

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**HUMAN RESOURCES**

**Tuesday, April 27, 2021**

**Video Conference**

**Nova Scotia Loan Forgiveness Program**

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## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

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[Hon. Ben Jessome replaced Hon. Gordon Wilson]  
[Dave Ritcey replaced Larry Harrison]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

## **WITNESSES**

### **Department of Labour and Advanced Education**

Duff Montgomerie, Deputy Minister  
Carol Lowthers, Executive Director, Student Assistance



House of Assembly  
Nova Scotia

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 2021**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**

Rafah DiCostanzo

**VICE-CHAIR**

Bill Horne

**THE CHAIR:** I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I am Rafah DiCostanzo, the MLA for Clayton Park West, and I am chairing this committee today.

Today we will hear from the Department of Labour and Advanced Education regarding the Nova Scotia Student Loan Forgiveness Program.

I also wanted to note that, as members know, the Executive Council Office has informed us there will be no appointments to agencies, boards and commissions to consider today. They will be there for the following meeting, I believe.

Members, witnesses, the committee clerk, and Legislative Counsel should keep their video on throughout the meeting, with their microphone on mute, unless I call them to speak. They should turn on their own microphone before speaking and then turn it off afterwards. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off. If you have another device, this is the time to make sure your cellphones are off - and I just did mine as well.

Please try not to leave your seat unless it is absolutely necessary. If I need to confer with the clerk or Legislative Counsel or if members wish to confer before a vote, I may call a brief recess. If any members have technical problems, please reach out to Judy Kavanagh, our clerk today.

I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves. We can start with Mr. Bill Horne, Vice-Chair.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel, Mr. Gordon Hebb, and Legislative Committee Clerk, Judy Kavanagh.

I welcome the witnesses, and if I could ask you to introduce yourselves and start with opening remarks. Mr. Montgomerie.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Good morning, Madam Chair and committee members. My name is Duff Montgomerie, Deputy Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, Workers' Compensation Board, and the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency. I'm pretty proud of myself that I was able to tie a tie today, because I haven't had one on for a long time.

I'm also pleased to have with me this morning Carol Lowthers, Executive Director of Student Assistance at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education. I would like to begin by thanking all of you for the invitation to present to the Human Resources Standing Committee today.

We're very happy for the opportunity to be here today to be able to share with you the excellent work being done to financially assist students in post-secondary education. We have one of the best student assistance programs in the country, and I'll take the next few minutes with an overview of the program and its enhancements over the past several years.

The Student Assistance program provides needs-based financial assistance to eligible Nova Scotia residents who would be unable or unlikely to pursue post-secondary education due to insufficient resources. The Nova Scotia Student Assistance program has been significantly improved in the last 10 years. In 2010, a report on the university system in Nova Scotia by Dr. Tim O'Neill was released. In the report he noted Nova Scotia has one of the weakest student assistance programs in the country. Since then, the province's annual investment in Nova Scotia students has increased by \$30 million for students' financial needs.

The focus of each of the new investments has been on reducing student debt loads and making it more attractive for them to stay here, since we know that young people who study here are more likely to stay here. The flagship program within this investment has been loan forgiveness. Because of loan forgiveness, over 9,000 students have graduated with a combined total of \$66 million less student debt.

Since it was rolled out, the eligibility terms for loan forgiveness have been extended and improved four times. We've created a stream that accommodates the needs of students

with disabilities who study a reduced course load. We've increased forgiveness from four years of study to five, and we removed the minimum debt threshold to forgive 100 per cent of the provincial portion of the loan. Most recently, we added eligibility for certificates and diploma programs completed at universities and the Nova Scotia Community College.

Loan forgiveness is only one of the ways that Nova Scotia Student Assistance has continually made improvements, big and small, that better support students in financial and other ways. They also continually streamline the processes, manage a large direct-lend portfolio, and assess over 20,000 complex applications a year. The maximum provincial weekly assistance increased four times, from \$150 to \$200 per week of study. The ratio of provincial assistance that is provided as non-repayable, up-front grant versus loan doubled from 20 per cent to 40 per cent.

In the Winter of 2021, we responded to student financial needs by issuing two COVID-19 grants, one based on general need and one for students with disabilities. We have significantly increased our engagement with stakeholder groups so we can ensure all program improvements are the right ones. That's key to us; we meet with the students on a regular basis. Obviously, this includes everyone, from financial services officers at educational institutions, on-campus disability resource facilitators, to high school and post-secondary student unions and high school guidance staff.

Nova Scotia's program is the first in the country to offer the Repayment Assistance Plan, which helps students keep their loan in good standing while they establish their careers. Nova Scotia led the country in creating an online portal for schools to confirm enrolment, which meant students could get their funding much more quickly.

The launch of My PATH - and Carol, who is with us today, was the driver behind this. The launch of My PATH - My Personal Assistance Tracking and History - was among the first student self-service online portals in Canada. My PATH made the application process virtually paperless and has saved processing 250,000 pieces of paper each year because students' to-do tasks can largely be completed online. They can ask confidential questions or submit documents at any time of the day from anywhere in the world and receive a response inside a secure portal. My PATH was nothing short of revolutionary when it launched, and it is being redesigned right now, once again in consultation with student users, to be even better, with even more features. Because of My PATH and other processing and policy improvements, full assessment of an application has gone from six weeks to 10 days or fewer.

Nova Scotia Student Assistance has many features that specifically support students with disabilities, and these have also increased over time. In addition to a tailored loan forgiveness stream, students with permanent disabilities now have direct deposit of funding, which helps them pay for support services and equipment so they can access these much sooner in the school year. Students with disabilities also benefit from the many student assistance partnerships and memoranda of understanding with Nova Scotia

universities and the Nova Scotia Community College and a number of community organizations that ensure students have accessibility on campus.

Nova Scotia Student Assistance is also leading the country in outreach. Our outreach has shifted from merely explaining the program to integrating key financial literacy principles, campaigns, and partnerships within the information that supports students as they decide how to choose and fund their post-secondary education. Today, student assistance is seen as an approachable, helpful partner in students' post-secondary and life goals decisions. Outreach now also helps students with post-secondary decisions and career choices to maximize their return on investment.

It also maintains a special focus on opportunities to increase the number of young people in under-represented groups who make the transition from high school to post-secondary study. In addition to the Student Assistance Program, the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary provides every Nova Scotia university student a bursary of \$1,283 annually, based upon full-time study. In total, Nova Scotians can receive over \$40,000 in non-repayable assistance.

In addition to the Student Assistance Program, we have several programs to assist students in gaining valuable work experience and employment upon graduation. You may have heard recently that we had our most successful year to date, in the middle of a pandemic, with the Co-operative Education Incentive program, which provides employers with a wage subsidy, making it more affordable to hire post-secondary students into co-op positions.

We had a record number of 861 work placements in 2020, and we can't thank the public sector enough for stepping up during the pandemic to continue to provide an excellent learning experience for our students. The Student Summer Skills Incentive program provides approximately 800 summer jobs for post-secondary students with non-profit organizations throughout the province. Our Graduate to Opportunity program and Innovate to Opportunity program help recent graduates connect with jobs full time in Nova Scotia. In 2020, over 250 graduates were supported by these programs in partnership with the private sector.

