

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, February 22, 2022

Video Conference

**Addressing Affordability for Post-Secondary Students
in Nova Scotia Post-COVID**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Braedon Clark was replaced by Hon. Ben Jessome.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Advanced Education
Nancy MacLellan, Deputy Minister
Greg Ells, Senior Executive Director - Advanced Education
Cheryl To, Executive Director - Universities and Colleges
Ken Byron, Director of Programs and Student Assistance

Students Nova Scotia
Lydia Houck, Director
Ben Fairhurst, Chair



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Nolan Young

VICE CHAIR

Larry Harrison

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources, and I am Nolan Young, MLA for Shelburne, and the Chair of this committee. Today, in addition to considering appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Department of Advanced Education and Students Nova Scotia on the topic of addressing affordability and post-secondary students in Nova Scotia post-COVID-19.

Just as a reminder, members, witnesses, the committee clerk, and Legislative Counsel should keep their video on throughout the meeting with their microphone on mute, unless I call on them to speak. Please turn on your microphone before speaking and turn it off afterwards. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off. If you have another device with you, such as a phone, please put it on silent.

Please try not to leave your seat during the meeting unless it's absolutely necessary. If you do, please leave your camera on to ensure that we have a quorum and we know whether you're present if a vote is called for. If I need to confer privately with the clerk or Legislative Counsel, or if members wish to confer before a vote, they may call a brief recess. If any members have technical problems, please phone or text the clerk. I will ask committee members to introduce themselves for the record, stating their name and their constituency, starting with Mr. Harrison.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I also recognize the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb and legislative committee clerk Judy Kavanagh.

Before our agenda today, I'd like to take care of the ABCs first - the appointments first, before we move on to the witnesses - just to make sure there's enough time. I think Mr. Duale has just joined us. Mr. Duale, are you here?

ALI DUALE: Good morning. Ali Duale, Halifax Armdale.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. For our ABCs, I would ask, could we put forward a motion to accept - we'll have a separate motion for each board. Members already received a list of the nominees yesterday. I would ask that we put a motion forward to accept appointees. Do we have a motion? Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Chair, for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, I move that Kristin Hewlett be appointed as member for the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority Board of Directors.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Do you want me to continue, Mr. Chair?

THE CHAIR: Yes, please. Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Chair, for the Department of Environment and Climate Change, I move that Jeremy Scott be appointed as member and vice chair, and that Dwight Whynot be appointed as member for the Resource Recovery Fund Board, otherwise known as Divert Nova Scotia Board.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, I move that Leah Byrne, David P. Campbell, and Danny Cavanagh be appointed as employee representative members, and that Jacqueline Fahey be appointed as employer representative member, for the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Council.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, I move that Paul Mason be appointed as chair and member, Wayne Thorburne be appointed as member and NSFM representative, and Kyte Power, Heather Chappell, and Dana Jasper be appointed as members for the E911 Cost Recovery Committee.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Lastly, Mr. Chair, for the Department of Public Works, I move that Richard MacLean be appointed as member for Halifax Harbour Bridges.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Our topic for today is addressing affordability for post-secondary students in Nova Scotia post-COVID-19. We have some witnesses here today. Welcome. I would ask our witnesses to introduce themselves and perhaps have some opening remarks.

NANCY MACLELLAN: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. My name is Nancy MacLellan. I'm the Deputy Minister of the Department of Advanced Education. Joining me this morning is Greg Ells, who is the Senior Executive Director of the Department of Advanced Education, Ken Byron, Director of Programs and Student Assistance, and Cheryl To, who is the Executive Director of Universities and Colleges with the Department of Advanced Education. They'll help me respond to any questions that you may have.

It's also a pleasure to be here alongside some of our most important invited stakeholders, Students Nova Scotia. It's nice to see Lydia and Ben again. Students are at the centre of everything that we do in the Department of Advanced Education, so having this additional chance to hear from student leaders outside of our regular meetings is (Inaudible) welcome.

Our department meets formally with a government-student roundtable four times a year, and this does include representation from Students Nova Scotia. During our meetings,

we always gain valuable insight into the student experience. I'm really proud of the strong, collaborative relationship we've developed.

