome our guests from the Ministry of Advanced Education and the office of the Auditor General, who are here to address the ministry's annual report 2024-25, the responsibilities under their purview during that reporting period, and relevant reports and outstanding recommendations of the Auditor General. I invite the officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes.

Mr. Marchand: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to the committee. I appreciate the invitation to join you today. I'm pleased to share our work over the 2024-25 fiscal year, including our work with partners in the postsecondary community, industry, labour, the nonprofit sector, and other areas of government. Before I share some details about the ministry's annual report, I'd like to acknowledge, in addition to my colleagues joining me at the table today, Crista Carmichael, the assistant deputy minister of policy engagement and governance, who is joining us in the gallery.

Alberta has a differentiated model for public postsecondary institutions. This means that each type of institution in Alberta plays a distinct and vital role in meeting the adult learning needs of Albertans. This model enables Advanced Education to support system co-ordination, leverage the unique strengths of each public institution, and optimize the allocation of public resources to the benefit of learners across the province. This co-ordinated approach supports the efficient use of public resources and ensures the system remains responsive to regional priorities and evolving labour market demands.

The Alberta 2030: building skills for jobs strategy remained our guide in the 2024-25 fiscal year in setting the direction for Alberta's higher education system. This strategy aims to develop a highly skilled, competitive workforce; facilitate stronger innovation and commercialization of research; and build stronger relationships between postsecondary institutions and employers.

These goals are reflected in our ministry business plan outcomes, which were that Albertans have the education and skills required to secure rewarding careers in the current and future labour market to support a thriving economy and society. This we track through the number of domestic learners enrolled in approved programs in Alberta and the employment rates of graduates. Two, Alberta's high-quality adult learning system and professional regulatory environment attract, develop, and retain a skilled and talented workforce. This was assessed through average processing times for both domestic and certified out-of-province applicants applying to a regulatory body.

We are committed to helping students pursue rewarding careers and made significant investments to support Alberta's world-class learning environments. For 2024-25 Advanced Education's consolidated ministry expense was $7.2 billion, an increase of $350 million, or 5 per cent, from the prior year, and $151 million, or 2 per cent, more than budget. Expenditures by postsecondary institutions made up the majority of these expenses, about 92 per cent, which was an increase of $435 million, or 7 per cent, from the prior year. These expenses were $227 million, or 4 per cent, more than budget, primarily due to an increase in research-related expenses and program expansion costs due to enrolment growth.

To help ensure that Albertans have the education and skills to succeed in the current and future labour markets, we provided $2.1 billion in operational funding for postsecondary institutions to deliver through the operating and program support grants, maintaining a stable base of funding for institutions. Within the ministry the private career colleges and student aid portfolio was the second largest expense area, accounting for 5 per cent of total expenses. The funds went towards covering program delivery costs as well as grants, scholarships, and awards to students enrolled in the private and public postsecondary institutions.

To reduce financial barriers for postsecondary students, Advanced Education invested nearly $1.1 billion in student aid to help Alberta students access postsecondary education. This included $905 million in student loans to help an approximate 108,000 students as well as $63 million in grants to support over 18,000 students and $101 million in scholarships and awards to over 49,000 students. The $79 million, or 18 per cent, decrease from the prior year and $42 million, or 11 per cent, less than budgeted were primarily due to a decrease in student loan provisions expense and lower-than-expected utilization of scholarships and awards.

Foundational learning expenses were the third largest category of spending and account for 1 per cent of total expenses. We invested $21.1 million last year to support the community adult learning program, which provides literacy and foundational learning to Albertans. Our foundational learning assistance program received $75.6 million. The $24 million, or 20 per cent, decrease from the prior year and $41 million, or 29 per cent, less than budget were primarily due to reduced expenses in foundational learning support benefits resulting from decreased funding from the government of Canada labour market transfer agreement as well as a decline in demand from high school learners.

Apprenticeship expenses accounted for 1 per cent of total expenses. Alberta's apprenticeship registration in '24-25 approached an all-time high, with apprenticeship registration in Alberta rising sharply over the past two years. Last year we invested $20 million, which continues this year and next, in critical updates to high-demand apprenticeship education programs. From September 6 to November 17 in 2024 we ran a $1.1 million media campaign called Wouldn't Trade It to raise awareness of trades and apprenticeship programs to encourage more people to enter apprenticeships and the skilled trades. Through the apprenticeship learning grant, we provided $76 million to 11 public postsecondary institutions, supplementing the base operating grant to fund over 28,000 apprenticeship classroom instruction seats across the province.

9:10

The $19 million, or 44 per cent, increase from the prior year, $6 million, or 11 per cent, more than budget, were primarily due to early disbursement of many 2025 partnership grants to support high demand in skilled trades programming. Other expenses include ministry support services, support for adult learning, and regulated professions, which are relatively small and consistent from the prior year.

In 2024-25 a significant amount of work was done to streamline Advanced Education's professional governance legislation from nine acts into one through the Professional Governance Act, which was introduced in the Legislature in March 2025 following significant stakeholder engagement on its development. This act modernizes our professional legislation, emphasizing good governance and consistency in the regulation of the professions it covers while remaining responsive to the unique needs and operations of each organization. This act brings in transparent, fair, and accountable professional legislation that ensures the highest standards of competence and ethics are in place and enforced. It will support the mandate of these professional regulatory organizations to protect the public interest of Albertans and will provide improved regulatory tools to support the needs of today's professions.

With rural communities across Alberta facing a shortage of physicians, we are investing approximately $376 million over four years, from 2023 to 2027, to increase the number of graduates from Alberta's medical schools. The investment will fund 60 new graduates each year through the new rural medical education program training centres in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge.

Under our targeted enrolment expansion initiative to increase spaces in high-demand postsecondary programs that support key economic areas, Advanced Education provided $70 million last year to support just over 2,000 new enrolments in funded programs. Aligning seat funding with Alberta's priority industry sectors increases student access to high-demand programs, helps industry develop the talent they need, and connects Albertans to good-paying jobs.

Another important part of our work and how we prepare for the future growth of the student population is through capital project expenditures. Last year Advanced Education announced investments of $360 million for capital projects over the three-year budget cycle. This included $117 million to help create modern learning environments and $133 million for capital maintenance and renewal needs in 2024-25.

As Alberta's economy is growing and the world around us evolves, we need workers equipped with diverse and in-demand skills and training. Our province's prosperity depends on having one of the most highly skilled and well-educated populations in the world. This means Alberta's publicly funded postsecondary education system is critical to the province's ongoing prosperity and it's more important than ever to explore ways of improving the strength and sustainability of our postsecondary system. To this end, last year the government convened an expert panel to explore funding allocations, federal immigration policy impacts on Alberta's postsecondary institutions, administrative and regulatory burdens, and the overall competitiveness of Alberta's postsecondary system. The panel's report was released a few weeks ago.

These are just some of the highlights of last year's annual report and the work of the department to empower Albertans through an adult learning system and professional regulatory environment that supports an innovative and prosperous Alberta. We appreciate the committee's time this morning and look forward to the discussion.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I will now turn it over to the Auditor General for his comments. Mr. Wylie, you have five minutes.

Mr. Wylie: Good morning, Chair, through you and to the committee members. I'll be very brief. I'll just give a bit of an overview of the work that we do in the ministry.

As everyone here, I believe, knows, we audit the financial statements of the organizations within the government, and in '24-25 we audited the financial transactions at the Department of Advanced Education as part of our work on the consolidated statements of the province. In addition, we conducted separate financial statement audits of 20 publicly funded postsecondary institutions. We're now in the process of completing financial statement audits for these PSIs, and we will be reporting on the results of those that have June year-ends early in 2026.

I'll briefly move on and talk a little bit about the outstanding recommendations in our reports. Currently there are a total of 15 outstanding recommendations at the ministry. Four relate to the department, and 11 relate to the postsecondary institutions. Three of the department's four outstanding recommendations have been outstanding for more than 10 years. In 2024 we assessed implementation of our 2015 recommendations related to for-profit and cost-recovery ventures at postsecondary institutions. We repeated our recommendation to improve the department's oversight of the institution's risk assessment of ventures. The remaining two outstanding recommendations relate to our 2013 audit of the collaborative initiatives among postsecondary institutions, which was repeated in 2017. The outstanding recommendations related to postsecondary institutions primarily deal with processes around IT security, monitoring of cloud service providers, and procurement practices.

That concludes my opening comments, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wylie.