Mitacs is a national not-for-profit organization that fosters growth and innovation in Canada by solving business challenges with research solutions from academic institutions. The funding we provide to Mitacs supports up to 250 science and industry pathway internships for university and college students to work with and support local businesses. These valuable experiential learning opportunities will see students transfer their skills from theory to real-world applications, while private sector organizations will gain competitive advantages by accessing high-quality research expertise.

NPower is an example of a program we have that provides pathways for low-income, diverse youth to careers in IT through free, industry-specific training and wraparound supports. This program will train 350 youth from vulnerable populations in

digital skills over a three-year contract with LAE. The 15-week program includes training, mentoring, and wraparound supports, and connects students with jobs upon completion of the 15 weeks.

[10:15 a.m.]

We also have several apprenticeship programs available. This year's budget included \$1.8 million for the Apprenticeship START Program expansion. The Apprenticeship START Program was temporarily expanded to employers outside of rural areas to include Sydney, Truro, and Halifax, and now enables apprentices who were laid off to transfer to another employer and continue to still receive START funding. It is anticipated that up to 400 new apprentices and 200 laid-off apprentices could be hired through this expanded program.

The Province also provides free tuition for apprenticeship technical training levels delivered by the Nova Scotia Community College and other training providers, and issues progression and completion awards to apprentices to reduce the financial burden associated with completing an apprenticeship.

Finally, we know COVID-19 has been difficult for students. That's why we provided the one-time COVID-19 Response Grant of \$750 to over 13,000 Nova Scotians in 2020-21. The grant helped recover shortfalls of earnings and unexpected costs associated with their studies.

We also recognize that students with permanent disabilities have exceptional education-related and equipment requirements. A one-time \$800 grant will help ensure equity of access to training and other educational opportunities, reflecting the government's commitment to inclusivity and opportunity. Approximately 3,200 Nova Scotia post-secondary students with permanent disabilities have received this grant.

THE CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr. Montgomerie. Sorry to interrupt. You normally have 10 minutes. I don't know how much more - the rest of it can come out in questions, but if you can keep it to the 10 minutes, we'd really appreciate it.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Last page, Madam Chair, if it's okay.

THE CHAIR: Go ahead.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Okay, thank you.

In January, we provided universities with a one-time, \$25 million COVID-19 grant to help offset the negative impacts the pandemic has had and will continue to have on the post-secondary sector. This is about helping universities respond to COVID-19 and to keep their campuses safe for everyone. Funding to the universities will indirectly benefit students through the supports and programs they provide.

Thank you very much for the time. I fully appreciate it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr. Montgomerie. I apologize for interrupting.

I believe normally, in this committee, we put our hands up for questioning, but I would like to offer my colleagues here, if we can do the 20 minutes - if you prefer - so that it's fairer that way, just in case I miss somebody's hand. We'll do the 20 minutes with the PCs, followed by the NDP, followed by the Liberals. Depending on how much time is left, we'll divide it equally as well.

Is that okay with everybody? Could I get a sign - all in favour, put your hand up? To go for the 20 minutes.

Do we have enough hands, Ms. Kavanagh?

JUDY KAVANAGH (Legislative Committee Clerk): We have a majority. It's not unanimous yet.

THE CHAIR: Yes, go ahead Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: If I could - I'm sorry, I'm a little confused. Typically, what we do is ask questions around the table, right? So, you're saying we'll do . . .

THE CHAIR: Sorry. By putting your hand up, you'll get a question and a follow-up. However, in this case - just to make sure I catch everybody - when it's virtual, sometimes it's a little harder. I start a list of who put their hand up. If you'd like me to go that route, I can go that route, or we can do the 20 minutes that we've done in many other committees. I just find that easier when it's virtual, but I'm happy to do either.

Are you okay with the 20 minutes? By starting with the PC Party, it will be yourselves to start the first 20 minutes. Are you okay with that, Mr. Johns?

BRAD JOHNS: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I think we are unanimous now. Thank you so much.

It is 10:20 a.m., and we're starting with the PC Party. Mr. Ritcey go ahead.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, Madam Chair. Welcome, Deputy Minister Montgomerie and Carol to the committee today. I want to start out with some questioning around preparing students for post-secondary studies.



My first question is: Could you explain the reason for changing the Parents as Career Coaches to Let's Talk Careers and how it will assist secondary students in choosing careers and post-secondary educations?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'm going to punt that over to Carol, I think. I'm just double-checking my notes on that question as well, if that's okay, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lowthers, please.

CAROL LOWTHERS: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for having us. Parents as Career Coaches is a program that is managed through EECD, so we would be happy to try to get some information on that program for you. That is where that lies. We don't manage that.

DAVE RITCEY: I have a second question: How have the changes been rolled out in high schools during the pandemic?

CAROL LOWTHERS: I guess like with everyone, we had to pivot in terms of our delivery. Through our outreach program, we've had a really robust network where we have gone out to high schools and worked with guidance counsellors to deliver various presentations on post-secondary, and particularly financing your post-secondary.

We think we have a really great program, as the deputy minister indicated. We've made some very significant changes. One of the things that we've really focused on is doing presentations in the classroom or in the school, as well as at community groups and really anybody who is interested in us providing them with information on financing their education.

Of course, with COVID-19 we had to change up what we did and how we do it. We're very fortunate in that our students and lots of parents are way more tech-savvy than I am or our staff are. We worked quickly to move all our presentation information online, so even today we are still giving presentations from one end of the province to the other. I know our outreach manager, Jacqueline, and some of our financial aid counsellors are doing regular presentations.

Basically what we've done is we are in contact with our guidance counsellors within the school system and have advised them that we're still here, that we're still doing this work, and that we will continue to do that.

Instead of going out and being physically onsite, we have gone out and done them through social media, MS Teams, Zoom, whatever works, and we've had really good take-up.

The other thing we have around outreach that we have done is a really great working relationship with Junior Achievement in the province. We've been working with Junior

Achievement for about the last five years or so whereby they also deliver materials and information for us for students starting in Grade 9. That relationship has continued.

As with a lot of our programming, because we have to be where students are, this year we've undertaken a new working relationship or project that is just starting to get underway with Junior Achievement. We're going to develop some new tools to be able to provide more robust information and follow students throughout their journey from Grade 9 onward.

We also have a very robust and detailed website. We're very active - I'm sure a lot of you are following us on Twitter and Facebook - and trying to get good information out as quickly as we can. We all know it's important to get information to students sooner than later. Grade 12 is really getting kind of late in planning your next steps for post-secondary and how you're going to finance it, so we work closely to try to get as much information out as soon as we can.

BRAD JOHNS: I'm kind of curious with regard to enrolment this year with the pandemic last year and stuff like that, what the enrolment in first year post-secondary education is looking like. I'm wanting to know whether or not there might be any statistics or anything that show the number of students who graduated last year who actually did attend post-secondary education this year and what that number looks like in comparison to previous years.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: The surprising thing is two universities decided to have students back on campus at Wolfville and Antigonish, and really worked hard with the community to ensure that there was a true understanding of keeping not only the community safe but the students safe. The remaining universities did a mixture of some on-campus and mostly online.

The domestic enrolment actually stayed robust. I'm pleasantly surprised. The international enrolment, even though from distance learning, was a little less but still strong. We're seeing early on - and with universities, you have to remember the bottom line for them is September, when the student actually signs on the bottom line - the inquiries that our universities are getting domestically are very strong. We relate that to the amazing job that all Nova Scotians have done to work hard to make this as safe a place as possible in Canada, even though we're going through some challenges right now.