I'd like to begin by thanking you for the invitation to talk about affordability for post-secondary students in Nova Scotia post-COVID-19. Affordability of post-secondary education is a complex topic, even without a global pandemic mixed in. Over the next two hours, Ken, Greg, Cheryl, and I will do our best to walk you through the tremendous work under way to support students and strengthen the post-secondary sector.

Our students in Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions are a critical piece of the solution when it comes to meeting our vast and ambitious economic, population, and workforce goals. Additionally, we need students and the institutions that train them now more than ever if we're going to meet the unprecedented labour market demand in health care professions, and support the commitment made to all Nova Scotians to fix health care.

Today's students, both domestic and international, are tomorrow's doctors, nurses, continuing care assistants, early childhood educators, and skilled trades professionals. When students are making their decision to begin or continue their post-secondary journey, affordability is a key factor that they consider. It's timely that you've asked us to come and speak about the efforts under way to financially support students, both now and into the future, as we navigate this pandemic.

Less than a week ago, our department made a \$9.8 million investment in thousands of eligible Nova Scotia students with the greatest need with the issuance of a one-time, non-repayable COVID-19 grant. This grant put \$875 in the pockets of about 1,100 students to help them with the rising cost of living during the pandemic. Last year, we issued COVID-19 grants to students to help offset costs related to COVID-19, and to assist students with permanent disabilities with exceptional education-related equipment requirements, especially as learning moved online. Students have been very supportive of these grants and have said that they've helped reduce their anxiety and worry about how they'll pay for their rent or cover the cost of food, and they've been more able to focus on their studies.

Along with the pandemic causing difficulties like isolation and mental health challenges, the move to online learning, the inability for students to gather and learn in the ways that they're used to created challenges for students to secure part-time or Summer employment, making it almost impossible to make or save money for their education. These grants have helped close some of the gaps for students, but we know more is needed.

To that note, proudly, Nova Scotia has one of the best student assistance programs in the country. For those of you who may not know, 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 otherwise due to insufficient

resources. Nova Scotia student assistance has significantly improved in the last 10 years, with an annual increase of \$30 million for Nova Scotia students in need.

The key focus over the last several years has been reducing student debt load and making it more attractive for them to stay in Nova Scotia after graduation. The Loan Forgiveness Program has been one of our biggest success stories under that effort. Under the Loan Forgiveness Program, eligible Nova Scotia students can have their entire portion of their provincial student loan wiped out upon graduation if they complete their program within five years. Since its inception, loan forgiveness has saved over 10,000 students close to \$76 million in student debt.

Loan forgiveness is just one example of how we're enhancing programs to help students. Another is the increase made to the maximum provincial weekly assistance, which went from \$150 a week to \$200 per week of study. New improvements are made to our programs based on many factors, but one major consideration is the student voice.

[10:15 a.m.]

To that note, this past Fall, the Premier met with a group of Dalhousie nursing students who told him that they were experiencing a unique funding gap in their student assistance eligibility that left them short of enough funding to cover the entire duration of their program. Our department was able to act quickly to respond to student concerns by closing that gap and helping about 250 nursing students access the funds they needed to make their program more accessible and affordable. The average amount that students received under this enhancement was about \$3,300. In an effort to meet unprecedented demand for our health care labour market, these nurses will have a guaranteed job here in Nova Scotia upon graduation and they will have significant earning potential.

Another group of students that we heard from were continuing care assistants in training. Just recently, the government invested \$57 million in the continuing care sector. Part of that investment will cover tuition costs for more than 2,000 full- or part-time continuing care assistants under the work-and-learn program. We've already heard from some of the students who are benefiting from this investment. One student said the program changed her life by giving her the opportunity to work in a supportive environment while she furthered her education without financial concern or stress for herself or her family. These are just some of the examples of how we are making investments in students to enhance affordability and accessibility in the post-secondary sector.

