



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature  
Second Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Advanced Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 10, 2026  
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-2-3

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

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

Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC), Chair  
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP), Deputy Chair  
Deol, Jasvir, Edmonton-Meadows (NDP), \*Acting Deputy Chair

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Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)  
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\* substitution for Lorne Dach

**Also in Attendance**

Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP)  
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## **Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future**

### **Participants**

Ministry of Advanced Education

Hon. Myles McDougall, Minister

Jamie Curran, Assistant Deputy Minister, Skilled Trades and Partnerships

Craig Johnson, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services

Aaron Neumeyer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Program Planning and Student Aid



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Tuesday, March 10, 2026

[Mr. Wiebe in the chair]

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

**The Chair:** Well, good evening, everyone, and welcome to this meeting. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce your officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Ron Wiebe, and I'm the MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti and the chair of this committee. We will begin starting to my right.

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

**Mr. Bouchard:** Good evening, everyone. I'm Eric Bouchard, MLA for Calgary-Lougheed.

**The Chair:** Minister, if you could introduce.

**Mr. McDougall:** Sorry. Hello. Myles McDougall, Minister of Advanced Education. I'm here with my deputy minister, Shannon Marchand – we did have an earlier list of all people, so now I'm going to panic – Aaron Neumeyer, ADM for . . .

**Mr. Neumeyer:** Program planning and student aid.

**Mr. Curran:** Jamie Curran, assistant deputy minister for skilled trades and partnerships.

**Mr. Johnson:** Craig Johnson, assistant deputy minister, financial and business services, and senior financial officer for Advanced Education.

**Mr. McDougall:** And then other members at the back.

**Mr. Deol:** Good evening, everyone. Jasvir Deol, MLA for Edmonton-Meadows and, as I heard, deputy chair of the committee today.

**Mr. Eggen:** Deputy chair, indeed.

Good evening. My name is Dave Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

**Member Hoyle:** Good evening. My name is Rhiannon Hoyle, and I am the MLA for Edmonton-South.

**Member Ellingson:** Court Ellingson, MLA for Calgary-Foothills.

**The Chair:** I'd like to go back to Mr. Stephan for your introduction.

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

**The Chair:** Thank you.  
And Mr. van Dijken.

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

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Member Deol for Member Dach as deputy chair.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn your cameras on while speaking and mute your microphones when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of this meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for considerations of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotations, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? We will continue with the break.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphones in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commencing. Pages are available to deliver notes or other material between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run. Any written material provided in response to a question raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the question and the answer without interruption during estimate debates. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now like to invite the Minister of Advanced Education to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening to everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. As elected officials we understand the importance of aligning public investment with outcomes that matter to Albertans. Budget 2026 is focused on what matters, and advanced education is a central part of that focus. Today we would like to outline how Budget '26 delivers targeted, measurable investments in advanced education, investments that support students, strengthen institutions, and build the skilled workforce Alberta needs in every region of the province.

Advanced Education's Budget '26 is focused on growing a highly skilled workforce that drives economic growth, supports public services, and strengthens communities across Alberta. Postsecondary institutions are among Alberta's most important provincial assets. They train health care professionals, educators, skilled tradespeople, engineers, technologists, and agriculture specialists, people whose work directly affects the quality of life in every constituency. The core responsibility of my ministry is also to ensure postsecondary education supports research and innovation that benefits our communities and contributes to a strong, diversified economy.

In '26-27 Alberta's postsecondary system will operate with \$7.1 billion in consolidated operating expenditures, including government funding and the institution's own source revenue. Within that total, \$2.2 billion represents direct government investment in postsecondary operations, an increase of \$125 million, or 5.6 per cent, from '25-26. This increase helps institutions manage increasing enrolment and cost pressures, sustain quality programming, and maintain access and affordability for students.

A key focus of Budget 2026 is ensuring that operating funding translates into training capacity where Alberta needs it most. Budget 2026 continues to target enrolment expansion, which increases spaces in high-demand programs aligned with labour market priorities. This ensures students are not only able to access education but that their training leads directly to employment opportunities. Specifically, \$353 million over three years is allocated to continue existing target enrolment expansion initiatives already under way across the province, and, building on that success, Budget '26 invests an additional \$148 million over three years to create new seats and expand capacity in priority programs. These investments target areas such as engineering and technology, health care and mental health professions, and education and teacher preparation. For those of us around the table this means that institutions in our regions can respond directly to employer demand, grow program capacity, and retain talent locally.

Budget '26 also makes targeted investments to support both the mental health workforce and the well-being of students. To address province-wide demand for mental health services, Budget '26 includes \$12 million over three years to support additional training spaces for mental health professionals at postsecondary institutions. These investments help expand program capacity and prepare graduates to serve communities across Alberta. In addition, Budget '26 invests \$23 million over three years to support student mental health and healthy campuses at publicly funded postsecondary institutions, including First Nation colleges. This funding helps institutions strengthen counselling services, wellness programming, and early intervention supports.

Budget 2026 also maintains \$34 million over three years to support students with disabilities. This funding enables institutions to provide specialized supports, adaptive technologies, and services that reduce barriers and promote student success. Together these investments support retention, completion, and long-term outcomes for students.

#### 7:10

Budget 2026 continues to support student access to a comprehensive student aid system that balances discipline with affordability. In 2026-27 Alberta will invest nearly \$1.1 billion in student financial assistance, including \$887 million in Alberta student loans supporting approximately 115,000 students, \$107 million in scholarships and awards benefiting another 50,000 students, and \$75 million in grants supporting nearly 22,000 students, with a focus on lower-income Albertans. Budget 2026

also invests a million dollars annually over three years to open education resources, helping offset the high cost of textbooks and reduce out-of-pocket expenses for students. These investments help ensure postsecondary education remains accessible while providing support for those most in need.

Skilled trades and apprenticeship education are critical to Alberta's economy, and the demand continues to rise. As of January 2026 Alberta has more than 78,000 registered apprentices, the highest number on record. Budget '26 also responds with \$338 million over three years to support apprenticeship education and training capacity. This includes \$288 million for 11 postsecondary institutions across the province to expand apprenticeship training and \$15 million for union training centres supporting industry-led training delivery. In addition, this budget invests \$54 million over three years in nonprofit community organizations that raise awareness of skilled trades and reduce barriers to entry. This includes organizations that support women entering the trades, Indigenous Albertans, youth and career changers, and military veterans transitioning to civilian employment. These investments support workforce supply for major infrastructure projects, industrial growth, and regional economic development.

Budget 2026 also recognizes that a strong workforce begins with foundational skills. An investment of \$331 million over three years supports foundational learning assistance and community adult learning programs. These programs help underemployed, under-represented, and unemployed Albertans develop job-ready skills, complete high school or equivalency, and transition into postsecondary training or employment. With additional allocations through the federal labour market development agreement funding these investments will help strengthen labour force participation and support economic inclusion in communities across Alberta.

Budget '26 also makes significant investments in postsecondary infrastructure to support long-term capacity in modern learning environments. Over three years \$1.8 billion is being invested in postsecondary facilities, including capital projects, capital maintenance and renewal, and institutional contributions. Key investments reach \$785 million over three years for projects that support skilled trades and technology training. A few highlights include \$384 million towards the NAIT advanced skills centre, part of a \$560 million project that will add 5,500 new learning spaces; \$7 million for the Lakeland College beef yard upgrade and horse pen relocation, expanding agricultural training capacity; \$5 million for planning the expansion of health programming at Bow Valley College; and \$2 million for planning the centre for community wellness at Medicine Hat College.

Budget 2026 also provides \$387 million over three years in support for existing capital projects, including – this is ongoing support – \$160 million over three years of continued investment in the development of the multidisciplinary hub at the University of Calgary to allow more students to access science, technology, engineering, and math facilities and training; \$90 million over two years for the MacEwan University School of Business building; \$70 million over two years for the University of Alberta to complete the renovation of the Biological Sciences Building; and \$35 million over two years for the development of the University of Lethbridge rural medical teaching school, supporting the training of health care professionals in southeastern Alberta; and \$25 million in '26-27 for Olds College to complete the renovation of the W.J. Elliott expansion and renovation. What's more, this budget includes \$383 million over three years in capital maintenance and renewal funding. Importantly, institutions will receive full three-year funding certainty for capital maintenance and renewal grants, enabling responsible planning and timely infrastructure renewal.

In closing, Budget '26 delivers targeted, practical investments in advanced education that support students, institutions, and Alberta's workforce. These investments expand training capacity, align education with labour market needs, and strengthen communities in every region of the province. They reflect a clear focus on what matters and a shared commitment to stewarding public resources responsibly.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

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

We will now begin with the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Member Eggen, do you wish to combine your time with the minister?

If yes, do you agree to combine time with the member?

**Mr. Eggen:** Yes, I would like to combine, please.

**The Chair:** Minister, do you want to combine?

**Mr. McDougall:** Block time.

**The Chair:** Block time?

**Mr. McDougall:** Yes, please.

**The Chair:** We will go with block time. It's 10 minutes of block time and then 10 minutes for the minister to respond.

You may go ahead, Member.

**Mr. Eggen:** Well, thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to get some answers around the Advanced Education budget. I must say that part of my work is to consult with each of the 28 different colleges, universities, and polytechnics around the province in regard to the budget specifically, so you will see many of my questions are a reflection of who I have conversations with, everybody from Bow Valley to University of Calgary, University of Alberta. Everybody. That's the voice that I'm carrying here, and I just wanted you to keep that in mind.

A lot of people around the province are talking about the Mintz panel because, of course, we had the recommendations around the future of postsecondary posted here a few months ago. You know, it generated a lot of interest in making positive change, particularly in making an investment in postsecondary. We know that a dollar invested in postsecondary will pay exponential returns in our economy, in the quality of life for our population, for innovation and diversification: the whole thing. You know it as well as I do. So I'm troubled to see that, adjusted for a population and inflation, this budget, once again for the seventh time in a row from this UCP government, is essentially a cutting budget. While we have an increased population, while we have a massively increased expectation for what postsecondary would and should and could do for us, again we see a flat budget, really a cut, considering inflation and population.

If I could turn your attention to page 4 of the ministry business plan. This is a question that was inspired by the University of Calgary, the Graduate Students' Association. Page 4 of the ministry business plan shows that \$118 million has been allocated to targeted enrolment expansion. Now, the Mintz panel contains a number of recommendations that call for a more broad-based funding. It says: increasing administrative support for institutions to provide more stable, long-term funding to operating grants. That's a quote right

from the report. Will the ministry be able to start building towards these recommendations from the Mintz panel in this next year's budget, or has the implementation timeline been delayed? There's not much reference in this budget around the implementation of the Mintz report. Many people put in in good faith many, many hours to make sure that the report is, you know, quite solid, and we need to see it reflected in the budget.

My second question is in regard to student associations. The minister, in his briefing to student associations on the budget evening, informed them that spousal and parental income will now factor into financial aid eligibility in order to ensure that aid goes to students who lack any other source of income, according to the minister. Additionally, the savings would be redirected into grants and scholarships. Now, we need to get some clarity on how large these projected savings are supposed to be. How much of that is reflected in the \$182 million allocated to the nonrepayable student financial aid in this budget? How will the minister ensure that students that need financial aid don't slip through the cracks? It's very vague in the budget, through the chair, but you did have that conversation with the student associations that very evening. Everybody is wondering what's going to happen, right? I mean, I recall some version of that when I was going to school, and it was a very bumpy approach to student financing, so I hope we're not going back to those bad old days.

7:20

My third question is based on page 5 of the ministry business plan, and it's talking about that the budget documents from Advanced Education don't seem to be indicating that there is any change to the interest rates on student loans even though, again, the Mintz panel recommended moving away from them as a primary source of financial aid for students. Page 5 of the ministry's business plan indicates that loan usage is still at elevated levels. I just would hope that there is some appetite to bring our province into line with other provinces who no longer charge interest on student loans. This is an annual issue that is brought forward. The Mintz report does talk about this as well. I think that it's an idea that's time has come, and I was curious to know what the ministry is planning to do with that, no longer charging interest rates on student loans.

My fourth question. Yeah, I've got lots of time. One of the objectives of the ministry: to implement recommendations from the Mintz panel, as seen in 2.2 on page 5 of the ministry business plan. One of the Mintz panel recommendations was to work with other provinces to increase the flow of international talent into the province in order to increase research output, innovation, and economic competitiveness. Given that this is a budget item, does the government view international graduate students as an essential economic contributor in the way that the Mintz panel explicitly did so, or does the provincial government's immigration priorities not include international graduate students? As you can guess, that was a question from the University of Calgary graduate students as well.