In 2020-2021, there were a total of 46,621 students, of which 21,221 were Nova Scotians - 46 per cent; out-of-province, 14,023 - 30 per cent; out-of-country, 11,377 international students at 24 per cent. So we're cautiously optimistic again. Epidemiology is everything, isn't it, right? However we make out in the next two, three or four weeks can impact how those students and their parents make decisions about where to send their children, but so far, the response has been incredibly encouraging.

BRAD JOHNS: Does the department feel that any students entering into post-secondary education are at any disadvantages because of COVID-19? I'm curious to know how internet in the province has been playing, particularly for domestic in-province students.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I know Develop Nova Scotia can give you better data on our internet receptibility, but I think we're around 88 per cent, hoping to be around 96 per cent within the next two years. To the quality scenario, each university pivoted and spent a lot of extra resources in upping their game and making sure the virtual experience could be as positive as possible for their students.

It's amazing how we've all learned as this thing evolved how we can become better and stronger, even by using virtual kinds of scenarios. Ideally, it's best to have the student in the classroom - no question - but we feel a education continues to be offered by the Community College system and by our 10 universities.

[10:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: If you don't mind, both Mr. Johns and Mr. Montgomerie, just wait for me, because that's for Hansard. No problem at all.

Mr. Johns, are we still having questions, or do I move to Mr. Ritcey?

BRAD JOHNS: You can go back to Mr. Ritcey - thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you. Your comments to a previous question that I had triggered another question. How often is the information updated on your website? I'm just noticing around even tabs like education, you had wages and pay, median annual income by education levels was a 2016 census. How often is it updated, and how accurate is it today?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I think you may be referring to our Nova Scotia Works site, which is digital, and provides information as detailed as job openings, the educational criteria that's needed, whether it's apprenticeship, whether it's university, whether it's nursing, whatever. I'm not sure, to the honourable member, if that's what you're referring to, or data that might be on a broader site.

DAVE RITCEY: It's on your Explore Careers website, so yes. I guess the question is around whether it's accurate information. Wrong information can be costly for students, especially now in the overall economy in our province. Just curious, how updated and how often do you update that information?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Every time Statistics Canada does an update, my team gets a detailed review of the impacts of the data that Stats Canada releases, because it's very critical to understand during COVID in particular who's working, who's not working, who's coming back into the workforce and so on.

I'm going to stick my neck out, because that information is quite accurate, and we use that, even how we pivot training programs. For example, in the last update, if I remember correctly, more women than we thought were coming back in the workforce, and our employment rate was much better than we anticipated during the pandemic.

Also we were seeing hardest hit were restaurants and retail, and lower-skilled workers. That's why we pivoted and just announced 25 employment engagement programs in 25 different communities, to help individuals from diverse populations attach to the workforce with help from our department.

DAVE RITCEY: My next question revolves back to going virtual. Do you think some students may fall through the cracks by going virtual?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I think our fear always is people falling through the cracks, particularly in the middle of a pandemic, and it's tough. We're concerned about the mental health of our students as well, obviously. I'm sure people do fall through the cracks, but I know we work hard and our university colleagues and Community College colleagues work really hard to try to identify those that are most vulnerable in the student population and try to support them.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, deputy, for answering my questions. I have one more and then I'll pass it over to my colleague. How ready do you feel most post-secondary students are for the financial responsibility of post-secondary education? Should there be more preparation in high school, like a financial literacy course or choosing courses to go to the next step? Those are the types of things I'm wondering - are they prepared?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: If I can, Madam Chair, I'll put that over to Carol, who's absolutely knowledgeable on that side.

CAROL LOWTHERS: That's a really, really great question, and one that we have worked hard around for quite some time. I think that very question is what has moved us to a more robust outreach program, trying to reach students at a much younger age, and recognizing that we have to engage parents, which is why we offer sessions with parents and we don't just invite parents who have children who are graduating, but anybody who is interested in coming.

Again, it's why we have our commitment with Junior Achievement. They start to work with students at the Grade 9 level. We often say that when you get to Grade 12, we all know that university, post-secondary education - whether it is university or a college program - is so important to the future of our students and our province, that leaving it until

Grade 12 is too late. We need students to understand that good financial literacy is so important.

One of the things we're really excited about is - we work really closely with the federal government, through the Canada Student Loans and Grants program, and all provinces and territories. We have a really good working relationship where we meet on a regular basis. Just yesterday we had a federal-provincial-territorial meeting. Over the past couple of years, Nova Scotia has been a really strong proponent at the table on communication and financial literacy, and that you can't have enough of it. You can never have enough of it.

I'm really excited to say that this year we've formed new federal-provincial-territorial committees at the national level. One is on communications and the other is on financial literacy. I'm equally as excited to say that Nova Scotia is the provincial co-chair of both those committees. That's where our commitment is. We know how important it is.

We also are one of the leaders in the field in both of those areas, in the country, so it made perfect sense for us to step up and co-chair those two federal-provincial committees. We are looking at our opportunities in the future, what type of information do we need to get out to students, what type of information do we need to get to parents, and where do we start?

We also have started to do some work with a number of community organizations that target under-represented groups in post-secondary education so we can get the information out that we do have a really robust financial assistance program in this province and that there are loan forgiveness programs. If you meet the eligibility criteria, which is basically if you graduate, we're going to write off 100 per cent of your Nova Scotia loan. That's a great deal - that, along with the upfront grant.

We're very hopeful and we're seeing the results of it - students who are seeing, are understanding, and aren't saying that the Nova Scotia Student Assistance program is difficult to get, it's hard to apply for, and all those things. Of all the combinations of work that we have done, financial literacy and communication are two of our big outreach areas that we know we need to grow, and we'll continue to do that.

DAVE RITCEY: I'll just follow up on that. I guess my question is: In high school currently, right now, is there a financial literacy course available to students, or will there be?

CAROL LOWTHERS: Currently, there is no specific financial literacy course. There is, I believe, some interwoven information throughout. As we know, Junior Achievement is in the high school system, so that is working its way through. We certainly can check with EECD to see if there is any additional information that we could pass on.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the PC Party. We move on to the NDP, and who would like to start? Ms. Coombes, go ahead.

KENDRA COOMBES: I thank both of you for being here. In August 2020, a press release said that loans were forgiven for more than 1,000 Nova Scotia students who graduated from Nova Scotia universities that year. Nova Scotia universities grant about 10,000 degrees each year.

I'm wondering what percentage of Nova Scotia post-secondary students are eligible for student loans and what percentage of those qualify for loan forgiveness?

CAROL LOWTHERS: A big question. In the graduation data, that includes all students, so that's not just Nova Scotia students. That would be students who graduate from out of province, out of country as well. So it's only Nova Scotia students who prior to August 1, 2020 were enrolled in undergraduate programs who were eligible at that point in time for loan forgiveness. Since then, we've expanded the program to students who are in certificate and diploma programs at the Nova Scotia Community College and universities.

Of the number of students who enroll, it takes four years. We expanded that Nova Scotia Student Loan Forgiveness Program to five years. We have about 1,400 students who would be eligible in 2020. Actually for 2020, we had 1,468 students who were eligible for Nova Scotia loan forgiveness who received it, for a total of \$11.1 million that was forgiven.

