



Don't cut Alberta's post-secondary education system, put it to work

Albertans need jobs. Our colleges and universities can help

Alberta's post-secondary institutions offer a path to a better and brighter post-pandemic future for working Albertans.

It's time for the Alberta government to use this powerful resource to help its people and to stop unnecessary and counter-productive job, budget and program cuts.

Economic slumps

Albertans are all-too familiar with economic booms and busts.

Traditionally, when the busts arrive and workers lose their jobs, they turn to post-secondary education to upgrade their skills, to find new careers – to better position themselves and their families for life after the bust.

The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global oil-price war and a world becoming increasingly concerned about climate change have been a triple whammy for Alberta workers.

Unemployment is at an all-time high. Our economic model coming out of the pandemic may be very different from what we knew only a few months ago.

Will the retail industry go back to what was normal or will we see a continued reliance on online marketing and shopping?

Will oilpatch jobs ever return to the level we knew or will automation and action on climate change mean we're looking at fewer or different jobs?

Will green jobs and sustainable energy be growth industries where Albertans can find rewarding work? Will training in Information Technology offer better career options?

Faced with a tectonic shift in the economy and mass unemployment, more Albertans than ever will be turning to further education, only to find it weakened by cuts blamed on the pandemic and other, more damaging, permanent cuts ordered by the Alberta government before the pandemic.

Cuts to post-secondary education affect Albertans from every corner of the province, urban and rural. All Albertans – whether from the cities, towns, or rural communities and farms – need access to good post-secondary education if they are to ensure a bright future for themselves.

What is to be done?

Cutting budgets and jobs at post-secondary institutions was a mistake before the pandemic and economic collapse. Following through with those plans now that the world has changed so drastically would be an act of wilful and blind ignorance.

1) **Halt all budget cuts and jobs cuts.** There is a great deal of work to do in preparing these educational institutions and unemployed or under-employed Albertans to face the future.

All workers who have been laid off or had their positions abolished must be reinstated. Let's put these people to work rather than adding them to the terribly long unemployment lists. If the work they did is no longer as viable because of the pandemic or the changing economy, retrain them.

2) **All education programs that have been cut must be restored.**

When Albertans in increasing numbers turn to our post-secondary institutions in these difficult times, they should not be met by closed doors. Let's make it easier for them to learn, not harder. In fact, let's create more programs to meet the inevitable increasing demand.

3) **Make post-secondary education free.** This may sound like a big ask, but it really isn't. Let's offer free post-secondary education to all Albertans.

Those who are unemployed, under-employed, receiving the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or on any social support or welfare benefits can immediately use this opportunity to upgrade their skills and improve their chances of getting good jobs. This is how our post-secondary system can provide a path to a better future.

AUPE's Committee on Political Action has previously called for post-secondary education to be made free. In the long run, having post-secondary education accessible to all can only be good news for Alberta as it navigates our fast-paced and swiftly changing world. It will make this province more competitive globally and put us at the forefront of the world market for jobs for decades to come.

The government has found billions of dollars to invest in pipelines and to give as tax cuts to corporations. It can afford to invest in Alberta workers. Indeed, it cannot afford not to.

It's time to invest in education and Albertans

Let's research what kinds of jobs will be the jobs of tomorrow and prepare Albertans for that, rather than focusing solely on one industry or on the jobs of the past.

Over the next 10 years, 70 per cent of jobs will require some kind of post-secondary education (PSE).

Alberta is blessed with excellent post-secondary institutions. They are there to serve Albertans. They cannot fulfill that function adequately while fighting for their very survival due to a program of austerity created before the world changed.

Alberta needs to adapt and evolve to survive. It needs to change its approach to post-secondary education to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.