



August 17, 2023

Honourable Danielle Smith
Premier of Alberta
307 Legislature Building
Edmonton, AB, T5K 2B6
BY EMAIL: premier@gov.ab.ca

Dear Premier Smith,

On behalf of the members of the University of Calgary Faculty Association (TUCFA) and the Association of Academic Staff at the University of Alberta (AASUA), we would like to **congratulate** you and your caucus on your success in the last provincial election. Our two Associations represent the 6,400 academic staff members at the U of A and U of C, which is over two-thirds of the university academics in the province.

We appreciated the excellent relationship we had with the previous Advanced Education Minister, Demetrios Nicolaides, and look forward to continuing that relationship with the new Minister, Rajan Sawhney.

Our Associations are proud to take a strictly non-partisan position. Our members reflect the diversity of the Alberta political landscape, so we believe we should work cooperatively with all Members of the Legislature, the Minister, and the Premier. That doesn't mean we won't disagree at times, hence this letter, but we hope you accept these comments in the constructive manner they are intended.

We were hoping to see your recent mandate letter to the Minister of Advanced Education speak to the crucial steps needed to protect Alberta's world-class post-secondary system. While there are some positive initiatives listed in that letter, it does not address a number of the key challenges facing the university sector, and the Universities of Calgary and Alberta in particular. We want to highlight some of those below.

Following a decade of restraint, over the last few years, there has been a significant decline in provincial funding support for Alberta's universities. From the high in 2018/19, the Universities' operating grant dropped by more than 14% over the following next two years (as reported by the Canadian Association of University Business Officers). Taking into account the impact of inflation (i.e. using constant dollars), the current operating grant is lower than it has been since 2008 in the wake of the international market collapse.

The cuts to operating university funding present a significant threat to the quality of Alberta's post-secondary system. For example, the comparative salaries and benefits for academic staff at the Universities of Alberta and Calgary have fallen significantly (see attachment). In comparing the U15

group of research/doctoral universities, the U of A was once second in the country; it has now fallen to the middle of the range and is quickly declining in the rankings. The U of C was once in the middle of the pack but has now fallen to the bottom third. We are increasingly unable to compete, and our recruitment and retention ability is being compromised. We shouldered the burden during the COVID crisis while maintaining program excellence for students. Now that the province has returned to a path of increasing prosperity, we are deeply concerned researchers, educators, and most vitally — Alberta's students — will be left behind. As our world-renowned education system is a cornerstone of our province, we hoped that your mandate letter would refer to the need to keep Alberta competitive and provide fair compensation for the recruitment and retention of university academic staff so that Albertans can be assured that the very high standard in teaching and research/innovation that the U of A and the U of C provide can be maintained and, indeed, be improved and deepened as we go forward.

Alberta is facing a period of significant population growth that we will soon be unable to accommodate without substantial reinvestment in the post-secondary sector. According to the Alberta government website, Alberta's average annual population growth was 4.5% from April 2022 to April 2023, higher than almost any other province. That's more than 200,000 people in one year alone. In the first quarter of 2023 alone, the Alberta government website reports a population growth of 1.22%, the fastest growth among Canadian provinces (other than PEI). According to the Alberta government's population projections in 2021 (before the latest boom), Alberta was expected to grow by 1.9 million people by 2046. According to the City of Calgary Population Projections¹ the city is expected to grow by more than 100,000 people in the next five years. Advanced Education's projection model² assumes a 15% increase in students over the next five years. There is an urgent need for a growth strategy to meet the increasing expectations of Albertans for access to a university education for themselves and their children.

The U of A and U of C have been growing in student numbers to meet the recent growth in population. Combined with significant budget cuts, this growth means larger class sizes (The U of C reports a 10.9% increase in class size over the last four years), and less support and attention for each student. The U of C reports an increase of 8.5% in the student numbers over the last four years, while the U of A reports an increase of 10.2%. At the same time the academic staff complement at the U of C has decreased by 2.2% over the same period, while the U of A's academic staff complement has decreased by 6.2%. On an ongoing basis, these trends are unsustainable.

As Alberta grows, we need increases in the health profession programs as your Mandate Letter rightly describes. But if we are going to equip future Albertans with the skills to play a meaningful role in a rapidly evolving economy, we also need growth in our post-secondary system as a whole, beyond immediate job training. Higher education's strength lies in its ability to foster innovation and critical thinking, creating future leaders and engaged citizens. Global shift such as the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence demonstrate we need higher learning's benefits now more than ever. We cannot predict what tomorrow will bring, but we can foster our province's adaptability by equipping researchers, educators, and students with the resources to build knowledge and embrace change through discovery. For our overall prosperity, we need graduates in engineering, computer sciences, agriculture, forestry, and the hard sciences, but also in the fine arts and cultural industries. We need

¹ <https://www.calgary.ca/content/www/en/home/research/economic-outlook.html>

² <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/alberta-post-secondary-enrolment-fle-projections>

more teachers, social workers, architects, planners, accountants, human resources professionals, lawyers, horticulturalists, and health professionals. Beyond preparing students for specific workplaces, we will also need bright, educated minds to fill the career opportunities we can't yet anticipate. In addition to our province's need for a variety of university graduates, we note that the unemployment rate for university graduates is the lowest of all demographic groups, and the salaries of comprehensive academic and research university graduates are the highest among workers (see the Alberta Government report³). The investment in post-secondary education in all forms provides significant returns for our provincial economy, and there is evidence our graduates contribute billions to the economy as workers.

Every year, about 6,000 students leave Alberta, the highest student export rate of all Canadian provinces⁴. This means we are annually sending 6,000 Albertans away to other provinces because the educational opportunities are not available here. Given our prosperity, we would expect Alberta to *bring in* students from other provinces, rather than relying on the other provinces to educate our young people. Often students stay where they are educated, so we do not want to be sending our best and brightest students to other provinces to get education opportunities that are not available here. In fact, we want to provide more opportunities to attract the best and brightest from across the country and around the world to Alberta to build vibrant, cutting-edge industries in this province.

We need an overall plan to ensure educational opportunities in Alberta for our province's students and we need a plan for continued growth of the university sector. I hope that some of these challenges may be reflected in the next provincial budget as well as your next mandate letter.

As we mentioned earlier, our Associations look forward to working with you and your government over the term of your mandate. If there is any further information you need of us or if you would like to discuss any of these issues further, please do not hesitate to contact our Associations at faculty.association@tucfa.com and reception@aasua.ca.

Sincerely,



Gordon E. Swaters
President, AASUA



J. Kent Donlevy
President, TUCFA

cc: Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Advanced Education
Brygeda Renke, Executive Director and General Counsel, AASUA
Sheila Miller, Executive Director, TUCFA

³ <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/results-graduate-outcomes-survey-publicly-funded-post-secondary-institutions-class-2019-2020>.

⁴ State of Postsecondary Education in Canada 2022, higherstrategy.com

Attachment

