



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Advanced Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, November 19, 2015
9 a.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Schneider, David A., Little Bow (W), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Ministry of Advanced Education

Hon. Lori Sigurdson, Minister

Darrell Dancause, Executive Director and Senior Financial Officer, Corporate Services

Rod Skura, Deputy Minister

9 a.m. Thursday, November 19, 2015

[Miranda in the chair]

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

The Chair: I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. Good morning. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2016.

I would like to ask that we go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record. Madam Minister, when we get to your end of the table, please introduce your staff as well. Thank you.

Mr. Schneider: Dave Schneider, MLA, Little Bow.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Rodney: Dave Rodney, Calgary-Lougheed. Welcome.

Mr. Taylor: Wes Taylor, Battle River-Wainwright, and I have with me Shannon Hamelin, my LOA assistant.

Ms Sigurdson: This is Darrell Dancause. He's the SFO for Advanced Education. I'm Lori Sigurdson, the minister. To my right is Deputy Minister Rod Skura, and next to him is Peter Leclaire. This is our team here.

I'll pass it on.

Mr. Connolly: Good morning. Michael Connolly, MLA, Calgary-Hawkwood.

Mr. Carson: Good morning. Jon Carson, Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Sucha: Good morning. Graham Sucha, MLA, Calgary-Shaw. I'm substituting for Lorne Dach.

Mrs. Schreiner: Good morning. Kim Schreiner, MLA for Red Deer-North.

Mr. Coolahan: Craig Coolahan, MLA, Calgary-Klein.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Maria Fitzpatrick, MLA, Lethbridge-East.

Mr. S. Anderson: And last but not least, Shaye Anderson from Leduc-Beaumont.

The Chair: Ricardo Miranda, Calgary-Cross and also the chair.

I would also like to note the following substitutions for the record. Mr. Rodney is here in place of Ms Jansen, and Mr. Sucha is here in place of Mr. Dach.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they may interfere with the audiofeed.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with the consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education, I would like to briefly review the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the

members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either the chair or the committee clerk about the process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn at noon.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on November 23, 2015.

If there are any amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on November 23, 2015. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. Twenty copies of the amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

Now I would like to invite the Minister of Advanced Education to begin with her opening remarks.

Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Good morning, everyone. Everyone on the committee, I appreciate you being here. Thank you to the chair, MLA Miranda. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak about the budget for the Ministry of Advanced Education.

I'd just like to again introduce the staff team that's here to support me today and tell you their specific positions. To my left is Darrell Dancause, senior financial officer. To my right is the Deputy Minister, Rod Skura. Next to him is Peter Leclaire, the ADM of advanced learning and community partnerships. Also, in the gallery is Dan Rizzoli, ADM, strategic and corporate services. They're here to assist when needed. I'm pleased they could join me as I present

Alberta Advanced Education's proposed budget for fiscal year 2015-16.

I'm going to start with a general overview of the ministry before speaking to the specific areas. Advanced Education works with partners across the province to build a well-educated, skilled, creative, and ambitious workforce in Alberta. The most familiar part of the adult learning system is the 26 postsecondary institutions, known collectively as Campus Alberta. Of those, 21 are publicly funded, and five operate independently but still receive a more limited form of provincial funding.

Our public institutions are grouped into several main categories: comprehensive academic and research institutions – otherwise known sometimes as the CARIs; it's an acronym – the baccalaureate and applied studies institutions; polytechnics; comprehensive community institutions; and specialized arts and culture institutions. This system provides higher education for roughly 265,000 full- and part-time students and apprentices every year. I'll speak more about these institutions later.

The adult learning system also encompasses community adult learning councils and adult and family literacy programs. The department is also responsible for student aid and scholarship programs to help students and their families afford higher education.

To fulfill our mandate over the next year, we have examined our budget needs. The consolidated expenses for Advanced Education are budgeted at \$5.7 billion. As you are aware, this figure includes all expenses from the 21 publicly funded institutions in addition to government spending. The Campus Alberta grant represents the single biggest expense in my department's budget. I'm pleased to say that in this budget we have shown commitment to protecting the value of higher education in Alberta by increasing spending by \$133 million above what was the previous government's budget.

The increased spending includes reversing the \$1.4 billion cut to postsecondary institutions, increasing base funding for postsecondary institutions by 2 per cent, and restoring apprenticeship and targeted enrolment funding. With this funding increase we also froze tuition and mandatory noninstructional fees for two years. In addition, we cancelled market modifier approvals that would have forced excessive tuition increases onto students in 25 programs. We know access to education is vitally important to sustaining the strength of our province. From certificate programs to apprenticeship training to PhD credentials, education unlocks the potential that Albertans have to do great things.

As I mentioned, this funding increase will also support apprenticeship spaces in our polytechnics and community colleges. Alberta trains far more apprentices as a share of our population than any other province in Canada. Although Alberta has only 12 per cent of Canada's labour force, it trains approximately 18 per cent of the country's apprentices. Despite the economic downturn apprenticeship remains in demand both as a career option and with many employers. By ensuring that seats are available for the apprentices who want them, we are helping not only those who choose a trade as a career but also employers across Alberta who need skilled labour.

9:10

But whether a student is an apprentice, a graduate student, or a first-year college student, postsecondary education has to be accessible, and that includes keeping it affordable for students and their families. One part of affordability is a strong student aid system. That's why this budget contains several enhancements to student aid programming: \$228 million budgeted for student aid programs in 2015-16, including \$83 million for merit-based scholarship awards to about 47,500 students; \$57 million for the

cost of providing student loans and student debt management programs; and \$53 million for grants to about 10,000 students. In addition, in 2015-16 \$579 million in student loans will be disbursed to more than 77,000 students.

We know that access to higher education is about more than affordability. It is also about removing barriers and reducing inequalities so every student can pursue an education or career goal. That's why this year's budget contains a proposed \$171 million increase from 2014-15 as student loan limits and living allowances are increased. Apprentices and students in preapprenticeship programs are now eligible for loans and grants.

Just as affordability and accessibility are important to higher education, so too is ensuring that Alberta is investing in our postsecondary institutions. I'm pleased to say that this budget continues to fund \$581 million over five years in construction spending and capital projects. These include major expansions at campuses such as NAIT, the University of Calgary, NorQuest College, Red Deer College, and several others. Students deserve modern classrooms and training spaces. We will also spend a further \$547 million to fund maintenance and repair work at existing campuses. We must protect and maintain the investments that have been made and ensure that institutions continue to run smoothly. These projects will add more seats for students and apprentices as well as provide and keep up modern training and laboratory spaces.

Finally, let me take a moment to address what will be the largest project for Advanced Education in the rest of this fiscal year and the next. Increased funding to the postsecondary system has restored stability now so that we can look to the future. My ministry is planning to review the entire adult learning system to ensure that our advanced learning system meets the needs of Albertans for years to come. The review will be done as part of the department's existing budget and operational work. More details will be available soon. However, the review will engage a wide variety of traditional and nontraditional stakeholders to discuss and provide options on topics such as funding models, student supports, better support for vulnerable learners as well as system governance and outcomes. I'm looking forward to this review and what it could mean for the future of our system.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank you and the committee today for your time. Advanced Education has a focused agenda to support the government of Alberta's efforts to ensure postsecondary education and adult learning opportunities are accessible and affordable for students and their families. I'm happy to answer any questions that others may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Sir, I believe that you are the first one to ask the questions.

Mr. Taylor: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Do you want to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Taylor: I would like to go back and forth, please.

The Chair: Excellent. You have 60 minutes.

Mr. Taylor: If you can let me know when the last 20 minutes and 10 minutes are, I would appreciate that.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister Sigurdson and all the staff that are joining us today. I would also

like to take the time to thank Mr. Skura and his office staff for joining us as well. I apologize if I've missed anybody. I welcome you all here.

I would like to say on behalf of the Wildrose opposition and all Albertans that we appreciate the hard work that went into preparing the budget and supporting all the different facets of the Advanced Education portfolio. We respect the time that you have put into this. The reason we are here is to ensure there is transparency in the process, putting all Alberta students and institutions first, to ensure that our institutions have the right tools to teach our students quality education, and to the best of our ability to ensure the system is equitable and helps create jobs in the future for all Albertans. Our government must do a better job in helping create a sustainable system for future generations.

Minister, we have a lot of ground to cover today, and if at any point I've asked a question or do interject, please don't take offence at that. It's just simply that I've got to get the information that I want through this process. In an effort to get as much information out of your team today, I may just ask you to allow me to move on if that's okay.

With you, Mr. Chair, just for clarity, I would like to make sure that you know that all the questions are going through the chair.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

Mr. Taylor: To the minister, of course.

Okay. Last year in the 2014 budget Alberta's publicly funded postsecondary institutions received over \$2.1 billion in base operating grants, and this year they are receiving \$2.2 billion. That included an increase of \$32.5 million towards creating 2,000 new full-time spaces and encouraging collaboration throughout the Campus Alberta system; 4,600 new spaces were expected to grow over the next four years.

We know that funding later was cut by the PC government by 1.4 per cent from what you just said, and that 1.4 per cent was reversed by the NDP in the interim supply act. At the time the ministry also increased the funding to postsecondary institutions by another 2 per cent. The ministry added an additional 2 per cent to help soften the blow it gave to institutions by freezing tuitions and halting nonmandatory instructional student fees and cancelling market modifiers for two years.

We know that salaries soak up approximately 70 to 75 per cent of most institutions' operational funding and that staff increases are projected around 2 and 2 and a quarter per cent for next fall. So let me ask you, Minister: how exactly is the ministry going to help the institutions reach their goals for expected growth over the next three and a half years? Is it going to give another generous increase in the 2016 budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much for the question. I just want to say that, obviously, the postsecondary institutions are very pleased with how quickly this government moved to reinvest in postsecondary. They've gone through a really challenging time in the last few years because of the cuts to that area, and what I'm hearing very much from presidents, chairs, faculty associations, support staff is that it's really created quite a bit of stability now in the system moving forward. People are very pleased and excited again, and the confidence – the University of Calgary just hired 100 new instructors.

Mr. Taylor: Is there going to be another generous increase in 2016?

Ms Sigurdson: In the 2016 budget we are, you know, continuing to backfill. Of course, the tuition freeze continues for two years, so

we're going to make sure that the institutions have the revenue they need for that period of time. I mean, the specifics regarding that will come out in that budget; \$28 million is the new funding for tuition.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

Now, after the government removes the tuition freeze – and I hope that you're expecting to do that – how are you going to assist institutions for lost tuition increases? Won't this plan keep tuition stuck kind of in a backwards cycle, post the lost tuition freeze? Now you're two years back of not actually having tuition increases. Where is that money going to come from?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we have already committed to and are funding that backfill so that institutions aren't on the hook for that. We are very much working with them, and they're very pleased. They're not going to be, you know, out of pocket.

Mr. Taylor: After two years?

Ms Sigurdson: After two years – we're about to begin an adult learning review. That's why we have this two-year window, so that we can really look at the adult learning system, do a comprehensive audit. We're going to work with stakeholders, with the public in general, and we're going to come up with what's best for the system. We've given ourselves a two-year window, and that's why we've frozen tuition for two years. The adult learning review, working with our . . .

9:20

Mr. Taylor: Won't the institutions be behind two years of tuition increases, so they've lost that ability to gain that tuition in those past two years?

Ms Sigurdson: We are, as I said, backfilling the tuition, and we're going to be working with institutions to decide where we go with the tuition from then on.

Mr. Taylor: So there'll be a 4 per cent, perhaps, increase after two years?

Ms Sigurdson: We're going to find out what's the best way to move forward in the adult learning review.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

On page 12 of the business plan it states at the top, "Desired Outcome One: An accessible, affordable, quality and stable postsecondary system ensures Albertans reach their full potential." We all know that we get what we pay for, so can the minister tell me what other governments are using a funding model which freezes tuitions and market modifiers and is also known for attracting the great instructors of the world, delivering the level of the highest education?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want you to know that, certainly, I've been touring the province, going to postsecondary institutions across the province, and there's a lot of excitement and, I think, a new passion because they're feeling like they are supported and that it is an opportunity for them now to create some really good plans moving forward for their particular institutions.

Mr. Taylor: It's only, frankly, a two-year plan that you have, so I don't know if that's going to be something that's that exciting.

Going back, how are you going to attract the best educators going forward if you stop giving increases?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said, the adult learning review will support us to make a longer term plan, and we, of course, want to

work with all the institutions to make that happen. We already have an excellent postsecondary . . .

Mr. Taylor: I look forward, though, to your adult learning review and seeing it.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. It's going to be great. I hope you get involved.

Mr. Taylor: I would appreciate that, actually.

Minister, I'm afraid that, at least in my opinion, you can't build great institutions and can't compete with the great institutions of the world and the rest of Canada when you cannot generate the money needed to compete. Students expect the best instructors. However, when governments freeze tuitions, roll back market modifiers, it stifles institutions' ability to attract the best instructors, professors, and staff. Asking students if they want tuition freezes might give you a few extra votes. However, has the ministry considered the implications of what will happen to the quality of institutions a few years down the road, after they've been financially stifled? I know it kind of goes back to the same question. I suspect I'll get the same answer.

Ms Sigurdson: I just already want you to know that I think that postsecondary institutions, the board chairs, the presidents, the faculty associations that I've spoken to are sort of heaving a sigh of relief. The government now in power in this province is committed to postsecondary. We demonstrated that early on by putting \$133 million back into postsecondary this year, and that is a commitment that continues. People are feeling more confident, universities are hearing the commitment that we have as a party, and they're making some really positive plans.

Mr. Taylor: I'm hearing sustainability. That's the concern that I'm hearing across. Frankly, they don't think it's sustainable, what's going on. A lot of students realize that not having the best instructors is not what they're asking for because, frankly, if you keep freezing and you can't keep the wages, it's going to spiral downward here in the future. How does this government plan to pay for the best instructors for the students?

