

Alberta's Ten-Year Strategy for Post Secondary Education

Conclusions of Phony Government Consultations

- Dr. Dougal MacDonald -

Alberta's 10-year strategy for post-secondary education openly attacks the right to post-secondary education. It reveals an intention to supply narrow private interests with skilled labour free of cost. It has nothing to do with educating the youth to acquire the knowledge and ability to think for themselves so as to build a bright future for themselves and the society they depend on for their living, and contribute to the same internationally.

Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) government revealed this in its 31-page report on post-secondary education, titled *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs*. The report puts forward six high-sounding goals, supposedly based on what was found out during the study: Improve access and student experience, develop skills for jobs, support innovation and commercialization, strengthen internationalization, improve sustainability and affordability, and strengthen system governance. However, all of them add up to further consolidating the post-secondary education institutions (PSEs) as the handservants of the monopolies.



The report was supposedly created through "extensive engagement" with a wide variety of stakeholders, supervised by a UCP-selected "Coalition of Thought Leaders." Albertans are familiar with phony government consultations. The conclusions are set in advance, the process is a charade, and the only feedback incorporated is whatever upholds the pre-determined conclusions. For example, academic organizations have long opposed focusing PSEs on commercializable research because it denigrates important research in disciplines like the humanities and social sciences, yet this is a key recommendation of the report.

Implementation of *Alberta 2030* will be overseen by a UCP-selected "Guiding Coalition" which is heavily dominated by business interests rather than educators. For example, one guiding coalition member is the former CEO of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP). Another is vice president of the Business Council of Canada. Still another is Stephen Harper's former Chief of Staff. What qualifications do such people have to direct the future of higher education?

The report completely ignores how the UCP is, in practice, already blocking the PSEs from having any future at all. The UCP has cut investments in post-secondary education by \$690 million with

more cuts to come, frozen student aid, allowed a seven per cent tuition fee increase annually for three years, fired hundreds of workers with more under threat, and cut vital maintenance funding. The UCP is also considering the long-discredited neo-liberal idea of basing PSE funding on institutional “performance,” however defined. Finally, it was recently disclosed that certain PSEs, backed by the UCP, want wage rollbacks and even want workers to pay back wages already earned. Obviously, attacking the rights of faculty and staff will further undermine the future of post-secondary education.

As expected, the upper administrations of Alberta’s PSEs are falling all over themselves to acclaim the anti-education *Alberta 2030* report, just as they humbly accepted the UCP cuts. They defend the UCP, not post-secondary education, which is not surprising as 43 of the current Board of Governors members, including nine Board Chairs, were rammed in by the UCP in a blitzkrieg sweep across Alberta in August 2019. Many new appointees were energy corporation executives, supposedly chosen because of their business experience. Already, newly appointed board chairs have run roughshod over faculty councils because their business background means they “know better.”



The first goal highlighted in the report is “Improve access and student experience.” This is empty rhetoric. UCP cuts in funding and freezing of student aid, coupled with university tuition increases and firing of staff, are decreasing access and boosting student debt, now estimated to average over \$20,000 per student. Already cuts have led to course and program cancellations and library closings, among other problems, all of which will worsen student experience. The real route to better access is increasing investments in post-secondary education and making it tuition-

free, as do Cuba, Germany, Finland, Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, and many other countries.

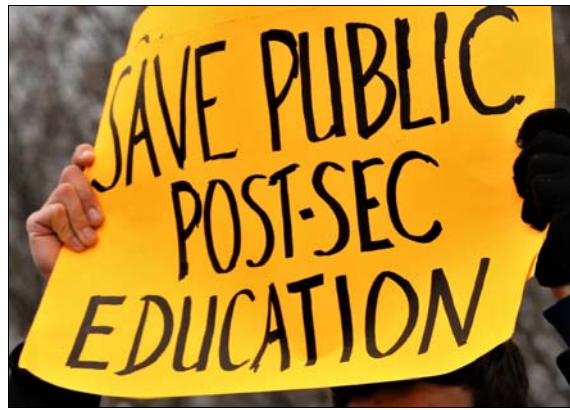
The second goal is “Develop skills for jobs.” This is a pillar of the neo-liberal view of the role of the university, that is, to provide corporations with well-trained workers for free. The Minister of Advanced Education states in his report’s preamble that, “Our system will be highly responsive to labour market needs.” But it is the private foreign corporations that control the direction of Alberta’s economy and thus set labour market needs. The fact that the people of Alberta have no significant input into the economic and political decisions that affect their lives is a huge problem which must be addressed as soon as possible.