In addition to the Student Assistance program and these other investments, every Nova Scotian who attends a Nova Scotian post-secondary institution received a Nova Scotia Student University Bursary of \$1,283 annually, based on full-time study. This is money that's been taken directly off student debt load and doesn't need to be repaid.

With many of the incentives I mentioned, in total, Nova Scotian students can receive over \$40,000 in non-repayable assistance. We know monetary investments like grants and enhanced access to funds are important for students, both now and after the pandemic - if there is an after the pandemic.

We are also focused on enhancing access to housing for post-secondary students. Students have told us that they need better access to safe, affordable, accessible housing options. We are currently working closely with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing on a province-wide strategy that will include student focus. Part of that plan includes three new Nova Scotia Community College residences. We announced the intention and a promise to build these in the Fall. Soon, once funding is approved, I'll be able to share more details.

I could continue on for quite a long time, but I don't want to take up your questioning time more than I already have. I hope the programs and investments I've mentioned show our strong commitment to affordable, accessible post-secondary education for students.

Thank you for allowing me this time to share some details about our important work. We're happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. MacLellan. We have some opening remarks as well from Students Nova Scotia.

BEN FAIRHURST: Yes, thank you. Good morning, Mr. Chair, committee members, and witnesses. I'm speaking today from Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw people.

My name is Ben Fairhurst and I'm the Chair of Students Nova Scotia, a nonpartisan alliance of over 20,000 post-secondary students across the province. I'm joined today by Lydia Houck, the executive director of Students Nova Scotia. We appreciate the opportunity to speak today on the affordability crisis facing students, as well as how to best centre students and graduates in our pandemic recovery.

The value of education as an economic and social capital builder cannot be overstated. Any level of higher education strengthens employment prospects and earning potential. In Nova Scotia, it has an even more critical role in disrupting cycles of poverty, given that we have the lowest median income and one of the highest child poverty rates in Canada.

However, these returns on investment are only realized for those able to access education in the first place. Currently, only an estimated 53 per cent of Nova Scotia high school graduates pursue university, college, or skilled trade studies after their graduation. Affordability is one of the largest factors in the decision to attend post-secondary

education, and income level is a significant predictor of post-secondary access, which contributes to an underrepresentation of low-income youth in the post-secondary sphere. Notably, rising costs also exacerbated access gaps for rural first-generation Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian students.

As education becomes increasingly critical to labour market attachment, its costs simultaneously become increasingly prohibitive. Although there are a range of expenses levied upon students, the one most frequently discussed is tuition. Despite a three per cent cap on annual domestic increases, average tuition at Nova Scotia universities continues to be the highest in Canada. International students face even higher costs with no accompanying regulation and a lack of year-over-year predictability mechanisms.

In contrast with tuition, institutions have greater autonomy in setting other student fees. In 2021-22, ancillary costs - excluding meals and residence - range from \$500 to \$1,400 across Nova Scotia universities. In addition, students spend upwards of \$1,000 a year on textbooks and educational materials.

This brings us to housing - the largest and fastest-growing expense for many Nova Scotians. Driven by historically low vacancy rates, off-campus housing costs are increasingly prohibitive, with many forced to choose between units outside of their price range or at a greater distance from campus. For those living on campus, either by choice or by necessity, the costs of residence and mandatory meal plans are comparable to, if not greater than, off-campus costs.

The impact of this cost envelope on students is significant, especially after the past two years. In a 2021 survey by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, two-thirds of students said COVID-19 made education less affordable; for 88 per cent, it changed how they funded their studies; and 60 per cent were concerned about affording tuition and housing in the Fall of 2021. Locally, a recent Maritime survey found 30 per cent of recent graduates used too much or all of their savings as a result of COVID-19 and 12 per cent took on additional debt.

The simple reality is that without sufficient financial resources and strong policy, post-secondary education is not possible for many Nova Scotians. Provincially, there are several programs that provide financial support to students, with a few in particular that we wish to highlight.

The Nova Scotia University Tuition Bursary provides a tuition discount of \$1,283 to every Nova Scotian studying full-time at a Nova Scotia university. Though beneficial, this program is not income-tested and provides the same funding to all students regardless of financial need. It also excludes college students.