Ms Sigurdson: Already the University of Calgary has hired 100 new instructors. That shows that they have a commitment . . .

Mr. Taylor: They have it now, yeah.

Ms Sigurdson: . . . and they have confidence that the government is working with them forward.

The adult learning plan is a plan that we create together for all institutions. A postsecondary can be very confident that this government is committed to working with them, and that, I know, will help them attract and retain really high-quality professors and instructors.

Mr. Taylor: I hope so. I truly hope so. This is my province as much as it is yours, so I want the best instructors.

What is your ministry's plan after the two years are up? Are you going to get rid of tuitions completely? I only ask that because one of the members said in the *Camrose Booster* that the NDP's plan was to eliminate tuitions.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, again I'm going to go back to the adult learning review because it's not something that we're dictating. We're really working with all the stakeholders in this, wanting to consult with the public to see what we'll be doing going forward. You know, we're not saying that we're going to do this or that. We really need to do the consultation.

Mr. Taylor: So you're keeping that on the table, the possibility of getting rid of tuition altogether.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think it's a great opportunity to hear all sorts of views.

Mr. Taylor: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: You know, I just met with the ambassador of Sweden, and that was one of his questions to me. He said to me: when is Alberta going to get rid of tuition, just like Sweden? There's a wide spectrum of things to think about, and I think the more broad our discourses are, the better.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

We see on page 26 of the estimates, on line 2.2, operating support for postsecondary institutions, there has been an increase of \$116 million, or an increase of 5.5 per cent, coming from public dollars. Can the minister please explain why they are not allowing universities to go directly to students to recover these extra costs and why at this time, in times of economic uncertainty, you'd be going after Albertans to foot the bill?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, when the economy is down, this is the time that many students will go back to school, so we're making it affordable and accessible for them. I know from talking with many of the presidents that their enrolment is up. Students are coming to school because the tuition is reasonable for them. They appreciate not having to pay the higher rate that was going to be paid. We as a government aren't making the institutions pay for that but, rather, are being responsible for that. It's a great thing to do. It's a great thing . . .

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you. I understand it's a great thing.

If I understand correctly, the board of governors at each institution are to set tuition fees, not the provincial government. Is that correct?

Ms Sigurdson: We have a tuition fee regulation that provides guidance to the board of governors at those institutions, and we've had, you know, obviously, good consultation with them, and we worked with them to create the tuition freeze that's currently in place.

Mr. Taylor: So you worked with them. Okay.

It seems like the government, who appoints the board of governors, is now turning around and is not only deciding how much of an operating grant the institution receives but has also frozen tuitions, halted mandatory instructional fees, and cancelled market modifiers for the next two years. What is there left for the board of governors to do?

Ms Sigurdson: Each institution has a board of governors that does direct the operations of the institutions. It is an independent body, and as a government certainly we have policies and overarching directions that we ask. They are often wanting to seek, you know, the new government's view, and certainly I've been sharing that with board chairs. We absolutely have an overarching view, but as we move forward in the adult learning review, we'll be hearing from those boards and learning more about where they're wanting to go. I mean, we have to make sure – we have to be assessing accountability, and it's . . .

Mr. Taylor: You haven't left them much to do, though.

Ms Sigurdson: If you talk to them, I think that they would disagree.

Mr. Taylor: Well, the ones where they really can get the meat, you know, sink their teeth into it, just something they can go with – it's been halted with that freezing.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, running a university – it's a very complex organization, and I'm sure that they have many things to do. Because we've really supported them with the tuition freeze by backfilling it, that, you know, has been a win-win for everyone.

Mr. Taylor: So are you saying that the government is better prepared to run the institutions rather than the boards?

Ms Sigurdson: Absolutely not. That's not what I'm saying at all.

Mr. Taylor: That's just what seems to come out of that.

On page 12 of the business plan under line 1.3 it states, "Work with stakeholders to initiate a review of the adult learning system to ensure it is accessible, affordable and of the highest quality." Who will these stakeholders be?

9:30

Ms Sigurdson: Who are the stakeholders that we want to consult with? Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Taylor: Yeah.

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, certainly, the board of governors of all the universities, the presidents, the faculty associations, staff associations, student groups, the public in general. We're doing a very comprehensive audit of the postsecondary institutions. That hasn't really been done for about a decade. It's going to be quite comprehensive. Even members of the opposition are welcome to be a part.

Mr. Taylor: That's wonderful. Thank you.

We have heard that not all universities have all board members at meetings because in some cases they have four or five board positions they need to fill due to the end of the term. But the government is not allowing them to fill these positions until the review of the previous government's process has come up with a different one. Is that true?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, you're right. We are doing what we call the ABC review. That's the agencies, boards, and commissions. Government is doing a comprehensive review, and we are moving forward on some appointments as needed. It hasn't created a complete moratorium, but it has slowed the process somewhat. I think that's a responsible thing to do as a brand new government. We want to make sure that those boards, agencies, and commissions are effective. Are they useful? Are they redundant? Are they duplicating the services of another committee? We need to assess all of that.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. So your idea is not to get rid of a board of governors, then.

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. Taylor: No. Okay.

There's been a cut to grants and bursaries by 31 per cent. In 2014-15 \$76 million was used and budgeted, and the 2015-16 is \$52.5 million. That's a huge cut, Minister. What specific grants and bursaries have been cut, and what are you still funding?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. So \$34.6 million in funding was repurposed from the completion incentive grant to support new program improvements. The completion incentive grant was eliminated

effective August 1, 2015. So \$7.7 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the maintenance grant that is provided to eligible student loan borrowers, including single parents, married students with small children, and \$8.2 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the Alberta low-income grant, that is provided to low-income students in undergraduate certificate programs. In 2015-16 the grant amount provided to eligible student loan borrowers was doubled to provide more funding to low-income students in these programs. And \$0.5 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the Northern Alberta Development Council to develop a new award targeted to northern First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners.

Student aid also provides grants for part-time students, grants for students with disabilities, and grants to students through the serving communities internship program at Volunteer Alberta.

So it's been moved as opposed to, you know, eliminated.

Mr. Taylor: Well, cut. Yeah.

How has money from these grants and bursaries been . . .

Ms Sigurdson: It wasn't cut. I just want to be clear on the record.

Mr. Taylor: Well, it sure looks like it. The numbers sure have changed, from \$76 million to \$52 million.

The Chair: Before we go further, I would just like to remind us all to please, you know, be mindful that you're directing your comments as well as the questions through the chair so that we don't derail the conversation to one that isn't as cordial as the one that was initially, I believe, envisioned.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms Sigurdson: My apologies.

The student loan program and the grants program: the money is just repurposed. It's not cut. I just wanted to correct the hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Are they changed or repurposed to increase operating support for postsecondary institutions?

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, like, the repurposing of the completion incentive grant – what we found is that when . . .

Mr. Taylor: Did it go to operating support, though?

Ms Sigurdson: No. It went to student loans. We find that for people who are wanting to go to postsecondary, getting that money up front is much more helpful than getting it at the end. Certainly, in the research that's been done by the ministry staff, it's more helpful to have the money up front so that they can go to school as opposed to getting it after they've completed and then get this rebate. That's why it's been put at the front end as opposed to the back end.

Mr. Taylor: It looks like it's going to cost them more in the long run if you're going to put it as a loan as opposed to a grant. Anyway, that's just my take on it.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, what the students wanted is to have the money up front, so we've made that change for them.

Mr. Taylor: They'll have to pay for it as opposed to a grant or a bursary.

Now, we know that you have moved the province's economic development to another ministry, but learning about small business and learning about creating one is still under Advanced Education.

Take, for instance, courses that are offered at universities and colleges where students learn entrepreneurial skills. Where in the budget are you including opportunities for small-business owners to grow and learn how to showcase Alberta business so that we can become more globally attractive and competitive? Or is the plan still to just tax small businesses excessively and hope it attracts others to want to come to our great province?

Ms Sigurdson: You know, I was just up in Fort McMurray at Keyano College, and there's a new program that's a partnership between NAIT and Keyano College where you can get a business degree. This is giving people locally, in that community, an opportunity to advance their skills. There are other partnerships across the province that do support business owners, people to develop those skills in business, entrepreneurship.

The funding that we give to institutions to support all these various programs is in our Campus Alberta grant. That's across the institutions. Certainly, business is a program in high demand, and we certainly support that. As I said, this Keyano partnership just began this fall, in September, and there are many other programs across the province.

Mr. Taylor: So would that be under line 4.3?

Ms Sigurdson: Line 2.2.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Is there a grant available for someone who'd want to learn how to become a small-business owner specifically?

Ms Sigurdson: I don't have the curriculum in front of me right now, but we can certainly look into that. I would almost be certain that there are programs to support small business, you know, all levels of business.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you. If you can find that out for me, that would be great.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We'll get that back to you.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

After the government removes the tuition freeze, how are you going to assist the institutions for losses due to tuition increases? I know that I keep asking this one. Won't this plan keep institutions stuck, though, in this backwards cycle?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, already we are backfilling the tuition freeze, what they would have gotten, what they had set before. So they're in a stable position right now. We'll be doing that for the next two years. Then in 2016-17 we're, you know, going to be giving another 2 per cent increase. I think institutions are very confident in the work that we're doing right now. As I said, the adult learning review will give us more direction from that collaborative work we do to know how to go forward with the adult learning system in Alberta.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

Now that we know that the STEP program is going to be reinstated in 2016 and the government will be adding an additional \$10 million to the budget in 2016-17, would this fall under line 4.1, program delivery support? What services does the government plan on cutting to reinstate this program?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, STEP, the summer temporary employment program, is a wonderful program that was cut back in 2013. It's not in this ministry. It's in Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour. It certainly does impact students, and it's a great program for them. It is a \$10

million investment by this government. It's not in this budget. It's in JSTL.

9:40

Mr. Taylor: Okay. I just kind of had to ask because a lot of students, you know, depend on that program as well.

Ms Sigurdson: No, we're very . . .

The Chair: It's becoming a little bit hard for me to hear with the side conversations happening here. I would actually like to follow the conversation if I could. Please, if you could keep it down. Thank you. Sorry for the interruption.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. No problem.

Minister, you discuss on page 11 of your business plan the need for renewal and that many changes have taken place with employer expectations and the economy. Can you tell us today if that change that you're talking about is a plan to change the Post-secondary Learning Act so that AUPE employees at universities and faculty employees are given the same right to strike?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. What you're really asking is about essential services legislation. Of course, the Supreme Court of Canada has come out with a ruling that public employees need to have the same rights as other employees, so we are doing focused consultations right now regarding how we get our legislation congruent with the Supreme Court of Canada decision. We have until March 31, 2016. That is something that we're certainly looking at and certainly wanting to make sure that public servants have the same rights as other workers and also that Albertans have the essential services they need when they need them. That is a process that's ongoing.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah. It seems to be a juggling act because it's essential services and public-sector employees.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, it is. Like, what are the definitions of those? There are many unanswered questions that we're looking at. It's a complex issue.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

Regarding the renewal in the business plan, are you also planning to help undergraduate teacher assistants go and become unionized?

Ms Sigurdson: You're talking about teachers?

Mr. Taylor: Undergraduate teacher assistants, the ones that are the teacher assistants for the university professors.

Ms Sigurdson: Again, I'll just say that the Supreme Court of Canada has said that public servants have the right to strike, and Alberta needs to be in congruence with that in our legislation. We're working to have that. We're talking with stakeholders, understanding the impacts, making sure that we do have the good services we need as Albertans but also giving rights to workers in the public service. That's an ongoing consultation.

Mr. Taylor: And that's because they're being paid? The undergraduate students are being paid to help. Is that why you're going down that road?

Ms Sigurdson: It's all to be determined. We just need to make sure that we are compliant with the Supreme Court of Canada decision.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Minister, where under operational expenses would the funding be for Portage College for the needed pipeline training centre?

Ms Sigurdson: It's under Campus Alberta grants. Portage College would receive funding through Campus Alberta grants.

Mr. Taylor: But specifically for the pipeline training centre?

Ms Sigurdson: It's line 2.2. So you want this broken down further? Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Taylor: I'm just asking: do you have something specifically intended for the pipeline training centre?

Ms Sigurdson: Portage College is an independent institution, and we have nothing specifically targeted for that. That is a decision that they would undertake.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah. You know, Albertans are waiting for this important event for training and don't understand why you would not have designated critical funding for this important job-creating initiative.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm just being shown that in the Campus Alberta grant Portage College gets approximately almost \$22 million, and certainly through that funding they can designate and they can make choices. That is really up to the institution.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you.

I would like to go on to line 2.7, other program support, and discuss what might be happening here. This line item has been more than doubled, to create a 120 per cent increase from that amount used in 2014-15. I understand that more was budgeted in 2014-15, but they used exactly \$20.2 million, and your ministry was budgeted for \$44.5 million. Can you please explain what all is included in this line item and why you have more than doubled this amount in this one area?

Ms Sigurdson: This budget provides funding for one-time or short-term program initiatives, system-wide support activities, information technology, data collection systems, and postsecondary graduate employment and satisfaction surveys. More specifically, the funding supports the following initiatives: \$11.4 million for operating costs of new facilities; \$13.7 million for ongoing commitments to institutions – this supports SuperNet access, Microsoft licences, the Alberta postsecondary application systems, and support for aboriginal colleges – and \$9.5 million for other ongoing commitments to initiatives such as Learning Clicks and activities of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.

Mr. Taylor: So why has it more than doubled? I guess that's the question. I understand that there are lots of numbers there, but what specifically made it be doubled?