In relation to that as well, we know that at this moment in history there are large amounts of academic talent and research talent in other universities, in other jurisdictions, around the world, particularly in the United States, who are interested in locating or relocating to another jurisdiction. I'm thinking of Canadians that are working in universities in the United States or even American or other nationalities that are working in American universities. I think the time, again, is ripe to have a coherent plan to attract this talent to the province of Alberta. Many other jurisdictions across Canada are doing so. They are working and going out of their way to bring top researchers and lecturers and academics from the United States into Canada.

Now, I know the University of Calgary has had a couple of successes in this regard, bringing in some very big talent from the United States, but they kind of did it on their own. What we need is a coherent plan that covers the whole province that puts an advertisement on the front window that says that we're open for building our universities and building them with your talent that you might consider bringing to the province of Alberta. As we see it now, it's pretty bumpy out there. I mean, obviously these are academics that do their research. They're probably really good at it, will do their own research as to where they might relocate, and if they see a jurisdiction like Alberta with seven cuts in a row to the postsecondary budget of our province, they'll say: "Well, what kind of commitment is that, really? What's the direction in the future?" and so forth. You know, if we want to build – again, a dollar invested in postsecondary pays exponential returns into our economy and to the quality of life of Albertans. We need to make sure that we put our money where our mouth is, invest in postsecondary, and make it attractive to academics from other jurisdictions to come here, set up shop, and to prosper.

Okay. I can probably get one more in there, and I just want to look at – in regard to the budget I have one here from Mount Royal. The budget documents do not outline the reported change to Alberta Student Aid requiring – that's the parental and spousal income. I think I already asked that one. Again, everybody was asking about this because, of course, it's quite a major change, and if people are obliged to report not just their family income before qualifying for loans and/or grants but their spousal income as well, again, it just wades into a myriad of problems that we don't necessarily need to do. You know, people have a freedom to make a choice to take a loan or to apply for a grant to go to school. They don't necessarily have to talk to their spouse. I mean, maybe there's a problem in that familial situation or their family. Maybe there's, again, something that would impede their ability to access those funds. I mean, everybody is talking about this. We need clarification on the change to student aid and how to access it.

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

Before we go to the minister, I'd like to ask Member Wright to introduce himself for the record.

**Mr. Wright:** Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Minister, you may proceed with your 10 minutes.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much for the questions. I'll start off with questions about the Mintz panel, and I think that's very appropriate because you're right. A lot of people waited in anticipation for that report. It's a very comprehensive report and comes with a lot of analysis that's useful and a number of recommendations, many of which the government is considering at this point in time.

You know, when we look at the Mintz panel, there are a couple of things that I would point out that are important that it talks about. It does make the observation that in the world today, certainly in the western world, the postsecondary system is under some stress, and that is a reflection of the financial stress that many governments throughout the western world are holding. We look in Canada, for example. Every subnational government, every provincial government has a deficit, the federal government has a huge deficit, and many other countries and other jurisdictions that fund postsecondary are dealing with the same thing. We're dealing with a situation where resources are limited, and we need to acknowledge and recognize the fact that these resources are limited.

Meanwhile the pressures to be able to educate, train, and do research, you know, if anything continue to go up, or the need for what the postsecondary system does. What that means and certainly what is reflected in the Mintz report is that we need to set priorities. We need to determine, with the amount of money that is going to be available to myself as Minister of Advanced Education for Alberta or any ministers of the same place in other jurisdictions: how do we most efficiently allocate limited resources to optimize the benefit, the return that we get on that investment?

The report talks about a new funding model that would make it more reactive, economic. It would use the tools of economics to put funding and prioritize funding so that the postsecondary system responds to the priorities of, in our case, Albertans and recognizes that our society is evolving, our society is changing, and the demands on our institutions are evolving and changing. We need to make sure that those resources that we apply are going to the places that are needed most.

There are going to be some changes in how this operates if we implement the recommendations. To answer your first question about timing, it was never the intention that we would have these recommendations implemented in this particular budget cycle. In fact, many of the issues and many of the recommendations of the Mintz panel are still under consideration by the government. What I have told postsecondary institutions before and now is that they can expect that the consultation process will begin in the next little while. I would say that within the next month or two we will start going out to institutions with certain direction as to how we are going to approach things, and as we go along, we'll be providing certain suggestions or recommendations that we think how the new funding formula will go.

**7:30**

We want to have an opportunity that that conversation is iterative, that we get feedback from the postsecondary system, that they're able to point out – it's very complex because the issues involving the structure and how you fund and the policies around it can be very different for, you know, a major research university like the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, or a polytechnic or a smaller community college. They're very different beasts, very different things with different needs, so we're trying to work through all those details. But it will be coming, and I would expect that we will have a lot of the elements of a new funding formula structure in place for the next budget cycle. That would be what I am telling the institutions, and I think, if anything, they're appreciative of the fact that there's going to be that time that we have to take to consult and make sure we try to get it right.

I would argue that when we look at how we presented this particular budget, some of the priority setting, if you will, or having to respond to looking at, "Okay; what is the most effective use of a dollar? What is the highest priority that we need to get accomplished?" there are some things that have declined in the budget allocations, and there are things that have been increased.

One of the things I'm happy about is, of course, TEE funding because the TEE funding is that mechanism we have to incentivize the postsecondary institutions to come forward and provide additional seats in the areas that the government believes are priorities. We know that the TEE funding will be going for things like health care, education, engineering, other technological areas, education training, and other things where there are labour market shortages or where we expect to have labour market shortages. We are going to be moving money from other places so that we can increase the number of seats for those areas.

Now, the member talked about student loans and the changes that would be happening in that regard. Again, part of the issue is that,

well, first of all, student loan amounts have declined because of policy decisions that had been taken previously, specifically, more restrictive covenants in terms of private career colleges. Particularly, those that study outside of the province are no longer being supported. But as is indicated in the Mintz report, Alberta has a reasonably high degree of loans out as a percentage of the total, certainly compared to other provinces. The Mintz panel recommended that we start moving a little bit more towards nonrepayable funding, and that's exactly what is reflected in the budget today.

Now, in terms of student loans, and you mentioned the fact about family or spousal supports, it's important to recognize that Alberta is the only jurisdiction in Canada that up until now has not required family income or spousal income to be a determinant of financial need. The only jurisdiction. The federal government and all other provinces do require this consideration to be taken into place, so our decision is to work as it used to be here in Alberta until about 12 years ago. When I was an undergrad student at the University of Calgary, I had a summer job, actually, being a student loan assessor, so I spent the summer doing student loans. That was a common practice. Part of the assessment process is that we would look at family or spousal income as part of the consideration. Like I said, every other jurisdiction does the same thing, and there are many mechanisms and processes and procedures to make sure that that determination is there.

We take those funds that we save or at least part of those funds that we save from that process by having people who can afford and families that can afford to contribute to their child or family member's education to be used, in part, for things like nonrepayable funding and other uses within advanced education that we think are important.

I recognize that for some people this is a difficult question, but again, it's about making sure that funding is available to help those that need it. This is the type of priority setting that we know we have to do within our government of Alberta and within this department to ensure that we have enough resources to deal with other priorities.

In terms of the interest rate I would say that currently we do not charge an interest rate for the time the student is a full-time student within their program and for 12 months after completion. At that point in time we charge prime rate, which is less than some provinces charge for that purpose. I know there are some jurisdictions that don't charge an interest rate after that, but we think this is the right balance. It provides an incentive for students to repay their loans and recognizes the cost of the government and the taxpayer to subsidize the financing that they're providing while that person is a student and for one year after they complete their program. Again, you know, this is part of trying to make sure that when we're going to spend money – because if you're going to provide interest-free loans, it's costing the money. We as the province still have to borrow the money in order to provide that. They have to pay interest on that, and there's a real cost to government to providing interest-free loans. We do it for some period of time.

**The Chair:** Okay. Member Eggen, for your next 10 minutes.

**Mr. Eggen:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yeah. I mean, those are some interesting answers. I mean, one of the questions that arises from those answers is, of course: you know, how low do you go to finance a public institution before it's really not a public institution anymore, right? Some of the universities around the province with their funding coming from this provincial government of 40 per cent or even below that; in an average OECD country a public

institution has a minimum benchmark of 60 per cent public funding. We've seen a gradual decrease of public funding for postsecondary education here in the province, but after seven years it adds up. What we end up with is fewer spaces for students, all this deferred maintenance, top researchers and academics leaving the province because they go to somewhere where it's better funded, you know, and we're not meeting the needs for our economy in regard to health care and tradespeople and so forth.

When you go to a targeted funding model, you are just moving the chess pieces around on the same board, right? You're not adding money to the system. We know that there's a tremendous amount of students coming to look for spaces from our K to 12 education. We see your counterpart in K to 12 education, you know, at least making some effort to account for this huge surge of grade school students coming through. Lo and behold, they will need a spot in postsecondary education in order to prosper as an Albertan. There's a real gap in planning here, and I think it's long past due that we start investing in public postsecondary the way that we should according to the population and growth of our province.

For example, I have cuts in program closures in the following colleges and polytechnics. I would like the minister to comment on these and include what changes to funding caused these cuts and explain the reason for why these cuts were allowed to be made. We have NorQuest College, Bow Valley College, Red Deer Polytechnic, Northern Lakes College, Lethbridge Polytechnic, all of them with significant cuts to programming which precipitated in cuts to instructors, support staff, and so forth. This is an unfortunate trend that we need to reverse, but we need to study why these things happen so that we can mitigate and not have it happen again.

My second question in the second round here is in regard to scholarships and awards. This is on page 26 of the government estimates, line 3.3. We see a cut of \$11 million there, a 31 per cent decrease in scholarships and awards. Could the minister please explain why that is so. What's the justification for that?

**7:40**

Alberta students are suffering a serious affordability crisis, and we need more scholarships and rewards, not fewer. I'm sure you would remember, Minister, the delegation of nine members of the Terry Fox humanitarian award program, for example, that were here on budget day – you probably met them – to advocate for a scholarship for students who emulate the determination and selfless community spirit of Terry Fox. Short-sighted cuts to scholarships and awards don't actually save any money and send a very bad message that this government is not a very forward-looking one in regard to postsecondary.

My third question is in regard to fees for skilled trades programs. You know, this government has often been trying to play one against the other, which I think is very inappropriate – right? – talking about less money for universities and more money for trades. Well, lo and behold, there's less money for trades as well as the universities. We see now this coming into the fees that tradespeople are paying. This budget this year has an increase to the blue seal fee from \$50 to \$150. Also, there's an additional \$150 cost being added to red seal certification. Entrance exam fees are also increased by \$150. These increases, in my mind, Mr. Chair, fly in the face of this UCP claim that they are supporting the trades and are, in fact, just allowing these loopholes, writing them right into the budget, to increase the fees for tradespeople to get their certification.

Massive increases in tuition as well in places like NAIT and SAIT and extra fees and the monthly expenses put up huge barriers that literally keep students away from being able to study. You know, by having these increases from the blue seal and red seal and

entrance exams, again, you're just setting a precedent which might allow students or schools to declare that they can increase their fees and extra fees with impunity just because the government is doing the same thing.

My next question is in regard to both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary dissolving or changing their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and, in the Alberta case, a UCP board member that was moving that they should do so at the University of Alberta. Now, I see this as a larger movement that is happening in other jurisdictions south of the border. There have been many attacks on DEI, you know, which I find ironic because, of course, in one of the very first pages of the business plan you talk about supporting diversity and supporting people that need a hand up and so forth. And then here we have this quite pointed attack. It seems obvious to me that diversity, equity, and inclusion programming in postsecondaries is being systematically eliminated or changed for some reason. I don't know. I would ask the minister if the previous ministers or this minister have actually spoken to institutions and then instructed them to shut down these programs. What's the story around that? That's from the business plan page 4, line 1.2.

Okay. The next question I have is in regard to – ah, yeah, here. This is from the business plan, page 5. The average undergraduate pays 32 per cent more than they would have about eight or nine years ago, 2019, which is much more than the national average. Excessive tuition increases result in diminishing returns and deterring enrolment. You know, in Alberta we have Canada's youngest average age, so we should be, really, an ideal market for postsecondary, but in fact our enrolment is actually declining. So I'm wondering what the minister's plan is to turn this around, right? Tuition plus very limited spaces are actually reducing our ability for our very large population to even be able to go to school.