In contrast, the Student Financial Assistance program is an excellent mechanism providing upfront funding to Nova Scotian college and university students with

demonstrated financial need. This is an important distinction, given that upfront needs-based funding is the most influential financial support in terms of post-secondary access. The only drawback of this program is its lack of modernization. While inflation, living costs, and tuition skyrocket, weekly maximums have been fixed at \$200 weekly since 2017, allocations for housing and living expenses have also remained at \$750 monthly, despite a housing crisis rivalling our country's largest jurisdictions.

One measure of the current affordability barrier to post-secondary education is unmet need, wherein a student's assessed financial need exceeds the maximum amount of funding they can receive. Between 2015 and 2019, an average of 15 per cent of borrowers faced unmet need at an average amount of \$3,044. We will no doubt see this continue to climb until weekly maximums and housing allocations increase. Students Nova Scotia has consistently advocated for this to occur through a tuition bursary reinvestment.

The need to modernize financial assistance, prioritize predictability, and target supports towards those with greatest need are a few of the themes we have historically brought forth in relation to affordability. We look forward to discussing these priorities today and addressing any questions you may have. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Fairhurst. We'll begin our question-and-answer period. Because this meeting is a virtual meeting - and I think we did it last time - we went 20-20-20 for each caucus. It just makes it easier in the Zoom format to keep track. For opening 20-20-20, depending on how much time we have left, we'll divide our rapid-fire questions before we continue on to committee business. We'll start our first 20 minutes beginning with the Liberal caucus. Mr. Jessome or Mr. Duale.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I'm going to kick off for now and welcome everybody this morning. Thank you so much for allowing me to sit in on today's meeting. Got pinch-hit as the critic for the Department of Advanced Education, so I'm happy to be here this morning with everybody.

My first question is going to be directed to Students Nova Scotia. We had a nice synopsis. I'm well aware that Students Nova Scotia's always been very proactive in reaching out to each of our caucuses and laying out in a very simplistic fashion the main advocacy points for the organization and for students across the province at schools that they represent. I'm wondering if, perhaps, Mr. Fairhurst or Ms. Houck could identify three specific top priorities that are leading into our budget session this Spring.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Houck.

LYDIA HOUCK: I can absolutely speak to that. I think the one we've highlighted first, that Ben has spoken to a bit during his earlier remarks, is that financial assistance program. We know that needs-based funding is the most effective way to support students, both before and during their degree, so really seeing enhancements within that financial

assistance program is certainly a large priority for our organization and has been for a long time now.

Beyond that, as has been mentioned, the cost of textbooks is another large expense that is often not considered when we look at the costs coming from universities. Something we've consistently discussed at Students Nova Scotia is the concept of open educational resources, which are open-source textbooks and other educational materials that students can access. Currently, we've discussed external organizations, such as AtlanticOER, that have brought forth alternatives to these traditional textbook resources. Looking at things like that is certainly a priority, as well.

Something we didn't highlight in our opening remarks is also the conversation about health care and health care supports for students - in particular international students. We know that, currently, international students in Nova Scotia aren't able to opt into provincial MSI until they're 13-months here, and they can't have left the province for more than 31 days during that period. Those barriers are certainly quite prohibitive, not only in terms of well-being, but also in terms of affordability. Looking at lessening those barriers where possible is another great priority for our organization this year for sure.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that response. I'm wondering if you could focus some of the time on the specifics - draw back, just for the purposes of reiterating the most up-to-date information that you have on how assistance is calculated, and what the gaps and unmet needs are. Just for context, I'd like Students Nova Scotia to answer that first, and then the Department of Advanced Education to respond to that as well, just to ensure that there is consistency between the two sets of information, please and thank you, Mr. Chair.

LYDIA HOUCK: Just to clarify, looking at the actual mechanism through which a student's need is calculated?

BEN JESSOME: Yes.