Ms Sigurdson: It's an increase because the \$24.2 million increase from the 2014 actual to the 2015-16 estimates is primarily from planned spending that did not occur due to the economic downturn in 2014-15. Cost savings were taken from within other program supports as the funding was not committed. Those were decisions made by the previous government, and they didn't go ahead because of the spending freeze.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. I guess you can't speak for exactly what the previous government did. Thank you.

Sometimes, Minister, you know, I have to read twice what has exactly been said in the business plan and try to make sense of it in the budget estimates. Maybe you can help me with this one. On page 13 of your business plan it states under priority initiatives under line 2.1: "Restore funding for apprenticeship technical

training and ensure sufficient technical training seats are available." Then when we go back to page 26 of the budget estimates, in line item 3, apprenticeship delivery, we see that the previous government budgeted \$47.7 million and that under your ministry you have cut that by \$6.1 million, to bring it down to \$41.6 million. Can I ask the minister: how is this restoring funding, and do you not think that the priority initiative statement was at least a little bit misleading?

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to be clear that we've committed \$6 million more to the apprenticeship program. That's like a reinvestment that was part of the \$133 million that we did overall.

Mr. Taylor: But you called it a priority project, and now it's . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'm happy to answer your question. I'm just getting the specifics from my staff.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Sorry. I thought that you were kind of done.

Ms Sigurdson: No, I'm not done. Funding for comprehensive community institutions and polytechnics, including support for adult learning – this is 2.2 in the estimates – includes \$75.9 million for apprenticeship technical training spaces and related one-time costs such as equipment purchases. This amount reflects the \$6 million increase provided to restore funding for apprentice technical training.

Mr. Taylor: What line item was that?

Ms Sigurdson: Line 2.2.

Mr. Taylor: Line 2.2?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Funding was restored through Bill 3 and approved in the Alberta Leg. in June 2015. This gives you more detail about that. So we're really reinvesting.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Fair enough.

Can we go to page 27 to discuss the capital investment for ministry support services? Under line item 1.4, strategic and corporate services, we see that in 2014-15 \$727,000 was used, and in 2015-16 it's been budgeted for \$1 million. Can you please explain the increase of 36.7 per cent and what these funds are going to be used for?

9:50

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. The \$4.4 million budget for department information technology investment support system development and equipment costs includes servers, network infrastructure, and application support and development. Funding is allocated as follows: \$1 million for ministry support services, \$0.8 million for apprenticeship delivery, and \$2.6 million for student aid.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. That's ministry support services?

Ms Sigurdson: One million for ministry support services.

Mr. Taylor: One million for ministry support services. Okay. Thank you.

On page 27, loans and advances, under the student aid line, item 4.4, loan disbursements, can the minister tell me why there has been a 46 per cent increase in loan disbursements from last year? Has there been an influx of new postsecondary students this year? Would you say that there's been an increase in adults going back to school to get further education because unemployment has risen to 6 per cent?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this is, again, about the repurposing up front for students so students have money to go into postsecondary education. As a result of the improvements to the student loan program, \$171 million in additional loan disbursements were provided in the 2015 estimates over the 2014 budget, and \$183 million in additional loan disbursements will be provided in the 2015 estimates over 2014. So it is about the reinvestment.

Mr. Taylor: How much do you think this is going to cost students in the long run now that they have to pay loans as opposed to getting these grants that were available before?

Ms Sigurdson: I just know that that kind of an investment made makes a significant difference in anyone's life. Having three degrees myself, I know that it changed my opportunities and opened many doors, and for students who invest in education and that are able to get great jobs and diverse work, it's a well-focused spending of money, I would say.

Mr. Taylor: How much more money will it cost the students?

Ms Sigurdson: You know, Alberta is a province that has lots of tremendous opportunities for people, and 90 per cent of our student loans are paid back in full. Students are able to pay back because they can get great jobs here in Alberta.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. I guess I'm not going to get an answer out of that one.

Under performance measures on page 12, 1(b), it states: "Percentage of post-secondary transfer graduates satisfied with the transfer credit they received." Minister, I believe this statement should actually read: percentage of postsecondary students satisfied that they were able to receive the transfer credit they needed in order to not retake classes. Are you only asking the students that received a transfer credit if they were satisfied with that? Why not ask all students who are wishing to transfer if they were able to do so with minimal challenges and release that performance measure?

Ms Sigurdson: As you see, that's a pretty high percentage of students that are very satisfied with the system that we have in Alberta, where they can transfer from program to program to be able to – sometimes life takes someone somewhere else, or someone gets married, or a job becomes available somewhere else. I think our system already is responding to them significantly. I mean, there's . . .

Mr. Taylor: How about the ones that want to transfer with minimal changes? I speak because my daughter just went through, and she had trouble transferring from one school to the next.

The Chair: There are 20 minutes remaining.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: You know, I mean, there's always room for improvement, and I appreciate the member's concerns about even making it better. I'm with you. I want that very much. Certainly, our adult learning review will continue to look at that and how we can make our transfer program even better because we want students to have the opportunity to continue their education if life circumstances change for them. I appreciate your comments, and certainly during the adult learning review it would be great if you had your daughter maybe give us some feedback.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Minister, why is it that you have two portfolios, yet you still require almost the same amount of money to run each

of them like separate entities? Can you explain how this is saving money?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I want to say that certainly the work of both ministries goes on regardless of them having one particular person who's responsible, one particular minister who's responsible for both of them, and having staff to carry on all the responsibilities of the ministry.

Actually, it has gone down somewhat. I'm just being shown that it's gone down 7 per cent in terms of the minister's office expenses. One of the things, too, is that it looks like it's gone up somewhat, 17 per cent, because there was a whole bunch of severance pay. Oh, is that down? Okay. Sorry. So it's gone down 17 per cent because of severance pay paid out by the previous government when some staff retired or moved out of those positions.

Mr. Taylor: Can I ask you – sorry to interject that way – how much is the severance pay that was paid out?

Ms Sigurdson: It's \$115,000.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. On page 26 can you also explain why under ministerial support services the total amount has been increased to \$30.5 million when in 2014-15 ministerial support services used \$30 million for both innovation and advanced education? That's with both. Why the significant increase?

Ms Sigurdson: Again, because of the previous government's decisions to freeze spending, the actual budget in 2014-15 was \$32,760,000, so this year's estimate is below that even though they didn't spend that total number.

Mr. Taylor: No. They spent \$30 million. It was used. And now it's \$30.5 million, and now you've lost the innovation part of innovation and advanced education.

Ms Sigurdson: I understand that these numbers have been adjusted to make it comparable, so, you know, they've been adjusted for the loss of that innovation piece. Maybe we can follow up with you about how that's done if you're interested, if you need more details about that, but it has been taken into consideration in the practices that we undertook.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah. I'd appreciate a little bit more insight into that in the future, just with discussion of the . . .

Ms Sigurdson: My deputy minister will give you more details.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Skura: On this one, the normal budgeting processes, whenever there's a government reorganization, the numbers from the previous budget and the actuals are adjusted so that it looks as if the ministry existed in that form forever. What happens through the budgeting process is that that innovation piece, the actual expenditures from before, would be taken out of that number and transferred to the new ministry so everything is comparable, as if that ministry has always existed in its current form.

Mr. Taylor: It seems to me that if I look at Economic Development and Trade, I just have to go back. But if you put the two together, you've got a significant increase even though you're doing your adjustments that you're talking about.

Mr. Skura: Yeah. I was at the Economic Development and Trade estimates discussion yesterday. That was a combination of two ministries, intergovernmental relations, and there was some

incremental funding that was provided there as well for the new ministry, so it's not a simple one-to-one addition.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Skura.

On line item 1.5, human resources, there's a 4 per cent increase from last year, and again innovation has been removed. Why the increase when you no longer have to look after innovations?

Mr. Dancause: Same answer.

10:00

Mr. Taylor: Same answer? I heard that, yeah.

Minister, on page 11 in the business plan, under strategic context, it states that we need to ensure that the system "is still helping Albertans reach their fullest potential." Recently, due to the economic crisis that Alberta has been dealt, we have been hit with the loss of jobs and an unemployment rate of 6.5 per cent, higher enrolment into schools, and by the government's own admission they want to get away from oil revenue and diversify the economy. What is the government going to do to ensure that the courses that the students are now taking are going to mean jobs when they complete their schooling? You've delivered a budget. Surely, you have a plan to see that today. Can you tell us what's going to happen with that in your plan?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, investment in postsecondary education is one of the best ways to diversify an economy. People have opportunities to train in all sorts of different fields, and certainly our government's commitment has given confidence to students and also to the institutions so that people can go back. You know, we have experienced drops in the oil price previously, and we will rebound. This is a great time. We have high enrolment this year, higher than in previous years.

Mr. Taylor: But where's the targeting? Where is that specific targeting with this?

Ms Sigurdson: My point is that there's been a big commitment for us, and there is a lot of support for students and institutions currently. We do have a target enrolment in terms of apprenticeship programs. For example, I was just yesterday out in Spruce Grove, where NAIT has a new site. They're going to have a crane and hoist apprenticeship program out there, and that will double the number of apprenticeships. If you look at the sky in downtown Edmonton, you see cranes everywhere. I mean, there's still much work that's being done and will continue to be done. I think the city of Edmonton had \$4.6 billion in permits for building over the next years. That's tremendously under demand. Certainly, our investment in apprenticeship funding to support . . .

Mr. Taylor: It looks like it's gone down. On page 26 under point 3 it says: apprenticeship delivery.

Ms Sigurdson: Again, it's in 2.2, and that area that you're looking at is just the administration piece. It's not the funding, so that's why.

Mr. Taylor: So the administration is the \$41 million? It says: apprenticeship delivery.

Ms Sigurdson: That's the administration of the apprenticeship. I can give you more details about that if you'd like. That funds salaries, supplies, service costs for the delivery of the apprenticeship and industry training programs. Staff works with industry, employers, and employees in training providers to support the development, maintenance, and delivery of the designated trade

and occupation qualification certificate programs. Staff responsibilities include acting as the registrar – so it is very much the administrative piece – counselling apprentices and employers, promoting participation in designated trades and occupations, facilitating industry's development of training and certificate standards, monitoring workplaces for compliance with the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act and regulations. It is the administrative piece. I've given you quite a bit of detail.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Yeah, you did give me quite a bit of detail, so thank you for that.

The Chair: Ten minutes remaining.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I would like to ask you a question that's a little bit different. Alberta abroad is a program to send young Albertans into the world to gather work experience abroad and then to return to Alberta with that experience. What line item is that funded out of, and how much is this program being funded?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. This is actually sort of similar to the STEP question. This is in the Economic Development and Trade ministry now. That was one of the pieces that moved over. Oh, it was always there. Okay. Sorry. It didn't move over. It was always there, I've been just advised.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you.

The last government called for the cancellation of Alberta's centennial education savings plan grant on March 26, 2015. Your government committed during the election campaign to maintain the grant. Why the change of mind, and where will the extra money that was saved by the cancellation of the ACES grant go?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say that our government believes there's a better way to support low-income families to gain access to education and training. That was the purpose of this grant, to support families that had lower incomes to support their children going to postsecondary. While this program was intended to encourage more parents of low-income families to save for their children's education, only 17 per cent of lower income families participated in the program. Therefore, we're proceeding with the closure of the program, and that was announced by the previous government. Alberta families can still access the federally funded Canada education savings plan and the Canada learning bond, and we'll also be exploring better ways to reduce financial barriers and increase access to education and training for all Albertans as part of the comprehensive adult learning system review.

Mr. Taylor: Wouldn't you consider 17 per cent quite a large number? If that many people are taking the ACES grant and going with it, I would perceive that to be a fairly large number.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it really was a targeted program to support low income, but only 17 per cent – not even a quarter of the people who were benefiting were low income. It was middle- and upper-income people who were benefiting. We want it to be more robust. We want it to be more like, you know, 80 per cent or even 100 per cent. That's going to be part of the adult learning review because we do absolutely need to support low-income people. It's a part of creating more equality in our province, giving people more opportunities. So 17 per cent isn't good enough.

Mr. Taylor: Do you have stats to show that that's what it was, that it was not going to low-income earners, that it was just going to high-income people?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's correct. We do have that information. We did research on it. I mean, to be truthful, it was the previous government who did that research, and the ministry staff have shared that with me. Having seen that and heard how the program was working, I certainly concur that it's good to move forward with the closure of this program and develop something new. Of course, we'll be looking at that through the adult learning system review.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Is that part of the grants that you've cut previously? Does that go with the grants? You had grants and bursaries being cut. Is that part of those grants and bursaries, or is that a separate one?

Ms Sigurdson: It's separate.

Mr. Taylor: That's why I wondered if it was on line 4.3 under grants and bursaries, that amounts to \$24 million. That's why I wondered if it was a decrease from there.

Ms Sigurdson: No. It's another matter. I'm just advised that it's one of the not-voted items.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Not-voted items.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, so it's not in there. On page 29 are the not-voted items.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. The Auditor General said that the department "does not have adequate processes to oversee the unique risks that post-secondary institutions take on when they generate revenue from [for-profit and cost-recovery] ventures." My question is to the minister. In your introductory paragraph, found on page 11 of the business plan, you say that postsecondary institutions are accountable to the minister. Can you please tell us what your plans are to create an adequate process to oversee these unique risks that postsecondary institutions take on when they generate revenue from for-profit and cost-recovery ventures?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. This is a really important question, and we appreciate the Auditor General's feedback to us. We're certainly looking at that with the postsecondary system. We have to balance the risks and the benefits of this kind of program. For example, if you think about Olds College, they have a brewmaster program, and part of the brewmaster program is that they sell beer. It kind of makes sense because that is an opportunity for students to, you know, actually understand what it's like to run a shop and sell the goods that they're making. It kind of fits with that learning model.

10:10

The hon. member spoke earlier about: "What about small-business people? What kind of training can they get?" I mean, if you're interested in that area, being a brewmaster, maybe in having your own small business, this program would be ideal because it would give you that sort of practical aspect plus the theory.

