



2024 BUDGET SUBMISSION

Prepared by the Alberta Students' Executive Council, representing 15 students' associations and 90,000 students across our province.



MISSION

ASEC empowers and unites student leaders to advocate for the best interests of post-secondary students in Alberta, ensuring accessible advanced education and quality of life for students.

VISION

Alberta post-secondary students have the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive academically and personally during and after their studies.

OUR MEMBERS



ASEC Members represent approximately 90,000 students at 15 post-secondary institutions including universities, polytechnics, and colleges with service areas covering all major centers and the majority of rural Alberta. Our members are located on Treaty 6, 7, and 8 territory, the traditional homeland of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and the Metis nation. We are honoured to live and learn on these traditional lands as we acknowledge our responsibility towards reconciliation.



Best Preparing the Next Generation

Post-secondary should be an exciting time when students are preparing for the next stage in their lives, discovering who they are personally and hope to be professionally. However, many students are currently graduating with daunting debt and experiencing tremendous stress over financial pressures without access to adequate mental health supports.

Over the last year, ASEC has seen improvements to the framework to keep education costs predictable for students and celebrated the announcement of the 2% domestic tuition cap, adjustments to student loans, and the announcement of a retention tax credit in the mandate letter. Related to tuition, ASEC is hopeful to have consideration of including Independent Academic Institutions willing to uphold the domestic cap included in backfill funding.

While we believe it important to celebrate successes, it is clear from what student leaders from across the province are reporting from their campuses that more needs to be done to alleviate the severe affordability impacts in the short-term. Students are impacted by the same rising costs as other Albertans but are also struggling to pay big ticket items like tuition, fees, and textbooks. There are plenty of anecdotes involving students living in vehicles, choosing to drop out, or forgoing textbooks in order to juggle growing bill totals. This year, ASEC's budget submission includes just two key priority areas identified by students in hopes that their urgency will be felt.

Mental health, like many better known physical health ailments, benefits greatly from early intervention. On-campus services often serve as a triage, or first point of contact, and the intention is that with increased investment students can gain awareness of these services and access them promptly to avoid more severe diagnoses that cause more strain on the healthcare system down the road.

While ASEC was pleased to see the lowering of student loan interest to prime in 2023, with the highest rates this generation has seen, we are calling for this to be further reduced to zero, in line with five other provinces and the federal government. Specifics of these two focus areas are in the following pages.

INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH

Invest in Mental Health on campus and ensure community supports are accessible in rural centers.

Economic factors such as rising tuition fees, persistent inflation rates, and the increasing cost of living have created substantial financial obstacles for students seeking to access post-secondary education (2). These financial strains have exacerbated mental health issues among students, who grapple with the emotional toll of financial stress, academic pressures, and the life transitions associated with attending post-secondary.

Per the 2021 Mental Health Index, Albertan post-secondary students struggle more than students in any other province with mental health (5). Full-time students have the lowest mental health score when compared to individuals across all industry sectors and have the most significant increase in mental stress (4). A significant number of Alberta students report experiencing elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and depression directly linked to their financial circumstances. Students from rural centers have noted that it is challenging to retain exceptional talent on campus without base funding and furthermore, that community supports are often lacking. With campus often being preventing and triage referring to community care, we see partnership between Advanced Education and Mental Health & Addiction as essential to finding a sustainable solution. This rising challenge disadvantages students both during and after their studies, earlier more effective care would be likely to cost less over the long run.



Our Recommendations

ASEC recommends a commitment of \$188 per Full-Load Equivalent (FLE) student to be allocated towards mental health services in alignment with the Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS). This recommended funding level is based on an examination of historical allocations (\$143 per FLE at Lethbridge University funding granted in 2013), adjusted for enrolment trends and inflation. The proposed allocation of \$188 per FLE serves in fortifying the mental health infrastructure and services on Alberta's campuses.

ASEC recommends that this allocation be tied to base institutional funding with regulations that require the funds to only be spent on mental health services and programs that result in reliable long term funding.

MINIMIZE THE STUDENT LOAN BURDEN

A prime rate on student loans is still too steep with soaring interest rates.

In the most recent RBC Student poll, 41% of Alberta students expect to graduate with over \$20,000 in student debt and only half of those graduates expect to repay their loans within three years (6). The majority of student loan borrowers are affected by compounding interest payments that impact graduates with less financial security the most. This financial challenge can profoundly impact their ability to establish themselves in the workforce effectively and force them to make drastic decisions like leaving school early, moving, or taking on work they cannot handle to make ends meet.

Loans are an excellent tool for students who would not otherwise be able to fund their studies. However, current interest rates make them cost prohibitive in the long-term. We need to ensure that Alberta continues to produce the talent that will fuel innovation and industry for our continued collective prosperity.

Average Student Loan Debt By Program

College

\$18,100

Undergrad

\$31,000

Masters

\$33,000

Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0036-01 (7)

Our Recommendations

ASEC recommends the further reduction of student loan interest. To further aid in the repayment of these loans by graduates who need it the most, ASEC recommends student loan interest be reduced to 0% for Alberta Student Loans in alignment with British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

ASEC recommends the implementation of a loan forgiveness program for graduating students to both help graduates as they enter the workforce and retain talent in Alberta. We recommend that 25% of a borrower's Alberta Student Loan for their program be forgiven if they are working in Alberta within three years of graduating. Under these conditions the maximum forgiveness for an undergraduate student would be \$21,250 (3).

REFERENCES

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2. Alberta Government. Advisory Panel on Post-Secondary Mental Health: Final Recommendations Report. October 2017. Retrieved From: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/advisory-panel-on-post-secondary-mental-health-final-recommendations-report>.
3. Alberta Student Aid. Loan Limits. 2023. Retrieved from: <https://studentaid.alberta.ca/policy/student-aid-policy-manual/eligibility-for-student-loans-and-grants/loan-limits>.
4. Healthy Campus Alberta. Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addiction Framework. Retrieved from: https://bp-net.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HealthyCampusAlberta_PostSecondaryFramework.pdf.
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6. RBC. 2023 Students & Financial Readiness Poll. Retrieved from: <https://www.rbc.com/newsroom/news/article.html?article=125828>.
7. Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0036-01 Student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710003601-eng>.



CONTACT US

ASEC
Alberta Students' Executive Council

ASEC seeks to collaborate with diverse stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of its advocacy priorities. Driven by elected student leaders from across the province, ASEC leaders have unique and valuable lived experiences to help shape meaningful solutions for Alberta post-secondaries. Together, we can create a post-secondary landscape that empowers students as the leaders of tomorrow to have excellent experiences while in school and be set up for success upon graduation.

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