We will now hear questions from committee members, and we will begin with the Official Opposition. You have 15 minutes for this block.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, everybody, for being here. Page 38 of the annual report has the postsecondary student mental health grant. It's $8 million every year since 2017, and according to the annual report grant allocations aren't made according to student numbers but a formula that considers geography, demography, campus size, and availability of external services. If I just look at my hometown of Calgary, we've got four postsecondaries there. SAIT and University of Calgary received around $2,500 per 100 full-time equivalents, MRU received $5,700 per 100 full-time equivalents, and Ambrose University, same city, received $17,000 dollars per 100 full-time equivalents. Can the folks in attendance here tell me why there's such a vast discrepancy of per-student funding for the mental health student grant?

Mr. Marchand: Thank you for the question. I think, as you identified, there are a number of considerations, and one of them is trying to find, fundamentally, a meaningful base of funding that enables an institution to actually do something effectively with the money. If, for example, it was allocated on a purely per capita basis, the very large institutions would obviously get more money, but the small institutions, I think, would end up with an amount of money that you couldn't realistically do very much with, so there was an effort to try to find a certain amount of a sufficient base that, you know, the institutions in receipt of the funding, the small ones, had sufficient resources and capacity to be able to meet the objectives of the grant agreement.

Member Eremenko: When you talk about the outputs, we've got 60,000 appointments booked for the entire funding envelope. Sixty thousand appointments booked, and then I think it was 15,000 training and skills development activities. Do you have that broken down by institution so that we can actually identify which of them are doing what with their allocation?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. We would have that information by institution because we would have it in the annual reports, and they're reporting to us.

Member Eremenko: If we could get that in writing, please, in a response. That would be terrific.

There are no performance measures here. How do we actually gauge that that $8 million a year is achieving the impact that it's meant to?

Mr. Marchand: Well, part of how we gauge the intent is through the reporting, as I say, the grant reporting, right? As a condition of the grants we seek the information on what activities are happening that are within the allowable scope of the grant agreement, and that's where we have the data that's in the annual report.

Member Eremenko: Sure. I guess not so much the how but the what. What are people actually reporting on, as far as the indicators go, to demonstrate that it's actually having the desired impact?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I mean, I think it's – I don't know. We're trying to develop skills for staff and students and also the work that they do in terms of formal training and skills development. Then there's the sheer volume of appointments, right? But I don't know that I'm in a position to sort of speak to the efficacy of those individual appointments.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Onward, then, to some questions around affordability for students. Page 17 talks about progress made toward improving affordability for students by capping tuition increases for domestic students at 2 per cent. At the University of Calgary since 2019 the increases in tuition have been astronomical, north of 30 per cent as an average across all programs. Are school fees included in the accounting of affordability for students? I know that there can also be several hundred dollars' discrepancy between different postsecondaries across the province. To what extent does your ministry include school fees?

9:20

Mr. Marchand: I think they are two distinct pieces, but there is oversight over both. As you identified, there's the tuition cap on tuition fees. For mandatory noninstructional fees, there's policy around mandatory noninstructional fees, and they must be cost recovery on the part of the school. It is a fee that is charged for something that all students, obviously by virtue of its mandatory nature, have to pay, but it has to be cost recovery for the service, and there needs to be engagement with the student representatives in setting those fees.

Member Eremenko: In the same way that the annual report compares tuition to other jurisdictions across Canada, does the policy for the mandatory student fees – are those also compared to other regions across the country?

Mr. Marchand: I don't know. I will say that I am not certain about that. I suspect there's a level of variation in terms. Statistics Canada has a model for capturing the tuition data and the comparison that happens whereas I think mandatory noninstructional fees are – there's probably more variability in terms of how those are structured and regulated across provinces.

Member Eremenko: Okay. I'll be curious to see the policy if that can also be included, then, the policy specifically that guides how postsecondaries provide that: what the framework is, if there's a formula, however that number is determined, and how much variance is permitted between institutions.

Moving on, you address the very real financial pressures faced by students due to rising inflation in food and housing costs. I'm sure we all know universities are a microcosm of our communities in many ways, and food insecurity, demand for food bank usage for example, is absolutely through the roof on campus. What I wonder is whether we did enough in the last fiscal year to meaningfully address those affordability concerns. For example, does your department measure dropout rates for students kind of midstream in their program, and do they capture the reasons for dropping out? I'm trying to get a sense of whether students are simply having to suspend or stop their postsecondary education because they simply can't afford to do it anymore.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I appreciate the intent of the question. I think we would certainly receive the data from the postsecondary institutions in terms of the annual data they provide to us on enrolment, so I think we could find – you know, we could see if we could discern some trends in there. I would say it's not something that's explicitly reported on, like, in the sense that we ask, except perhaps from surveys, because we do do surveys. I'm thinking of the Graduate Outcomes Survey we conduct, but of course those are people who graduated. For people who have left, I'm not sure that we'd have a ready way to understand why.

Member Eremenko: Okay. It feels like it would be a real telling indicator of how people are feeling in terms of their confidence to actually be able to complete their four-year program, whatever it might be.

Furthermore, where students have to dial back their course load or suspend their program due to, say, financial constraint, they risk losing eligibility to future student aid funding. This is a change implemented just this past fiscal year. Can you square that for me, folks, that the department recognizes the financial constraint, they recognize the affordability challenges, it's dominant in the Alberta 2030 strategy that they are trying to make postsecondary more accessible and more affordable, but now there's this new barrier to being able to access student aid funding as a result of dropping to part-time status or if there are – correct me if I'm wrong – two or more kind of years where they haven't made progress on their program? How does that square for you, that we're talking about increasing affordability and accessibility yet we've put in some new constraints in terms of eligibility for the student aid funding?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Thank you very much for the question. It's an important one. There's this balance, I think we're always trying to find, in terms of the effectiveness of the resources we provide for student aid and sort of seeing continuous academic progress. Some of the policies that were put back in place were put back in place. They had previously existed prior to COVID, and they were reintroduced. There are certainly options, you know, if students had extenuating circumstances that were really tied to financial need or something like that. There are options within the student aid program for reconsideration. I think this is an area where the sense is that the appropriate balance is to have the policy set so that it really is promoting completion and moving through the system. What the academic progress policies look at are things like the period of time someone can enrol in open studies, the success of short-term programs, repeating a year of study twice, so scholastic progress. But if there are extenuating circumstances, the student can certainly approach student aid and there can be consideration of whether they should be applied in that instance.

Member Eremenko: Then when we look at the underspend of loans and of grants, not spending the full allocation and then spending less than we have in last fiscal year, in your report it says, "due to fewer eligible students resulting from an operational policy change." Is that the operational policy change that resulted in the decrease?

Mr. Marchand: No.

Member Eremenko: What was the operational policy change that resulted in the decrease?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. The operational policy changes that resulted in the decrease were related to student aid access for students in private career colleges. On January 1 of last year PCCs were limited to 10 per cent growth in the number of students receiving student aid for the academic year. Effective August 1 student aid would only cover tuition and book costs for students who are attending exclusively online programs as well as not providing provincial funding to students attending PCCs outside of Alberta but within Canada, with some exceptions based on programming. Those were what drove those changes.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Thank you.

When we compare the student loan data in the annual report for '21-22 to this year's, we see that total loan disbursements rose by 23 per cent but the number of recipients only grew by three, so the size of each of the loans increased, but the number of students actually benefiting from that increased envelope is quite a bit smaller. Are we in fact moving the needle in making postsecondary more accessible to more Albertans when the size of the allocation is growing but the number of people eligible to receive it is not?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. It's a good question. Over the last number of years, probably 10-plus years ago, there were certainly some policy changes made to the student loan program so that, you know, Alberta is unique among provinces in that we don't look at parental income as a requirement in adjudicating student loans and we also don't look at spousal income. The consequences are that if the need exists within the parameters of the loan program, individuals will be able to access the loan.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Sorry. They will or they will not be able to?

Mr. Marchand: They will.

Member Eremenko: They will.

Mr. Marchand: They will, and they can access up to the maximum allowable within the policy constraints that we have. That may be a factor in what's driving the scenario you described – right? – increased loans. Certainly, and just generally speaking, it was part of the dynamic around some of the limitations put on the private career colleges.

Member Eremenko: I've got a minute and a half left, and I want to make sure I get this question in, DM. Thank you. What's happened to the Minister's Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills? The initial nine members were appointed for a three-year term, and that should have ended mid-2025. Has it been disbanded? There are kind of crickets when I look online to figure out what the status of this has been. If the disbandment happened prior to the end of last fiscal, I'm curious why that's not reflected in the annual report.