Some of those programs make sense, but, yes, we have to make sure that there is accountability and that the primary focus of a postsecondary institution isn't lost. It's not about businesses and making revenue but, rather, about education.

I guess another example of that would be NAIT. It has Ernest's restaurant. People in the culinary program are able to, you know, be chefs in that program, perhaps even wait tables, just develop themselves in the whole aspects of the industry. We appreciate the Auditor General's comments because: when do we draw the line? We're certainly looking at that, and we want to be prudent and make sure that the risks and the benefits are well balanced.

Did you want to add anything else?

Mr. Skura: Yeah. Just a couple of additional points on this one. The revenue that's generated from any of these things is important to defray the costs of programs. We recognize there are some risks with these, and we recognize the department has to put better policies and processes in place in evaluating those.

The other point I would make is that the boards in all these institutions evaluate these revenue-generating opportunities from a risk perspective. One of the things that the Auditor General had pointed out in this review was that the department's responsibility is to make sure that the boards (a) have the appropriate competencies to make those evaluations and (b) that the board processes are robust enough to satisfy our needs.

We agree with the recommendation, and we're going to work with the postsecondary institutions to improve our internal department policies, but there are processes in place right now that evaluate the risks of these programs.

Mr. Taylor: So you would say that you're encouraging these ones such as Lakeland College in selling livestock and NAIT in selling meat through their retail store?

Mr. Skura: We think in the department that that's a valuable piece of the educational experience. If you're taking a meat-cutting course at NAIT, it's a valuable experience to learn the retail marketing side of that as well. Likewise, with the brewmaster program at Olds, it's a valuable experience to learn the business side of that as well.

Mr. Taylor: I agree. I believe that the students can learn quite a bit, you know, as a combination of the two.

How much time do I have left?

The Chair: A minute and 19.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

It looks like you are increasing student debt, line 4.4 on page 27, over \$180 million over last year. Do you think that is a good idea during the current economic time?

Ms Sigurdson: I think it's an excellent idea, and certainly it's kind of countercyclical. When the economy is down somewhat, it's a great time for students to go back and up their skills and be able to develop themselves to get great jobs. It also is another really wonderful thing to diversify the economy. People can really explore new programs. I think it's an excellent investment, and I'm very proud to stand by that.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Increasing debt: I guess I've heard that before.

Anyway, is there any plan for loan forgiveness? If so, how much, and what are the criteria?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as we said previously, we did repurpose the completion incentive grant because what we heard from students . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I'm sorry. You've run out of time. Thank you.

Now we turn to the members of the third-party opposition. I understand, Mr. Rodney, that you will be asking the questions.

Mr. Rodney: I will. Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Will you be going back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Rodney: If that's okay with the minister, I'd like that.

The Chair: Okay. Again, I'd like to remind you both to direct comments and questions through the chair.

Thank you. Please go ahead.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just for your information and that of the committee members, I have a statement because, of course, we know we can speak for up to 10 minutes, and I have questions after that.

The Chair: Okay. So you want to have your chunk and then divide it?

Mr. Rodney: No. We said that we're going back and forth. I'm just informing you that what I will be doing is making a bit of a statement preceding, so the minister can have a sip of coffee.

The Chair: Okay. I understand.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for being here today. And a special thank you to your staff, those here and those far beyond these walls. I believe every Albertan knows that you do great things for Albertans every day. We're talking about numbers here, but we're talking about a whole lot more than that. We're talking about people. We're talking about quality of life. We're talking about the contributions people can make in their homes and their work and their community and far beyond because of what happens in Advanced Education in this province. Thank you is not enough to say. And I want to thank Terri Kemball and Ben Li from our office and my colleague Richard Gotfried for joining me here today.

Now, Minister, I'm sure that, again, everyone around the table and far beyond agrees that Albertans deserve access to an affordable and world-class postsecondary education system regardless of where they live in our province, and we do have to be able to pay for that. Partially because of that situation I know I was able to earn my degrees and my master's in small degrees, like some of you, in education and nonprofit and business and now politics, and I'll be eternally grateful for that. But that's not the important thing. The thing is that hundreds of thousands of Albertans have different versions of this sort of story.

I think, Mr. Chair, it's a good place to point out that due to the importance of the innovation and enterprise aspects of higher education and how these components come together to align with Alberta's entrepreneurial spirit and goals, previous governments have typically linked them as part and parcel of the Advanced Education portfolio. It has come to my attention that, you know, this business plan is only two and a half pages long, and I wonder why that would be.

In any case, to forge our way to a brighter future, if that's possible, it's worth pointing out that our government had a strong, successful focus on building a first-rate, integrated postsecondary set of institutions, really, a system that was designed to engage Albertans in learning and entrepreneurship with the ultimate goal of building a resilient economy and a thriving society and an incredible quality of life. I truly hope that's going to continue in the future. In the past the ministry had a strong emphasis on fostering excellence in research and innovation, commercialization by attracting research funding – and previous speakers have referred to this – and talent, and enabling the system to evolve and create strategic partnerships and encourage new investment. Mr. Chair, I trust that this will continue as we move forward.

Not only that, but Alberta's postsecondary institutions were intimately tied to the health and life sciences sectors, and it provided the people, knowledge, and connections that underpin our health care and social service systems through great nursing and medical

schools. I was proud to have a little hand in things that happened with the U of C and the U of A and MRU and MacEwan University.

People sometimes refer to our Alberta heritage fund and decades of subsequent investments. We built research capacity that's really been world leading in child health and cancer and heart health and neurological research through institutions like the Hotchkiss Brain Institute – I'll never forget that day – and at the Stollery and at the Alberta Children's hospital and the south Calgary hospital. If you haven't been there, folks, you should visit it. It's absolutely amazing. It's dependent on our researchers and educators and students from across Alberta's postsecondary institutes, not just the places in which those buildings reside.

Additionally, Mr. Chair, it's worth noting Campus Alberta, which was created to be a significant initiative so that there would be seamless education for mobile and remote citizens because it's a vast province. It also encourages lifelong learning, and we all know the importance of that.

Maybe you've heard, as I have, for a long, long time about how proud Albertans are of the fact that excellence in learning has been awarded through the Alberta scholarship program, which, by the way, has traditionally been the envy of the rest of the country. In fact, in 2013-14 alone – are you aware? – over 37,000 Alberta learners received over \$72 million in scholarships, which helped them get the learning opportunities and gave learners an incentive to excel.

10:20

Now, Advanced Education has long been committed to ensuring that all Albertans have equitable access to advanced learning opportunities. How? By providing funding for nonprofit or not-for-profit organizations and projects. This isn't just about big business, believe me; it's about big, medium, and small. It's helped to provide funding for the engagement of women and youth and aboriginal people in apprenticeship and trade-related opportunities.

As the current skilled trades workforce increasingly reaches retirement, I think it's worth noting something that doesn't necessarily catch everyone's attention. The ministry and industry need to work proactively together to ensure that there are enough apprenticeship opportunities available for Albertans in the future. In the past we've encouraged institutions to become more competitive – that's not a dirty word – in attracting sponsored research in not just natural resources but life and agricultural sciences and biotechnology and in collaborating with the venture capital industry and entrepreneurs and international partners to establish research infrastructure.

We can think of some great examples like the Li Ka Shing Institute of Virology. Additionally, to their credit, Alberta's research institutions and universities, their students, really, and their staff, have commercialized research through dozens of spinoff companies, start-ups, and partnerships.

I think we can all agree that some great things have happened in the past. Mr. Chair, that leads us to the present and the future.

The Chair: I was hoping you'd come to that.

Mr. Rodney: Absolutely. It's very, very important that if we are going to have a present or future that is as good or better than before, we need to know what happened. I thank you for allowing me to get that on the record.

Madam Minister, Alberta's postsecondary participation rate is the subject of hot discussion a lot of times. But let's face it. It's remained pretty stable for about two decades. In fact, our postsecondary participation rate at the advanced education level tended to run slightly lower than the Canadian average. I know that

we got beat up big time on that. What's one of the reasons? In large part because of a strong labour market. I'm not sure that's a bad thing. I think that's a good thing.

In any case, we have a very significant change going on right now in our labour force. We're going to see students staying longer, we're going to see them return to postsecondary institutions to upgrade their skills, and they are going to enter the system at a higher rate after graduating from high school. All the signs are there. How will your government adapt, specifically, with the system to provide greater access for Albertans as the economy shifts? Minister, where exactly in this budget, in what budget line, do we see support of that goal?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much for the comments, hon. member. Just to talk specifically about participation in postsecondary, Alberta is at about 18 per cent, which is, you know, the bottom of all involvement across the provinces. The average across Canada is at about 24 per cent, with Quebec being the highest at 28 per cent. Certainly, that's something as a government that we're very concerned about, and we want to increase enrolment.

Certainly, our commitment to postsecondary education is by putting \$133 million back in. Freezing tuition is a strong commitment to show that we're supporting stable postsecondary education. Despite what the member said, postsecondary education has been experiencing some pretty challenging times, many cuts in the last few years, and I know that there's a collective sigh of relief now that we've reinvested \$133 million. So it is budget line 2.2, to give you the specific number.

We've shown a real commitment to postsecondary. Our commitment is to have the spaces and to encourage students to go by making tuition affordable, making that valuable for families so that it's not so challenging for them to send their children to school. We're making it easier for young people to get the training and education that they need. You know, I'm confident that our enrolment will be increasing.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Minister.

I'm glad that you mentioned, you know, not only access and dollars but spaces because that's what it really is about.

Minister, I promise that I'm not going to turn this into a Calgary-Edmonton rivalry, but I will be cheering for the Stampeders this weekend.

I do want to point out something important, though. It's important for the entire province to know that the enrolment demand at the U of C is increasing by 57.3 per cent of all new provincial postsecondary demand, so the entire province – I see the minister nodding. I'm guessing she's aware of this already. Some suggest that, therefore, the U of C should receive 57.3 per cent of your budget, but I'm not going to suggest that. I will say, however – and, again, these numbers are pretty staggering – that at the U of C the university received almost three applicants for every undergraduate student enrolled and almost four applicants for every graduate student enrolled. That means it has the highest turnaway rate going, and we all know that's a problem.

Now, Alberta Advanced Ed numbers indicate that by 2022-23, so in the next seven or so years, there will be a shortage of 4,600 spaces at the U of C. The U of C has solutions, and I'm hoping the minister is aware of them and actually has a plan with respect to them. They've got four top infrastructure priorities. They're coming forward saying: hey, we can help solve this problem of being 4,600 spaces short. You know, that's not just going to meet enrolment demand, but it'll support research activities and attract and retain high-calibre faculty. Because if we're not growing, we're dying.

Minister, I'm guessing you're aware of the life and environmental sciences research centre, with 361 spaces, the Haskayne School of Business advanced learning centre, with 650 spaces, the MacKimmie complex and professional faculties, with 500 spaces, and the Science A building redevelopment, with 625 spaces, each of which are ready to go. Some are retrofits, as a matter of fact. This can all be done quickly. Minister, with great respect, can you please tell me and can you please tell the families and the students: with this being a fix of half of the problem already, will you be funding these, and if so, where can we find it in your budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say that our government has increased funding and committed to stable operating funding levels for the postsecondary system for the next two years while we conduct a review of the entire adult learning system, and \$28 million in funding was restored to the budget for apprentice seats and a targeted enrolment expansion initiative, which provides special funding to help address capacity issues in high-demand and collaborative programs. In Calgary this program has helped fund the expansion of engineering spaces, as an example.

I want you to know that I've had the opportunity to meet with President Cannon and the board of governors, with President Cannon on more than one occasion, and I'm very familiar with their concerns about the demand for spaces at the University of Calgary. I just last week was there on a tour, and they did show me the MacKimmie block there and some challenges they're experiencing. We went to a floor – obviously, that building isn't operational now, and if it was operational, then that would increase the opportunity.

Mr. Rodney: Right. So the question directly is: of these four, which are you funding, when, and what line is it in the budget? This is an answer to half of the problem. They have the answer. Are you funding it, and if so, where's the number?

Ms Sigurdson: Right now we're very excited about the Schulich centre of engineering. That's a big project that's going on right now, and we are funding that. We're aware of the capital projects, the four that you spoke of that the University of Calgary has brought forward, and we'll be looking at that in the capital plan for the 2016 budget.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you.

So that would be an answer, but let's move on to the other half of the problem. If you add up these four, that's only half of the shortfall. What will your department do to solve the other half? We're looking at 4,600 spaces that are short in the next number of years. This is half of that. Where is the other half coming from?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said, we already have reinvested \$133 million this year in postsecondary education, and we are beginning an adult learning review.

Mr. Rodney: But let's talk spaces. Where are the spaces? They need 2,300 other spaces. Where are those going to come from? Do you think \$133 million is going to cover that?

Ms Sigurdson: We're in our adult learning review. We're working with all of the institutions to come up with a plan going forward.

Mr. Rodney: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: I know that the U of C right now just hired a hundred new professors. I know that they're feeling confident, and they appreciate the stable funding that has been given back.

10:30

Mr. Rodney: I appreciate that a hundred new profs have been hired, but we're talking about spaces and students and the space that they'll be in.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay.

Mr. Rodney: Let's move on to deferred maintenance at the U of C. You know that the number is closing in on half a billion dollars. It's one thing to have the bricks and mortar and the capital infrastructure, but it's another thing to operate them. So if they apply for CIP grants – sorry, there's \$10 million here. That'll be 50 years to fix up what they have now, and we know that there are going to be a whole lot of things that happen in the meantime.