I think I can get another one in there. Last one, maybe. Okay. I'm finding it very disturbing that medical residency positions are being unfilled in Alberta despite a desperate shortage of physicians, especially family doctors. I'm curious to know how much money Advanced Education pays to train each medical student in our system. And then those same medical students who we've invested a lot of money in decide to take a residency position in some other jurisdiction besides Alberta. We lose that investment in terms of potential doctors who would practise in Alberta. Again, I will say that there are medical residency positions that are being unfilled in Alberta.

This, in my mind, looks for more co-operation between the health ministers – there are four of them – and the minister of postsecondary education. We have, obviously, a problem in our public health system, yet it's being exacerbated by medical students choosing to vote with their feet and literally not take residency positions here but, rather, go somewhere else. I want to ask if the minister talks to the ministers of health in this regard so that we can sort of head off this problem at the pass. A similar version of this is happening, I believe, with registered nurses. Now we're just moving in the first graduates of nurse practitioners, and we don't want the same phenomenon to happen to them.

Oh, almost out of time, so I'll stop there and take a drink of water, and you can see what you can do.

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

I'll turn it over to the minister for his answers.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the questions. Some good questions. Well, I think I would like to comment a little bit. You made some comments about how Alberta funds postsecondary education relative to other jurisdictions, and

you mentioned that, you know, there are some places that don't have tuition, for example, or have higher percentages of government support.

The reality, certainly in Canada, is that currently taxpayers fund approximately 40 per cent of the overall cost of the postsecondary system. Another 30 per cent is paid for by tuition. This is average. It varies by institutions somewhat, but that's the average for the province. You know, the rest is other funding that comes to postsecondary institutions through other sources, their investments, et cetera. That is pretty well average for the country. So 40 per cent taxpayer support of the postsecondary system, I said, is about average and in line with actually what the Mintz report had indicated would be an appropriate target. Now, I won't say that this is explicitly the target, the policy of the government as of today, but that's more or less what we see happening with this current budget.

I would point out that in terms of tuition here in Alberta – and, of course, you have to be careful with tuitions because tuitions vary a lot depending on what type of programs, and different places have different types of mixes of programs, et cetera – for undergraduates our tuition is slightly higher than the national average, and our tuition for graduate students is significantly lower than the national average. So, overall, again, on a blended basis I think we're about comparable to, you know, what is going on in the country generally. However, of course, what we do want to make sure is that programs are accessible and that anybody who has the ability and desire to take whatever program is able to do that, and we think we have a whole myriad of programs and supports to make sure that that's happening.

Definitely, when we're looking at funding – this relates to government but certainly in Advanced Education – we need to be considering the fact and the reality that we need to expand the number of seats going forward. We have a huge jump in the population. You made mention of that, of what's going on in the K to 12 system and the huge number of students that have come into the Alberta education system. They will eventually graduate, and they will be looking for postsecondary. Many of the people that have come already are of the age that they would be in the postsecondary system. We have, you know, the target, the priority – one of the priorities is to increase the number of seats, particularly in those areas where there is market demand for the graduates of those programs. For planning purposes I would say that we're kind of looking at a long-term average annual compound and annual growth rate for enrolment going over the next 10 years about 3.5 per cent per year. When we're looking at budgeting and how we're managing our finances, we need to factor in this fact that we need to continue to grow in number of seats. Of course, you want to maintain quality, and we need to respond to the changes that are occurring within our society.

7:50

You did make mention of the fact about program closures. I think that's a great question and great answers. Nothing stays the same. Things vary. Things change. Society changes. The market changes, evolves. Technology changes. For example, you know, what is the impact on the job market going to be or on the postsecondary system from artificial intelligence? Just to name one element that's changing things.

We can expect that the postsecondary system is going to have to evolve, and they will be introducing new programs, revised programs, and if they find a situation where there's a lack of demand for a particular program, you know, it would make sense that they would close that program or change it. There have been a couple of things that have occurred in the last couple of years and currently that also have an impact, and that, of course, is a reduction

of international students, which has been a source of income for a number of postsecondaries, some more than others, not as much here in Alberta as, I'd say, it was in British Columbia or Ontario. Because of the drop in student visas, et cetera, and demand by international students to come to Canada generally, postsecondary institutions have to adapt. They have to change and reflect that loss of revenue.

You know, you mentioned a number of institutions. I know the University of Calgary has come up lately with their suspending programs in the classics and religious studies. Frankly, the issue is that there are not a lot of people looking to major in those areas these days; they might take courses in those subjects. So the change is to consolidate to reflect the fact that there isn't that demand for a degree or to major in those programs, and institutions have to reflect that. There have been a number of adjustments and closures and consolidations within the system, and that's required. It's a dynamic system that we operate in, and I would expect the postsecondary institutions to make those changes. They need to balance their own budgets, and they need to make the decisions that are necessary, responding to the market for their students and what they provide.

You mentioned a reduction in scholarships and awards. I know it looks like that, and part of the biggest reason for that is that we had a heritage fund scholarship that was being paid out of operating and therefore was voted, and because of changes in the heritage trust fund for the scholarships we are able to get additional funding coming from there that is not voted. So if we look on page 29 of the estimates, you will see a provision there for increased funding coming from the heritage trust fund scholarship. Therefore, scholarships and awards have actually increased net-net over this year versus last year.

You did specifically mention the increase in fees for the trades, blue seal and entrance exam rewrites. Red seal and blue seal trades qualify for a recognized credential. As part of the budget process the government of Alberta did do a review of fees, not just in Advanced Education but generally within the government. I think you can say that we have been fortunate in Alberta for a long time that there wasn't a need to go and perhaps review all of the fees. We found certain fees that had been not changed since the 1970s or there was no fee at all while all other institutions, all other jurisdictions, in Canada do charge fees. You know, this is one element where we thought that it would be appropriate that there'd be some fee. It's not a tuition; it's a fee for those exams. We thought it was manageable. It's less than most other jurisdictions in Canada continue to be, and that's just one of the adjustments we have to make as we try to prioritize how we spend and how we receive our revenues and what we can do that would be relatively benign in terms of negative impact and provide some additional resources that we can use for other purposes.

You did talk a little bit about the issue of the Mintz report as it relates to neutrality, DEI if you will, and some of the policy changes that may be happening on some of the postsecondary institutions. You talked about the board of governors at U of A. It's the position of this government and this minister that there should never be any discrimination by anybody on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, et cetera, and decisions as to entrance into programs or hiring and things like that should be done basically on the basis of merit.

Having said that, we do recognize that there are some exceptions. We talk about reconciliation with Indigenous communities, for example, so I think there's still an argument to be made where there can be some favourable treatment in that regard. But we believe that, really, we should be treating people as individuals for the most part and provide supports for any particular identity group where it may be – we call it “underperforming” relative to other groups, that

we provide the support level so they can get up to the level that they can compete and meet their potential and be able to succeed on the basis of their merit. That's the policy that I would like to see, and I think the institutions are starting to reflect that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go back to Member Eggen.

**Mr. Eggen:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, it's interesting that the minister talked about colleges and postsecondaries having to adjust their programming for budget concerns and for the future. I mean, that always does happen, but as I listed a number of places that had to make quite significant cuts, those cuts were not based on what the market was looking for but, rather, because they were simply cut off at the knees by this government funding their programming.

A very good example of that is Bow Valley College, which is in serious trouble, I mean, in regard to offering the programming that they are designed for because they are not as able to provide that supplementary language and basic skill education because the funding is just not there. They had to lay off 120 instructors, so many people I know. I'm sure that the minister has gone to Bow Valley. It's a great place, and there are so many people coming in from all over Calgary and southern Alberta, too, to be educated in the programs that we need them for, for them to improve themselves and to improve our economy, health care workers, for example. But concurrently, while they're taking that health care programming, they need to upgrade their language and perhaps their mathematics or science skills at the same time. The funding that was cut in regard to instruction of language and so forth has undermined the ability for many people to get that programming.

I know that the minister might say, “Oh, well, that was just federal funding,” and so forth. We need to provide that here then with the province. If there's not the funding there to make Bow Valley function for new Canadians especially to get that postsecondary training so that they can get a leg up and improve themselves and to get them into the economy where we need them, then we're not doing our job, quite frankly.

NAIT, again, the court reporter program, right? Yes, we do need court reporters, and yes, that program was cut off in midstream and left so many people hanging that were studying that program. My point is that, yes, we do have to be nimble and to evolve, but we always have to go back to first principles, which is that we educate the population, we make sure it's affordable and accessible, as you said, and we make sure that we're meeting the needs of our society and the people that live in it. We're not doing that right now with postsecondary. We're just kind of stumbling along, and we can do a lot better.

For example, another one that I'm concerned about is in regard to funding for First Nations education. Oh, here it is here, page 26, line 2.3. Indigenous education has remained flat for the last three years running while the numbers of Indigenous students in our colleges, universities, and polytechnics is rising considerably. Why make a cut to Indigenous education? You know, if you look at that page 26, line 2.3, the number just stays exactly the same for the last three years in a running, and it just makes me feel like there's not attention being paid to it. Someone just fills it in as an afterthought, and then there we go. There's our Indigenous thing that we paid for.

8:00

In order to get Indigenous students to participate in postsecondary education, you have to go to where they are, you have to provide that extra education, supplemental education, upgrading, and so forth, and you have to have a geographic

diversity of where those programs could be accessed. All of those things cost money, but again, a dollar invested in postsecondary education pays back exponential returns to our economy and to our society and Indigenous education. There's no exception to that.

I'd like to turn our attention to page 4 of the business plan. Key objective 1.2 states to "enhance the accessibility of post-secondary education programs by providing supports to strengthen the participation of [all] adult learners from diverse, under-represented, and vulnerable populations." Again, this goes back to the Mintz report, it goes back to the first principles that this minister talked about here tonight, and it talks about this idea that we can't use the diversity and equity initiative thing just as somehow that it is discriminatory, but as a way, a tool, to give people a leg up. We need to make sure that we are taking that key objective seriously, and we have to take a look at it honestly as well, putting money into the ability to enhance the accessibility of postsecondary education for adult learners from diverse, under-represented, and vulnerable populations.

I just want to move over to – I have a couple of questions here from Bow Valley, and they're asking specifically about funding allocations to advanced education for student mental health services at Alberta's postsecondary institutions and how that funding has maybe changed for Budget 2026. A lot of people would like to see the mental health funding be fine-tuned to represent the population of any given postsecondary institution. Right? You know, big ones need more and so forth. I mean, obviously you have to compensate for smaller colleges. They'll need that extra because they're smaller, and just that's the way it is, but a lot of larger colleges, which includes Bow Valley, really, don't feel like they're getting sufficient per-student funding that meets the need of mental health supports for their population, and I've heard that in other schools as well. I'm sure you have, too.

Another Bow Valley question, and this is very interesting because I've seen this everywhere, is in regard to food insecurity among students. Funding mechanisms. Are there funding mechanisms within Advanced Education that would support these initiatives? If not, is the minister exploring ways to address student food insecurity through Budget 2026? The affordability crisis leaves students particularly vulnerable. Right? They don't have necessarily full-time employment. They are experiencing debt from going to school, which is a good investment, but nonetheless.

Now the price of food going up by 15 per cent here in the last number of months here in Alberta has really left a lot of students quite frankly unable to feed themselves sufficiently. Of course, we don't know about that, but we do know, at least you can imagine, that food insecurity undermines everything else that you choose to do in regard to studying, in regard to leading a healthy lifestyle, in regard to maybe working an extra job or so forth. If you're food insecure, all of those things are compromised, so I'm seeing it with food banks all over. You can't find a college that doesn't have one, you know, and they're very well subscribed. That's not a source of pride. I mean, it's a source of pride for the students who are building those programs, but it's really an eye-opener to see just how many people are going hungry in our schools today.

Okay, I'll just move on to a couple more questions here. If we can turn your attention please to page 26 of the main estimates. We see historically Alberta has lost more postsecondary students to other provinces than it has gained since 2007. Since 2007 Alberta has lost more than 14,000 students. The postsecondary graduates pay most, you know, are paying personal income tax, are less likely to require social assistance, and are more likely to start their own businesses. Has the government of Alberta calculated the loss to Alberta's economy due to emigration of Alberta's postsecondary

students away from this province? I had this question from a number of universities here in Alberta.

Okay, probably another one. Many student jobs are very low paying and offer limited relevance to career goals. Access to work-integrated learning opportunities are crucial for skill development and postgraduation success. Students are particularly exposed to the affordability crisis, as I said, and youth unemployment is the highest that it's been for decades, I think at about 14 per cent just this week. How is the government incentivizing employers to offer students better wages, benefits, and work experiences that are relevant to their field of study?