What's happened to the program is each year the numbers grow a little bit because we get more students who graduate. We expanded it to a five-year program, or take five years to complete, in 2015, I believe, so we are just starting to see those numbers start to ramp up because of the extra one year of eligibility. We're estimating that next year we'll see about another 1,400 students will be eligible for loan forgiveness because they will be graduating from a certificate or diploma program at the Nova Scotia Community College or a Nova Scotia university. That is about another \$2.2 million.

We expect to see that program grow to close to \$14 million - \$13.5 million and about 2,800 students estimated for that program annually.

KENDRA COOMBES: So it's 1,468 eligible?

CAROL LOWTHERS: For 2020. The program is done on the academic year, so it's for a student who is in a program from August 1st to July 31st. The last full year that we have is the 2019-20 year. For that year we had 1,468 students who received loan forgiveness, for a total of \$11.1 million forgiven.

KENDRA COOMBES: I just wanted to clarify that number and make sure I had it right.

So Nova Scotia students graduating from the Nova Scotia non-professional undergraduate program can be eligible for forgiveness of the provincial portion of their loan of up to \$20,400, if I am correct. What is the average amount of loans students have upon graduation?

CAROL LOWTHERS: That is a great question and one that I don't have the number for right in front of me but I can get you that information.

KENDRA COOMBES: That would be appreciated. If you could send it to the whole committee, that would be great. Thank you.

[10:45 a.m.]

CAROL LOWTHERS: Absolutely.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, Madam Chair. The Canadian Federation of Students released a document - I'm not sure if you read it - called *Just Recovery for Students*, which included a number of recommendations to guide the post-COVID-19 recovery. One of these recommendations was to commit to a funding framework that would eliminate tuition fees, with a 50/50 funding model with the federal government.

I am wondering: Has the department had any conversations with the federal government about working towards eliminating tuition fees in post-secondary education?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'll answer first, and Carol might speak more specifically to the Government of Canada.

We meet with the student leadership on a regular basis - actually quarterly with the minister, me, and the senior team, but also individually, and we really value their input. The thing is, we can't do everything they want or ask, but we get a really good read from them where the most critical need is.

Given the resources that we have and that we are in the middle of a pandemic where many sectors are being hammered, we worked hard to be strategic, which is why the \$750 grant and the \$800 grant and other things we did were, we felt, timely and easily accessed by students who were in need.

The Government of Canada, in the world of universities, doesn't like to get directly involved with universities per se other than through research and innovation, where universities can be used to advance the social economic agenda, but of course, also through the student loan program.

If it's okay, Madam Chair, I'll punt it to Carol to speak to whether there were any discussions at that level.

THE CHAIR: Sure, with pleasure. Ms. Lowthers.

CAROL LOWTHERS: In our discussions with the Canada Student Loans Program folks - who, as I indicated, we work with very closely - there has been no discussion in that regard. Our focus and their focus is really on trying to provide financial assistance to students who would not be able to go at all because their family resources are not sufficient to help them, and how do we help them to get into post-secondary, and then when they get out, once they do graduate, how do we support them if they have difficulties in repayment. We've had a real focus in that particular area. I think, to the deputy's point, they don't get involved in tuition and that sort of thing.

The real focus is in that area and, as you can see, I think the programs that the Province has brought in and the programs that the federal government has brought in are about attracting students, particularly those who would not otherwise be able to afford to go to post-secondary - so looking at grants and debt-management tools to assist them when they do have struggles in that period from when they graduate and when they become employed. Then, as they start their life and they're not making as high an income as we hope that they will over time, what supports can we put in place to help them to manage through those periods of time overall.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, Madam Chair. Another recommendation from the Federation of Students was for the government to pass legislation requiring open meetings at all universities - board meetings, I should say - to increase transparency and ensure accountability of public funds. I am wondering: Has the department taken any action on this issue?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Yes. Thank you for the question. There are various ways - the universities are their own entity, but we have a memorandum of understanding with them that runs for five years, and built into that is a process of student consultation, particularly around any changes they are going to make.

Also, on many of the boards, students are members of the board or in the senate and have a say in those settings and the ability to attempt to influence the full board of the university. In that setting, and I think in some cases - I have to be careful whether they have open meetings or not. I was at one at Dalhousie, come to think of it, three or four years ago.

My concern is that the student leadership gets consulted on any major change that the university is thinking of making that will impact those students directly. That's built into the MOU.

KENDRA COOMBES: I would just like to let the deputy know that I have had many conversations with the leadership in many of the universities, and they have said the transparency within the board meetings and their ability to actually influence within the board is extremely limited, in their understanding. I think it might be a good thing for the



department to maybe take a look at that. As we have seen in many universities, that has now become an issue with the department.

I would like to move on. The province provided post-secondary students eligible for student assistance with a one-time grant of \$750, as mentioned, as a recognition of additional costs and challenges related to COVID-19. How was the amount determined? Why was it only available for students eligible for loans?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Basically, we had an opportunity, on a one-time basis, to support students with approximately \$10 million. The key for us was the students most in need, and those were students who were on the student loan program. As a result, 13,000 Nova Scotians were able to access \$750.

Madam Chair, I might be leaving something out. Carol may have better information than I do.

CAROL LOWTHERS: No, deputy, you've got it.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Every once in a while.

THE CHAIR: This is a great team. We love it.

Ms. Coombes, you have eight minutes left.

KENDRA COOMBES: I have one more question, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague Ms. Chender.

Was any support made available to international students to recognize the challenges posed by COVID-19, specifically those who had to stay here and could not travel?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: We have an amazing partnership with Public Health and the Department of Health and Wellness. We have an ongoing team. You may or may not be aware that we have Occupational Health and Safety here. We're totally supportive of Dr. Strang and helping develop plans, et cetera. The universities, early on, when campuses had to vacate quickly, there were several - to your point - international students who could not get home or did not want to go home for safety reasons. Some of the universities were able to help out and support. I must say, it varied between universities, but I know they worked hard to try to support those students.

THE CHAIR: We'll move on now to Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you to the deputy and Ms. Lowthers for being here today and allowing us to ask some questions.

I wanted to shift a little bit and ask about housing for university students. You were just talking about how some students chose to stay. We know, and certainly you would be aware through the other work of the department, that we're in what could kindly be described as a housing crunch here in HRM and other parts of the province - but more accurately probably a bit of a housing crisis, particularly affordable housing, particularly rentals. The average price of a two-bedroom apartment in Halifax has increased 43 per cent in the last five years, and the minimum wage has gone up 15 per cent.

I have a couple of questions related to this. My first is: How is the department working across government, but also particularly with post-secondary institutions, to address the impact of high housing costs for post-secondary but also for NSCC? There's an NSCC campus in my neighbourhood and I became aware, starting a couple of years ago, of people withdrawing their enrolment because they could not find a place to live. It wasn't a one-time thing, it was several. I'm just wondering what's being done to address that.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I am part of a group, with Deputy Miller and Deputy Farmer and Dr. Strang, that meets on a regular basis to look at impacts across the system to all citizens.

To your point on housing and university students, they're obviously hard-hit. Our housing situation is not unique to the rest of the country. Unfortunately right now, the markets, as we all know, are going through the roof. But at the same time, the government created the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission that we're working with to help find solutions.