Let's take this beyond U of C. Think about how many billions of dollars in deferred maintenance it would be. I know we have to limit it just to Advanced Education. What's the plan for that?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Of course, maintaining our institutions is important, and we'll work continuously with postsecondaries on their infrastructure and maintenance priorities. The budget includes a 20 per cent increase in funding for maintenance and renewal currently. Postsecondary institution buildings across the province are safe and in overall good condition. Facility condition reports rate 99 per cent of our postsecondary institutions as in fair to good condition. Certainly, we're continuing to work with postsecondaries regarding that. We realize that that is a concern.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah, and it is for a lot of really obvious reasons. Those who have toured the facilities know that they're everything from state-of-the-art condition to: oh, my goodness, we can't believe that people go here.

Ms Sigurdson: Could I give you a few more specifics on that one? I just got another . . .

Mr. Rodney: Sure. Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. The capital plan also includes \$547 million for capital maintenance and renewal. This, again, is a 20 per cent increase in the funding.

Mr. Rodney: Great. That would cover the U of C, but we have others to worry about.

Let's go on to the Maskwa house of learning. I know it was great to see you and so many others the other day, when our new president at the U of A was installed. It was a great ceremony. You know, he spoke about the Maskwa house of learning. Minister, I know everyone on that stage and in the audience and far beyond, to all borders of this province, really would like to know: how is this budget going to support replicating and adapting successes such as the U of A's aboriginal students services centre to other Campus Alberta institutions?

You know that I have the portfolios of both Aboriginal Relations and Advanced Education to look at, and this is both at the same time. So, really, it is two things. Maskwa house of learning: where's the funding for that? How are we taking best practices at the U of A to other institutions regarding aboriginal learning?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I was, as you said, at the installation of the new president of the University of Alberta, Dr. David Turpin, and I just want to congratulate him on that very important appointment.

I am familiar with the Maskwa centre, that the hon. member is speaking about. I have heard about this plan, and we are happy to

review the business plan when we receive it. We look forward to that, and we're happy to continue dialogue about that.

In terms of indigenous learning, the supports in general for indigenous people – and of course this is a vulnerable group, that we very much want to support to be able to engage in postsecondary and to, you know, overcome those barriers that may be in the way of that. Again, this is part of the adult learning review. A large part of that will be focusing on how we can support indigenous learners to be engaged in the postsecondary system.

Of course, as a government one of the first things we did was agree to fulfill the United Nations . . .

Mr. Rodney: Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Ms Sigurdson: That's right. UNDRIP. Yes.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah, that one and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. Rodney: And that's extremely laudable.

Minister, I don't mean to interrupt. We're going to run out of time this round, but maybe there are some staff, if they would – and this is not meant to be condescending at all. Are there specifics related to what you just said about what the hope is to do with our indigenous peoples? As you're very well aware, and with great respect, a lot of our indigenous learners require additional supports to thrive in an urban postsecondary environment. Given what you just said about UNDRIP and TRC and what was in the throne speech as well, what I'm looking for maybe in the next round is: in the estimates and business plans for universities to develop their competencies to support indigenous learners, what are the specifics? Again, it's about numbers, but it's also about people and a very important group of people.

I know we're out of time now, but perhaps we could continue in that vein afterwards, please. Thanks.

Ms Sigurdson: Are we out of time?

The Chair: Yes. There are only 15 seconds left.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah. Go on to the next. Thank you.

The Chair: Next on the rotation are the other parties represented and independents, and I don't think I see – no.

Okay. The next rotation is the government caucus.

Ms Sigurdson: May I ask a question?

The Chair: Yes. Sure.

Ms Sigurdson: May we have a break?

The Chair: Well, sure. Just, again, as I mentioned before, the clock will continue. If everybody is in agreement on taking a five-minute break today at this point, that will be okay.

Mr. Rodney: I'd like to register that I'm not in agreement, and I'd like to know if we're allowed to stop that clock. That indeed has been the precedent for the first week, and it never ever happened before. We worked right through. I think the people of Alberta deserve three hours, not three hours minus five minutes.

The Chair: In fact, I actually went and researched and spent a lot of hours reading, and I actually pulled every single *Hansard*. I can

tell you that all those meetings started on time, ended on time, and they had five-minute breaks.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah. Of course they did. I'm just saying that it breaks protocol, and I would vote against it. I know that I'd lose the vote, so let's do it your way.

Mr. Hunter: Chair, I think that we've had this argument before, and rather than wasting another five minutes on the argument, let's just have the break and then get on with the business.

The Chair: Okay. Actually, no. If we don't have an agreement that we can take the break . . .

Mr. Hunter: I would recommend we not have this because we know how it went last time.

The Chair: So it's okay to take a five-minute break and the clock continues? Thank you very much, then. Five minutes. We'll be back.

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

The Chair: Thanks, everyone. I'd like to call us back to order, please.

In the meantime I do believe that it was the government caucus's turn. The note says that it's Mr. Connolly first.

Mr. Connolly: Yeah.

The Chair: Thank you. Did you want to go back and forth with the minister, sir?

Mr. Connolly: Yes, please. Back and forth.

The Chair: Okay. The minister is okay with that?

Mr. Connolly: Back and forth? Is that all right with you?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's fine.

Mr. Connolly: Perfect.

The Chair: Please, go ahead.

Mr. Connolly: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister. Before I begin asking my questions, I would like to take a moment to point out that for the first time an undergraduate student will be asking questions to the Minister of Advanced Education in estimates. Thank you, Minister, for giving us this opportunity.

I have been able to consult with students from across the province to formulate these questions, and I cannot tell you how much students appreciate the way in which we are moving forward with our progressive platform.

To begin, I would like to ask a couple of questions about the University of Calgary as I am a Calgary MLA and I have about 1,500 students in my riding and just under 1,000 faculty and staff. According to your department's information the Calgary region, mainly the University of Calgary, predicts to have a shortage of student spaces in the coming years. When I was a student at the University of Ottawa, this was an enormous problem. The student union building at uOttawa was only built to deal with 25,000 students, and while I was studying, we had 40,000 students attending at the same time. The library was only built for 10,000 students, and there were days when there were literally fights for study spaces in the library. How do you intend to maintain access without enough spaces?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you for the question. I just want you to know that our government has increased funding and committed to stable operating funding levels for our postsecondary system over the next two years while we conduct a review of the entire adult learning system. Twenty-eight million dollars in funding was restored in the budget for apprenticeship seats and a targeted enrolment expansion initiative, which provides special funding to help address capacity issues in high-demand and collaborative programs. In Calgary this program has helped fund the expansion of engineering spaces. As an example, we're investing significantly in the Schulich centre. Across Campus Alberta nearly 9 out of every 10, 86 per cent, qualified applicants are offered admission to postsecondary institutions.

We're confident that across the system there is space available to accommodate increased enrolment. We recognize that in Calgary some institutions face enrolment pressures, which is why we work with all institutions to plan for the future and to address challenges on the horizon. Certainly, I'm well aware of some of the challenges facing the University of Calgary, but we're looking at the Campus Alberta system in general, and we need to make a plan that's going to be best for the whole region using Campus Alberta spaces. Again, this is something that we're really looking into and taking seriously.

Mr. Connolly: Perfect. Thank you.

Recently we heard controversies involving energy corporations and the University of Calgary. As announced yesterday, there'll be an investigation into the president's actions and whether there was any wrongdoing. As I'm sure you're aware, students are incredibly disappointed by the president's actions and are embarrassed by the entire situation as it has gained nation-wide coverage. Does your ministry have any regulatory powers to ensure that academic research remains unaffected by corporations?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, of course, academic integrity is the cornerstone of the postsecondary sector, and researchers must absolutely have their own say in the research that they do, and that's something that we stand by as a government. I'm very pleased that the board of governors of the University of Calgary quickly has taken action in this situation. Of course, the board of governors is an autonomous body, and they have hired an independent investigator to assess if there was a conflict of interest in this case and to make sure that academic integrity is preserved. So I look forward to hearing the outcome of that. You know, this is a serious issue, and we'll be monitoring it.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

Moving on, I didn't see any mention of funding to support students with mental health issues in the budget. Student groups like CAUS, Council of Alberta University Students, and ASEC, Alberta Students' Executive Council, are very concerned about this. It's a growing concern among students. Just this year I have personally had to help two of my best friends get to hospital because of suicidal thoughts and actions, both here in Edmonton and back in Ottawa. It's an epidemic that, if ignored, will only worsen. The majority of students can't afford to see a personal psychologist, and they rely on the resources supplied by postsecondary institutions, but many postsecondaries place a cap on how many times and how often you can see these professionals, and it can take months to even get a consultation. How is your ministry planning to support resources on campuses?

Ms Sigurdson: Of course, we believe that the mental health of our students is an important issue for both government and Albertans.

Currently over \$12 million in combined funding is being provided by Alberta Health and my ministry to enhance mental health related programs at campuses throughout the province. While some funding to institutions for these supports is ending in the next year, we're seeking ways to see how mental health on campus can be addressed long term.

Our government is pleased to participate with the postsecondary institutions and community partners in developing a postsecondary mental health and addiction framework. The University of Calgary is leading the framework's development, and the current mental health review, co-chaired by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View and the Member for Lesser Slave Lake, will present recommendations later this year on how our mental health and addictions system can better serve Albertans, including postsecondary institutions. We're looking forward to the review reports as they come out. Certainly, it's an area that we're very concerned about, and we look forward to making further plans when we have those reports.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

Who are you consulting with in this project?

Ms Sigurdson: In the mental health review?

Mr. Connolly: Yeah.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, the mental health review is a very broad consultation. All Albertans have been welcome to come to consultations, both in person and also online. You know, student groups are certainly welcome. I believe that for the mental health review the consultation process is complete now, but certainly it was a very robust, open process.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Thanks.

How do you intend to share consultation reports with Albertans, namely Alberta students and student unions?

Ms Sigurdson: Say that last part again?

Mr. Connolly: Sorry. How do you intend to share consultation reports with Albertans, namely Alberta students and student unions?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, they'll be made public, and since the U of C is leading this other one, the students are, you know, directly involved. Absolutely, we'll be meeting with them to hear more about them, and we're absolutely wanting to work collaboratively with these students so that we make sure we hear their voices.

10:50

Mr. Connolly: Great. What is your ministry doing to ensure that the voices of aboriginal students are heard and respected during this review?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the review of mental health, as I said, is being conducted by the members for Calgary-Mountain View and also Lesser Slave Lake. I don't have those details because, you know, I wasn't involved in that, but I know that it's very important for us to include the indigenous people. I can find that out for you and get back to you on that.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

I'm going to move on now. Market modifiers are one of the more complicated issues of Advanced Education that institutions are struggling to cope with. Last year 25 market modifier tuition

increases were approved by the previous government. Students were ecstatic when we repealed market modifiers as they often decrease access to postsecondary institutions, don't increase the quality of education in the slightest, and appear to be a cash grab to get around the tuition cap. Universities that participated in market modifiers did hold consultations with students, but the majority of these consultations were seen as – and I quote – a sham by many student unions. In some cases there were multiple increases, and when increases were cancelled, institutions who applied were compensated while those who didn't apply received no compensation. This was seen by some as rewarding bad behaviour. Why was this allowed?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to talk a little bit about market modifiers in general first. Certainly, they were a product of the previous government, and they're the ones who approved these increases. Our government did not agree with approving these market modifiers, and reversing those increases was one of the earliest things we did in Advanced Education. We want to ensure that students have access to both affordable and high-quality education. Given that these increases were cancelled shortly before the start of the school year, we chose to compensate institutions for the revenue shortfall they would have seen. It would have been irresponsible, actually, to create a situation where students could have had their programs adversely affected by sudden cuts or reduction in services. Moving forward, tuition and funding will both be discussed during our adult learning review. Because of just sort of the timelines, we did want to make sure that the stability and the access for students were assured, so we decided to cover the cost of those.

Mr. Connolly: Thank you.

How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair: Nine minutes.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

What role is your ministry doing to prevent this in the future?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, again, we very much want to have that discussion, when we're working with the adult learning review, with postsecondary institutions. We are concerned about having allowed that previously. It seemed, you know, that some institutions didn't use those at all and really tried to be respectful about just having tuition, but others did use it because they had a rationale that made sense in that some programs cost a bit more. But then there was just such volatility, and students were very vulnerable. We really need to talk with postsecondaries regarding those noninstructional fees and come up with a plan. Again, it's going to be in the adult learning review, to assess that.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

As you're aware, the students in our province are often struggling to survive on student aid alone. Many of us are forced to drop out of university because of insufficient funds or an unexpected expenditure. Thousands of our students have to work several minimum wage jobs on top of their studies just to make ends meet. Even after we graduate, it can be incredibly difficult for us to find work within six months to start paying off our student loans. My question is: how is the budget improving student aid so that our students are able to have the support they need to access educational opportunities?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Well, certainly, education and training are the single most important investment an individual can make, and

our government is committed to ensuring that this investment is accessible for both Albertans and their families. Our government assists students with learning and living costs while not saddling them with unrealistic and unmanageable debt. Alberta student aid programs have expanded to ensure that more students and their families have increased access and support for postsecondary education. These enhancements include doubling grants for low-income students, impacting over 7,500 vulnerable learners; making student loans and grants available to apprentices; and increasing student loan limits and living allowances to cover the real cost of tuition and living expenses. Also, through the upcoming review of the adult learning system we'll evaluate the student aid programming to ensure that our funding supports are responsive to the needs of Alberta students. So we've made a significant contribution this year.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

You just explained some of the specific enhancements to the programming. I was just wondering: what groups of students will be particularly assisted by this?

Ms Sigurdson: Low-income students, apprentices, and other vulnerable learners will be supported and students in general, certainly. Yeah, those would be the ones who would be most supported.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

How can we ensure that our funding supports are responsive to the needs of our students?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think we have to talk with the students, first of all, you know. Certainly, my connections with all of the student unions, across CAUS, across the province: that's how we do that. We need to be realistic about the cost of going to university or to a polytechnic like NAIT. That was one of the things that hadn't been done for some years; the cost of living, rent, food hadn't gone up. That's why we've reinvested quite a bit in student loans, so that it's realistic, so that students have the money that they need to do that, and just are working collaboratively with them and understanding, really, what students are facing in the market right now.

