

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Faculty respond to Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs Report**

EDMONTON, AB, May 4, 2021 – The “Building Skills for Jobs” report underscores the fundamental lack of understanding by the current Alberta government of a university education. It is not to impart skills of the moment, for a job today, that by some metric is purported to meet current market/industry needs, which is gone tomorrow. A university education develops and nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, higher order problem solving, and a quest to discover. These qualities and more, provide university graduates with durable, transferable, and versatile skills, allowing them to adapt and thrive in any environment. Furthermore, university education benefits society well beyond industry and labour markets, facilitating an informed citizenry to make important societal decisions. It is unfortunate that the report reflects this lack of understanding.

“The provincial government is correct that a majority of post-secondary students are looking for jobs and employment opportunities to accompany their university degree,” notes Dr. Kevin Kane, President of CAFA and Professor of Medical Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Alberta. “But they are looking for education that will lead them to a rewarding, well-paying career, not simply the entry-level jobs that *Alberta 2030* seems overly concerned about.”

We agree with the report on the point that access to high quality post-secondary education (PSE) must be expanded. Among young people, Alberta has the lowest PSE participation rate of any province. We laud the report for mentioning “targeted strategies to strengthen the inclusion of indigenous learners”. The report is lacking, however, in specific mention of means by which the PSE participation of young people will be enhanced, particularly regarding financial challenges to such participation.

The report indicates that investments in research have not kept pace with growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in many countries, including Canada. The report proposed that Alberta’s strategy should be to build and invest in “priority sectors and areas” for commercialization. Experience shows priority investment and government attempts to pick “winners” has a poor track record. Truly transformative innovation and discovery comes from broad-based investment in research, as winning innovation cannot be predicted, but instead first emerges and then its worth becomes apparent. A bold move by the province, and industry, would be investment significantly exceeding the pace of GDP growth.

“Alberta’s researchers need academic freedom to pursue the innovative discoveries that will propel our province’s diversification of our economy, and lead to exciting new ideas and products,” noted Dr. Kane.

In the report, the provincial government claims they have an objective to ‘attract and nurture world class faculty’ while at the same time they are trying to force salary rollbacks and concessions through their Provincial Bargaining Coordination Office. How can any government or employer claim that they are trying to attract top talent while cutting salaries and benefits?

In the report, the government proposes to attract increasing numbers of international students to Alberta PSE institutions. We hope this is not for the simple purpose of using much higher international student fees to off-set constantly reduced provincial investment in our universities. Furthermore, as it is, we see little investment in the added supports necessary for international students.

CAFA applauds the proposed deconsolidation of the three largest research universities from the provincial budget, that would give them autonomy similar to other Canadian PSE institutions. This would end the government encouraging universities to attract research support from sources external to the province, and the government then discouraging expenditure of such support, as it would be reported as a provincial government budget expenditure. CAFA would like to see deconsolidation and increase of institutional autonomy apply to all universities and colleges in Alberta. If this approach promotes our institutions’ ability to attract revenue and improve the quality of education, then why does it only apply to three of our institutions?

Potentially, the most worrisome proposals that *Alberta 2030* recommends, are changes to the PSE governance structure. The provincial government claims these changes are a strategy to depoliticize our boards of governors, but this is the same government that removed the previous government’s appointees before their terms had expired, and now propose extending their own appointees’ terms far past the next election. The report recommends a new governance model without attempting to specifically outline what that might be. Although three new provincial boards/councils are mentioned in the *Alberta 2030* report, their roles or responsibilities are either vague or not articulated, and regardless, will likely increase red tape.

“For the price of \$3.7 million, CAFA was hoping that *Alberta 2030* would clearly outline a strategy for the future with compelling proposals that provided academic evidence for their effectiveness,” stated Dr. Kane. “From the document released last week, faculty, sessionals and professional staff are still left in the dark with what many of these proposals will mean to the future of their work and livelihoods.”