I can think of a program that could be re-established, which is the STEP program, or some equivalent to the STEP program, which does provide employment that is relevant to a person's field of study. Again, postsecondary students are super exposed to this affordability crisis, but we have to look past that. Part of the way we can look past it is to have meaningful employment that pays decent wages and offers a future.

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

It's over to the minister for his answers.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much again for those questions.

I just wanted to answer a question that you had last block that I didn't get to. When the full complement is done – as you know, we've increased it in the Faculty of Medicine significantly over the last couple of years. It's still expanding. We opened up a med school at the Northwestern Polytechnic in Grande Prairie this last September. We'll be opening up a med school in University of Lethbridge through the University of Calgary this coming September, 20 first-year students going in each of those cases. Once they get to three years at the U of A and four years at U of C, or the other way around, it will be a 20 per cent increase in total med school seats over the last couple of years that has been implemented.

I would also mention that we're working to train and educate more doctors. It costs about \$750,000 per doctor, between \$750,000 and \$1 million for a med student just to get through the basic med school, so it's a big-ticket item. We certainly want those doctors to stay in Alberta and continue to serve the people of Alberta. The reason for opening up the med school in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge is that we know that there's a higher chance that people who finish their education in the communities will likely stay in those communities or in those regions. So that's part of a big investment that we have made and will continue to make in that regard.

I would also point out – and this is not my department – as I'm sure you've heard from the minister of health, we've increased the number of doctors in our jurisdiction by 3,000 doctors over the last several years. You know, I'm reading that more doctors are coming from other parts of Canada to Alberta than the other way around. We continue to try to put efforts in place to make it easier for internationally trained doctors to come and be able to participate and become doctors here in Canada. We are going to continue to need more doctors and other health care professionals. I mean, the gap between where we would like to be and where we are: we're making a lot of progress, but there's a lot of work to do, and looking at retirements that are coming over the next 10 years, we really need to buckle down and work on that, and we are.

**8:10**

You did make some comment about First Nation education, and I think you were looking at the FNC specifically, which is the First Nations colleges. Yes, the budget is the same this year as it was last

year, but we increased it by about 25 per cent previously, so, you know, there was a significant uptick there. Also, I would point out that there's a big increase in foundational education, and probably about a little over 30 per cent of the clients that are subject to education and training under the foundation program are First Nations. And so there's a big increase in there in supports that would benefit that community and others, of course. Again, you know, the issue on First Nations. I mean, there's a responsibility here of the province. Also, the federal government has a responsibility. You know, we think that we as a province are doing our part, and we would hope that the federal government will do theirs.

Bow Valley. You made mention of the fact that they have had to make some significant adjustments. They face some operating challenges because of the loss of international students and other factors, and we expect them to make that. Rest assured that we did approve \$5 million planning dollars for Bow Valley College. That's just planning dollars. We are anticipating that there's going to be a major expansion at Bow Valley. We'll see how future budgets come out, but that planning dollars is the expectation in line with the fact that we need many more people in the kinds of areas that Bow Valley is training, particularly in health care. The future is a future of growth for Bow Valley, and we're continuing to do that. We will continue to see increased seats. We expect that they will be a recipient of some of the TEE funding that we're talking about. I would say for Bow Valley, they have to make adjustments for the changes that have happened over the last couple of years to their enrolment, but I'm very confident that Bow Valley has a future of growth.

You mentioned about food security. Yes, this is, you know, an interesting challenge of our time that has happened. It's difficult situations. Inflation pressures have – this is the problem with inflation. People don't like to talk why you want to have fiscal responsibility, why you don't want to have other taxes incorporated into supply and things like that. Everybody loses from inflation and particularly those most in need. You know, we try to do what we can to maintain costs low. We provide funding support. The budget for students is largely determined because we work in line with the Canada student finance to set the budgets that they set as to what is the amount that is required for those who are receiving student finance. I understand that there's always situations that emerge that cause other people to have challenges. The government of Alberta provides \$2 million in total for food banks in this province, and there are many other organizations that do that. It's an unfortunate reality of today, but I think we do our part, and hopefully as we move forward, the need for such things will decline.

You mentioned the desire for something like a STEP program, that was discontinued a couple of years ago. I would point out that it goes by a different name, but the Department of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration did come up with a new program a couple of months ago called the Alberta youth employment initiative, and it is very similar to what the old STEP program was, with some differences. We provide \$7,500 to hire people who are between 15 and 24 years old, so that certainly would include many people, particularly in undergraduate programs but not only. So there is that there. One can always say that we do more, but we also have to live within budget parameters and with what we have, the dollars available for us to spend. So, again, there is a STEP-like program already in place that will help a lot of the students.

Within the Alberta Advanced Education budget it is correct to say that the \$8.785 million in total that we provide for mental health issues throughout the postsecondary system is only one source of funding for mental health. All students that are here attending postsecondary institutions in Alberta also have access to the rest of

the government, including the department of mental health and drug addiction and social services, et cetera. Look what is happening in some of those budgets. It's a big increase in funding, especially over the last couple of years, in mental health. So I think when we look at all the other different elements where the government of Alberta is working to provide funding and supports for that to meet the increase in demand in mental health issues, it's there, and I think Alberta has been a leader in this country in terms of providing those types of supports.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you, Minister.

We will now move for 20 minutes to the government caucus members and the minister. Member de Jonge is up. Would you like to combine your time with the minister? If yes, Minister, do you agree to the speaking time with the member?

**Ms de Jonge:** Minister, would you like to do shared or block time?

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure. Let's do shared.

**Ms de Jonge:** Sounds good. Thank you so much, Minister, for being here tonight and to your deputy and your incredible team as well for joining you this evening. It's 8 p.m. Really incredible to see dedicated public servants come in front of the committee and talk about Budget 2026 and answer the committee's questions. Yeah. Really appreciate your work on the file, Minister.

I'm just going to start at page 1 of your capital plan. You talk about your investment in the NAIT advanced skills centre. You may know that I'm a polytechnic graduate. One thing that our polytechnics do so well in Alberta is experiential learning, and that has really set their graduates apart, not just in our province but nationally. So it's really important that we continue to invest in the type of education they provide to students. It's a great benefit to young Albertans and even older Albertans that are returning to postsecondary to pursue other careers.

Page 1 of your capital plan mentions that you are funding the NAIT advanced skills centre to the tune of \$384 million. That's a significant amount of funding that's going to hugely benefit the capital region and core Albertan industries. I'm really pleased to see that. You know, I have two questions. First, how is this funding going to specifically support trades education in Alberta? Secondly, did you receive employer support for this project, and if so, can you share what that was, what that looked like?

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure. Well, thank you for the question. Yes. I actually think that the announcement we made as it relates to NAIT and the expansion of their skills facility is huge. The \$384 million that we have incorporated into the budget over the next three years is actually only a portion of what we think the total facility is going to cost when it's completed. Things will change, and we have to wait until other budget cycles and things like that to go further out, but I would say that the government contribution, you know, could very possibly be over \$500 million, and the total facility could come to a total of over \$700 million. The difference between that and the \$700 million is funding that is expected to come from industry and other philanthropic donations and from NAIT itself. So, yes, in fact, one of the most attractive elements about their proposal was how much money was going to be coming from sources other than the government of Alberta. We like to leverage dollars, but this is big. This is 5,500 additional skilled seats that we are going to be needing.

**8:20**

One of the things I would comment on in terms of the apprentice and trades program is that we're trying to increase it as quickly as

we can, but the gap between what we see happening and the demand for trade skills particularly over the next 10 years, with all the retirements that are anticipated by many of the journeymen that are now working in the industry, is significant.

Of course, we have many major megaprojects that we think are going to be coming into Alberta over the next several years. You know, we talk about Dow Chemical's \$10 billion. One of the big questions, when a Dow comes and talks to Alberta about locating their facility here – and we were competing with Alabama for that facility. One of their biggest concerns was: would we actually have the skilled workers that they need to build and operate that facility? We have a commitment to make sure that we do train and educate the type of workers they need, and it's not just Dow. It's all industries. So we have a lot of work to do.

I see the NAIT project as being a major, major step for NAIT and for the Edmonton region and for Alberta. It's one component of the kinds of things we're going to need to do over the next several years to be able to meet the future demand for that.

**Ms de Jonge:** Yeah. I appreciate that, Minister. Certainly, as our economy evolves and we're seeing population growth, our labour market is growing and evolving along with that, so it's important that we're investing in the postsecondary system and we're responsive to the trends that we're seeing in the economy. You know that in my constituency of Chestermere-Strathmore we're seeing major investments being made by De Havilland Canada specifically, and Wheatland county is just doing incredible work to bring investments into the region. We need to respond to that, so great to see the work that you're doing with the advanced skills centre and bringing more skilled trade positions to the labour market.

I'm very happy to see that Budget 2026 includes major capital investments in this regard. That's really important, and I know you've done really great work as minister towards that. Albertans expect us to make sound investment decisions and to ensure a strong ROI and proper, efficient, effective use of taxpayer dollars. Of course you know that, with your economics background, your banking background. So in the context of providing taxpayer dollars, can you walk the committee through some of those benefits that those investments in your capital plan will bring to Alberta's economy and to the province as a whole?

**Mr. McDougall:** I'm happy to do so. I think it's important that we try to plan. We're looking ahead. We've already initiated some capital projects that are very relevant going forward. I'd actually like to talk a little bit about some of those. Of course, we have the big announcement. NAIT is the biggest one in this particular budget in terms of capital projects, but we also provided some planning dollars for future projects that we think have a good chance of hopefully being funded in the future once the planning is completed.

In this budget cycle NAIT, again, is the big one. We've also provided capital for Lakeland College's beef yard upgrades and the horse pen relocation which is needed. You know, it's been around a long time, and it really needed some work because that services, obviously, the agricultural sector in our province and certainly the northeast region of Alberta, so that'll be important. We are working towards increasing the number of STEM seats. I would point to the University of Alberta's biological science renovation that is ongoing right now and the University of Calgary's multidisciplinary hub that we have previously announced. We will be spending significant dollars in this particular budget year on those projects. I talked a bit about opening up the med school at the University of Lethbridge. There is capital for the rural medical teaching school

project for them so that they'll be up and ready going into the future. Lots of projects. I talked about Bow Valley already. They've been given \$5 million to do some planning.

It's interesting. You know, we probably had about \$4 and a half billion of proposals just for Advanced Education in this budget cycle, 130 separate proposals. There are a lot of requests for money, a lot of interesting projects. I'm not saying that every single one warrants serious consideration, but we have a pipeline of projects that we're working on, we continue to work on. It's going to be about meeting the number of seats that we need, making sure that our students have access to the latest facilities, latest equipment. This is really important for trades, by the way, on NAIT. When industry is changing so fast and technology is evolving quickly, our students need to be working with the best equipment and the last-updated equipment, the same equipment they're going to be using in the workforce afterwards.

Yeah. That's just most of the bigger ones, anyways, that are going on right now, but it's important and it's part of our view that we have to expand. There are going to be more students in the future, and the needs of the facilities are evolving.

**Ms de Jonge:** Thank you, Minister, again for your work and the time of your team here tonight.

With that, I'll cede the rest of my time to my colleague MLA van Dijken.

**Mr. van Dijken:** If I may, Chair?

**The Chair:** Yes. Go ahead.

**Mr. van Dijken:** Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister. Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to present this evening. Thank you to all the staff that are here with you. It's important work addressing some of the labour shortages and service shortages within the province of Alberta.

I'd like to start by talking a little bit about the Calgary veterinarian medicine program and the work that is happening there and the continued investment into that program. In rural Alberta we definitely recognize the importance of the Calgary faculty. I see plenty in this budget that demonstrates how much our government is helping to support agriculture, and this is one part of it. On page 81 of the fiscal plan it shows that we're allocating additional funding to the University of Calgary veterinary medicine program. It includes \$83 million over three years to support doubling the enrolment at the University of Calgary veterinary medicine by '28-29, creating more opportunities for Alberta students and helping to ensure Albertans will have access to high-quality veterinary services.

I know that over the last number of years we've seen a real strain on having that service available in rural Alberta, so this is very much needed to address the shortages and the long distances, actually, that veterinarians and producers have to go through to ensure that the animals that they're producing are well taken care of. Minister, how critical do you see this investment in supporting veterinarians and the ability to have this actually solve the critical labour shortage in that field at this time?