9:30

Mr. Marchand: Yes. I don't believe the disbandment happened prior to the end of last fiscal. So there was a review that we have to do on a regular cycle, a review of our agencies, boards, and commissions, and last year we looked at a number of them, including the Premier's Council on Skills and the Alberta Board of Skilled Trades, and the Minister's Advisory Council on Higher . . .

Member Eremenko: So when was it disbanded?

Mr. Marchand: It would have been earlier this fiscal, like this spring – the beginning of this fiscal year, I believe.

Member Eremenko: So what's happened to the tasks that were originally in that mandate? They were supposed to, you know, monitor long-term strategic goals and provide the metrics for measuring performance, which ironically is exactly what we're here for today. I would argue that you and your team were likely capable of doing this internally, but it begs the question of how necessary the council was in the first place, and will there be a fulsome reporting to the public on whether or not the council actually did what it was meant to do?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Well, as part of the review process I think the finding was, with the Premier's Council on Skills as well as the Board of Skilled Trades and the capacity within the department, that there was not a need to sustain it.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now hear questions from the government caucus members, and we will start with MLA Tara Sawyer. You have 15 minutes.

Mrs. Sawyer: Thank you, Chair. On page 5 of the annual report it states:

> In April 2024, Advanced Education and Alberta Health announced the establishment of new Rural Medical . . . Training Centres in Lethbridge and Grande Prairie. These new training centres will also function as multi-disciplinary teaching clinics, to improve access to physicians for Albertans in rural and remote areas.

If you could, can you tell the committee when they're going to be operational and when we can expect to see the first set of graduates?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you for the question. The funding to expand the medical seats: at those two rural centres it is training that is offered by the U of A and the U of C. It was not an intent to create new medical faculties. The first enrolment growth actually started in 2023-24, when both the U of A and U of C were looking to add 10 new seats in that first year to their cohorts. In terms of Grande Prairie, the Grande Prairie cohort just began their studies in Grande Prairie this fall. And the cohort will be in Lethbridge next year. Lethbridge is in the process of renovating a building on campus, and they will be there. But those first 10 graduates are expected from the U of C because U of C has a three-year program. Their first graduates will be in 2026. The 10 graduates from the U of A are expected, the first ones, in 2027, and at full implementation in '28-29 there will ultimately be 200 additional seats, resulting in 60 graduates a year.

Mrs. Sawyer: Oh, sorry. I'm so sorry. I apologize. I pass my time on to my colleague.

Ms de Jonge: Thanks, MLA Sawyer. Good morning, committee members and department officials here this morning. On pages 31 and 32 of the annual report it mentions the targeted enrolment expansion. TEE, I think it might be referred to in short, which is a "program to help address Alberta's workforce needs by increasing spaces in post-secondary programs" that are in line "with high-demand fields needing more working professionals." And it notes that so far there have been two rounds of TEE that have been supported. I'm interested in more details on the total amount of funding that has been provided to postsecondary institutions through both rounds of TEE today. Also, what is the total number of new spaces that have been created as a result of both rounds of that TEE funding?

Mr. Marchand: Thank you very much. Since 2022 we've provided institutions with a total of $312 million in funding through TEE. That included $258 million in round 1 and $54 million through round 2. Overall, it is expected to support creation of more than 15,000 new postsecondary seats in high-demand program areas by 2025-2026.

Ms de Jonge: All right. So $258 million in round 1 and $54 million in round 2. Can you explain the difference between those two; why such a big difference between the two rounds?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. The budget round, certainly the first round in 2022: I think there was a bit of pent-up system demand to be able to respond to needs in some of the key economic areas, so that was a larger investment that was made. Then, I think, that funding would have been allocated through sort of a call for proposal process from the postsecondary institutions looking at programming in the technology area, technology programs, business, nursing, other health-related programs. Then there was the rest; smaller allocations into other areas. I think, at least in part, it would have been based on demand and what the department saw in that first round, that there was likely an opportunity to do more. So, you know, there was a subsequent decision to allocate some additional funding, but not as large a pool.

Ms de Jonge: And when you start off by allocating TEE funding, is it with a set number of seats in mind? Like, do you say, "Okay; we're aiming for 10,000 seats in this round" and then allocate funds accordingly? Is that how that process works?

Mr. Marchand: I think a little bit. In part that is how it works. I think there is a sense of, based on our understanding of the system, what could be achieved with a certain amount of money at a general level. But then as we go through the call for proposal process with the postsecondary institutions, you know, we would look at sort of each proposal on its merits, and it depends a little bit on the situation, right? If they're standing up a brand new program, there might be some more upfront costs. So you might not kind of get quite the same initial value for money as opposed to, say, a program where you're really just looking at expanding enrolment in an existing program. And, of course, you have a bit of a differential as well, depending on the length of the program. But, yes, generally speaking you'd sort of have an idea about what the expected graduate impact would be from investing a certain amount of money.

Ms de Jonge: Makes sense. Thank you.

All right. I'd like to cede my time to my colleague MLA Lunty.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Thank you, and thank you, Chair. Through the chair, I'd like to thank the deputy and his officials for joining us this morning and providing us with some information on, obviously, a very important topic and a key part to what we need to do to build our economy here in the province. Deputy, I know you made some comments on Alberta 2030 in your opening remarks as sort of underpinning a lot of your work and certainly a key objective, as identified in the business plan. I also note it looks like there are six strategy goals, all working towards the "Building Skills for Jobs strategy to transform the adult learning system and focus on providing the high-quality education, skills and training needed for Alberta's future."

If I could, I'd like to ask a question, through the chair, on goal 3, support innovation and commercialization. It's listed here as: contribute to Alberta's innovation capacity, supporting research needs, and then strengthening the commercialization potential. These are obviously really important topics, so if you could maybe expand on what that might look like, or provide a few examples, we'd appreciate it.

Thank you.

Mr. Marchand: Thank you very much. There are a number of things that we have been doing to support achievement of that goal. One was that we recently, or in, I think, the reporting year, provided one-time grants of just over a million dollars to postsecondary institutions to develop intellectual property microcredential courses. So five microcredentials have been developed and are actively enrolling students. Sort of the point of this was to provide accessible intellectual property education to strengthen the ability of individuals and organizations to innovate and generate financial returns. As of September of this year there are 2,200 participants enrolled in those courses.

9:40

We've been working very closely with Technology and Innovation on innovation and commercialization. One of the issues in taking the step from being an individual who has effectively created intellectual property through research and then commercializing it into something that you can sell and make money on is appropriately protecting the intellectual property. It's not an area where I have a lot of expertise, but what I do know is that it's complicated and there are a lot of different ways to get at it. Some of this is helping people understand what they have, what the right means of protection would be.

We've also worked to ensure that particularly our comprehensive academic research universities are focused on research commercialization as a system outcome through their investment management agreements that they hold with us. So that is an area where they have targets to try to increase that commercialization.

Our continued investments in the Mitacs globalink as well as a renewed investment in the Mitacs internship program are all really about support for highly skilled professionals in our sort of priority economic sectors like technology and innovation, aerospace, agriculture, clean technology and health. In terms of the globalink program, it's focused on strengthening talent attraction and retention and really supports our global research reputation as students are provided professional development, mentorship, and networking. And then similarly with the broader internship program, which places students with innovators and businesses across the province. In addition to having a really meaningful benefit for students, they help the industry partners achieve some of their own innovation potential, respond to their business challenges, and grow their competitive advantage. Those are a number of the steps we're taking.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Through the chair, thank you for that information. You know, you hit on some really key points. I think we see announcements all the time from our postsecondary institutions about some of this commercial potential and the way that their research is contributing to our economy. I was happy to hear some of those examples, and I'm happy that we have this strategy in place.

If I may ask a follow-up, through the chair, on a different one of our six strategy goals: just provide maybe a very high-level overview on how this is going to strengthen some system governance. I think it's important that we, you know, can understand how that governance can help us achieve some of the other goals we have here in the strategy.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Well, in terms of system governance, there are a few different components to some of the work on system governance. As a matter of some of our work here on system governance, there are a few things that have happened. I think one is that we talked about, in the context of the matches, the review of ABCs that occurred. I can just confirm that dissolution matches happened in July of this year.

We did the review of all of the boards of governors last year, of the institutions, and that was sort of a confirming that the mandate of the institutions remained relevant and important. I think in September of 2024 we also had the redesignation of Lethbridge College to Lethbridge Polytechnic under the Post-secondary Learning Act, which was to provide more regional opportunities for career-focused postsecondary education.