Mr. Connolly: Great. What were the actual changes to the student aid program?

Ms Sigurdson: The specific changes: \$34.6 million in funding was repurposed from the completion incentive grant, which I've spoken about earlier, to support new program improvements; \$7.7 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the maintenance grant, that is provided to eligible student loan borrowers, including single parents and married students with children; \$8.2 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the Alberta low-income grant, that is provided to low-income students in undergraduate certificate programs – in 2015-16 the grant amount provided to eligible student loan borrowers was doubled to provide more funding to low-income students in these programs – and \$0.5 million in additional funding has been repurposed to the Northern Alberta Development Council awards to develop a new award targeted to northern First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners. Student aid also provides grants for part-time students, grants for students with disabilities, and grants to students through the serving communities internship program at Volunteer Alberta. Those are some of the specifics.

Mr. Connolly: Thank you.

How much time do we have left, Chair?

The Chair: Four minutes.

Mr. Connolly: Great.

Minister, your ministry's business plan indicates the creation of a supportive, enhanced learning environment for adult students, apprentices, and postsecondary students. Ensuring a high-quality education for Albertans depends on more than just a professor in a classroom. Students need facilities that are well maintained and provide the best environment possible. What are you doing to ensure that our campuses are being looked after properly?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we know that we need to work with our stakeholders to review many aspects of our adult learning system so Albertans can be confident we have a system that works for them while being affordable and accessible. I've had an opportunity to get out and meet informally with some of our postsecondary partners over the last several months and begin conversations around this review. Details of the review are in development, and more information will be shared as the stages of the review roll out over the next few months. Everyone who is interested in adult learning will have a chance to participate. I'm very excited to move forward to create this plan, with all the stakeholders and the public in general, to support the adult learning system here in Alberta.

Mr. Connolly: Perfect. Thank you.

What do you take into consideration while spending taxpayer money on educational institution facilities?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think what's really important is that, especially when we are in an economic downturn, this is really a time for us to invest in public education, in our postsecondary system. We know that students having access to postsecondary is one of the best ways to diversify the economy because people can go in and get good jobs. Despite the downturn there are still a lot of businesses that are looking for well-trained, excellent employees that we need to graduate from our postsecondaries. We've obviously shown postsecondaries that they can have confidence in us as a government because we're committed, and we've shown it right away. We put \$133 million back into postsecondary. We're working with institutions and will continue over the next two years to create a plan for more stability going forward.

11:00

We want to be sensitive to the needs across the province. You know, I've certainly been up in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge and Fort McMurray. I've gone out to the Banff Centre for the Arts. There are particular needs in different areas, and we need to make sure that Albertans have access to postsecondary, to adult learning across the province regardless of where you live, and we're really excited to move forward with that and to make sure that everyone has a voice in that process and that we're supporting the needs in those particular communities.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

As you're aware, there is usually a stigma against women entering the sciences and sometimes postsecondaries in general. What is your ministry doing to enhance access to postsecondary specifically for women?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, there are some unique programs that we're continuing to support here in Alberta. One of them is for women in the trades – it's actually heavy equipment work – which is Women Building Futures. That's really had tremendous success in helping

many vulnerable women be able to get really great jobs, become apprentices, and be able to support their families in that area.

Certainly, in the postsecondary area we are investing in those kinds of high-demand professions like nursing, education, environmental sciences, engineering and technology, putting increased funds into those. There is targeted funding specifically in those programs and certainly supporting that there be a sort of gender balance in them and that women and girls are supported.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the time remaining, we will follow the same order as we have. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes, and the minister and the member may combine their speaking time for a maximum of 10 minutes.

Having said that, we turn to the opposition member. Go ahead.

Mr. Taylor: Yes. Thank you. If we could do back and forth for the 10 minutes, that would be great.

The Chair: Fantastic. Please go.

Mr. Taylor: I would like to actually defer my questions right off the bat here to . . .

Mr. Hanson: The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

Mr. Hanson: Just to clarify the last band of fluff questioning, I guess, actually over 60 per cent of the people in university, postsecondary, are women.

Anyway, that aside, I have a bit of a concern here. Just going through your very short business plan, we mentioned things, you know, some good words like “removes barriers,” “strong communities and a healthy environment,” review with stakeholders “to conduct a review of the adult learning system, including a review of the current funding and tuition models and financial support for learners.” “Accessible, affordable” is used quite a bit, “restoration of post-secondary education . . . funding”: all nice stuff.

Yet when you go into your grants and bursaries under section 4, a \$24 million cut over last year's actuals, \$23 million of that was grants and bursaries. Then you go over to student loans and disbursements, and you've increased that by \$183 million. Now, the member opposite talked about issues of mental health in postsecondary education and suicide and depression. I can tell you that it's not all about the education process. A lot of it is burdens of finances. How do you think this is going to help when you're increasing the debt on Alberta students by \$183 million in one year to a total of \$579 million in one year? How is that going to help with issues of mental health in postsecondary?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I said earlier, actually, that investment in postsecondary education is one of the best investments anybody can make. We know that 90 per cent of . . .

Mr. Hanson: So why are we cutting bursaries, then, and increasing the debt on students?

Ms Sigurdson: We have repurposed some money up front because we heard from students, other stakeholders, that students need that money to get into school. They don't need it after they've completed.

Mr. Hanson: But why cut bursaries? Why not make it easier? If you were doling out \$75 million, just about \$76 million last year, now only \$52 million this year, why couldn't you just make that more accessible rather than a loan that's going to hang over the

student's head when they get out and can't find a job in this economic climate?

Ms Sigurdson: We know that 90 per cent of students do repay their student loans, so that's a significant positive response.

Mr. Hanson: Then it takes a long, long time.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as a person with a student loan, having, you know, gotten three degrees over the years, I paid off my student loan over time, yes, by the family also, so I appreciate that, but it was a great investment for me, as it is for many students.

The grant that they didn't get, the students before, was at the end, so we've put money up front, and I think that that's very helpful, and that's what students asked for.

Mr. Hanson: Well, yeah, and I understand that, but why wouldn't you just make the free money more accessible up front?

Anyway, if you have three degrees, you might be able to help me on the next question, then, because I think this is my fifth of these estimate debates, and I always ask the same question. Back as late as late September Joe Ceci was quoted in an interview as saying that all the ministries would be held to a zero per cent increase other than Education and Health, which would be held to 2 per cent. Now, this is my fifth estimate debate, and your department is increased by 4.7 per cent. At what point did your ministry and other ministries decide to ignore Mr. Ceci's promise to Albertans to hold all these ministry budgets to a zero per cent increase?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, there were four specific ministries, you know, in the spring session in interim supply that did receive increases, and Advanced Education was one of them. We ran on a platform of commitment to advanced education, so right away we did put \$133 million back into advanced education. This was one of the ministries that we saw as being very important, and Albertans wanted that.

Mr. Hanson: So why would the Finance minister state to the papers and to Albertans in September that he was going to hold ministries to zero per cent if he knew full well that every ministry was blowing that right out of the water, one of them at a 43 per cent increase?

Ms Sigurdson: I think the important thing here is that we are fulfilling our commitment in the election, and we right away moved quickly to do that, and we're very proud to do that. Certainly, as the Minister of Advanced Education I know that students, the postsecondary sector, and Albertans in general are very pleased.

Mr. Hanson: No answer. Okay. Thank you very much. I thought you'd be able to help me out with that one.

You can go ahead.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you. You were just talking about market modifiers, and you make it sound like market modifiers were a bad thing. Alberta taxpayers really need to know some information on this.

The Chair: Can I call everyone to order on this? I'm sorry. I understand that everyone here has, but if I could ask every member here at the table to please be respectful. The member is asking questions. I would like to hear those, and there's chatter coming from all sides of this room, all corners of this room, and I'm not having a very easy time following the questions. Out of respect for ourselves and each other, please.

Thank you.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Anyway, you made it sound like market modifiers are a bad thing. Alberta taxpayers really need to know this. With market modifiers what it does is that it gives you the same cost for the program basically right across Canada. That's what a market modifier does. That's what its intended purpose is. When you have one and you don't have market modifiers in place, it becomes quite a bit lower and lower and lower, to a certain point. What would happen in the future is that you could be getting and will likely be getting people from B.C., Ontario, Nova Scotia coming to our province to be able to take these programs and then leaving after they've completed the program. How do you look at that and make it so it's responsible? How can you ensure that students that are taking programs here in Alberta that came from other provinces don't return and put the burden of taxes on Alberta taxpayers?

11:10

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Certainly, I just want to explain. Market modifiers are typically instituted to allow an increase in tuition based on comparison of similar programs at other schools, demand for the program, and employment prospects of graduates of the program. The challenge with market modifiers is that it did sometimes put students in a vulnerable position because they would change each year, and it was beyond the regular tuition, so it was hard for them to access education because of that. By our reinvestment into postsecondary now, that creates stability for the institutions, and freezing tuition gave access for students more easily. I think that we could ask the institutions to suspend market modifiers to ensure that students had access and that they had the resources they needed to create stable funding, so we went ahead and did that.

Right now in Alberta we're sort of middle of the pack in terms of tuition, and we'd like to make it accessible, for sure, for students, but we have sort of a middle of the range compared to other provinces.

Mr. Taylor: That's tuition. That's market modifiers. But what are you doing to ensure that these students stay in Alberta after they're finished?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think, absolutely, by freezing tuition and showing them that we're committed to postsecondary institutions. Then, you know, that's great. They stay in Alberta. We're experiencing an economic downturn, absolutely. The price of oil has gone down, and that has caused some challenges, absolutely, in our economy, but there's still demand in many sectors for workers, and there are still opportunities here in Alberta.

Mr. Taylor: But you're putting a burden on the Alberta taxpayers by putting in market modifiers, and you haven't told me how you're ensuring that these students are going to stay in Alberta after they've finished their program. That hasn't explained any of that. Those are nice things that you're saying, but you haven't . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Well, there's still demand in the labour force for workers. If that's what you're thinking, that there are no jobs, there are jobs. There are lots of jobs.

Mr. Taylor: No, I'm not talking about that. There are jobs in Ontario.

The Chair: Can I ask you to please direct the conversations to me, to the chair. Thank you.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chair.

The Chair: I just want to make sure that we can have a very cordial dialogue and still get the answers to your questions, sir.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Chair, I'm just still wondering about the answer.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Taylor: How are you going to ensure this, and, Minister, how are you going to protect Alberta's taxpayers and the money that they're paying out because they have market modifiers in place?

Ms Sigurdson: I'm not quite sure I understand the question, actually.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. The average . . .

The Chair: We've run out of time.

Next in the rotation is the third party. Would you care to go, sir?

Mr. Rodney: Yes, please. Thank you.

The Chair: Would you be going back and forth, or would you prefer to do half and half?

Mr. Rodney: Back and forth, please.

Minister, I'm sure you well remember my last question about indigenous learners. I won't repeat the entirety of the question, but you know the theme of it was: what exactly is in the estimates and business plan for universities to develop or strengthen their competencies to support indigenous learners? Minister, with great respect, I'm asking for specifics. These are not just files; these are people.

If you want to, I'd be happy to accept the answer in writing, but again a while back I asked for those answers to be ready.

Ms Sigurdson: No. It's fine. I can respond to you.

Mr. Rodney: Go ahead. Please and thanks.

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. Obviously, there's a recognized need for more targeted financial supports for indigenous learners. Our government currently offers a variety of financial supports for indigenous students. Student Aid has been working with the Northern Alberta Development Council to create a new award for indigenous students. Advanced Education also provides funding to the northeast Alberta apprenticeship initiative, which focuses on indigenous apprentice recruitment, placement, and retention and ongoing support systems to encourage training and completion of apprenticeship programs. So we do have some specific programs that are there.

We do have grants and bursaries for indigenous learners. I mean, I could give you . . .

Mr. Rodney: That's okay, Minister. All I know is that we're all aware that it would be so much better not just for the province but for the people that we're talking about if barriers continue to be broken down. I have given you the example of the Maskwa house of learning, but I was also asking related to the U of A more because they've got quite a set of protocols that are helpful. Just keep that in your bank for later.

Let's move on to Athabasca University, again, in a similar line, though. How does this particular budget recognize Athabasca? It's a unique place, isn't it? In fact, you could say: space on the Internet. It has a unique role, and it also has unique needs in terms of its being a key learning institute, including for not just the area in the province but for Canada's FNMI communities, and, secondly, as a university that depends on online learning

infrastructure because it doesn't fit traditional bricks-and-mortar funding models. Where in the budget do we see Athabasca's unique role and needs met?

Ms Sigurdson: It's in 2.2. That's where the funding is. Certainly, I recognize it. I've met with the president of Athabasca University and the board chair, and they do have a very unique model, a distance learning model. Right now they are putting together a report and a plan for going forward. For some of the reasons that you mentioned, because their particular way of delivering is not bricks and mortar, is more distance learning, sort of virtual classrooms, the board is actually working very diligently right now on a plan going forward. We're happy to work with them, and my ministry staff have already been working with them to make sure that they're sustainable over time.

Mr. Rodney: I know that this does take time, so I'm glad to hear that more discussions are taking place. But in future question periods and future budgets I'm hoping we're actually going to get results, not just ideas.

Let's move on to the business plan. Here's a short question for you, Minister. You might like that. How will this Advanced Education business plan co-ordinate with small-scale research and experimentation in Alberta's innovation system; in particular, Alberta ingenuity grants for employers to hire new graduates?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we already have some wonderful connections with different businesses. Siemens has a connection with NAIT for very highly trained technical experts. Engineering at the U of A, also GE . . .