**Mr. McDougall:** I would totally agree with you. There is a shortage, and it is critical. It goes beyond just, you know, taking care of people's pet dogs and cats. Particularly the issue is the agricultural things and large animals. There is a shortage of qualified people. We've doubled the capacity of the vet school with the opening of the new facility out by Spy Hill north of the university. It's a beautiful facility, and we've increased from 50 to 100 the number of incoming students into that program. So the

focus of a lot of what we're doing here is actually related specifically to the agricultural sector and the need for meeting the needs of livestock and industry in rural Alberta. It's important for our agricultural sector. It's important to make sure that our animals are cared for properly. Excited by that increase.

**8:30**

I would say, as a side comment, that it's not only the veterinarians, but it's also vet techs, and we have a couple of institutions that provide vet tech programs going forward. I think that's something that we need to get more attention to going forward, particularly with the changes happening with Northwestern Polytechnic and the Fairview campus. I won't, you know, go into detail on that one right now today. There's a big need for this, and I think that we built a world-class facility. We're going to be and we are attracting a lot of good students. It's critical to the agriculture sector in this province, and we're making the investments to make sure that that happens.

Again, the expansion just started this last September; 50 additional students in the first year, and then, of course, there will be 200 additional students by the end of the four-year cycle. We're working on that and putting the money where the needs are.

**Mr. van Dijken:** Thank you, Minister. I also see on page 107 of the fiscal plan, the capital plan, \$7 million for Lakeland College and the beef yard upgrade and the expansion to the horse pen. That project will expand agricultural education training spaces at the Vermilion campus. If you could provide a little bit more detail on that investment. If you have time, also, it would be good to, on the same page \$5 million to Bow Valley College for planning for a health care program, provide a little bit more detail on how you see that providing workers for shortages in both those areas in the agricultural field but then also in the health care field.

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure. Thank you for the question. Yes, \$7 million is going to the Lakeland College horse pen and beef yard. The need is there because the current beef yard infrastructure has deteriorated. It has deteriorated significantly, as you would know. It was built for 60 students and 100 cows, and now it serves 80 students and 220 cows. So it needed to be larger and it needs to be modern, and I believe there are some safety issues there as well that are required. We want to make sure that it's modernized. We want to make sure that it's comparable to, you know, what happens within the agriculture industry itself and that the project aligns with Lakeland's teaching environment, with its reputation: hands-on, student-managed learning.

It also has a role in terms of applied research. It supports research trials and genetics, nutrition, feed efficiency, animal behaviour, welfare, environmental sustainability in partnerships with industry, producers, and ag tech companies and adopts innovations that increase profitability and sustainability in Alberta's livestock sector. You know, we are leaders here in Alberta in agriculture, and we've done very well for that, and we would certainly want to continue to remain leaders who want to work on improving animal welfare, biosecurity knowledge. This investment in that regard is for that and, you know, supporting sustainability, I mean, long-term industry resilience for Alberta livestock holders.

The other question was related to Bow Valley. Again, we provided \$5 million for planning. My expectation is that what they're looking at is they're looking at purchasing some land adjacent to the current facility. Which piece of land is yet to be determined, but this is large. Is it 4,500 additional? Is that the number? The expectation is of students primarily in health care. The interesting thing is that if you go to Bow Valley – and I don't know

if you have – the training of health care workers is evolving. It involves a lot of new technology, these computerized artificial intelligence doll things that you have that talk to you and explain their symptoms, et cetera. It's turned out to be an extremely effective teaching tool and helps us resolve the issue of getting practical training, hands-on planning with our students that are limited to go into a health care facility and actually get the same work. Bow Valley, I think, has been a leader in that within this country, but they need a bigger facility because we need many, many more health care workers going forward.

Obviously, it's going to take some time for this to go in place. We're doing planning. I expect in the next year they'll be looking for additional funding, but there is room for capacity. As I mentioned, they currently have about 12,563 full-load equivalents, and we're expecting them to get up to 22,000. So they're going to need a bigger facility for that type of expansion. Again, trying to think ahead, look ahead to where the province is going and what the needs are. Looking forward to their design work and planning, and we'll look at that next budget cycle as to how that might go forward.

**Mr. van Dijken:** Thank you, Minister.

My constituency is always excited for new apprentices and skilled workers who can help build our communities and be rewarded with good, high-paying jobs. The education business plan states that your ministry will invest an additional \$96 million in '26-27 to create apprenticeship seats. In the short time we have, can you please tell me more about this funding program?

**Mr. McDougall:** Seven seconds. Well, the demand for apprenticeship has never been higher, and we need to meet the demands.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you. Thank you, Member, and thank you, Minister.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions. We will now take a five-minute break.

[The committee adjourned from 8:37 p.m. to 8:42 p.m.]

**The Chair:** Hello, members. Welcome back.

We will now move on to the second round of questions and responses. The caucus rotation going forward will be the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition and followed by the members of the government caucus. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting. We will begin this rotation with members of the Official Opposition, who will have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may also speak for up to five minutes. After both individuals have had the opportunity to speak once, then we will move over to the government caucus for the next rotation. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with a 10-minute segment, during which neither member nor minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not share any unused portion of their five minutes with another member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share your time? Member Hoyle, do you wish to share your time with the minister?

**Member Hoyle:** I'm happy to do blocked time.

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Block time it is. You may go ahead, Member Hoyle.

**Member Hoyle:** Okay. Thank you to the chair, minister, and his team. You know, advanced education sits at the heart of Alberta's future economy, and every student in our postsecondary institutions represents potential that will shape this province in the coming decades. The choices made in this budget matter because it shapes our job and employment opportunities available to students. Right now Alberta's economy is changing quickly. Employers across all sectors tell us that they need skilled workers. Our future workforce is sitting in classrooms today and training centres across this province that will drive economic growth.

You know, students can only succeed if the system supports them, so my key focus here today, Minister, is: does the Advanced Ed budget align with the real needs of the Alberta labour market based on our future economy? We know that Alberta and all of Canada, in fact, is indeed facing a deficit in skilled trade workers, from welders, electricians, and the like. Many businesses are struggling to find the talent they need. On page 80 of the 2026-29 fiscal plan it states that "demand for apprenticeship seats remains high with registered apprentices in skilled trades reaching records of more than 78,000," but according to the Alberta Chambers of Commerce report in October of 2025 among those experiencing staffing shortages, a majority continue to say that it's very or somewhat difficult to hire employees with trade certificates.

Across the country governments utilize union training centres to support apprenticeship training, and these training centres in Alberta are already training and supporting apprentices, both union and nonunion members, that they mostly fund, and it's mostly funded by members. On page 6 of the '26-29 ministry business plan, under initiatives supporting key objectives, states "the ministry will provide \$18 million in funding to industry partners and non-profit organizations for initiatives related to development, [and] expansion and promotion of designated trades." Through the chair, can the minister explain which industry partners are being referred to on page 6? Clarifying the budget, will union training centres be funded moving forward? How much funding is set aside specifically, and which training centres are being funded and which ones are not?

On page 6 of the '26-29 ministry business plan, key objective 3.3 states that the ministry will "advocate for and champion the value of designated trades careers and certification to meet the needs of Alberta's labour market . . . economy." Union training centres also provide an important pipeline to connect prospective apprentices with employers and jobs, which helps, of course, act as an incentive for students completing their training. Through the chair, can the minister explain where in this budget we can see specific support for Alberta's labour market and economy connecting apprentices to employment and jobs?

In April of 2024 the Ministry of Advanced Ed announced a pilot program for operating engineers, and this ended in 2025. The stated goal was to expand access to training and trades facing shortages. Through this pilot program the goal was specifically for train operation apprentice program. Through the chair, can the minister share if the program will be funded again? If not, why not? What were results of this program, and how many completed? And what are the new KPIs or goals for this budget? How many seats were available? How many full-time permanent positions are created and will be expected, and how many apprentices were still employed 12 months after ongoing training?

According to BuildForce Canada, the Canadian construction industry alone expects 300,000 workers to retire by 2032. The minister spoke at the beginning of his introduction of reducing barriers to under-represented groups, such as women and Indigenous peoples. However, on page 159 of the 2026-29 fiscal plan changes to fees show that application fees for five types of

trade training will be standardized at \$150. We know that skilled trades students have multiple certifications in a year and multiple entrances and applications. When we look and do the math, just one example: we look at apprenticeship education program. That's a 328 per cent increase of fee.

Through the chair, has the minister taken into account how these new fees are likely to reduce enrolment in skilled trades programs, create further barriers, especially to these under-represented groups? How is the minister planning to offset the potential reduction of applications, and more importantly to reduced completion rates? We have an issue with folks completing, not just registering, here in Alberta of trades and apprentices. What is the goal to fill those gaps, and how will we keep up with the demand for 2032?

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

We'll give the minister up to five minutes to respond.

**Mr. McDougall:** Okay. Well, thank you very much for the questions. I think you've hit on an extremely important issue and certainly something that takes a lot of my attention and concern. The upcoming retirements that you're talking about are something that I can assure you that ministers responsible for the training of apprenticeship programs and trades talk about all the time across this country, because the retirement level is something, this phenomena of many journey people who are in their 50s and we'll be looking at them retiring over the next 10 years, is significant and important and exists across the country.

Currently we have approximately 78,000 apprentices in total that have started apprenticeship programs. Many of them may be working right now. Some are in classrooms, et cetera. We seat about 32,000, I think is the number, around that range, is the expectation for this year going forward, recognizing that for most apprentices, they're in the classroom for a while, then they're in the workplace training and being educated right there.

One of the challenges we have with the apprenticeship programs and that concerns me in terms of the amount of investment we make, because you talked about the \$150 fee for, you know, registering in an apprenticeship program. That's just a fee. The tuition is higher, but the cost, depending on the actual trade, is many thousands of dollars up to – I think in one institution we're looking at a potential cost of close to over \$50,000 per FLE. So the money and the expense is not on the fee. The \$150 is a one-time fee in this case that I would argue is not that material in the whole grand scheme of things. But there's a cost of educating and training, and we have a phenomenon that exists – it's not just here; it's across the country – where a lot of people sign up and begin apprenticeship programs, they do their first year, and many of them drop out after that. There's a lot of argument and discussion about what transpires. Employers are not hiring second- and third-year apprentices. They want first-years and then they want journeymen. And, of course, a lot of the industry that apprenticeship trades or trades respond to is very cyclical or seasonal.

**8:50**

This is something that causes some people to leave the workforce, or in some cases people decide that this is not what they want to do. We need to not only train and educate and increase the number of seats in the trades, but I think we really need to spend some time and attention – and this is interesting. This is beyond Advanced Education. How do we retain people who have begun the apprenticeship program so that they stay and remain working in the industry in their area?

The other part of it is, again, a little bit outside Advanced Education, although many of our postsecondary institutions support it. It's dual-credit programs and collegiates to try to get younger people that are still in school thinking about the trades as good. The reality is that the trades is one of the most financially lucrative options a young person has in terms of looking for a career. You tend not to have the huge student loans that we've talked about before that you get in, say, a degree program. The pay is good, and the pay is right away when you start into an apprenticeship program, and there are some good salaries. And, of course, it's a great way to start, especially if somebody has entrepreneurial aspirations down the road.

We talk about parity of esteem, and this minister and others spend a lot of time talking about trying to convince young people that the trades is a good program. You don't have to go to get a university degree, et cetera, or whatever. There is a good lucrative position that will allow that.

We talked about partners. For most apprentices, they're working with industry already. Part of the apprenticeship is that they have to work with a company and get time, hours in towards their next level of apprenticeship. Over and above that we work with other organizations like Careers; Skills Canada Alberta; Women Building Futures; Trade Winds to Success, which is focused on our Indigenous population; Alberta Construction Association Trade Pathways for low-income young adults; Careers, which is focused on youth. So there are a lot of partners involved in this effort.

**The Chair:** So thank you, Minister.

We will now move over to the government caucus, and Member Stephan is up. Member Stephan, do you want to share your time with the minister? Yes or no.

**Mr. Stephan:** If the minister is willing to share time, that would be wonderful.

**The Chair:** Minister.

**Mr. McDougall:** I am willing.

**Mr. Stephan:** He is willing.

**The Chair:** There you go.

**Mr. Stephan:** That is wonderful.

Well, Minister, it was great hearing about your discussion on the trades, and I appreciate, actually, those questions on the trades. I was just thinking about: I have two sons, young adult sons, and both of them are in the trades, and there is great opportunity in the trades. There's great opportunity in many areas in Alberta, and having an intentional education is a great return on investment. Trades are definitely a great return on investment. I appreciate the questions and the discussion on the trades. It's a great area, and it's good to see our government prioritizing that to provide great opportunities for our young adults in Alberta. It's a great win-win opportunity.