The other piece of work that was happening around sort of system governance throughout last year, and we've kind of alluded to it in some ways, was the oversight of the private career college sector as part of the work of the ministry. There was significant review undertaken – I mean, it was a lot of the activity that was occurring through 2024-25 and ultimately culminated in the introduction of the legislation for the amendments to the Private Vocational Training Act that was introduced.

Mr. Lunty: I appreciate those examples.

Through the Chair, I heard you mention Lethbridge there, and I think that was an important change and demonstrates the sort of emphasis on career and skills. I wonder – it looks like we have a minute or just under here – if you could maybe expand very briefly on some of the impetus or the successes we've seen from that change.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. I think, you know, this really comes back to the differentiation model of our postsecondary system, which allows us to support co-ordination and respond to local needs. Ultimately, I think it really provides for a wider range of programming to align with local student and business needs. Lethbridge College submitted to us a business case that demonstrated how they were already effectively operating as a polytechnic institution by offering an autonomous degree program, providing hands-on technical training, and undertaking significant applied research initiatives. They also consulted with and gained the support of key community stakeholders in southern Alberta, including the University of Lethbridge, Medicine Hat College, and Red Crow college.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

We will now hear from the Official Opposition caucus for 10 minutes.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to follow up on a couple of additional questions on the rural medical education program training centres, please. The $43.2 million training centre in Lethbridge: is that project on time and on budget?

Mr. Marchand: Yes. It is right now.

Member Eremenko: And you said it's due to be operational when?

Mr. Marchand: The students will be there on campus basically next fall.

Member Eremenko: Next fall. September '26. Okay.

Aside from the construction of the Lethbridge training centre, what's the remaining $376 million, you know, less the $43.2 million, being spent on? Just give us a few examples.

Mr. Marchand: Sorry. The $343 number . . .

Member Eremenko: The $376 million over four years to increase the number of graduates for Red Deer and Lethbridge.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Doctors are expensive. I mean, what it's fundamentally paying for is those new expanded seats.

Member Eremenko: But can you tell me, like, how is the money spent to expand those seats?

Mr. Marchand: The expansion is happening with the base institutions, right? The U of A and the U of C. I mean, it's a long and complicated and expensive process to stand up new medical schools, so you're using the existing medical schools. There'll be additional instructors who are going to be teaching those folks in the communities where they're operating, you know, where the training centres are. That's fundamentally the physical plan to maintain those medical facilities and do the day-to-day operations of those education programs.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Big investment for sure.

Does your ministry have a goal to keep those medical graduates in Alberta?

Mr. Marchand: That is the objective, and that is the rationale for the training centres outside of Calgary and Edmonton.

Member Eremenko: Have you set specific targets? Or is there a window in which you can estimate how many are expected to stay? Are there targets for the duration of their stay, for the size of the panel?

Mr. Marchand: Well, I think the approach is based on sort of understanding of research where learning medical practice in a rural area and getting that practice and that training in a rural area is what is seen to be the best practice and the most impactful way to try to have those graduates stay in a rural area.

Member Eremenko: Do you have a target?

Mr. Marchand: I don't think we have an explicit target that there will be X number that will stay in the area.

Member Eremenko: Of course, the big concern is an investment of almost $400 million and then the doctors end up practising elsewhere.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. That is absolutely a risk. What we do know, though, is that generally speaking, also particularly for medical professionals where it is a highly paid occupation, other tools like return service or like, you know, we're going to give you a bursary if you promise to practice here for a certain period of time, are generally not very effective, I think, because the earning power of the professional is such that they're . . .

9:50

Member Eremenko: What is effective?

Mr. Marchand: Having training in rural Alberta, in rural places. Like, we are doing the most effective thing.

Member Eremenko: Okay. We're trusting that that should be adequate.

Mr. Marchand: Based on what we know, that is the best approach to achieve the desired outcome.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Thank you.

I have some questions about the Labour Mobility Act. I'm confused, DM. Hopefully, you can clear this up for me. I'm not clear with the Labour Mobility Act, with the labour mobility rate on page 60 and some of the other indicators that you use in regard to that particular program and that policy. When an individual from another province seeks to practise their current profession in Alberta, is there work that's already done to ensure that their certification in Ontario, for example, can be directly carried over to Alberta? My question is because in some places in the annual report we talk about applications. When a person is applying, I assume that there is the potential for a rate of decline where it is not a direct transfer from another province to ours to be able to practice, but the only metric that we ever hear about is time, the amount of time that it takes for an application to be processed. I'm not clear on how many applications are actually successful.

What does the Labour Mobility Act and its associated regulations actually intend to do? Is it to eliminate the barriers between provinces for a professional to practice, or is it to expedite the processing of an application?

Mr. Marchand: It's a good question, and I think maybe the answer is that it is a little bit of both and how the two concepts work together. Under the Canadian free trade agreement there is supposed to be mobility of regulated professionals unless provinces have taken a specific exception to that mobility, so implicitly if you are licensed in one place, you should be able to come and practise, be licensed, and operate in another place. That's the foundational objective.

In Alberta's case we have taken nine legitimate objectives. Most of them are in the health sector, and most of them are related to scope of practice. The scope of practice of the health professional here is different than somewhere else, so there is some restriction or limitation put on their ability to practice here. The interaction with the Labour Mobility Act, then, is to achieve that outcome. At the end of the day, for the purposes of ensuring the public interest is met, we still need to know who is practising, right? The Alberta regulatory body needs to know who is practising. The act limits the information that can be sought from the applicant who is coming from another province. That fundamentally is about not creating the opportunity to re-adjudicate their qualifications. The key idea is that they're in good standing, right? So if they're in good standing . . .

Member Eremenko: On page 60 when we talk about performance indicator 2(b), 25 per cent was the labour mobility rate, certified out-of-province applicants applying to a regulatory body in Alberta. It strikes me that if we're actually going to be making progress on eliminating certification barriers between provinces, the indicator shouldn't be applications; it should be approved applications. Yes, people sought to work in Alberta, and yes, they were ultimately successful in porting their credentials to Alberta. This is just applications. What about successful applications?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I take your point. Jamie, maybe you want to supplement me here. I believe that because of the requirements – the fundamental requirement is that if they are in good standing in another jurisdiction, you will license them. And that's why we . . .

Member Eremenko: You will?

Mr. Marchand: You will.

It's a fair question about the wording, but I think the applicants and the approved are effectively the same number. Like, there may be a slight discrepancy, but it would be very exceptional. If they're in good standing and they apply – and that's why we focus on the timing because the next piece is that, you know, you could envision a scenario where you're going to license them but then it takes a long time. But in fact it happens really quickly.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Marchand. Sorry; I'm going to cut you off if I may. I've got 90 seconds left, and I want to get one more question in.

Concerning performance indicator 1(b), in 2024 95 per cent of postsecondary graduates reported being employed approximately two years after graduation, but according to the graduate outcome survey related to that particular finding the number is in fact 78 per cent when we take out graduates who are full-time students or unemployed graduates who are not in the labour force. Can you just unpack that a little bit for me, please, that we report 95 per cent in the annual report but it's 78 per cent in the graduate outcome survey once we take out those individuals who are not actually in the labour force at all. Tell me about that gap. Would the same discrepancy exist for the previous five years reported in the annual report that also say that 95 per cent of Alberta graduates are employed?

Mr. Marchand: Well, I don't think I'm able today but would be happy to provide some additional follow-up information in terms of the methodology and sort of the question that you're getting at in that. We can confirm this as well with follow-up information, but I would anticipate that it is consistent. Like, I would anticipate, given sort of the standards we have to meet in terms of performance indicators, that the methodology is consistent. If there was a change in methodology, it would be noted, so I assume the methodology is consistent.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to the government caucus for 10 minutes. MLA Garth Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you. I'd like to talk about apprenticeship distribution for a bit. Page 10 of the annual report talks about the skilled trades and professions division and some of its corresponding responsibilities. It's my personal understanding that certain areas have regional offices of this branch under the apprenticeship and industry training label, such as in the town of Vermilion in my constituency. Could you just provide additional details about these regional AIT offices and what they do?

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Happy to do so. The AIT offices are in Bonnyville, Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Hinton, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Peace River, Red Deer, Slave Lake, and, as you identified, Vermilion. They operate out of our apprenticeship delivery services unit. There are kind of two key roles in the offices, the apprenticeship and industry training officers and the apprenticeship delivery support advisers. Staffing numbers sort of vary by office size. Edmonton is the largest, and Slave Lake and Hinton are the smallest offices. They are kind of located where apprentices are working and training, generally proximate to public postsecondary institutions or other training providers within the geographical area.