I know that through the Department of Business, rent subsidies were made available - more than \$19 million and more than 3,200 monthly supplements worth more than \$300 each - which I understand students were eligible for, plus landlords could not evict. Those are some of the ways that we're working across together. We're hopeful that the new affordable housing folks will even bring us closer together and try to find even better solutions.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender, you have four minutes left.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Okay, well I suspect that maybe we'll pick this up when the merry-go-round comes back to us. But with respect, that's new to me, if the rent supplements are available to students. I'm not aware of students who have taken up that program, but perhaps. Nonetheless, our consistent position on rent supplements has been that in a market with no availability, rent supplements are not particularly useful, because there are no apartments.

The Affordable Housing Commission - I think it's great that they are soliciting feedback and certainly we're hopeful that that will lead to action. But as with newcomers, I think university students are kind of a specific case and where many post-secondary

institutions do provide housing, have there been conversations about increasing that supply or assistance to universities, to increase that supply of on-campus housing, such that students don't have to make the decision not to come to Nova Scotia for school, notwithstanding that this isn't the only jurisdiction that's dealing with this but certainly, as the deputy said in his opening, we want people to come here and we want people to stay here? We know that if they finish their degree here, they're more likely to do that. Housing is a big piece of that, so I'm wondering if there are specific conversations happening with post-secondary institutions beyond the kind of more generic measures being taken around student housing in particular.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: The dynamics of the universities that we meet with on a regular basis, together with them, is they got hammered because if you think of eight universities that had no residences, no cafeterias, basically, and so on and how financially they got hit and the inability to even have students in residence during a pandemic has created a real hardship.

Right now we're in the middle of discussing with Public Health and our occupational health and safety staff a framework plan for the universities to help bring the kids back to campus, which is the goal in the Fall, epidemiology notwithstanding, and have two to a room in residences, if you are vaccinated. Those are the kinds of discussions we're having with the universities to try to help alleviate the housing challenges that students face, but also the universities face, to even house the students on their own campuses.

The bigger picture - I agree with the honourable member. I look forward to the new commission. We need a centrepiece of folks who could really pull the key players together to try to address this. I'm a great believer in horizontal government and we practice it every day here, particularly with universities trying to advance social and economic goals of the province. I'm hopeful in that regard.

THE CHAIR: I believe we have just seconds before we move on to the Liberal caucus. Ms. Chender, you have probably 30 seconds.

[11:00 a.m.]

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I look forward to picking this up with my last few minutes. I will use the horizontal government comment as kind of a launching pad to ask for a couple of other things of the department. I don't know - the deputy may wish he hadn't opened that door, but we'll come back to it in a little bit.

THE CHAIR: You will have your time. There will be eight minutes in the second round per caucus. For the Liberal caucus, who would like to start? Mr. Glavine, go ahead.

HON. LEO GLAVINE: Thank you Deputy Minister Montgomerie and Ms. Carol Lowthers for being with us this morning. Obviously, it's a really significant topic, not just for university students but, in fact, for our province. Especially in the last decade, our

universities have become tremendous drivers of our economy. The relationship now is so significant.

In that regard, even in the couple of departments that I've had the good fortune to work in over the past couple of years, we get an occasional international graduate who is moving into that particular workforce. I'm just wondering, with COVID-19, have we retained the same numbers of international students?

Also, for the very life and vibrancy and economic function of our universities, the international component, now reaching 20 per cent in some universities, is significant. Did we have any tailing off or do we still do well with the virtual university in relation to our international students?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: It did tail off, obviously because, again, keeping in mind that the government of Canada controls travel between borders. We did lose a higher percentage of international students, while the domestic students did stay reasonably strong. We're now monitoring the ability, again - for September, the international students who are showing an interest in our universities remain high, but it depends on what the borders are come September versus whether they decide to stay and continue to do online learning. There has been a drop.

LEO GLAVINE: In that regard, then, could we reach a conclusion at this point that the virtual university is not as attractive as coming to Nova Scotia and engaging in university life and our way of life, especially in some of our smaller towns like Antigonish and Acadia and what those areas have to offer? We need to maintain that very strong international component.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Actually, I'm going to turn that around a little bit. I mentioned the committee that I am involved with on a regular basis, as well as deputy groups. The interest in Nova Scotia, by not only students but by Canadians and people abroad to come here and to stay here, to work here, to learn here, is incredibly high.

We've had in-migration almost highest in the country since last April, which tells you that people saw Nova Scotia as a safe place. These international students, their frustration is travelling by borders. They all know they're in the same dynamic no matter where they want to go in the world where the pandemic is active, which is pretty well everywhere in the world. Overall, considering the pandemic, I think we should all take a lot of pride in the interest that people outside our borders are showing in what we're doing to keep people safe and to make tough decisions, and at the same time continue to provide a high quality educational opportunity.

LEO GLAVINE: Thank you for that response. It certainly gives us a bigger picture of what is happening and the relationship of our students to our economy now and to the future.

I was wondering if we are seeing a trend towards our university graduates, especially those coming out with a BA or BSc. We know that year over year, our universities get a top rating for our undergraduate degree. We are seeing, certainly, a number now that go to the Nova Scotia Community College with a very targeted career, again often linked, because we are doing more linking with our Community College. Is that now an established trend? I'm aware of some students, having been a former educator, but is this a trend that now we see established in our province?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Part of the dynamic for us at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education is to understand workforce needs, and because of that, we have an amazing relationship with the universities and the Community College, but also other government departments, on what are the real employment needs of the province.

For example, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency and the Nova Scotia Community College work incredibly close together, and the average age of a student at the Community College is around 26. Those youngsters - young people, everybody's young to me - they tend to know what they want when they're going to Community College, and I think, the honourable member, that was your point. They enroll at a course at the Community College, they know what they want, they're hoping for a job on the other side.

Universities - you have young people who are not quite sure what they want, who may go into arts, but then you have others who are very sure of what they want and they go into a specific program. I tell the department, my colleague deputies, you're the subject matter experts. Let's take nursing. You need nurses, the Department of Health and Wellness says, we need nurses over the next decade, we need this many. We signed an MOU with three nursing schools to make sure that those needs are met. We're now looking at health technologists at the Nova Scotia Community College - whose retirements are beginning to cause shortages - of upping that program.

IBM has 750 people employed. We worked with IBM and six or seven universities when they first came here to really understand their needs and how to onboard graduates into their program, and they will tell you that our graduates are some of the best. We work really hard to walk the line of making sure young people are getting an education and there are opportunities for them when they come out the other side.

LEO GLAVINE: I'll finish up with this question, because I'm sure my colleagues have some further questions. Does that assessment of labour force needs also reach down into our high schools? There was early conversation around students preparing for university or let's say post-secondary generally, in regard to knowing the financial demands that will come their way, but also working and planning a career. Are we doing that kind of assessment, where we can reach into the high schools of the province to at least be notifying our high school graduates that there are labour force needs where they can have a greater degree of successful employment when they finish post-secondary education?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: A couple of dynamics. What I've noticed since being at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education seven years now, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency and others have done an amazing job of making Nova Scotians aware of real opportunities for good paying jobs in the trade sector. I've worked with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, as has the Apprenticeship Agency, where they actually offer trades training in some specifically targeted schools, which is a positive sign.

They recently have done a pilot project, I think in Yarmouth and one other community, with the Community College, where they track the young kids in Grade 10 right through to a Community College career with a job at the other side. It's a lot better than what it was, but we continue to work hard, particularly with young Nova Scotians and their parents to make them aware, wow, there are some really good trade opportunities, well-paying jobs in this province.

THE CHAIR: Next we have Mr. Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: My question is: What upgrades, if any, are being implemented in the My PATH online portal system?