I want to talk about page 80 of the fiscal plan. It discusses the targeted enrolment expense, which I think is kind of connected to our earlier discussion as well, and it indicates that our government is making investments that are focused on expanding capacity in high-demand areas such as health, technology, business, and nursing to better align education programs with key economic labour market needs. Can the ministry elaborate on how it determines which programs or institutions qualify as high demand when allocating capital funding? Does the ministry rely primarily on enrolment data, or are additional labour market or regional factors considered in the prioritization?

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, thank you for the question. Yes. Well, I think that we use a variety of things. We certainly do consult with industry, and we hear the Department of JETI comes out with a report annually on what their expectations are for the job market. We look at other reports that are out there talking about where shortages would be or where demand is evolving in the job market. We also look at what's happening with enrolment in the postsecondary system currently.

I'll give you a couple of examples. I think there's a lot of controversy these days about that you need a 93 per cent average to get into engineering at U of A. What does that tell you? There's a lot more demand than there are spaces. You know, at the University of Calgary you need a 91 average to get in. In nursing at Mount Royal for a degree program I think you need like a 98 per cent average to get in. All I can say is: thank God it wasn't things like that when I was an undergrad student because I'd maybe end up doing something different. So that would indicate quite clearly that there's much more demand, and we need to respond to that, and that certainly is one indication I'm looking at when we determine where this TEE funding is going to go.

Discussions with the minister: so when the Minister of Mental Health and Drug Addiction has come to talk to me – you know, we're building a number of facilities, mental health facilities and drug addiction facilities. Where are all the psychiatric nurses going to be that are going to fill all those facilities? We need to start working now to increase the number of that particular profession in order to meet expected demand that's been coming from investments that the government is making over the next few years in that area. So it's a variety of sources.

Of course, one of the challenges we have today is that many things are changing rapidly. What is the impact of artificial intelligence going to be on the future job market? You know, there's a lot of speculation. A lot of that speculation, and I would call it analysis, seems to have merit. There are opportunities and there are challenges and threats, perhaps even. You know, the need to be able to try to predict because, of course, if it's a degree program or a graduate program you're talking several years of study just to get to the point where you're now employable: we have to do a little bit of looking into the future and try to do the best we can, but there are some things that are obvious.

I was looking at a report a couple of months ago on health care professionals, X Quebec, because Quebec doesn't participate in the study. But, you know, something like Canada-wide we're 32,000 doctors short where Canada needs to be or should be. That's a lot. Again, you know, that's not a gap that we're going to be able to meet, so in some cases we have to say we have to do medicine differently, ergo things like practical nurses and other things expanding the scope of other medical professionals to deal with that. How is technology going to impact that going forward? It's not a simple area, and it seems that things are moving and changing faster and faster as we go along.

Having said that, we do take, like I said, these studies, what we see happening in the postsecondary system right now, talking to industry, where they think things are going, and all that kind of information in determining, but I would say right now, the determination of where our TEE funding seats are going to be is more than obvious. We need more teachers. We need more health professionals. We need more engineers. We need more other technical skills, so that's where I'd expect that TEE funding is going to go, and we'll have many thousands of additional seats this year that will come from this very targeted TEE funding.

9:00

This happens by the way of, you know, we go out to the postsecondary institutions, and we say: hey, we're interested in more seats here; bid for them. They provide us a bid, and then we can from there ascertain how many. We think that we'll have 4,000 to 5,000 additional seats that will come from this year's TEE funding. That depends on the specific program and the bids that we receive from the postsecondary institutions.

**Mr. Stephan:** Thank you for that answer. I'm going to actually give you an opportunity. I know we only have a few minutes left, but I know something that's kind of exciting for Calgary and, I think, Alberta as well, and that is on page 81 of the fiscal plan. We're allocating additional funding to the University of Calgary vet program. Alberta does have a shortage of vets. We kind of talked about areas where there are market shortages and needs. To the minister: how critical is this investment in supporting vets and solving critical labour shortages in that area?

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, if somebody has a pet dog, you just have to go to the vet and find out that they have a little bit of market control over what pricing is. I can tell you that it's expensive to have a pet these days. There is a shortage, and that's just domesticated pets.

I've got to tell you that, frankly, the biggest concern I have right now is the agricultural sector. I talked a little bit about that before, especially as it relates to large animals. We have a dire, dire shortage. It's a big problem for our livestock industry and very acute in very particular regional areas within the province. You know, there are areas that are a key concern, obviously production animal health and our ecosystem and public health. Just looking at our equine veterinarian situation, it is extremely dire right now. We need to find people that can take care of our horses within the province. Of course, it's also research, investigative medicine.

The beauty of the facility that we have and the program and the increased number of seats and funding that we're putting in that area is that we do expect and there is a very active research program going on and many areas about health and how to retain health, preventative health and things like that.

It's critical. It's critical for our agriculture sector. That's my primary concern on this right now. Those 200 extra spaces that we will get by the end of three and a half years from now are critical.

**Mr. Stephan:** Can I just ask a supplementary question in relation to that? Are there any mechanisms to ensure that those large animal vets stay in Alberta and work, in terms of who we're accepting into that program that we're investing a lot of money into?

**Mr. McDougall:** Yeah. The focus and priority are for Albertans.

**The Speaker:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now go back to the Official Opposition. Member Deol, do you want block time or shared time with the minister?

**Mr. Deol:** Minister, would you like to do shared time?

**Mr. McDougall:** We'll do block time.

**The Speaker:** Block time it is. Go ahead.

**Mr. Deol:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. My question is – actually it's not only my question; it's a consulted question with many community members, constituents, and the professionals working in the industry. According to the Global Affairs Canada report – I'm reading on the economic impact of international education – international students contributed

approximately \$38 billion to \$42 billion dollars annually to the Canadian economy. Based on national distribution estimates for the past seven years, roughly 10 to 11 per cent of those students were coming to Alberta. If you take that into consideration, you will probably approximate this \$4 billion to \$5 billion annually coming to Alberta, our economic activity in this province. So much of this money was directly supporting our postsecondary education system as tuition fees. The minister already acknowledged that 30 per cent of the postsecondary education cost is collected from the tuition fees. There might be a little difference of opinion on that figure, but still when I see that number, that tells me that a big chunk of the tuition cost to the university was coming from the international students.

What had happened is that last year the federal government made significant changes to the international students' visa system, and we see the institutional attitude change and political rhetoric. So many things. Even the international students' admission to the province is also being impacted based on that. So my question was around this: when you see like \$4 billion or \$5 billion annual revenue coming to postsecondaries from one part of the sector of the community, did the ministry take this into consideration when we were building the operational funding for the universities? If we did so, where is that reflected? And if we didn't, then why didn't we do it? And how do we expect the postsecondaries to survive and do well without taking that into consideration?

That was my one question. I think you still have time, and listening to your answers to some of those questions, you mentioned about more than \$30 million dedicated towards students with disabilities in postsecondaries. I know the students with disability in that sector are big-time impacted and suffering. The challenges are access to postsecondary education. I have first-hand experience. My son, and the biggest part of that batch to graduate from high school, is still on a wait-list for the past five years to get into postsecondary admission because of the lack of funding. So if you can just refer to the line items where we can see this is happening and how this money is being distributed and how this is being implemented, which organizations are going to help on this.

My other question was – I have two questions, but I don't know if I have enough time to do that – due to provincial government change, I know that was in, I think, 2024, not 2025, so that impacted the federal research funding to postsecondary institutions when we

...

**The Chair:** Thank you. We'll turn it over to the minister for his response.

**Mr. McDougall:** Yes, well, the issue of international students has certainly had a huge impact on the system both in terms of the huge increase that happened over the previous few years and then the change in federal government policy and its impact on the numbers. But there are different elements to this thing that are important, at least from my perspective.

9:10

It is true to say that a number of our postsecondaries benefited financially from the increase in number of international students that happened over the last few years. In many ways their search for additional revenues was satisfied or partially satisfied by increasing the number of international students which pay tuition sometimes three or four times higher than domestic students. The rule is that we don't allow international students unless they are covering their own costs plus providing some contribution to the rest of postsecondary operating costs and effectively subsidizing other students. The federal government made its decision in an abrupt

way with not a lot of notice. It's part of a larger issue on immigration et cetera and how many short-term visitors come to the country, and they made their decision independently. There wasn't a lot of consultation with the provinces on this, and this is a big challenge that we have.

One of the reasons why the province is insisting that we want more control over immigration is that things happen on an immigration file, and sometimes we feel like we're the last ones to find out what the federal government policy is. It's one of the reasons why we argue that we should be more consulted more often and be participating in determining. What I can say is that one of the fortunate things is that Alberta was a lot less exposed to a number of international students as, say, Ontario and B.C. were. The impact of what has happened with the loss of international students in those jurisdictions: if I talk to my colleagues who have my role in those provinces, they're dealing with a much more severe challenge in those provinces than we are here; nonetheless, it depends on the specific institution more or less, depending on the quantity of international students they had as a proportion of their total.

I would like to think that me trying to describe the fact – I mean, I think there's about, correct me if I'm wrong, \$168 million gross in revenues that went into the postsecondary system, net around \$75-80 million after costs that was contributed by the international students studying here in Alberta that was all of a sudden lost, and all of a sudden the institutions have to respond to that reality, both in terms of the number of seats they have and their operating costs, et cetera. So there've been adjustments, and it has been painful for many of those institutions, the adjustments that have been required there. It's hard to see.

Currently, the amount of spaces that we're allowed: right now the federal government has changed the policy again, so there is no limit on graduate students. That's now open, wide open, if you will, to the number of graduate students you can attract to your province. Undergraduate students: numbers are limited, but so far we're operating in terms of the number of requests that we get for international students in an undergraduate program is less than what we're allowed.

The big other side of this issue is that there has been reputational damage to Canada and certainly to Alberta, to our brand, the education brand, because of the abrupt changes the federal government has made. A lot of international students are saying: "That's it. We're not interested in Canada. We're not going to look at Canada anymore because they keep changing the rules." It's going to take some time to correct. I would say that we had a bunch of universities out there last month, a month and a half ago, in India. Pretty well every postsecondary president in Alberta was in India trying to recruit more students because there is room for us; we have allowed. We have the visa room to do that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. We'll now turn it back to the government caucus, and Member Bouchard is up. Do you wish to do shared or block time with the minister?

**Mr. Bouchard:** I would like to share, if he'd like to share. Sharing is always good.

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Member.

**Mr. Bouchard:** Well, thank you, Minister, and thank you to you and all your team for spending the night answering all our questions. Very much appreciated. Earlier you touched on the multidisciplinary hub investment under the Calgary economy and

programs. I'm interested in the significant dollars committed for the University of Calgary multidisciplinary hub investment detailed in the capital plan on page 1 of the ministry capital estimates. Can you explain how these dollars are going to support building Calgary's economy?

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much for the question. Well, there's going to be shorter term impact and longer term impact I guess is part of the answer. Obviously, when we're building these facilities, capital projects, there's this construction work and design and a whole network of benefit to those industries that are actually involved in the building of the facilities, so that is a big increase.

You know, I talked a little bit about this. I'm an economist, as has been mentioned earlier, and I'm very well aware as an economist that there are a couple of major pillars. What it is that makes an economy wealthy and prosperous versus one that isn't? It's not natural resources, surprisingly enough, in and by itself. If that was the case, Russia would be the richest country on the planet. It's got more natural resources than we do. Brazil, Argentina, places like that have huge amounts of natural resources in all kinds of areas, and their income is less than half of Canadians'. Natural resource is certainly helpful – you can build on it – but what you need to do is that you have to have a jurisdiction that is investable, where investors want to invest in technology and equipment and industry and things like that to help create the jobs and help generate those industries that will add value and help prosperity. The other thing is, you know, technology. But if you have technology and all this investment, you require a skilled and educated workforce to be able to take advantage. It is the key. For me that is the key to a prosperous society.

So when you ask me about these capital projects, my response is that this is an investment. These are investments in ensuring that we have a workforce that is educated and trained to be the generators of economic wealth going forward. It is the mechanism by which we train and educate the health care workers and educators and other people required to provide the social benefits that we have.