There are a couple of things that the folks in those offices do. They deliver all of the apprenticeship and trades qualifier practical and theory exams, which is a big activity for the ministry in terms of the exam administration. We operate a provincial contact centre. The offices are involved in that as well as processing and registering apprenticeship education agreements, so when an apprentice, you know, gets into the apprenticeship. There's also compliance and field activities that the officers are involved in in terms of going into work sites where apprentices are training. The offices also receive and process payments. For example, so far this year: 100,000 inquiries via the info line, almost 27,000 apprenticeship applications, support visits and site inspections at 6,300 sites, and delivery of 48 and a half thousand exams.

Mr. Rowswell: In addition to these details, could you please provide some rationale for how the offices support rural communities?

Mr. Marchand: Well, the offices and the staff roles I think are really intended to have a direct impact in the communities where they're located. Part of that is, as I said, being out on the on the compliance side of the House, going into the work sites where apprentices are training and making sure that the regulations under the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act are being followed. But the officers also play an important support and counselling role to the apprentices themselves as well their employers as they're navigating the program.

10:00

They are also involved as sort of on-site promoters in providing information about the programs, whether that's someone who has come into the office, but they'll also be involved in local career fairs. They'll do visits to schools and other events. Then we play a role working alongside some of the key partners of government such as Careers: The Next Generation or Women Building Futures or Trade Winds to Success.

As I said as well, the other thing is that every one of the offices does have a front counter service so people can come into the office, as well as operating an exam centre so people have ready access to be able to write the exams, make payments – there are often documents that need to be submitted – those types of things. Those are available to apprentices as well as their employers.

Mr. Rowswell: I often wondered. For example, I can talk about Vermilion specifically. I think the capacity there is about 1,500, and I think last year, they've been as low as 700 then bounced up to 1,000. So how is that determined as to where these allocation of apprenticeship-type seats go? You know, it would be nice if we're at full capacity from a college perspective, but I'm just wondering how that's determined and spread around.

Mr. Marchand: We provide the apprentice learning grant to institutions on top of the base funding that we provide specifically because the apprenticeship numbers, unlike most of the postsecondary system where demand is fairly linear and steady because of the nature of enrolment, apprenticeship learning is much more tied to sort of economic cycles and registrations.

We work closely throughout the year with the deans of apprenticeship at all of the institutions, monitoring their overall intake, as well as looking at – you know, we have the data on apprenticeship registrations across the province, what those programs are in, the proximity to the community. They similarly are based on that data. They've got the experience that they have in terms of being able to forecast what demand will be and what it will be in the specific trades, and based on that, we make the allocation of funds as we have available from the budget to best meet those needs across the province. Last year, I think that across the system, it was about a 90 per cent fill rate system-wide.

Within that there is some regional variation, but there are not generally very many occupations or trades where we actually don't have system capacity at the end of the year, right? We may not always have the capacity, you know, in an individual location or at a time period that the apprentice or their employer might prefer, and we do our best to balance that as best we can across the system, but it's really through looking at the data and then ongoing collaboration with the schools to understand what they think they're going to see and try and match it up as best we can. Is that fair to you?

Mr. Rowswell: Is that 90 per cent fill rate – I guess I'll call it that – capacity or allocation of seats?

Mr. Marchand: It's on the funding, like against the funded seats.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much.
Okay. I think I'll defer my next question to Member de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thanks, MLA Rowswell.
Through the Chair, I want to talk a bit about private career colleges. I come from a background in dentistry. I didn't attend a private career college myself, but there are certainly a lot of private career colleges in dental fields. Pages 21 and 22 of the annual report talk about them specifically and the regulations and some of the initiatives you're undertaking to improve Alberta's PCC system. Just as a note I'm very proud of Bill 2 that's been advanced to improve this and protect our students.
You know, in the annual report it mentions that since 2019 there's been a lot of growth in this sector but also an unusually high increase in student complaints. That's definitely concerning to hear. I know a lot of these colleges are really targeted for professional and vocational training, and students need to be protected as they seek to engage in Alberta's workforce. I'm hoping you can talk about the private career college registry and its goals. Well, how about we just start there, with the registry and what you hope to achieve through that?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. The registry is really premised on the notion of making sure there's good, transparent information available to potential learners as they're making decisions. What we wanted to be able to do was make public key information about the private vocational training programs licensed in Alberta. That's sort of the name of the college providing the training, the program length, the location, and the cost. It also indicates for people the licensing status for each program. It breaks down by program because under the current legislation the licensing factor is the program. For each program you see whether it's active; whether there's a stop order, which is a tool we use to suspend intake of students into a program while an institution rectifies something; or suspension, where the training will stop.

The Chair: Thank you.
For the next 10 minutes we will hear from the members of the Official Opposition caucus. MLA Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Page 22 discusses the Provincial Priorities Act. Now, when the act was introduced by the Premier, she said:

> That is what we are trying to correct, Mr. Speaker. That is the way in which the federal government uses its federal spending power to disrupt full, fair debate happening at our universities. Our academic institutions are vital for democracy. Having full, fair, robust, open debate on issues is vital for a common understanding.

Can the department describe the indicators or targets it created to measure the impact of federal funding on full and fair debate on university campuses?

Mr. Marchand: With the Provincial Priorities Act, following consultation – right? – with the postsecondary institutions, you know, the decision was made about how best to realize the intent of the act in terms of the work of institutions around research, which ultimately was that, really, research activities are exempted from prior approval and require reporting to government in terms of those agreements that are entered into.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. Thank you.
I want to get into that, then. When the Provincial Priorities Act was introduced, the University of Alberta issued a statement of concern that indicated that it had at least 1,800 separate agreements with the federal government. The U of C is about the same size; presumably it has a similar number. You know, considering that we have 26 public postsecondaries, how many federal government agreements exist with universities and of those how many will be exempt from prior approval from the department under the regulation?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I mean, there's the number from the University of Alberta. You're correct; the U of C has a comparable number. I would say that together, though, they represent the vast majority of the agreements that exist.

Mr. Schmidt: Do you have a number? Does the Deputy Minister have a number?

Mr. Marchand: From 2022-23 there are about 4,000 funding agreements.

Mr. Schmidt: How many of those would be exempt under the regulation?

Mr. Marchand: Most of them, like, the vast . . .

Mr. Schmidt: A number?

Mr. Marchand: Well, I can't speculate on the new ones exactly what will be exempt.

Mr. Schmidt: No, but . . .

Mr. Marchand: But I can tell you that most of the agreements are research agreements, and the research agreements are exempt. Then the regulation laid out the classes of other agreements, that aren't research agreements, that would also be exempt.

10:10

Mr. Schmidt: Now, okay, since the deputy minister is having a little bit of a problem giving me an exact number even though I would fully expect the department would have that – the regulation says that research funding is exempt unless more than 50 per cent of the funding is for capital funding. Now, the Canadian Foundation for Innovation funds research capital. Can the department clarify whether CFI funding agreements are exempt under the regulation or not?

Mr. Marchand: It will depend on if the proposed agreement is more than 50 per cent capital.

Mr. Schmidt: But I'm telling the deputy minister that those are 100 per cent for capital. They buy instruments. They buy technical equipment for conducting research. Are those exempt under the regulation?

Mr. Marchand: If they are less than $100,000, if they were a minor amendment extension or renewal of an existing agreement, but an agreement that is 100 per cent capital is a capital agreement and capital agreements are not exempt, as a matter of course.

Mr. Schmidt: If, for example, a professor in chemistry wanted to buy a new ICP-MS machine which was a million dollars, he would have to get department approval to get that funding agreement from the federal government? Is that what the deputy minister is saying?

Mr. Marchand: For the University of Alberta to enter into that funding agreement, it would need the prior approval of the government.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you for clarifying that.
Now, in fiscal '24-25 the U of A booked $65 million in revenue from federal and other government grants. Does the

department know how much of that revenue would be exempt under the regulation?

Mr. Marchand: No, I don't.

Mr. Schmidt: Excellent. I can tell the department did a really solid job preparing for the implementation of this act.

On that note, did the department add any staff for reviewing federal agreements between universities and the federal government to implement this act in the '24-25 fiscal year?

Mr. Marchand: No. We've not added additional staff.

Mr. Schmidt: Can the department tell the committee how many staff have been assigned to review those agreements within the department?

Mr. Marchand: As the agreements come forward, they come into a team, and within the team there's an allocation. You know, they make a determination . . .

Mr. Schmidt: How many people are on the team?

