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For immediate release

Alberta's post-secondary student leaders are issuing the following joint statement in response to the Government of Alberta 2019/20 budget release:

October 25, 2019 Edmonton, AB - Student leaders in Alberta have worked hard to advance students' priorities to government and yesterday's budget announcement presents serious concerns for students.

Tuition increases of up to 22.5% compounded over three years, combined with a student loan interest rate hike and the elimination of tuition and education tax credits, will significantly increase the costs of post-secondary education. All these measures will have severe impacts on affordability and accessibility of post-secondary education, causing many Alberta families to sink further into debt. After all, student debt is family debt. As such, students must be included in finding innovative solutions that lessen the burden of these cost increases placed on Alberta families. While we have significant concerns about affordability and accessibility for domestic students, we must also ensure that predictability is maintained for our international students, who have had to bear the burden of unfair tuition hikes for many years. We hope to work alongside our institutions to ensure proper fiscal efficiencies are found first before relying on students to fund operations.

We are also disappointed to see the elimination of the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP). This initiative created over 12,000 positions over the last four years, resulting in positive impacts on student finances, employability, and skills development. Its elimination will also have a huge impact on Alberta's non-profit sector which relies on this funding to create new jobs. As a result, it is necessary to find alternatives to fill in the gap left by STEP, such as ways to connect students with employers, experiences, and skill sets to contribute to Alberta's economy upon graduation.

It is unfortunate to see multi-year reductions in infrastructure investments across the province. While we understand that the current economic climate constrains available capital funding, we also know that a failure to invest in capital construction and maintenance now will only lead to ballooning costs down the line. Campus Alberta faces a \$2 billion deferred maintenance deficit over the next five years, and we cannot saddle future Albertans with the physical and financial costs of ignoring this problem. We call on the government to create and commit to a strategic plan that will address the post-secondary deferred maintenance deficit in a reasonable and responsible manner.

Large-scale cuts to institutional operating grants will create cost pressures at every post-secondary institution. We expect to have a seat at the table when discussing how these cuts will be implemented. Alberta student leaders want to ensure these cuts do not impact front line instruction, student affairs, or mental health supports at our home institutions, but instead are targeted towards centralized administrative costs that have increased out of proportion to inflation and enrolment growth.

Notwithstanding the previously-stated concerns, a positive outcome from budget 2019/20 is the increased funding provided for apprenticeship training across the province. This funding will allow greater numbers of students to access retraining opportunities and re-enter the labour force, expediting Alberta's economic recovery. While we are pleased with this positive outcome, we would like to see a similar value placed on both undergraduate and graduate students' professional development as students are key drivers for economic development and innovation.

Post-secondary education represents a strong return on investment in creating new jobs and growing our economy, but in order to realize that return, our higher education system must be accessible, affordable, and predictable. Unfortunately, this budget undermines the accessibility and affordability of the system while threatening the viability of quality instruction and critical support services at institutions across the province. Despite these setbacks, Alberta's student leaders will collaborate with decision-makers to strengthen our province's advanced education sector and keep students' rights top of mind.

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The Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council, the Alberta Students' Executive Council, and the Council of Alberta University Students along with the Athabasca University Students' Union, Lethbridge College Students' Association, and the Students' Association of Lakeland College collectively represent over 260,000 post-secondary students from all corners of Alberta.