By having good, well-trained, educated people that can use the latest technology, that can provide added value, it's a virtuous circle. If you generate these things, if you have the educated workforce and you have an investable society, which is stable, which has a rule of law, which doesn't make dramatic changes from one time to another so that people feel secure, then have that educated workforce, things will happen and then you'll get and can afford those wonderful social programs that we all take advantage of. For me, again – I'm taking a little bit of a walk here – you know, at the end of the day, it's the educated, skilled workforce that makes it all happen and that's the big differentiator. To me, these capital projects are about providing the facilities that can generate and where we can house all this education, training, and research.

That's another element I forgot about. I talked about technology, and going forward, it's technology that becomes increasingly the determinant. Again, the research happens in postsecondary. It happens in industry as well. There's a co-operative environment that needs to exist in that area. Again, these facilities: many of them are going to be places of research and development, and we want to be able to attract the research dollars, whether it's from the federal government, ourselves, or the private sector, and they can know that these things can happen in those locations.

**Mr. Bouchard:** Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the answer.

Switch gears a little bit here. One of the key objectives, 1.1 on page 4 of the business plan, focuses on strengthening the alignment between postsecondary programs and employment by enhancing education pathways and expanding innovative learning opportunities

such as work-integrated learning and apprenticeship models. It reflects a broader theme throughout the budget, ensuring that skills development options match the evolving needs of Alberta's labour market. Can you elaborate on the potential of work-integrated learning and apprenticeship programs to help address this challenge and provide Albertans with training that better aligns with current and emerging job opportunities?

9:20

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, work-integrated learning, I think, is critical. You know, in the case of apprenticeship programs and trades, for example, most of the learning will actually take place at the workplace of whoever is providing the positions for the apprentice. There's a certain segment of time that comes in the classroom in the postsecondary institution or in the union hall or union facility, but a lot of the learning in that particular area, and most of the learning, I would argue, will come from the actual workplace and the hands-on experience of doing the job.

It's not only related to the trades. Increasingly, employers are telling us that students just coming from a classroom without having any work experience and that progress and actually having a close relationship with the type of company that they're going to end up working for is suboptimal. So we put in a great deal of attention to the fact that: is there an opportunity within the different programs? This is at the university level; it's not just polytechnics and others, community colleges. Is there a relationship with those programs with the workplace? It gives an opportunity to work, get some experience while they're doing it. The student can themselves say: do I like what I'm doing?

You know, one of the worst things – it frustrates me – is somebody that spends a lot of time going down an education path and then gets there and decides that it's not what they want to do. This is a big problem, by the way, in education today. We have a huge number of people who graduate education degrees and don't want to become teachers. It's a complicated issue, of course, but we just spent four years educating that person to become a teacher, you know, and then we lose much of the benefit. Sometimes they go into other areas that are not teaching but where the education in education is important.

I think that increasingly we will provide – we do it now. We will require postsecondaries to look very strongly as to where people can get work experience while they're doing their programs because you end up with a much better product at the end for the employer and a more prepared graduate of whatever program we're talking about. That's what I think is key.

**Mr. Bouchard:** Okay. Awesome. What do we have left? A minute and a half? Okay. I'll just ask a quick question, I guess. You spoke earlier about scholarships a little bit. Line item 3.3 of the ministry's operating expense shows that Advanced Ed is forecasting 35 and a half million in scholarships to support students. Are you able to detail the specific scholarships under this line item?

**Mr. McDougall:** Sure. Well, we have a long list of scholarships. It's worth noting as well there are the scholarships that Advanced Education provides and then most if not all of the postsecondary institutions also have their own inventory, if you will, of their scholarships that have been made possible by oftentimes philanthropy by people in their community and industry players as well.

Before I get into any specifics, it's also posed, you know, that over and above what you see in the operating line on the budget, there's a further \$71.2 million in scholarship awards funded by the Alberta heritage scholarship fund, which, by the way, I think they don't get attention much.

Anyway, we have Jason Lang scholarship, Indigenous careers Alberta award, Alberta Innovates graduate student, Rideau Hall Foundation, northern Alberta development bursary, high school apprenticeship, Alexander Rutherford, all these type of scholarships. And the list is longer than that, that we provide.

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

We'll now go back to the Official Opposition with Member Eggen. Would you like to do block or shared time with the minister?

**Mr. Eggen:** You know, I would like to share. The minister is doing such a great job, you know? He's got to branch out.

**Mr. McDougall:** Next year.

**The Chair:** Block time.

**Mr. Eggen:** All right. That's cool. I sort of have a grab bag of questions, then, because we're running out of time here. Now, this is the budget document here. Once again – this has been for a number of years, Minister – it doesn't seem to annotate how much operating funding each college, university, and polytechnic receives from the provincial government. If your ministry can please provide this information before the budget is voted on this spring. This information used to be provided, but then when the UCP started to underfund certain institutions in, you know, a widely sort of divergent way, I would say unequal way, suddenly that chart disappeared, right? So: new minister; fresh start. Transparency is a great virtue. Like, if you could get us a list of all the colleges, polytechnics, and universities and how much operational funding is allocated to each of them. That doesn't have a page number because it's not there.

I found it interesting and I was heartened for you to mention two things, first of all that the best investment we can make, of course, is in the education and the technological training of our population. You're right. I mean, I think you have lived in Brazil. You know, that is a place with great resources and a very large population, but it doesn't perform as well as Canada because it just doesn't have that reach into the population with postsecondary education.

We need to make that investment. I know that you understand the concept, and I understand the political challenges that you have in regard to this, but we can make the case. We can improve the lot of all Albertans' lives, increase the economy and the diversity of the economy, have people live longer and healthier – it's documented that a postsecondary education will do that for you, too – if we increase our capacity to educate people in a postsecondary institution, be it the trades or a polytechnic or a college, so I implore this government to make that investment. We've had seven budgets in a row that are serious cuts. Almost a third of the money was taken out in the first few years, and now we have static budgets, I say \$172 million short again on this budget, and it's just not the time or place – it never is – to do that. We need to make an investment, and we can still do that if we have the will.

It's interesting because we can see the effects of that underfunding over these last seven years in Albertans losing more students than other provinces to other places. Alberta also has slipped from fifth to ninth in terms of being the most educated province. We were in fifth place, and now we're in ninth place amongst the provinces having some postsecondary education. Clearly, we are doing a disservice to Albertans who can't afford to attend school or there are no places available. Young people especially: there's that key window where you can go to school and get that education, and then the probabilities decrease very quickly over time after, you know, age 20 or 21, 22. There's a window that

we can do to make that happen, and we're clearly losing ground in educating our population.

You quoted some averages of, you know, what sort of average you need to get into nursing programs and engineering programs. I'll have to look back to see. I've been trying to remember those ones. There are some outrageous numbers, really. It's a shortage of spaces. We need to create those spaces, and you can't create them out of nothing by doing targeted programming. I mean, you can a little bit but not too much. It's like the loaves and fishes kind of analogy. Like, you can't magically create something out of nothing.

Until we make up that operating budget shortfall and increase the base funding for our schools and, for me, be able to document and see that, as I said with my first question, we're going to end up with more of these 98 per cent entrance requirements for nursing and 95 for engineering. It's a shortage. You're an economist. You know. This is, like, a version of a shortage of a product that is getting priced out, in this case by the entrance requirements that it takes to go to these schools. We can do better. I demand better, and certainly we will do better with an opportunity to invest.

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

We'll go to the minister for his answer.

9:30

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, thank you very much for the question. Yeah. I mean, I've had the, I guess, you could say privilege or at least the experience of both living and working in Russia, in Brazil, and in Argentina, so I had a lot of time to look at and compare what goes on in those types of jurisdictions that, like I said, are resource rich but are not able to get the level of prosperity that we have been taking for granted here in Canada. I am concerned, and I'm sure most members around here are very aware of what's happened to our level of productivity in this country, particularly over the last 10 years.

It's alarming to me because when I was born, Argentina had the same income per capita as Canada. Hard to imagine. Same population, same level of education. They actually had a little bit bigger navy. They went one direction and we went the other. We should not take for granted that our level of prosperity is a given. At that time Argentina was the richest country per capita certainly in Latin America, and it was one of the top of the world. Again, there are a lot of elements that are required to do that.

We have the highest, most educated population in the world in Canada, yet our productivity level is stagnant. This comes down to a question of priorities and what we are doing. I was looking at a study a couple of months ago, and the highest unemployment rate amongst our young people – and when I talk to young people over 18 to 32, with those who haven't finished high school and actually those with university degrees in certain areas, an education doesn't necessarily get you a job, and it doesn't necessarily increase the level of productivity of your country, which is what we depend on to sustain our level of prosperity. The question is: how are we spending the money, and how are we allocating? Where are people going, and what are they choosing to be educated in and trained in? Do we need to do things differently? The trend so far over the last several years in this country is a little bit alarming.

You talked about the level of funding that Alberta has funded. For many decades Alberta, because of the benefit of our natural resource wealth, was able to fund well in excess of any other jurisdiction in this country all kinds of things, including advanced education. I was at a conference about a month and a half ago perhaps now, December or January, where ex-Premier McGuinty from Ontario was talking about how he went out and put in an extra \$3 billion into advanced education when he was there. And he

lamented the fact because the level of productivity and the result of all that huge increase in investment in the advanced education system provided zero measurable results. So the question comes in: if you're going to be spending money in a limited-resource reality, how are we spending the money, and have we invested the money in the things that are going to optimize the rate of return that we get, the marginal benefit that we get from that marginal cost and investment? This is what concerns me.

You're right when you mention the issues about what's happening in education, nursing, and things like that and the high average to get in. Yes, we need to be focused, and we need to increase that, not only because there's a lot of demand for people to go in those fields, but there are also shortages in the workplace for those people, of graduates of those areas. This is what we're doing. We're allocating funding within the system to try to target and focus on the things that will optimize our results. That will mean that some people are not going to be happy that are not within those priority areas, but this is the prudent thing to do. We need to respond to this dynamic world that we live in and recognize that what worked five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago isn't necessarily the right allocation of resources that we need today.

So there are no budget cuts. I'd like to think, like I said, that part of the reason why the Treasury Board, was able . . .

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

We'll now go back to the government caucus with Member Wright having the floor. Member, would you like to share or block time with the minister?

**Mr. Wright:** I'd love to share time with the minister.

**The Chair:** Is that okay with you, Minister?

**Mr. McDougall:** For you, I'll do that.

**Mr. Wright:** Aw, excellent. You're too good. Too good.

Well, Minister, I want to thank you for taking the time to discuss a couple of pieces tonight here with us about your estimates. I'd like to hone in on something that you brought up a little bit earlier, about half an hour ago, maybe a little bit longer, around dual credits and the impact they have on the postsecondary space.

Now, Minister, we've kind of talked at length of my deep love and appreciation for the Medicine Hat College as well as the Prairie Rose public school division down in my riding. When I take a look at the dual credits, you know, it's really about how we're (a) relieving pressure from our postsecondary institutions but also how we're getting our youth engaged around cool and emerging industries and technologies at the high school level.

Now, with that, you know, the Medicine Hat College has been able to bring on their agribusiness certificate, their new and emerging technologies with drones and UAV certifications, addiction counselling, but on the dual credit side of things they focus very heavily on flight with Prairie Rose, fire rescue with Prairie Rose, the health care aide, heavy duty mechanics, firefighting I and II certifications. I think it's really important that when we take a look at providing the supports to the next generation of Albertans in a postsecondary space, we have to look at that whole pipeline as being kindergarten to workforce, not segmented out between, you know: what's advanced education and what's not advanced education? There's a large crossover, a Venn diagram, if you will, of education and opportunity.

Now, as I'm looking at the estimates, you know, I'm very pleased to see the Medicine Hat College expansion receiving \$2 million towards their capital fund planning for this expansion. This has been a project of mine that I've been advocating for for over two

years, well before your term as minister, and goes back to your predecessor. You know, I hear a lot of great things coming out of Medicine Hat College: how they're engaging with the youth, how they're expanding their program offerings, and what the community health wellness centre expansion would look like and how it would engage with putting more bums in seats in key industries to really bring forward the next healthy cohort of the workforce.

With this being a great rural Alberta, you know, item and also key to my community, I just want to say, first of all, thank you for this big win in southern Alberta. Minister, can you please explain how this critical project for Medicine Hat College is going to impact the workforce in southern Alberta and specifically in rural Alberta and how the expansion of, you know, health-related programs are going to be able to service rural Alberta's health needs?