Mr. Marchand: It's in our policy area. Because of the level of the number of exemptions – most of the agreements are research. There are other classes of exemption that were created for postsecondary institutions in terms of, you know, whether it's an apprenticeship program or a work experience or tied to official language instructions, short-term rentals. We don't anticipate having a large volume and believe that we can accommodate review as required with the resources we have.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I'll just note that the deputy minister said that he doesn't know how many federal agreements are exempt under the regulation, so how can he say that he doesn't anticipate any additional staffing needs? It's obvious that more work needs to be done, I think, if the intent of this is to be met.

I want to move on now to executive compensation at universities. In this fiscal year there were some astonishing pay hikes for university presidents. Bill Flanagan, the U of A president, had his salary hiked by $54,000 a year. That's the equivalent of – I don't know – two educational assistants. Ed McCauley, the U of C president, saw his salary increase by $58,000 a year. That's a 9 per cent hike. The University of Lethbridge president got a $63,000-a-year increase, which was a 13 per cent pay hike. What's even more offensive about this is that the University of Lethbridge president makes more than the University of Toronto president, even though the University of Lethbridge has an operating budget 1/20 of the size of the University of Toronto. Topping the list of presidents' executive compensation is Athabasca University's president, whose salary went up $100,000 last year.

How can the department justify these skyrocketing executive compensation costs when students are struggling to afford to pay tuition and rent?

Mr. Marchand: I just want to clarify. Are these the salaries that are disclosed on page 83 of the annual report?

Mr. Schmidt: These are the salaries that are disclosed in the annual reports of the universities.

Mr. Marchand: Well, I mean, they all ultimately do connect.

The compensation in the public postsecondary institutions was governed previously under the Reform of Agencies, Boards and Commissions Compensation Act that Treasury Board and Finance is responsible for. Then earlier this year Treasury Board and Finance began implementing a new non-union compensation framework for the public-sector employees, but these are board-governed entities. They have to have the salaries within the approved levels of RABCCA, and if at any point there's any deviation, that needs to be approved by the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance.

Mr. Schmidt: But the salaries don't have to go up. I would argue, and I think most Albertans would agree with me, that most people can afford to put food on the table and pay the rent if they're making $600,000 a year. They don't need to have their salary go up to $660,000 a year.

Now, the government appoints the majority of members of the board who approve that executive compensation. Did the department maybe issue any warnings to board members about halting executive compensation?

Mr. Marchand: Oversight of executive compensation is with the Ministry of Treasury Board and Finance through the public bargaining . . .

Mr. Schmidt: I mean, you can't fool me. I was the minister, and the minister does have the power to direct the board to do certain things. I'm asking if the department or anybody in the ministry directed, issued any warnings against skyrocketing executive compensation in this year.

Mr. Marchand: I believe in the intervening period since 2019 some of the exercise of those authorities have shifted, and they rest now with Treasury Board and Finance.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. I guess it's shocking that the U of L president makes more than the U of T president and nobody thinks that that's fair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to government caucus members for 10 minutes. MLA Lunty.

Mr. Lunty: Thanks again, Chair. Deputy, through the chair, I'd like to ask a couple of questions on the air access expansion initiatives. I think this is on page 32 of the annual report. You know, aviation is, obviously, important to me, having the Edmonton International Airport in my riding. We have conversations with them on multiple occasions about the importance of that workforce, so I'm glad to see that this is in fact referenced in your annual report.

Through the chair, I'd like to ask a couple of questions. I'll start with maybe the air access bursary and the bachelor of aviation information. Can the deputy please describe: how do these initiatives support students to gain in-demand careers that will help make sure that Alberta is in an even greater position as a travel hub and when it comes to the aviation sector?

Mr. Marchand: Well, thank you very much for the question. Yeah. There are, as you identified, two related initiatives there, and they really build on, I think, both the growth of the aviation sector centred on the Calgary International Airport and WestJet as well as other economic initiatives happening down in southern Alberta around aviation as well as building on Mount Royal. Mount Royal has had a long history of an aviation program at the diploma level, so they introduced the bachelor of aviation management program, you know, with the intent that they will have graduates who can support that growing aviation and aerospace sector and in turn help enhance our position as an aviation hub and foster the business growth through increased operational expertise.

So we're providing both capital and operational funding to MRU's aviation programs. In the '24-25 academic year there were about 40 students that were enrolled in this new program, and they're expected to graduate in 2027-28, when they'll complete. Then, in addition to the funding, we offer the air access bursary to students at MRU of up to $10,000 each. Aviation training is generally an expensive program, so the bursary is provided to enable students to receive the $10,000 bursary. Last fiscal year 59 of those bursaries were awarded.

A policy change that we've made for this current academic year that began on August 1, 2025, is that students are now eligible to receive up to two bursaries in their lifetime so that we're providing some additional funding support in this area.

10:20

Mr. Lunty: Great. Thanks for that information. As I mentioned, it's certainly a key area of focus moving forward.

Do you mind expanding just a little bit on the partnership with WestJet and sort of maybe making some comments on the industry partnership piece to these initiatives?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I think there was, obviously, the memorandum of understanding with WestJet, which was intended to do a number of things in terms of resulting in new seats coming in and out of the Calgary airport, increased tourism spending, new jobs, and overall economic benefits. You know, I think government had responsibilities underneath that. WestJet had some responsibilities underneath that to support this initiative.

One of the pieces that we've invested in is the support at Mount Royal for the aviation program. We're also seeing expansion, though, in aircraft maintenance programming at SAIT. There's been the recent announcement of Lufthansa Technik expanding their operations, which is, as I understand it, a sort of engine maintenance type of activity at the Calgary International Airport, as well as there's research activity happening at institutions around air flight-type issues, drones, defence-related types of things. So there's just a real hub of activity, I think, happening in the Calgary area around air travel and aerospace.

Mr. Lunty: Through the chair, thank you, Deputy. You know, again, I think some of these initiatives are definitely going to help the aviation sector across the province, and I look forward to the future work on this and how we can tie it into the Edmonton area a bit more and help the entire sector. I'm happy to hear that information.

Chair, I would like to cede my time to my colleague MLA van Dijken at this point.

The Chair: MLA van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Thank you, and thank you, Chair. I'm going to focus my question with regard to key objective 2.1 on page 50. The objective is to strengthen and streamline the professional regulatory environment to reduce timelines and barriers to registration within professional occupations to attract and retain a skilled workforce in Alberta while maintaining a high standard of quality.

In the spring one of the key accomplishments of the spring legislative session was Bill 40. Bill 40 was introduced, as I said, during the spring legislation. Knowing the importance of this legislation, how does the Professional Governance Act improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the government's regulatory oversight?

Mr. Marchand: Well, thank you for the question. Right now we've got nine different pieces of legislation that Advanced Education is responsible for, covering 22 different professional, self-regulating occupations. What the Professional Governance Act is going to do is provide a consistent and standardized way for the professional regulatory organizations to carry out sort of their core common functions such as governance, registration, issues related to professional conduct, and discipline of their members.

In terms of increasing efficiency and removing red tape, one of the pieces is that with the professional regulatory bodies. You know, they have the bylaws. They have their regulation or they have their act. Prior to the PGA it was a bit of a mix, whether there was a specific regulation or whether it was in the act. One of the things in developing the new legislation was working with the regulatory bodies to really try to figure out what responsibility and authority belonged where, with a real effort to try to drive as much as possible, where appropriate, into the bylaws of the organization because then the organization can change their bylaws and they don't have to approach government for the regulatory change or a legislative change.

Once we work through the transition process, that's probably the key benefit. To come to government previously for legislative change, they would have still had to do almost the same things you would do to change bylaws: have a vote meeting, have the vote of the full membership. Now they'll be able to stop with the bylaw change as opposed to coming to us.

The other thing it does is it does provide some consistency. The power, the authorities, the functions across the pieces of legislation are common. The requirements for reporting, transparency, accountability, and offences are common. Access to the Ombudsman will now be consistent across all of the regulatory bodies, which is an important piece, as well as consistency in terms of information, privacy, and disclosure requirements. That's the intent of the legislation.

Mr. van Dijken: In terms of next steps with the legislation, proclamation date of June 2026, it identifies in the report, what is Advanced Education's current plan and timeline as you head towards the enforcement date?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. There are kind of two key regulatory steps that need to be fulfilled. There will be a common general regulation that will apply to all of the regulatory bodies, and that will speak to some of the more operational detail associated with the legislation, and then there will be an occupation-specific regulation for each of the regulatory bodies. You know, if you think of the Architects Act right now, there are some specific provisions that are really related to the architecture profession; they will find their way into a specific regulation for the Architects Act. So you'll have the general piece of legislation, the general regulation, and then you'll also have profession-specific regulations. We're hoping to proceed through, really, just phases of regulatory work: get the general regulation in place, a tranche of some of the regulatory bodies, and then the next tranche so that they're all done by next summer.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

For the fourth rotation we will move to the Official Opposition for 10 minutes of questions. MLA Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On pages 37 and 38 of the '24-25 Advanced Ed annual report I note the annual students with disabilities grant. Over $11.2 million was distributed to 26 publicly funded postsecondary institutions that in turn accommodated 21,750 students. I'm wondering if the deputy minister could just give us a range of what those accommodations look like.

