

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Distance students concerned about budget impact at Athabasca University

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Students at Athabasca University were shocked at the planned changes coming to Alberta's post-secondary education system as a result of the provincial budget announced on October 24, 2019. The budget cuts come just as Athabasca University finishes implementing changes based on the Coates Report, including improving its sustainability as well as the quality of education delivered at Canada's largest distance education institution.

"Athabasca University students are deeply disappointed about the direct attack on post-secondary affordability and quality contained in the provincial budget," said Brandon Simmons, Athabasca University Students' Union President. "Despite commitments to the contrary over the course of the recent election campaign and in ongoing discussions with the government, this budget represents the largest step backwards in improving Alberta's post-secondary system in over 25 years."

The budget highlights five changes that will have a direct impact on Athabasca University students:

- Education and tuition tax credits are unceremoniously being terminated without consultation or discussion. Outside of a few niche programs, there is no increase in student financial aid to cope with these detrimental changes, which are often the only aid that distance students can take advantage of.
- Tuition could be hiked by 21% over the next three years, which is a drastic reversal of the previous legislative change - which UCP MLAs all supported – that limited any future tuition increases to inflation only.
- Provincial funding will be cut by 3.6% to Athabasca University, which means students will be asked to pay far more for a decreased quality of education. While there is some room to be innovative and efficient, a cut this large will have a direct impact on the education students receive, and the ability of our province to leverage an educated workforce into creating new jobs.
- The rate of interest on student loans is being increased by 1%, meaning students will have to pay more to borrow money to get an education. Over the course of paying back a \$40,000 student loan, for example, this would cost over \$1,750 more for a student to get their education.
- Ending the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) means fewer opportunities for students to gain experience and earn money to pay for their education during the summer months. It will also have a huge impact on Alberta's non-profit sector, which relies on this funding to create new jobs.

"I hope the government reconsiders these steps and takes the time to consult with students to ensure that changes to government programs do not have an impact on instruction and affordability," concluded Simmons. "This is going to make getting a post-secondary education harder to get for Albertans, especially for the demographic of students that Athabasca University often attracts – rural students, students with dependants, and students who are already working full-time and contributing to our economy."

The Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) is an independent, student-run society representing the undergraduate students of Athabasca University. We serve over 35,000 members annually in home-study locations across Canada and internationally. In any given month, our membership is in the order of 26,000 active students. Our mandate is to provide advocacy, support, and student services to our membership, and to foster the support, promotion, and excellence of distance education at AU and globally.

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For more information on AUSU and its programs:

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