CAROL LOWTHERS: As the deputy had mentioned before, My PATH has been around for about five years. As we all know, technology is changing faster than the speed of light. We need to be able to keep up with it. Students are pushing us, and we love to be pushed because that means improvement.

Right now, we have done some consultation, a real focus on working with students. We sit in our office, and we think we know, but we don't use the portal the way that students use the portal. We have had focus groups with students, a cross-section of students, to provide us with some information, input, suggestions, advice, and so on.

One of the main things that we are looking at and starting to move forward with is accessibility. We provide assistance to students who have disabilities, who use different technologies, and we need to be able to support that as well. Our My PATH and our online applications, we are looking at how we make them accessible for all of our students. That has been on our to-do list, and we're excited to have started over the past year to move it forward and hopefully we will get down to programming some of those changes within the next few months. Our plan is that we will have this done for our 2022-23 applications, so for next May. We are looking at that.

The other thing that is really important for students is to make the application and My PATH portable so that students can access and use it with their iPhones. It's difficult right now. Those are some of the things that we are looking at. There are little tweaks that we need to do. As always, as you go, you launch something, and then you think, darn, I wish I could have done that. We are working with our internal IT folks, and we had a consultant who has just finished their work. Now we are looking at our next steps.

We have gone paperless, pretty much, in the office. Our deputy mentioned during his speech that we eliminated over a quarter of a million pieces of paper. We still had some paper coming in. About two years ago, we moved to being able to do uploads and downloads, so the few pieces of paper we were getting, we have now been able to eliminate those as well. The other thing that this does is it speeds the process up exponentially. We're not waiting for a student to send us in something, us input it, and scan it to a file. It's really amazing how fast it has been in our timeline. Our portal is and was one of the leaders in the country, and it will continue to be that way with the changes that we're looking to make to it. We're really excited about that.

[11:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: We have five minutes left for the Liberal caucus. Then we will go to the PC caucus. Mr. Jessome, you have five minutes.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I will be concise. I just want to give a quick shout-out to Ms. Lowthers. She has been my buddy since I was going through the student loan process at Acadia so I appreciate the work that you folks are doing in your shop and hope you'll be there forever, right?

I just want to perhaps direct a question to the deputy: COVID-19 has created a bit of a phenomenon whereby we're seeing people vastly interested in Nova Scotia as a place to stay and to build a career, try to buy a home. Does your shop have any planning related to a potential influx in the number of forgiven loans that we may or may not experience as a result of COVID-19 because of people staying in Nova Scotia?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'm thinking that Carol might be better for that one, to the honourable member, if I could.

CAROL LOWTHERS: It's an interesting question. It's a question we have talked about over time, sort of incenting folks who have come into the province so that they would stay. I have to say that our focus over the last few years, as I am sure most are aware, has been a real focus on incenting Nova Scotia students to stay in Nova Scotia.

In our Student Loan Forgiveness Program in 2015, we made some changes so you were eligible for loan forgiveness if you studied at a Nova Scotia institution. We know that if you study here, you are more likely to stay here, and with a robust economy - we all know we're in a difficult place right now but seeing that things will likely turn around very quickly.

We've done the same thing with our upfront grant - you need to be studying here. You can still get loan forgiveness if you leave the province to study in a program that's not available here. Otherwise, we have really focused on - at least in the Nova Scotia Student Assistance program - incenting Nova Scotia students to stay in Nova Scotia. That has really been our focus.

BEN JESSOME: I understand and I believe that the continued intention is to create pathways for new Nova Scotians and that transcends the Student Loan Forgiveness Program and transcends COVID-19. As a government, and I think any member would perhaps agree, we need to create lanes for new Nova Scotians and as we understand, the student experience that Nova Scotia has to offer is a prime example of a positive way to draw that line. That's really the only question I had for right now. I would reinforce the positive experience that I had with the student loan experience dealing with the office there - always such a great help, informative. Thank you for your continued work and your willingness and availability to be nimble through this difficult period in our history.

THE CHAIR: We're right on time, 11:20 a.m., Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: Thank you, Madam Chair. Before I get into my question, just a very quick comment. I know, deputy minister, you had some remarks there - your opening statement - and you didn't quite finish those. There was also some information there I found interesting. I'm wondering if it would be possible for us committee members to get a copy of that, please.

I find this quite interesting. I have two daughters - one currently in Grade 9. All this information is quite interesting for me, although they may or may not qualify for some of this. I'm trying to make a lot of notes here.

I'm curious to know - in regard to mental health, the normal stress that university students go through, whether it's leaving home, financial stress, making new friends, and being in a new environment all brings mental stress and anxieties to students. Then, of course, with the pandemic, I think a lot of stress has been added this year particularly. My phone's been ringing off the line today from constituents who are stressed out over the high numbers that came out today.

I'm curious to know, are there stats that show how many students did not actually complete their first semester of post-secondary education, and if so, how many of those were COVID-19 related? Like, did they relate back to the stress and the anxieties of COVID-19?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I think I might have to check with the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission to get the exact stats on that, but regarding mental health, two or three years ago we set up a mental health table with the universities. Students are a part of that table to help design supports for students with mental health challenges or stress. An outcome of that was some online programs that students have strongly supported that have been used during this.

The other thing is, in our meetings with the presidents, mental health is front of mind with them in their discussions and how they work with their own student leaders to ensure they're doing their best to support them as best they can.



On the data question, unless Carol might have it, we would have to find it for you.

BRAD JOHNS: Yeah, if you could. I'm curious to know about that.

Can you elaborate a little bit on the actual supports that were put in place to assist students with this blended online learning around mental health issues? Was there anything else that was put in place?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: They were already in place, but at the same time, we were concerned and that's why the \$750 direct grant to 13,000 students and \$800 to 3,000 with permanent disabilities to ensure a quick and rapid financial response to help them in the event that they weren't successful with jobs or other scenarios - even the challenge of being in COVID-19.

Again, by helping the universities with \$25 million to help offset some of their COVID-19 costs - not all of them - that also helped them to be better able to continue to try to support their students directly as best as they could. The student employment programs that are in place, that I mentioned early on in my remarks, are incredibly robust, even in the middle of a pandemic.

To the private sector, I tip my hat. They have really stepped up and are using a lot of our young people in innovative and different ways. We changed the criteria of those programs to make it easier for employers and students to match up as well.

BRAD JOHNS: Madam Chair, I'll let my colleague Dave Ritcey ask anything he might have.

DAVE RITCEY: I just have some questions around the pandemic effects. I'm wondering if you have any statistics for the number of students who graduated June 2020 who did not attend full-time post-secondary studies this past year as a result of the pandemic?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: To the honourable member, I would have to get those stats for you. I don't have them at hand. My apologies.

DAVE RITCEY: What effects did the pandemic have on post-secondary revenues, for example, in tuition and residence and meal operations?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: The major impact, particularly on our post-secondary system is their residence, their food services and scenarios like that, where it helps make for a homogenous environment, a community if you like, and a workforce that's homogenous as well. That's where they took their really biggest hit.

The second hit was some reduced enrolment, particularly in the international student area. On the flip side of that is steps that they had to take to make sure they were keeping their students and staff safe by regular cleaning and so on.

The other part of that is technology that they then had to turn and pivot to develop to ensure they could provide a quality online education for their students.

They have their challenges, there's no question. They're working hard, as best they can, as we are all over in government to help those sectors that have been incredibly hit, as best we can with the resources we have.