Mr. Marchand: Thank you for the question. Of course, as you'd be aware, Member, the intent of accommodation is to remove barriers and obstacles that would prevent a student from being able to fully participate in the program, and there's a range of what that can look like. It could be ensuring physically accessible classrooms. It could be flexible course delivery and exam formats. It could be assistive technologies or also individualized services such as sign language interpreters.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I mean, that's quite a range, and every student: I imagine their need for accommodation is very different. How is the distribution of the $11.2 million determined?

Mr. Marchand: The distribution of this: I think there's a little bit of a mix, but it ties also back, I think, to sort of my earlier response on the mental health grant. Some of this funding was initially a transfer from another department 15 years ago, at the time the ministry of employment and immigration. Then, in addition to that, I think it is similarly looking at enrolment and other considerations and also ensuring that there is sort of a reasonable amount that would enable the institutions to actually be able to respond to the need.

Ms Renaud: Can I back you up just a little bit? I didn't catch your answer. You talked about a transfer from mental health. Could you explain that a little bit?

Mr. Marchand: No. It was transfer from the former ministry of employment and immigration in 2011.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So that was transferred, then, to make up part of the disability . . .

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I don't know the exact details of what happened there, but that is a portion of where the base of this funding has come from. We, I think, built out to some degree the rest of the funding. I don't imagine that funding . . .

Ms Renaud: What did the rest of the funding look like? What did you build out?

10:30

Mr. Marchand: What I would say based on having worked previously in the ministry of employment and immigration 20 years ago is that that funding was probably focused on the career colleges, and then the rest of the funding over time is supporting the other institutions. I think there's been a certain amount of trying to, again, make sure there's an equitable distribution but also a meaningful distribution that enables the recipient institutions to have sufficient funding to actually have the desired impact of accommodation for students.

Ms Renaud: So that was a lot. I'm not really clear on how exactly it was determined which postsecondary institution got what of the $11.2 million. So I'm assuming that there are larger numbers of students with disabilities in larger cities. They tend to move to cities for other services, whether it's accessible transportation, things like that. So I'm wondering if you could just maybe clarify for the committee how the $11.2 million was decided.

Mr. Marchand: I think I've tried to communicate that it is really based on historical funding that, you know, was trying, again, to find the best distribution of available funds to respond to both demand but also ensure that small institutions had sufficient resources to be able to meet the objectives of the funding.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So does the department have any reporting requirements for the 26 institutions in terms of accommodation reporting, or what you are getting back so that Albertans can look at this investment of over $11 million and say that, you know, we're actually moving the ball forward?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. We do get reporting, and I may ask Anne to provide a little bit of a supplement on the details of that reporting.

Ms Ryton: Yes. We do get reports from each institution that receives funding. They provide us with information on the number of students that they are serving, the types of disabilities that they have, and the accommodation services that they provide. So we take all of that information and we look at, you know, what the trends are over time in terms of the number of students that we're supporting, and then we work with institutions in terms of what that looks like going forward.

Ms Renaud: Can you tell me: so are you tracking any sort of employment data following graduation for students that have been accommodated?

Ms Ryton: In general we track the employment outcomes through our graduate outcome survey and whether that could be broken down in terms of students with disabilities. I'm not a hundred per cent sure.

Mr. Marchand: But we can certainly be happy to follow up in writing in terms of if through the graduate outcome survey we're able to connect to graduates who have, you know, received an accommodation while they were studying.

Ms Renaud: You know, that'd be great if the department could do that, give this committee some additional information. I guess I'm just trying to get at: $11 million is a healthy investment. It's good to see, but it would be great to have some metrics to know, from year to year, are we actually improving? So, you know, one of my questions would be: has this ministry provided any insight based on the data that you collect or the information that you have access to, to your adjacent ministry that is looking at perhaps accessibility legislation, so making Alberta more accessible, any sort of work or preliminary work around using the information that you've collected to create more accessible pathways?

Mr. Marchand: That would be ALSS you're thinking of.

Ms Renaud: Well, I guess. Sure. It could live anywhere, but sure.

Mr. Marchand: Maybe. Well, we certainly work with other departments on kind of key priority areas. I'm not sure, Anne, if there's anything specific on this one.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Just the one area, and that's accessibility.

Ms Ryton: Yeah. Not a specific initiative at this point.

Ms Renaud: That's unfortunate.

The department noted a 9 per cent increase in self-disclosure of accommodations required by disabled students, so clearly there is a mechanism to collect some information about the types and intensity of accommodation that are needed. Can the department make any other sort of statements around what is needed in terms to open up more pathways or intensify these pathways for students with disabilities? I can see little bits of information here and there through the annual report, but there doesn't seem to be sort of a package of outcomes or targets that we can look at to say that year after year we're making these investments but we don't see any progress. We don't know if people are employed a year after or two years after. We just don't have that information. Is there anything else that you could point to where we can look to see: are we moving ahead?

Mr. Marchand: I think it's a good question. I'm not sure. You know, it's a fair comment that it is sort of captured in various places throughout the annual report, but I don't think there's maybe the focal point that you've identified, so we can take that away.

Ms Renaud: So there are no specific metrics for the $11.2 million grant. Okay.

I'm going to move on to another topic because we're running out of time. The ministry focused its $249.8 million capital budget for postsecondary institutions on high-demand programs such as science, technology, engineering and math, trades, and health care. Is the demand cited by the ministry a reference to enrolment, and if so, is the enrolment the only criteria used to prioritize capital projects?

Mr. Marchand: There's a range of criteria for capital submissions as we support government in making capital allocations. Institutions submit their capital requests to us. System needs is a consideration. Increasing access is a consideration. The condition of existing assets is also a consideration and, whether it's a renovation or whether it's a new build, how that will impact across those different considerations.

Ms Renaud: So enrolment is not the only criteria.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah, it's not simply enrolment.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Can the ministry say whether it funded any arts, social science, or humanities capital projects or capital maintenance and renewal projects in the fiscal that we're looking at?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. In the fiscal that we're looking at, the projects that were funded – I'm just looking at the projects that were funded. Well, the upgrading of Campus Saint-Jean, which would have had continued funding in '24-25, would sort of have a breadth of impact. As well, sort of the repurposing of existing facilities at Mount Royal would have had some potential impact in those areas.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to government members for 10 minutes. MLA Tara Sawyer.

Mrs. Sawyer: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you if I may, Advanced Education is a large ministry, and just looking at the role, our government looks at it as a primary economic driver relative to our labour force not only in the skilled trades but also in the health care sector and in STEM. I think it's worth noting that our side of the aisle is well aware of how critical it is that we have skilled and educated professionals to create the best economy for Albertans and to ensure that they have high-paying jobs and strong career outcomes. I know that within my constituency I've certainly seen it, and in speaking to a lot of the young people, I'm really encouraged to hear that a lot of them are taking on these skilled trades, going into apprenticeship programs. I think I've spoken to it.

We have a lot of our young people, especially, coming out. I'll brag about my school for a minute, that takes part in the dual credit programs with respect to health care initiatives. It's really encouraging. I think that's why our government invests several billion dollars in the sector. You've shown that in the statement of revenues and expenses. I guess the first part of my question would be: how does this investment in our workforce support Alberta's economic goals?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for the question. You know, when we look at labour market information, it's estimated that more than 60 per cent of the 1.5 million job openings that are anticipated over the next 10 years will need at least two years of postsecondary education. Our investment in postsecondary education supports sort of two things, right? It's both the individual benefit that accrues to the learner as they are able to participate in the economy as well as the overall impact that they have in the broader economy and the support for the broader economy in terms of innovation and job creation and sort of long-term economic growth.

10:40

We've talked a bit about the graduate outcome survey. You know, nearly 90 per cent of graduates remain in Alberta two years after graduation, and 95 per cent are employed and actively contributing to the province's workforce and economy.

I would just maybe add that beyond the graduates the institutions themselves are significant economic drivers, impacting the economy through their direct spending, those income premiums that are earned by their alumni, the academic research outputs and commercialization, and student spending. So they certainly have an impact on our economy and their local economies where they are participating.