Mr. Rodney: I was asking about small-scale research, and those are big companies.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I just like to talk about these because they're great . . .

Mr. Rodney: Well, you know what? This is actually my time to ask.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it's our time.
So small scale?

Mr. Rodney: Yes, please.

Ms Sigurdson: Do you want to give me a measure?

Mr. Rodney: Well, let's face it. Siemens is not a small-scale company. We know about those, and those are great. If we really want to help big, medium, and small – and we don't have to divide into Wildrose, PC, and NDP on it; this is far beyond any politics – I'm just wondering: what are the plans for small-scale research and experimentation in Alberta's innovation system, specifically having to do with Alberta ingenuity grants for new graduates?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, the Innovates piece of this ministry went over to our new Economic Development and Trade ministry. There were three Innovates in innovation and advanced ed previously. They continue to support researchers, new grads. Those processes are still all in place, so those programs still exist.

Mr. Rodney: That's fair except for one thing. I've heard so many people say that to separate the two is to just – they use harsh words. I'm not going to use them. The nicest one I can come up with is "nonsensical." I just hope that, whether it's at your level with the

other minister or department officials, there is an incredible collaboration.

Let's move on to the next one. On which budget line item or business plan bullet even does the plan demonstrate a commitment to training health, social science, education, science, and many other nontrades professions? We talk about diversification all the time, but those kinds of things are going to be required to support Alberta's seniors and patients and students. Where do we find that in the budget or the business plan?

11:20

Ms Sigurdson: Well, 2.2, again, is where you'll find that. The programs that you've identified are the targeted enrolment programs because there's a high demand for education, environmental sciences, nursing, engineering, and technology, so we have targeted funding for that within that 2.2.

Mr. Rodney: Again, we've seen that the business plan is two and a half pages long – I'm not criticizing you; I know you had a short time to deal with this – but I'm hearing that just about everything is in 2.2. All I'm saying, again, with great respect, Minister, is that we just need more specifics.

Let's move on to the next question. What is the vision, whether it's you or the Premier, the government, of a desired demographic composition of Alberta universities? We're talking about students and educators and support staff and boards of governors and senates because the quotation from your business plan is that they need to be reflective of Alberta's diverse population. Are there going to be quotas, or how will you make that happen?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think you're asking a lot of things there.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah, I am.

Ms Sigurdson: It's a very important question. Certainly, we are wanting to work with the postsecondary sector, the whole adult learning system. We're going to have this adult learning review over the next two years to flesh out how we're going to move forward in those plans. Certainly, right now also we're doing a review of the agencies, boards, and commissions, and one of those important elements of that is just recognizing diversity. Are boards reflective of the population of Alberta in terms of gender?

Mr. Rodney: Minister, how do you make that happen without quotas?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're doing a review right now of agencies, boards, and commissions. You can do a gender analysis. You can do an analysis of ethnicities.

Mr. Rodney: What if, whether it's students, educators, support staff, boards of governors, or senates, they are not reflective of Alberta's diverse population? What happens to those universities?

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, we are investing in student aid. We're investing in postsecondary. We're investing in apprenticeship programs. We're doing all these things to create more access so that the barriers are alleviated.

Mr. Rodney: Okay. But that really doesn't have anything to do with the question. I'll give you an example. Let's say that the U of A on their senate has absolutely nothing but white people or black people or aboriginal people or whatever. If you're saying that they're supposed to be reflective of Alberta's diverse population, how is that going to happen, and if it doesn't happen, what happens?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I did speak to you previously about the ABCs, the review of the agencies, boards, and commissions. We can do analysis of who is on that board and, in terms of the appointments that come forward, be assessing for those kinds of variables of diversity which you're speaking of.

Mr. Rodney: You know, it's a great idea. Nobody is going to argue that. It's a simple question: how do you make it happen, and if it doesn't happen, what happens to those different groups?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think it's pretty clear. You do the assessment, you see where you're lacking, and as appointments come forward, you move more towards your goal of really being representative of the population.

Mr. Rodney: Is there a letter from the minister saying, "Hey, you have too many oriental students" or "Hey, you don't have enough, you know, people of this ethnic background on support staff or boards of governors or senates"? I guess what I'm saying is that it's a nice idea. I think Albertans have a right to know how you make it happen because people will gain or lose places as a result of this, and this affects their life.

Let's move on to page 11.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it's managed over time. It doesn't happen on a dime.

The Chair: Time is up, unfortunately. Thank you.

Seeing no members from the fourth party here, I believe, then we turn to the government caucus. Mr. Carson.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Did you want to go back and forth with the minister, sir?

Mr. Carson: Yes, of course. For sure.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Chair, Minister, and, of course, all of your staff for joining us today to discuss some of the important work taking place within Advanced Education. This happens to be one of the most important concerns of my constituents and their families concerning the quality and, of course, the cost of postsecondary education. I know this government does recognize the positive impact education can have on a person's life and also on the economy. I'm encouraged by the direction your ministry has gone in so far, and I look forward to some more things coming forward in the future.

Now, I've got to be honest. A lot of my questions have been answered here, but I would like to discuss the idea of distance learning. It's something that I've considered for myself in the past and possibly in the future. I think it, you know, gives people more options in terms of being able to work while going to school still. One of my questions is just: how are you going to improve access for people taking distance learning programs?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, this sort of brings us back to Athabasca University a bit because, certainly, that is the university in Alberta that does provide distance learning. We're very proud to be able to offer that program, and we certainly want to make sure that that program is sustainable. Right now they are doing a review of their programming, and one of the concerns that is sometimes presented is, "Oh, it won't stay in Athabasca," but we want to make

sure that we're going to do our best to have an in-Athabasca solution.

We also have Campus Alberta institutions that offer distance learning in lots of different places. Athabasca is in the lead regarding that, but some institutions have hybrid courses so that maybe you only attend once a month, actually, in person in the classroom. So there's a lot of diversity. I think that really respecting the student needs is very prevalent in our universities. I know that I myself have taught a block course at university where master's students in social work would come, and they'd be there for just one week. They work full-time otherwise, but they would take one week off and then do things online. This kind of programming kept them in the workforce and able to still stay with their families or only be away for that one five-day period a month and then helped them get advanced degrees. I know there are many programs like that out there, so I think there's a tremendous amount of opportunity for students that way. There are actually 900 online courses and 70 programs through eCampus here in Alberta, so there is a tremendous offering already.

Mr. Carson: Wonderful. Well, I do look forward to that, and I have seen a lot of the programs. I've looked at them in the past.

I'm just wondering how you think this affects rural communities. I'm assuming, obviously, in a positive way. Do you think there's room to grow this industry or just the idea of distance learning?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, as I've toured the province, we know that colleges and universities in maybe not the major two centres are very passionate about keeping the learners in their communities because they know that if they keep the learners in their communities, then they often stay in their communities whereas if they go to Edmonton or go to Calgary, then they're likely not to come home. I'm sort of a product of that. I grew up in Valleyview, a small town in the Peace River country. When I was 18, I came to school here at the U of A, and I never went home, only to visit. So, I mean, I appreciate that. Really, a concern in rural Alberta is just sort of that drain of their young people into the centres.

I just want you to know that 11 of Alberta's public colleges are given a leadership role with regard to adult learning, with 10 defined stewardship regions across the province. This role includes collaborating with the partners to assess and respond to learning and training needs. More than 130 nonprofit organizations are also funded through the ministry's community adult learning program. These will be supporting people who are foundational learners. They need some support so that they can perhaps go on to a college or a polytechnic and ultimately perhaps a university. We fund all of those programs. They range from programs such as literacy, English language training, employability, and community capacity building for adults in more than 430 communities.

Alberta's model for providing access to learning is one of the subjects being considered in this fall's adult learning review, and all stakeholders across the province will have an opportunity to provide ideas and feedback regarding this. Certainly, it's an important concern for us as a government, that we want to make education accessible in rural Alberta.

Mr. Carson: Wonderful. I think that's great, that point about going back to your community. I love the idea of, you know, doing courses through Athabasca or whatever distance learning and actually taking that, whether it be business experience, and applying it to your community, especially in a rural sense. That's wonderful.

My next question is on page 12 of the business plan. Line 1(c) says that the percentage of Albertans age 18 to 34 participating in postsecondary education by 2017-2018 will be 19 per cent. Now, that's an increase of 2 per cent higher than the previous government's estimates. I'm just wondering how you plan to achieve that number.

11:30

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said earlier, that's sort of one of the sad things about our postsecondary education system. We do have the lowest enrolment in Canada, and it's something that we'd like to change very much. By our coming out boldly and showing our commitment by putting \$133 million back into postsecondary education as one of the first things we did as a new government, I think that really creates stability in the sector. The freezing of tuition helps students know that, you know, we're committed to making it accessible and affordable for them.

The Canadian average, actually, is 24 per cent, so even in reaching this target, we will be under that. But certainly what I'm hearing from institutions across the province is that students are very grateful for the tuition freeze, the stability in education, and are going back to school at this time to, you know, upgrade their skills, really developing themselves so that they can go complete whatever training or education they need and get good jobs in the future. I'm confident, because of our government's commitment to stability and then the affordability, those two things supporting the postsecondary, supporting students, that we'll have an increase in enrolment.

Mr. Carson: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

Next question. Continuing the conversation on supporting students, I'm just wondering how our budget specifically plans on helping aboriginals. I have two specific places in my riding. Trade Winds is something that takes place in my community from the Pipe Trades College. As well, Yellowhead Tribal College is in my community. I'm just wondering how they might see some support from our government in this budget.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'll just identify that Student Aid has been working with the Northern Alberta Development Council to create a new award for indigenous students who commit to returning to live and work in northern Alberta communities. This additional \$0.5 million for the new award doubles the total funding for these awards to \$1 million, so there is some significant support there. Advanced Education also provides funding to the northeast Alberta apprenticeship initiative, which focuses on indigenous apprenticeship recruitment, placement, and retention and ongoing support systems to encourage training and completion of apprenticeship programs. Those are two significant initiatives.

Mr. Carson: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

Chair, how much longer do I have?

The Chair: A minute and a half.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Wonderful.

Now, you discussed a review. I believe it was the adult learning system.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's it.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Wonderful. I'm just looking for a bit more in specifics on that in terms of what you're looking at adjusting or changing.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Well, I mean, it's really a collective review of the system, including all our stakeholders: the postsecondary

education system, the Campus Alberta folks, the adult learning system, that are doing more of the foundational learning, the public in general, students. It's really a comprehensive audit of the system, that hasn't been done in over a decade. We're really wanting to take time. We've given stability to the sector right now by creating that two-year window, by assuring postsecondary institutions that they will have stable funding during that period of time and ensuring students that tuition is not going to go up, that what they need to pay to go to whatever postsecondary they want to will not change. We've created, I think, a little bit of a window for ourselves to really look very deeply at the system and engage with all our partners to develop a new system going forward, one that we can agree on together. That's more detail, but we're not sure . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You've run out of time, unfortunately.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you.

The Chair: We continue with the rotation, sir.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you, Mr. Chair, I'll start asking my questions.

The Chair: Back and forth?

Mr. Taylor: Back and forth. Yes, please.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Taylor: To the minister. You just recently said here that Quebec highly subsidizes postsecondary institutions, by 24 per cent, and Alberta is at 18 per cent. Are you planning on highly subsidizing postsecondary institutions to increase to what Quebec gets?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just wanted to clarify. What I said was right now 18 per cent enrolment in Alberta, 24 per cent across Canada, and 28 per cent in Quebec. Quebec is the high roller. I just was showing you the range.

Mr. Taylor: Is your plan, then, to go up to 28 per cent?

Ms Sigurdson: Nineteen per cent is what we have in our targets here.

Mr. Taylor: That's your future target?

Ms Sigurdson: That's our target in our business plan.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. The next kind of question. I just want to go back because it was brought up a couple of times. It's Athabasca University. How much are you planning on helping them out? Like, you said in line 2.2 that you're planning on helping them, but I don't see any detail on that.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, there is a process right now. Right now they do receive \$40 million in operating grants from us, and as I've said, the president and the board of directors are working to develop a plan that will show that they can be sustainable and financially stable. You know, certainly, we've supported them to look at an Athabasca solution, and the ministry staff have been working with them. We're waiting to hear back from them regarding that work that they're doing. We certainly want to help them move forward and continue to be viable.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

I understand that MacEwan University has been trying to move from the BASI system over to the CARI system. Is there a plan in the works to help them accomplish this? The baccalaureate is what I meant.

Ms Sigurdson: I've certainly heard from the president regarding this. That is, again, something that we will talk about in the adult learning review. You know, there are different desires from, certainly, people in the community. I've also heard about people wanting to become polytechnic universities like Red Deer College. There's a whole mix of things that we have to really look at collectively and see what's best for Alberta. Those are things that we'll be discussing in the upcoming adult learning review.

Mr. Taylor: But how will you accomplish this?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, through the adult learning review we'll have information from all of the stakeholders. We have that window that we've carved out for ourselves so that we can look at what's best for the system. Certainly, I look forward to hearing more details about this and how we can work . . .

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you, but how would that change their funding?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I guess I'm not going to prejudge all of that yet. We have to decide what we're going to do first before we talk about allocating funding.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Have you budgeted some finances to take care of this, and where would it come from? Pardon me; I've got to back up a little bit to make my question more appropriate. The Auditor General said that the department does not have adequate processes to oversee unique risks that postsecondary institutions take on when they generate revenue from for-profit and cost-recovery ventures. Have you budgeted finances to take care of this, and where would that money come from?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say that the government takes its commitment to accountability and transparency very seriously. It's committed to examining oversight processes to ensure that oversight communication and information sharing are strengthened to ensure minimal risk exposure and cost to Albertans. The department will develop and communicate to the postsecondary institutions guidelines and expectations on revenue-generating ventures, and the government will also review its existing oversight responsibilities, including risk management responsibilities of the boards of governors. We very much appreciate the Auditor General's advice to us and are following through with doing those specific things.