The third goal is “Support innovation and commercialization.” This is another pillar of the neo-liberal view of PSEs. That is, that PSEs should mainly serve to develop new ideas and technologies at public expense which can then be turned into commercial enterprises that are handed over to the rich for a song. Alberta has countless examples of this, especially relating to petroleum. For example, at University of Alberta in the 1920s Dr. Karl Clark perfected a process using hot water and reagents to separate bitumen from oil sands. It is Syncrude, Sun Oil, and other private oilsands monopolies that have made billions from Clark’s publicly-funded discovery, while next to nothing dribbled down to the people of Alberta.

The fourth goal is “Strengthen internationalization.” This means attracting promising students and researchers from elsewhere to participate in the innovation, commercialization, and sell-out already mentioned. In 2014-15, international students comprised 35.1 per cent of University of Alberta graduate students. International students are also shamelessly used as a cash cow, with student fees far higher than domestic fees, as well as not capped or restricted in any way. For example, a domestic undergraduate at University of Alberta pays an average of \$5,320 per term while a “foreign” undergraduate pays \$20,395, almost four times as much. This means a significant revenue windfall when international students comprise almost 14 per cent of the University of Alberta’s

undergraduates.

The fifth goal is “Improve sustainability and affordability.” More specifically, this goal calls for PSEs to “access more diverse options for revenue.” This is code for less investment from government and more from student tuition fees and private donors. Revenue contribution from tuition fees has already climbed from 16 per cent in 1985 to 40 per cent in 2015. Private donations mainly benefit the donor. For example, Darryl Katz, billionaire former owner of Rexall Pharmacy Group, partly funded University of Alberta’s Katz Group Centre for Pharmacy and Health, which will do research that will benefit drug companies. “Improving sustainability” also implies that eventually universities should fund themselves with zero government investment. In other words, the long-term aim is privatization of our public universities to exclusively serve the needs of the monopolies.



The sixth and final goal is “Strengthen system governance.” This is doubletalk for private industry more closely controlling the universities. Academics know well that the standard “bicameral” form of governance where Boards of Governors supposedly make only financial decisions and faculty councils supposedly make academic decisions is broken and cannot be fixed. In essence, all important PSE decisions are made by the corporate majority on the Boards of Governors who overrule any faculty decisions they disagree with. The report also recommends that this failing system should be overlaid by another government-appointed, system-level council or superboard that will essentially control the entire PSE sector, no doubt dominated as usual by private business interests.



The UCP’s backward vision of post-secondary education is clear. Universities, colleges and technical institutes should be funded so as to first and foremost serve the private monopolies that control Alberta’s economy and politics. This is not what Albertans want. As is the case everywhere in society the key question facing everyone is, “Who decides?” The current system of governance disempowers the faculty, students, and staff when they are the ones in whom decision-making should be vested. This underscores that an urgent matter for discussion is how PSEs could be funded in a sustainable manner that serves the needs of a modern society which humanizes the social and natural environment while upholding the rights of all.

By opposing funding cuts, tuition hikes, changes in governance, and so on, faculty, students and staff are already taking social responsibility for post-secondary education in various ways. The defence of our rights and the rights of all should guide the resolution of academic problems in a way that genuinely improves the quality of student learning and meets the needs of society, not those of narrow private interests. By waging this fight, taking over making decisions collectively on all matters that affect our lives becomes a new normal. Organizing to exercise control over the post-secondary institutions and their academic missions will build academies and societies that serve the continuous nation-building interests of the working people at home and abroad.