Mrs. Sawyer: Thank you for that.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I would like to have you, if you could, give us just a little bit of detail on ways that our government ensures that the dollars are spent responsibly and are achieving the key metrics for the students and for the economy. If you could expand on that a little bit.

Mr. Marchand: I'd be pleased to. One of the kind of key mechanisms we have are investment management agreements, which are signed with all institutions. The investment management agreements do tie funding to performance targets for several metrics. The key metrics are around work-integrated learning experiences. We certainly have had sort of significant – from when that was first introduced as a measure in 2021, we've gone from 62 per cent of the proportion of courses that offer work-integrated learning opportunities for students to 89 per cent in '23-24. This is kind of a key metric because by having those work-integrated learning experiences during the course of study, it increases the likelihood of successful employment upon graduation.

The other kind of key metrics are the employment outcomes. We want to know about the employment outcomes for graduates, work-integrated learning. For the public postsecondary institutions administrative costs and keeping the proportion of administrative costs, the share of administrative costs, low is one of the other performance measures. That's in turn trying to get at the idea that the funding is going into the system and supporting the students and administration costs are low.

Enrolment is the other key metric. We're really looking across, so we want to know that we've got enrolment happening. We want those students to have work-integrated learning outcomes, and we want to know that they are successfully getting into employment upon graduation and at the same time that the administrative costs, the share of overall cost, remains low. Those measures all have funding at risk, so funding is tied to those for the institutions. I think that's within the broad – you know, you have the broad strategy of Alberta 2030. I think there's good institutional alignment, and if you were to look at the strategic plans in many of the institutions, you can see a very strong correlation. Then we have the investment management agreements that help to sort of put a point on it in terms of what is important and that the funding flows to those priorities because we've actually put that funding at risk if they miss their targets.

Mrs. Sawyer: Thanks. Yeah. I think, you know, the community partnerships that go in with that, that are allowing these students –

when you talk about getting them integrated to then have that full-time position: like I said, really well done on your department on how things are going. I mean I'm seeing it in my communities, you know, when we need those skilled workers, and they are seeing the opportunities within the province now and going into those programs. So thank you.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I'm going to cede the rest of my time to my colleague MLA Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much. I'd like to talk a little bit about consolidation. As shown in the statement of revenues and expenses, public postsecondary show up on our balance sheet as roughly $6.4 billion separate from other government investments that are in the sector. Could you explain the nuance between these dollars and how consolidation process actually works?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I'm happy to take a run at that and may need to ask Craig to supplement here. I think the important point to make is that consolidation is fundamentally an accounting treatment, and it's about the public-sector accounting standards. The requirement for a consolidation within the accounts of the government and specifically this ministry is a consequence of the control relationship that exists. It's not intrinsically sort of a policy decision; it is because of the control that government exercises over the public postsecondary institutions by virtue of the provisions of the Post-secondary Learning Act, primarily, as well as other pieces of legislation that cause the consolidation and bringing into the government's accounts the revenue and expenditures of the institutions, including salaries, facilities, maintenance, supplies, amortization, et cetera.

One of the things that does happen in the consolidation is that there is a reconciliation of the transfers that ultimately go from the department, because within the department's budget, which approaches about $2.7 billion dollars, a big portion of that is funding that then subsequently flows to the postsecondary institutions, and consolidation will net those numbers out so that the actual place where the money is spent is what is showing in the consolidation.

10:50

Mr. Rowswell: I guess, is there anything valuable to learn the way government tracks postsecondary institution spending against our balance sheet?

Mr. Marchand: Well, I think, you know, consolidation can certainly have significant impacts on the government's fiscal results given that PSIs represent over 90 per cent of the spending of the ministry. You know, if on balance the PSIs have an overall surplus, it would certainly be seen to add to the government's bottom line, but also if they had a deficit, it would alternatively reduce the bottom line.

You know, regardless of consolidation I think that our oversight role, as outlined in the Post-secondary Learning Act and other pieces of legislation, certainly requires significant reporting which we receive from the institutions on both financial and nonfinancial results of the PSIs. But, as I say, the consolidation is really based on the assessment of control that government has over the institutions.

The Chair: Thank you,

For the final round members will have the opportunity to read questions into the record for a written response from the department. Members have three minutes. We will start with the Official Opposition.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Auditor General found that the requirements to report the financials of for-profit and cost-recovery ventures were removed from the annual report guidelines for the '21 and '22 reporting years. In a status report the ministry says that this requirement started in 2021 and was made ongoing in '24-25. Can the ministry clarify if this requirement was removed in the annual report guidelines for 2021 and 2022, as indicated by the Auditor General, and explain the reasons for removing this reporting requirement? And can the ministry confirm that this requirement has since been added to the guidelines again?

The Auditor General found that the department provides little feedback to boards on ventures. The ministry states that it provides feedback on the annual reports. Can the ministry provide details about the kind of feedback it provides on the annual reports and if this feedback is directly about for-profit and cost-recovery ventures? Can the ministry elaborate on what additional feedback beyond feedback on the annual reports it provides regarding for-profit and cost-recovery ventures, does the ministry provide targeted feedback specific to individual ventures, and how does the ministry document the feedback it provides regarding ventures?

The final question for me: has the ministry ever intervened in a for-profit or cost-recovery venture that was not meeting expectations; if so, would the ministry share details about what happened, how it intervened, the outcome of that process, and any lessons learned?

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A couple of additional questions: one is around the funding formula and what work has been done by the department to work on what that is going to contain. Certainly, it was highlighted significantly in the expert panel as chaired by Dr. Jack Mintz.

I have another question: in regard to the targeted enrolment expansion the annual report shares that enrolment was 72 per cent, but the ministry writes that some programs may fall short. For what reason are they not meeting targets? How many programs and which programs were in this category, and how much money was ultimately redirected?

My last question is in regard to the international nursing program. Can the minister provide any results analysis for this program? How many of the international nurses who received bursaries have remained in the rural communities where they were placed, and what percentage of the total bursary recipients does this represent?

The Chair: That's it?

We'll move to government members. Thank you.

I would like to thank the ministry officials and the Auditor General office for being here today, and we ask that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Other business. Are there any items for discussion under Other Business? MLA Marlin Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just have a question for the Auditor General. I was dismayed to see that his request for a contract extension was denied by government members on the Legislative Offices Committee yesterday. I guess it just goes to show that no good deed goes unpunished. I'm just wondering if the Auditor General can provide us updates on the timelines for the completion of the DynaLife report and the Procurement Alberta . . .

Mr. Lunty: Point of order.

Ms Lovely: Point of order.

Mr. Lunty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to call point of order 23(b). The member opposite is speaking to matters other than the questions under discussion through our committee meeting this morning, and I would ask that the Chair in fact uphold the point of order 23(b) in this circumstance.

Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Chair, this is other business. There is no strict definition of what's allowable under Other Business. Our business is to understand and review the work of the Auditor General. There have been significant developments in the Auditor General's time frame for his work since we last met. I think it's a reasonable question that I should be allowed to ask the Auditor General

The Chair: Member Lovely, you also raised a point of order. Was it a different one or on this one?

Ms Lovely: You know, it was actually the same point of order. The purpose of our meeting is to focus on what these folks are working on and not something that happened yesterday.

The Chair: I think the question was about the Auditor General's work around DynaLife in some other report that the member mentioned.

Ms Lovely: I'm sorry, how does that pertain to advanced education? That's the purpose of our meeting today.

The Chair: I think it's other business, and the Auditor General is part of this committee. His recommendations are always discussed. His work is discussed, and as such, I do not find this question, in so far as it relates to the Auditor's work around these reports, out of scope. So if the Auditor General likes he can answer.

Mr. Wylie: Okay, thank you. I think that I've actually been on public record on this, and I will repeat that. With respect to DynaLife, we have actually completed the work and that will be reported very, very shortly. I cannot give you a specific date, but it is imminent. We are following our process, the legislative process that we require, before we make a report public, and we are in the midst of that.

With respect to the procurement work at Alberta Health Services, that work is ongoing, and we do not have a set timeline for that report. We are still conducting under-oath interviews at this time and we don't have a target date for that yet. We're in the middle of the examination phase of that piece of work.

The Chair: Thank you.

Any others?

Seeing none, the committee's next meeting will be on Tuesday, November 25, 2025, with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction.

I will call for a motion to adjourn. Will a member move that the November 4, 2025, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned. MLA Rowswell.

[The committee adjourned at 10:55 a.m.]

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