DAVE RITCEY: That leads me to my next question around what is expected, because of the current surge in cases, as we head towards - I don't know where, I guess. It's the unknown - unprecedented times.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: There is no question, obviously, as Dr. Strang has indicated several times on the variant and how quickly it spreads and how it impacts younger people, more so than the original virus. Right now, with the lockdown that we're in in HRM - and usually it's a two-week gestation period of seeing how successful lockdown can be. At the end of that, I'm sure Dr. Strang and others will monitor where we are with the positive tests.

The good news for us as a province is that our testing capacity, quite frankly, is phenomenal. It's really helping to do the contact tracing and try to keep localized as much as possible where the community source outbreaks can be.

I was in Public Health for four years. I was there during H1N1, and the phraseology I heard every day - and I was on calls with scientists every day - is the epidemiology can change. It can change within 24 hours and you've got to be ready to change with it. What we tell you now, two weeks from now, maybe it's under control and we're starting to open stuff up or it's still at a high level.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time has elapsed for the PC caucus. We'll move on to the NDP. Ms Chender, go ahead.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll ask a couple of questions and then turn it over to my colleague. Deputy, if you want to finish that up in response to my question, feel free. I want to just continue with a couple of housing questions.

To your point that right now with the variants of concern and with our rising caseload, we know that younger people are impacted and potentially very adversely impacted in ways that they weren't in previous waves of the epidemic. We're hearing a lot about university students, here in HRM at least, who have leases ending at the end of April, which would be normal, who are being required to move notwithstanding being in self-isolation due to a COVID-19 exposure. We've heard several.

If there has been an exposure alert and they're told they need to self-isolate for two weeks, but they need to move in a week, their landlord is saying, too bad, you're out of luck, your lease ends April 30<sup>th</sup> and you've got to be gone.

Is that on your radar? Is that something that you've been in touch with the Department of Infrastructure and Housing about? We did, as you mentioned, have an eviction ban, but this is slightly different. This is about public health, so I'm just curious, what is a way to tackle that, when, clearly, appealing to a landlord's better instincts is not working?

[11:30 a.m.]

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I really appreciate that. Each university has their own housing section where they really work hard to match up with their students, but in this case, I want to thank you for this. I'll take it to our working group with the universities and see what kind of dynamic is happening with lease-ending when an individual tests positive. I really appreciate you making me aware. That's the first specific I've heard of. My team on the ground may have heard of it, but I haven't, so I thank you for that.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I look forward to hearing more about that. My last question is, obviously these are extraordinary times, but in ordinary times - even in extraordinary times we know that students mostly, many rely on minimum wage work to cover the cost of their studies, and even now many of those students are on the front lines and are still at work in grocery stores and other places that remain open.

I'm just wondering whether, in the vein of horizontal government, this is taken into account, when the government reviews its approach to how minimum wage is set. We know there's a new process being considered for that, and understanding the skyrocketing cost of housing, the cost of tuition, the need for so many students to rely on those minimum wage jobs, is that something that's taken into account?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: By coincidence, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education has responsibility for minimum wage and has by legislation put in place a minimum wage committee of two employer representatives and two employee representatives. To the honourable member's point, they made their recommendations to government, and we considered them in the middle of the pandemic. As I said, I'm part of a group working together from the economic social side. One of the things they also recommended is their ability to look at the existing formula and come back to the government with recommendations, which Minister Diab agreed to.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm going to turn it over to Ms. Coombes to finish out our time.

KENDRA COOMBES: To go back to that \$10 million of the COVID-19 funding that was mentioned, was this a federal stream of money or provincial funds, and was the money divided by the number of students?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'll answer the first part in the context of the Government of Canada, through changes they made in the Student Assistance program, enabled us to have access to \$10 million one time only, provided it was used to directly support students. Our team made recommendations to the centre of government that the most effective way to help students who were in need was a direct grant, one time only, to them as a result of this.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to go back to tuition. We've also heard from students and student unions that the universities' tuition that just keeps rising, has the department looked at reducing tuition by 10 per cent, as students are recommending, or a tuition freeze?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: The fine line we walk in a pandemic, more than anything else, is - and again, my department is involved with every development of a plan for Dr. Strang in every sector, everything from restaurants to retail to you name it. We really know how hard people are being hit and we work really hard with them to support them and keep a safe workplace, but also an innovative workplace.

At the same time, with students, we have an MOU agreement with the universities that allows the universities a maximum of three per cent a year tuition increase in undergraduate programs for domestic students.

We have looked at that in the balance of the pandemic and the challenges that the universities are facing, but also the students. I don't know if folks are aware, but the universities in 2018-19 committed \$58 million for scholarships and bursaries on their campuses for students. In this pandemic, a lot of their alumni stepped up and offered special scholarships to students who were in need. It's global and we are trying to work together, keeping in mind the restraints on all of us, to be as fair as we can.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr. Montgomerie. You have less than one minute, Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: A follow-up with that is I am assuming that is not being discussed, but to be fair, this issue has been on students' radar prior to COVID-19, and so that's why I am asking. It is prior to COVID-19 that we have seen tuition just continue to rise.

I am assuming that, no, it is not on your radar or having discussions on reducing tuition or a freeze when the MOUs are up again for review.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time has elapsed for the New Democratic Party caucus and we will move on to the Liberal caucus.

We have Mr. Glavine, I believe. Correct?

LEO GLAVINE: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair, and a few more questions to finish off our time.

Deputy Minister Montgomerie, you were referencing the challenges that university bodies themselves, as well as students, have been facing, and now, with the variants, they are unknown elements across our country, in our province, and well beyond. I know we often do a scan to make sure that we are giving support to students and are very much part of the Canadian picture where we have 10 universities. Have you done a scan to see how our COVID-19 relief and response has been and also looking out in case it is needed in the next academic year?

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'm on regular calls with my deputy colleagues across the country to compare notes and, more importantly, to share how we are all trying to cope with this kind of a pandemic in the post-secondary world. Nova Scotia has an amazing relationship with its universities. We are the only province in Canada that meets with university presidents and student leaders on a regular basis to try to get corporate approaches to work together to maximize social economic development in the province.

More importantly, in a pandemic it is becoming even more critical, so that is why the government felt that \$25 million would help support, mitigate the cost of COVID-19, which is quite reasonable compared to what is going on in other provinces. As well, the amazing close relationship that we have been able to forge with Occupational Health and Safety and Dr. Strang's office to ensure universities can maximize their opportunities for enrolment and so on.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a framework that is going to be sent to Dr. Strang about how the Fall could look on our campuses, bringing students back in on campus safely, and hopefully we will have that in another month or month and a half. We are particularly waiting to see how the epidemiology evolves over the next couple of weeks.

LEO GLAVINE: I have one more question, just in case somebody else wants to finish off, but this may take a little while but, you know, we want all our universities to have a tremendously successful path into the future. What is taking place at Cape Breton University is nothing more than transformational and it wasn't accidental.

I'd like to hear from the deputy minister on what he saw as some of those elements that came together concurrently to have this kind of impact on student enrolment - an extremely bright, expanding future for CBU - and the integration into the community and the economic impacts, again, in fact, led to the recovery of the transit system in Sydney, as

it was near collapse at one point. I'd just like a few comments from the deputy as to how the university took hold of the situation.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I'm reminded of several years ago. We were reviewing the strategy, approaching universities - we did a focus group in the Cape Breton campus with international students in February. They all loved Cape Breton - this was February. They talked about how the Cape Bretoners would stop them in the street, invite them to their homes, and so on. A lot of these students were Saudi Arabians.