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much for the question. Medicine Hat College, I think, was one of the first postsecondaries I visited outside of Calgary, and I was impressed with the facility, impressed with the people, impressed with the kind of work they're doing and the passion of the community.

I think it's important to recognize that a big element of it and part of, you know, what helped drive support for that project is the community support. They received a significant financial donation from one of your citizens from down there, and that certainly makes it easier for us to say: look, we have some leverage dollars here that we can use to build a facility that's extremely important. We know as a general that the best way to make sure that you can have the kind of educated, trained workforce in those communities in your region is to have an opportunity for people to be educated and trained in that region. If people move off to the big cities, it's less likely that they're going to come back, things being as they are. The community is facing labour shortages in health and social services, and there's a rising demand for early intervention and preventative wellness in the community and limited access to local training infrastructure.

9:40

It was easy to come to a conclusion that this was a priority that was worth supporting. This planning project will provide better insight to the scope and cost of that eventual product and how they address these needs. The project ultimately aims to deliver a modern, inclusive, purpose-built facility that integrates student supports, applied learning, community services, and workforce development. The planning funding, like I said, will help us to determine the scope of the overall project, and I'm excited about it.

**Mr. Wright:** Well, thank you. Thank you, Minister. Like, I'm a big fan of Medicine Hat College. One of the things that I really appreciate is that the president of the Medicine Hat College, Kevin Shufflebotham, is very committed to making sure that they fit in the ecosystem in a way that supports Albertans and they're not just chasing after the next title to go behind; Medicine Hat polytechnic or Medicine Hat university. They really fit well in that comprehensive community college space, and it really leads to a number of key trade career promotions and how they're able to get these trades students out into the workforce faster. It's another one of the partnerships they have with Prairie Rose about getting folks through their first-year apprenticeship while they're still in high school and then being able to go forward into trades.

Now, Alberta's economic strength really depends on expanding our apprenticeship seats. Minister, through the chair, can you expand on how the \$18 million investment under outcome 3, champion designated trades, will promote these designated trade

careers across Alberta and support industry partners in reaching new audiences?

**Mr. McDougall:** Yeah. Thank you very much for the question. Well, first of all, Advanced Education is investing more than \$18 million in nonprofit community organizations to raise awareness of opportunities in skilled trades and reduce barriers to accessing apprenticeship education. That funding directly supports Albertans by increasing access to groups that are traditionally under-represented in the skilled trades such as women, youth, and Indigenous Albertans. I've talked a little bit. I've mentioned Careers, Women Building Futures, Skills Canada, Trade Winds.

The other thing is the dual-credit program, which you referred to, which I am a huge, huge fan of. I mean, I think anything we can do to get people started earlier – you mentioned about kindergarten to workforce. I mean, you know, work is not the only purpose of education, but it's a big part of it, and we need to make sure that we're training and educating people for the workforce. Dual credit makes things more efficient. People begin to get credit for certain programs while they're still in high school, and it means that it takes less time once they finish high school to be able to get certified in an area that they want to pursue. I think we need to do more of these things, and we're doing that.

The nice thing about Medicine Hat College, where you're talking about, is it fulfills a very specific role, and it's not the same role as a research university or a polytechnic. The community college has a very important role. It's important to the community. It's got to be very integrated with the community, and it has perhaps, you know, a wide variety of things that it needs to do for that community. Yeah. I mean, Medicine Hat College is a wonderful example, and I think the president up there is doing a wonderful job. It makes it easy to support.

Anyway, as it relates to skilled trades and careers, Medicine Hat College has a big role to play with that, and it's good that they're working with the high school system in there to provide the dual credits. Again, it's a more efficient way to educate people. It gives people a taste of options before they graduate high school, and a community college has a major role to play within that.

**Mr. Wright:** Minister, I'll just take the last 30 seconds to recognize a program your ministry has been a part of and has funded, and that's Helmets to Hardhats, which supports our Canadian Armed Forces members transitioning to a new career in civilian life. Maybe I'll turn it over with the last 15 seconds for you to discuss maybe some of the impact on CAF members with that.

**Mr. McDougall:** Well, how much am I going to say? I mean, you know, our veterans who have made service come back, and we provide that assistance to be able to help get them into the workforce.

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

We'll now go back to the Official Opposition with Member Hoyle. Do you wish to share or block time with the minister?

**Member Hoyle:** I'll do block time.

**The Chair:** Thank you. You may proceed.

**Member Hoyle:** Minister, on page 106 of the '26-29 ministry business plan it states that "\$94 million is allocated to skills and training support to help individuals get back to work and build a skilled workforce, including initiatives under the Alberta jobs strategy."

In 2024 I introduced Bill 207, the skilled trades and apprenticeship education amendment act, aimed at supporting skilled trades in Alberta, which would have been a great strategic investment in the future of our workforce and economy, and the government did not accept that as a vote in the House. In 2025 out of the provinces with the highest apprenticeship completion rates Alberta comes in as fifth in the country, below Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, and Manitoba. We continue to see that skilled trades are generally at risk under this government because of the overall decreasing apprenticeship enrolment numbers and, more importantly, the completion rates lower compared to other provinces, especially when we're looking at full-time permanent employment.

Through the chair, is the minister collaborating with both the Ministry of Jobs Economy, Trade and Immigration and the ministry of education with the RAP program to ensure a swift transition from training to apprenticeship to employment? What strategies are in place between these two ministries to ensure that apprenticeship seats are being filled and turning into permanent employment?

Page 10 of the '26-29 strategic plan states that the government remains committed to "Supporting industry-led workforce development initiatives that address sector specific labour shortages and build Alberta's competitive advantage." Minister, you spoke earlier about the opening of more seats this evening, and I have some questions regarding performance metrics regarding the grant program.

In 2025 \$15 million was invested over three years to union training providers to deliver apprenticeship training, and it was expected to open 650 new apprenticeship seats per year. I don't see any performance metrics for this grant in this budget of 2026, or if there is, I would love to know where that is. How many seats, through the chair, were opened last year? How many are you planning this year? What other KPIs are being used to measure the impact of this investment as it relates to Alberta's labour market needs?

Also, line 2.2 on page 26 of estimates covers revenue and cuts for postsecondary. I've got a question here in terms of: Minister, you know, you suggested way back in the first block of answers that charging interest on student loans acts as an incentive for former students to pay their loans. I'm wondering, Minister, if you have any data or numbers to back this up? I'd love to have that, even if you aren't able to share data today, to have a follow-up on this. Do more Albertans with student loans pay off their loans compared to other provinces? Does the department know of any measurable relationship between each percentage of interest collected and increases or decreases in the percentage of loans that get paid back?

The one thing is that I'd love to just get a follow-up on the question I asked you earlier, and that was related to the union training centres and the program of International Union of Operating Engineers for local 955. This program ended in 2025. It was a test pilot put on by Advanced Ed. I had asked a couple of questions previously, and I would love to see if you can answer that again, please. So through the chair, can the minister share if the program will be funded again in this budget, and if not, why not? What are the results of this program? How many actually completed this program? What are the new KPIs and goals for this budget? How many seats were actually made available? How many full-time, permanent positions were created in this and are expected if it is going to be funded again, and how many apprentices were still employed 12 months after undergoing training under this test pilot program?

9:50

**Mr. McDougall:** The union-funded program?

**Member Hoyle:** Yeah. In 2024 the Ministry of Advanced Ed announced the pilot program with the International Union of Operating Engineers. That's the program. Specifically, it ended in late 2025, and the stated goal was access to training in trades facing shortages, so the designated trades.

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

We'll go to the minister for the response.

**Mr. McDougall:** We raised a few issues, and I'll try to deal with everything. You talked about the low completion rates on apprenticeship programs, and it is a concern. It's a big concern for myself, and, you know, there are a lot of issues that are used or a lot of factors that can explain it. One of the issues is the cyclicity of a lot of, say, the construction industry generally and a lot of areas. There's work when there's work, and then there's not work when projects end and they're waiting for the next project. One reason we'd like to make things a little bit smoother, everyone could, is so that people would know that when they finish a project, they can move on to the next project that would be available.

The reality is that the number of new jobs created in this province is also much higher than the rest of the country, so people have options, particularly if there's a gap between projects at work and there's other work available comparative to other jurisdictions. A lot of people will opt to leave that. That's unfortunate, like you said. Some people realize they don't like the work, but when you don't have options, you're more likely to stay there than if you do, so there's a number of factors.

Like I said, we're interested in increasing the opportunities for people to understand and work within the trades so that they understand what they're getting into, and then they hopefully will like the work or the kind of work that they want to do over a period of time before they begin the training. But it is an issue. It is a concern that we lose a lot of people, particularly after first-year apprenticeship and going into second year, so it's an ongoing issue. A lot of it is, like I said, that people here in Alberta tend to have more options than other jurisdictions in this country.

In terms of the union program, there was a pilot, the International Union of Operating Engineers for the crane and hoist pilot project. That has been successful, and there were 32 in the pilot project; 100 per cent of people were able to get work after that. Now we have put aside \$1.25 million over the next three years for 88 seats. In terms of the union program generally that shows up in the accounts, we have almost 400 seats in '25-26. We just initiated this general overall union program. We put out bids to the unions. They came back, and I think we took 10 separate proposals – in around that range – and we would expect that increase this year. We're looking to have even more additional programs that they would want to do. We're working well with them. They're happy, we're happy, and this is something that we're going to sustain, certainly until '27-28, and then we'll re-evaluate.

Because it's new, at least for the other trades over and above the crane and hoist, it's still early to know what the results are going to be because the funding for that was just approved a couple a few months ago. They're beginning to provide those programs, and it'll be interesting to see what the results are and if they have the same fill rates as what happened with the crane and hoist pilot program.

Every day I forget a question. Yeah. So I hear there's an allusion that we were reducing funding, and that's not the case. We're actually increasing funding: \$18 million additional funding this year for apprenticeship programming. We intend to increase its number of seats, and I would expect that kind of trend to continue over the next few years. Don't forget that I mentioned we have 78,000 – that's a record – apprentices going right now, and we

expect that number to increase. We're going to continue to operate new seats and . . .

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

We'll now go back to the government caucus with Member de Jonge speaking. I imagine you want to share your time with the minister.

**Ms de Jonge:** Sounds great. Would you like to share time?

**Mr. McDougall:** Let's do that.

**Ms de Jonge:** Thank you so much, Minister. Sounds good.

Well, thank you so much, Minister. I want to talk about something that you actually already mentioned, so I'm going to go back to it. It's the TEE funding, the targeted enrolment expansion funding, that you mentioned earlier in response to some of my colleagues' questions. I'm seeing good things about TEE funding in the budget and, specifically, there are two separate buckets of funding that are mentioned under outcome 1 of the fiscal plan.

So that's going to support critical occupations in Alberta, and you've talked a bit about that, but there's this existing \$118 million. I'd want to know: what does that existing \$118 million in funding currently support? In addition, what are some expected areas of growth with the additional \$30 million investment that Advanced Education is seeking to make?

**Mr. McDougall:** In general terms the target enrolment expansion has increased spaces in postsecondary programs in health care, nontrades, construction, technology, business, engineering, aviation, agriculture, early childhood education, and a few others. In the first round we ended up with 12,574 additional seats. Like I said, the list is long in specific programs, and in the second round, which was last year, we ended up with 2,592 additional seats. If we tell you to take a quick look at where the biggest numbers were,

bachelor of commerce: 3,309 in the total; physical science, 600. Health care aide certificate was 1,403 additional seats. This is all in the first round, by the way.

Like I said, the general areas that I talked about were there. In the second round the biggest single was in nursing, with 761 seats in a number of different degree and diploma programs. The second would be in the technology area, where there was 726.

Where we're going to put this particular round: we haven't actually put out the bids yet so we can't say definitively, but I can tell you that engineering is a big target. Nursing is another target. Educational aides and child care aides is something that we'll definitely be focused on, reflecting the needs that we have already discussed today.

Of the \$118 million in Budget 2026 we have \$87.6 million to continue the funding of round one and the \$30 million for the funding for round two that I talked about. So in total, like I said, we have 72 programs and 15,100 additional seats. Of course, we'll see, we think, between 4,000 and 5,000 additional seats in those priority areas will be happening in this particular new round two of funding.

**Ms de Jonge:** Thank you very much, Minister, for all the great work you're doing and again to your department officials with you tonight.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you. I'm well supported.

**The Chair:** Thank you, everyone. Thank you to all the members and the minister for the discussion. I must advise that the committee's time allotted for the consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded, and I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled tomorrow at 3:30 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]