Mr. Taylor: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: Specifically, just for your information, it is part of the 2.1 line item.

Mr. Taylor: It's on 2.1. Okay. Thank you.

Through you again, Mr. Chair, Member Connolly touched on this. The minister and I have had previous conversations, and on a member's statement I've talked about the mental health funding, so we're going back to that again. It needs significant changes in how mental health funding is being done. Right now it's \$3.91 per ASEC student, but, say, for a student of the University of Lethbridge, who falls under the CARI model, it's \$146.94 per student. Now, I know that funding for mental health comes from the Ministry of Health, but would you please commit a promise to the students of Alberta

today that you will talk to the Minister of Health to discuss the discrepancies, because there are big discrepancies here, and discuss a plan going forward to help all Alberta students to get equal funding?

11:40

Ms Sigurdson: I just want you to know that we're committed to improving mental health supports for all Albertans and to bringing stability to a system that has been neglected for far too long. One of the first things we did when we took office was initiate a nonpartisan mental health review, which will present recommendations later this year on how to provide better mental health care for everyone in the province. I just want you to know that my ministry staff did submit a proposal to MLA Swann, who's the chair of the committee. Our government has already provided over \$12 million to enhance mental health related programs at campuses throughout Alberta, and our government is pleased to participate in the postsecondary mental health and addictions framework that the University of Calgary is leading. So there are activities we're doing and, obviously, a strong commitment from our government.

Mr. Taylor: So you're commencing talking to the Minister of Health?

Ms Sigurdson: I talk to the Minister of Health quite regularly. She's well aware of our concerns. We certainly all want a solution so that students are supported.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

Something I've heard time and again from school representatives is that attainable schools are important for our students here in Alberta. However, with no real restrictions on a tuition cap or on market modifiers in the education system for international students schools may be looking at a model that sees more international students come to the schools to make up funding shortfalls. This system that you've created without consultation from citizens and stakeholders is a risky move. It's mentioned in the business plan on page 11, second paragraph, under Strategic Context, that "the system has not been renewed in a decade and many significant changes have taken place with teaching and learning technology, learner and employer expectations and the economy" and that the ministry is going to have to conduct a review of the adult learning system. Yet the ministry has made very significant changes by freezing tuitions, market modifiers, and mandatory fees ahead of this review. Why did you decide to make such a significant change to the system during times of economic uncertainty without conducting your review first?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, first of all, I just want to say that in terms of who sets those fees, it really is institutions, and they're independent. It's institutional discretion. I think, as I'm sure, you know, the member would understand, that we are, first of all, providing places for Alberta students, Albertans who are contributing into the tax base, and we're wanting to make sure that they have spots, but of course we always want to attract bright minds to our province.

Mr. Taylor: Well, thank you. But you said, through you, Mr. Chair, that you need these people, these foreign students. The universities get to set what they want for tuitions, but you told them that you're going to freeze tuitions for the rest of Albertans. Where's the balance there?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said, you know, our priority is for Alberta students.

I just want to share with you kind of a special model that SAIT actually has. For each three international students that they have, that enrol in their school, they are able to fund one Albertan. That's a program that's working well for them, and it's a support to Alberta students.

Mr. Taylor: Well, thank you about that, but it doesn't really take in the capital costs that they have to have for the schools.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We are going to go into the next round of questions.

Mr. Rodney: Chair, I'll do the five minutes for our side and then five minutes for her. Then I will be sharing it with my colleague Richard Gotfried.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Mr. Rodney: Question 1, Minister, regarding the business plan. On page 11 it states, "The review will help ensure that the system is accessible, affordable and of the highest quality." Again, we can get written answers later. Why is there no indication of the details of any new indicators to be developed to reflect the goals that this review is supposed to accomplish? Because, of course, we're living in a society where people need to be shown, show me the number; show me the money or whatever it happens to be. We need to have science-based and evidence-based decision-making.

Question 2, regarding page 13. Through partnerships with industry, employer and employee organizations, technical training providers, and other governments you're going to work towards affordable and accessible apprenticeship. How will Advanced Ed specifically work with Alberta's knowledge-intensive businesses and services and nontrades employers? We are looking for specifics. Why are you increasing training in trades when there's a glut of vacant offices and housing and industrial capacity in our province and when trade workers are fleeing Alberta because of a lack of employment opportunities? How does that make sense? Then to what extent will science, technology, engineering, and medicine graduates as well as arts and science graduates – don't want to forget about those folks – be required to lower their expectations given the government's evident enthusiasm for trades?

Question 3 is having to do with page 13, priority initiative 2.2: "Support a pan-Canadian Apprenticeship Mobility Protocol." To what extent have these business plan objectives been informed and acknowledged by university boards of governors and senates as achievable, or is this from the top down? Was there consultation first, and if so, by whom, where, when, and when did Albertans, including students and employers, have input on this? This directly affects them. I've met with student groups on this. They're extremely concerned. Given the importance of relationships to the development of international relationships and trade, not to mention the personal effects in all sorts of ways, why is there no explicit link to internationalization in this department's business plan?

Over to my colleague for the remainder.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, I just wanted to ask a few more questions about the Alberta centennial education savings plan, the \$19 million showing in the budget. We've obviously heard that that program has been suspended. I guess my concerns on that are that any type of matching savings program or ways to encourage, particularly, again, low- to middle-income families to save is a positive thing towards the future of our next generation and the viability for their children to be able to consider postsecondary in one form or another. The intent of the program was, I think, well placed, and perhaps the execution was not as

strong as it could have been. It concerns me that we discontinue that program when, in fact, the problem wasn't the plan but perhaps the communication of that plan or even engagement of some other organizations such as Momentum in Calgary – and I'm sure there are other similar ones here in Edmonton – that are very skilled at working through programs like that, like the Owen Hart Foundation, in terms of matching savings programs and developing that with low-income people.

I also would say that even high-income earners, which was one of the reasons given for cancelling the program, can lose their jobs. We're seeing that now. They may be no-income earners now. Hence, any saving that they can do during better times that can be encouraged is not a bad thing either. I'd like your views on this program or similar programs and what your plans are going forward.

The Chair: You still have a minute, sir.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. We're just reading that one in, I guess. I was expecting a response, but that's fine.

The other thing that I'm concerned about or interested in is the minimum wage impact on students. We know and I've heard specifically from some of my constituents that they are employing students at minimum wage, and in some cases those positions will be eliminated by the shutting down of some of these small businesses. I'd also like your comments on the potential impact of the change of minimum wage on student employment and how that could negatively impact their ability to finance their education.

Minister, thank you.

The Chair: You still have 14 seconds.

Mr. Gotfried: Actually, those questions were intended to be . . .

Mr. Rodney: The minister has five minutes to answer any of the questions that I've asked.

Mr. Gotfried: We wanted to make sure we read those into the record.

The Chair: Now your five minutes are up.

Now, Minister, you will have five minutes to answer the questions that were posed to you uninterrupted.

Mr. Gotfried: And we would like those to be, for anything you don't get to, obviously, written responses if possible, please.

The Chair: That is understood, yes.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you.

11:50

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'll do my best to go through these specifically in the order that they were presented. The first question, I believe, was about new indicators for the adult learning system going forward. What further are we going to do to ensure that we have an excellent system here? I'm going to, again, speak about the adult learning review. This is a review that is a very significant, deep dive into our adult learning system in Alberta. It's the largest, most significant audit in about 10 years. We're really having a very robust discussion about adult learning here in Alberta, and we're going to be hearing from boards and presidents, faculty associations, students, the public in general, and support staff regarding what's the best way to move forward, making sure that we have really very high-quality, accessible, affordable postsecondary institutions here in Alberta. Those indicators will

come out of that adult learning review, and we'll be happy to present those at the time, after the completion of the review.

The next question: how does Alberta engage with industry? Certainly, we have the Alberta industry training board. We work closely with them, and we are listening to them. Of course, they are in industry. They know what their needs are out there, what the challenges are, so we work in partnership with them, and they guide the decisions that are made. We have certainly a very close connection with them to guide our work. There are also, I'm just advised, networks of locals, so in different parts of Alberta, depending on where you're from – the Peace River country or Fort McMurray or down in southeastern Alberta, central – there are local partners that we work with that inform decisions. Again, they'll be very involved in the adult learning review also.

I think the third question was about consultation with student groups. I understand that it's about the concern for the lack of mobility amongst the provinces sometimes for apprentices. Alberta does extraordinary work in terms of training apprentices, and even though we're at only 12 per cent of the population, we train 18 per cent of apprentices. We punch above our weight, I guess, in terms of that. We also have quite high standards, and I know that there has been ongoing work to try to make sure that we don't necessarily lower our standards, but how do we create those linkages so that workers can come into Alberta and go to other provinces? Certainly, there is ongoing work doing that, and that is quite a detailed process and something that we're working hard on.

Then the next question, I believe, is about lack of an international focus in our business plan. I just want to let everyone know that certainly the institutions themselves do a tremendous amount of work with the international community to make co-linkages, and there are many programs where students may go over and do a semester at another school or come here to Alberta. Certainly, even in my short time as minister, I've met with many ambassadors from other countries wanting to enhance programming in that regard, and we're in discussions about that all the time. I think it's very much alive but perhaps not a specific line item in the budget.

The next question is about ACES and just the concern that even though, perhaps, the program wasn't really supporting the targeted population it was meant to, which was low-income earners, to support . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Unfortunately, your time is up.

We turn now to the government caucus. You have four minutes and 55 seconds.

Mr. Connolly: Perfect. Thank you. I just want to begin by saying that I find it odd that simply because there are women in postsecondary, the opposition doesn't believe that increasing access for women in, specifically, the sciences is a good thing. I'm not saying that I'm particularly surprised by this; I'm just saying that I'm disappointed. It was only a few years ago, 1989 I believe, on December 6, that a number of women were killed by a man in Quebec because they were women in the sciences.

Moving on, we know that we are in tough economic times, and I am seeing this in my constituency. We are seeing the impacts of this tough reality every day. Can you please speak to how this budget supports jobs and families in Alberta?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, at a time when there's an economic downturn, it's a really excellent time for people to go back to university, to go back to colleges, to polytechnics to upgrade. We already know that that's happening. We've heard from many institutions that enrolment is up this year. It's a great time to develop themselves.

That creates diversity for them in terms of being able to work in perhaps a different industry than they could before because they didn't have that level of training. Alberta's postsecondary institutions have told us that they, you know, really need clear, sustainable funding so that they can continue to support students.

We're very excited to see so many students going back. It's true that the oil and gas sector is experiencing some challenges right now because of the global drop in the oil price, but other industries like the forestry industry, the agribusiness industry are still having a big demand. I've met with various industry leaders, and they've told me: we can't get those educated people. So here's an opportunity for people who may be out of the oil and gas sector now to go back and be able to expand their opportunities and then be able to be hired in those industries, which will create more diversity in our economy and then create more stability for the economy overall.

I was down in Lethbridge earlier this year, and they're really insulated from the plummet in the oil price right now because they have such a robust agribusiness area. You know, housing starts are still going ahead; employment is good. There are so many things that are going right. I mean, we need to create that model for the whole of Alberta so that we have a more diverse economy.

Mr. Connolly: Thank you.

What are you doing to ensure that Albertans are able to access postsecondary education during a time when many people may be out of work?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I've said, we did freeze tuition, of course, and market modifiers and have created much more support for student loans so that students can go back to school. We have increased the funding for Campus Alberta for the institutions so that they have stability and can provide those good programs for the students. This is about \$65 million over this year and next. These two actions together will save Alberta students and their families roughly \$65 million over this year and next, and those are real savings. Those are the tuition freezes and the market modifier ones.

In terms of student aid we've looked at the cost, you know, how much it costs to go to school, the price of renting nowadays, and also food has gone up. We've increased the accessibility to that funding for student loans so that they are able to make it and they can actually live on a student loan.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Why is government eliminating the Alberta centennial education savings plan – I believe you touched on this a little bit before – which gave money to parents to help jump-start RESP savings plans?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it is very much because it was meant to be created for, you know, low-income people to support their children, but only 17 per cent of those who did have it were low-income, so we just didn't feel it was fulfilling its purpose. It was actually a decision, I think a good decision, made by the previous government, and we are carrying through on it. Certainly, the ministry had done quite a bit of research regarding it to know who had benefited. As part of the adult learning review we want to look at how we can support low-income people to support their children to go to postsecondary. So that kind of information will come out of that.

12:00

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, Madam.

Mr. Rodney: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: What would you like to raise?

Mr. Rodney: I don't want to waste any committee member's time, but I have a question about protocols in this chamber.

The Chair: We have run out of time at this point.

Mr. Rodney: I understand that they're the same as in the Legislature: no live tweeting. Can you comment on that, please?

The Chair: I don't understand exactly what you're talking about.

Mr. Rodney: Okay. Well, I'm not going to refer to specifics because I won't go that low. A member of this committee minutes ago made reference to one word that I said in my comments, which was actually a positive thing. Even the minister said that it was a good question. It was taken completely out of context, and I am completely incensed at how it's taken out of context because it's the opposite of where my question was going.

The Chair: Okay. I will take that under advisement, and I will get back to you.

Mr. Rodney: I would like you to do that because, as we have been instructed by Mr. Speaker, there is no live transmission of any kind, including tweeting, and especially when somebody uses two words that were meant in a completely opposite way. I have many friends who are going to be very upset about this.

The Chair: Like I said, I will take it under advisement. Thank you.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you.

The Chair: I, again, must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded. I would also like to remind the minister that any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

This meeting completes our consideration of the 2015-2016 main estimates.

The meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12:01 p.m.]