A cautionary note that I say on international students is that it can change on a dime, based on a consequence in a country, so we're very cautious about what percentage international students should be of your full student body.

Again, to your point, Cape Breton University has done an amazing job working with the community and working with us to maximize those opportunities. The vast majority of their students are from India.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Montgomerie. We move on now to Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: Thank you so much. It has been a very interesting discussion this morning. I do have a granddaughter who is going to Acadia, but she lives in New Brunswick, so this may be all for naught for her.

Anyway, I'd like to ask Ms. Lowthers about who would not qualify for student loans or for forgiveness in Nova Scotia if they are a university student. Is there anyone? Is it the salary income? Is the parents' income part of this still?

CAROL LOWTHERS: Yes, it is.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: I just want to respond to your granddaughter. Basically under the Public Health order she is eligible to come to Nova Scotia, provided she self-isolates and all those kinds of scenarios. University students' education is considered essential, so that's the good news.

Now I'll punt it over to Carol to answer your question, if that's okay, Madam Chair.

CAROL LOWTHERS: There's also good news for your granddaughter in that New Brunswick also offers student assistance. Being a bit selfish, I'm going to say that it's likely not as good as ours because we do have the Loan Forgiveness Program.

All provinces have a needs-assessment process that they have to go through, so basically the Student Assistance program is not to displace parental contribution, if parental contribution is within reach. Basically what happens is a student completes the application and provides information on family size and parental income. A student is also expected to contribute to their education, so we would look at what their earnings were. If they were

coming out of high school, the eight weeks previous, and out of university, 14 weeks - we call it the pre-study period - and we would take a portion or assign a portion of that to the student.

It's kind of a holistic process to determine. We look at your costs and we look at your resources, and then the difference between that is what your assessed need would be and that's what you would be eligible for.

Every application is different. We have, I think, about 30 per cent of applications in Nova Scotia that are very similar, and they actually go through more of an automated process for the assessment. All the other applications have a touchpoint where we need to have a closer look and review the material and information and that sort of thing. As long as a student has a need, they can be eligible for assistance, irrespective of what province they are from.

THE CHAIR: Thank you again. The time has elapsed for the Liberal caucus as well.

We will ask Mr. Montgomerie to give us his final remarks or closing remarks. Then we will ask you to leave some time to do some committee business after that. So please, some final remarks from either of you or both of you.

[11:45 a.m.]

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Madam Chair, thank you again to the committee for this amazing opportunity. Student loans can be a complex kind of system, so we really welcome the opportunity, particularly for Carol, who in very plain English takes folks through the amazing opportunities that are available for Nova Scotians to access student aid.

THE CHAIR: I want to thank you on behalf of my daughter. Only one of them was able to use the loan forgiveness, and that was the only time she was happy with her mother being part of this government. She just jokes about that. It was really helpful. I'm very happy that it's at the end of the degree, which incentivizes them to finish the degree in order to get that loan forgiveness. I think it's wonderful what you are doing. Maybe we can get the feds to do the same.

Again, I thank you for being here on behalf of my colleagues. If you don't mind signing off so we can start our committee business.

DUFF MONTGOMERIE: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: What do we have as committee business?

BRAD JOHNS: Your microphone is on, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: It is on. Can you hear me? I'm just looking to see if there is anything else.

We don't have any correspondence. Other business? I see Mr. Ritcey has his hand up. Go ahead.

DAVE RITCEY: This is new business, I guess. I have a motion.

THE CHAIR: I believe you have sent it in writing. If you would like to read the motion.

DAVE RITCEY: Nova Scotia has been dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic for over a year. Parents and students in this province are looking for information so that they can have confidence in the plan regarding pandemic learning. Madam Chair, I move that this committee write the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to have confidence restored in knowing what triggers the following events: single school closures, family of school closures, Centre for Education-wide school closures, provincial school closures, online learning, and event cancellations like graduation.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? Mr. Johns and then Mr. Jessome.

BRAD JOHNS: Not only do I agree with this because Mr. Ritcey is in my caucus, but I also think that these are good questions that Nova Scotians want to hear. People are contacting the office daily asking these questions, so I know it's something that Nova Scotians want to hear.

Similarly, there's a high school in Mount Uniacke, or the schools in Mount Uniacke, all the elementary and junior high students currently are on lockdown because they're within the Mount Uniacke district, but all the high school students actually go to a high school that is I think towards Windsor way, so the high school is not locked down. I think people have a lot of questions in regard to this stuff. It's a good motion, so I certainly would hope everybody would support that.

THE CHAIR: Go ahead, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I want to thank the honourable member for submitting the motion in advance. It certainly helps us prepare.

I would also acknowledge that there continue to be questions from the public related to COVID-19 and COVID-19 response, but I would submit that Nova Scotians have a great deal of confidence in Public Health and their ability to manage the pandemic over the course of this year. We have seen, throughout the course of the school year, Public Health-led decisions that are situation-based, based on epidemiology, on a school-by-school basis, on a community basis in order to make the strongest efforts possible to keep students in the classroom, which we can all agree is the best place for them.



I would suggest that if the honourable member seeks our agreement in the intent of this motion, which I respect and I understand given the level of cases in particular in the last week, that we do not use the language that Nova Scotians don't have confidence. If that can be amended, then I think the intent of the motion is consistent. I think that we need to continue to empower Public Health to lead us and continue to make recommendations that in this instance prioritize keeping students in classrooms but being able to react and make decisions when the situation merits it, as we've seen take place in the HRM this week.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Can we vote on the motion? Is that what you'd like me to do? Are we in agreement with this motion?

Go ahead, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Madam Chair, again I think the intention behind this motion is to raise up the continued willingness for parents and students and educators and all Nova Scotians to continue to get information about the pandemic, which I submit that we continue to do.

I mean, by all accounts in my community I continue to hear a great deal of confidence in Public Health over the last year, so I reject that there is a lack of confidence in Public Health. If that language can be amended then I am happy to support the intent of this motion because we want to continue to relay information as much as we possibly can to give that information to Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Alright, I guess we can vote on the amendment, for accepting the amendment. Is that what you would like me to do?

I'm going to ask Ms. Kavanagh here to clarify it for me, if you don't mind.

JUDY KAVANAGH: As the person who would be sending the letter, if somebody is proposing that we amend the wording, can he be specific about exact changes he would want to make to it?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome, are you able to give us the exact wording?

BEN JESSOME: I would amend it to read: Nova Scotia has been dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic for over a year. Parents and students in the province are looking for information in the plan regarding pandemic learning.

Madam Chair, I move that the committee write to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to inquire about what triggers the following events - and then the rest remains the same.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. Are we all in agreement with this amendment?

It is agreed.

Now we can have a show of hands, to accept this motion with amendment.

[The motion is carried.]

The clerk will write the letter, with the question as amended. Thank you so much. Perfect.

The next meeting we have is on May 25<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 to 12:00 noon, again by video conferencing. The topic will be: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding Student Security, Alerts, Lockdowns and Other Protocols.

No other questions?

The meeting is adjourned. We are done for the day.

Thank you so much everyone for attending. We have another committee meeting right after this one.

[The committee adjourned at 11:55 a.m.]