LYDIA HOUCK: Great. From my understanding, the financial assistance department would be looking at all the resources a student had available to them, whether that be through provincial contributions, income, other sources - whether that be education savings funds and things like that - to determine a student's level of need. That assessed level of resources would then be contrasted with the level of need, including things like tuition cost which would be confirmed through the university, residence cost if they're attending, that sort of thing, and all the other considerations that go into determining the level of need. Essentially, that would be broken down to determine how much a student could receive in that weekly maximum up to a level of \$200 currently.

For unmet needs, that would be students for whom, in the calculation of resources in comparison to need, their maximum amount of need surpasses the weekly maximums of

\$200 that can be allocated through the financial assistance program. That's my understanding, but I do welcome my colleagues at Student Assistance.

[10:30 a.m.]

BEN JESSOME: If I may jump in here, Mr. Chair, I'd just like to try to understand what the gap or what the considered value is for the things that are considered in assessing financial aid. We reference the average cost of housing. We reference the cost of tuition as being the highest. We have some figures that weigh into that dialogue of how we get to that point of the assessed value.

I'm wondering if Students Nova Scotia has some specific comparisons that would explain some of the unmet need. Then perhaps the department can respond in terms of how they assess that value and try to address that unmet need.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Houck.

LYDIA HOUCK: Absolutely. Yes, in particular one of the things we know that's one of the largest drivers of unmet need is those housing and living costs. Whether students are living on or off campus, they are facing costs that well exceed the maximum amount they can receive. As Ben alluded to in his remarks, current housing allocations are \$750 on a monthly basis for housing and other living costs. Across our province, the reality is that whether you're living on or off campuses, your costs for accommodations are going to well exceed that sort of allocation.

In particular, we can look at the fact that NSCC students, although facing slightly lower levels of unmet need, we are still looking at around 10 per cent of NSCC students who had unmet needs, even though their tuition costs are lower. The one thing they do share with university students is the cost of housing. I would say - and I would welcome folks from financial assistance to comment on that - that housing costs are probably the largest driver of unmet need right now.

THE CHAIR: Ms. MacLellan.

NANCY MACLELLAN: I think you did a great job of articulating the balance of resources that a student applicant would have and what their need is based on, based on the formulas that she described. I certainly agree that housing costs have gone up for everyone. I formerly was a deputy minister at the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, so I have some familiarity with some of the pressures in the private market, and the student experience certainly echoes and mirrors that experience as well.

We recently announced the new residences for NSCC. We do have work under way with our colleagues at the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to do a needs assessment across the province, with a lens also to student housing needs. We know that

as we increase the supply for student housing, that will relieve some pressure from the private housing market and the rental housing market as well.

There are unmet needs for students, as Lydia described and Ben (Inaudible) was describing. We certainly serve the students who have the highest need. Those are the ones who do receive student assistance. It is a calculation of the expenses less the resources that are available to students.

I don't know, Ken, if you had anything you wanted to add (Inaudible)?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Byron.

KEN BYRON: (Inaudible) No, deputy minister, I think you've captured it very well. As Lydia's identified, we identify the student's cost to attend and we look at their resources or the resources of their families, subtract the two, and that forms the basis for the assistance package.

NANCY MACLELLAN: The other thing I would add, if I may just add on, on unmet need - some of the factors that are included in unmet need would be those folks who are attending professional schools as well. Sometimes the cost is much higher. It's dental school or medical school, and the maximum student assistance is certainly predicated more on the cost of undergraduate degrees.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you all for providing that context. Deputy Minister MacLellan, welcome to your new position. Congratulations.

Could the department provide the committee with a breakdown of line items and their assessed value in terms of the actual assessed value that the department, the government contributes to student assistance year over year, just so we have that itemized information?

NANCY MACLELLAN: To clarify, do you mean so much per week for rent, for housing, so much for - that assessment?

BEN JESSOME: Yes, please.

NANCY MACLELLAN: I'm going to defer to Ken on that because that's a level of detail that I don't have. Ken, are you able to help with that question?

KEN BYRON: Just to make sure I understand the question correctly, you're asking for the weekly maximum? It's \$210 federally for the federal loan, and \$200 provincially for the provincial loan. Is that . . . ?

BEN JESSOME: I'd appreciate if there was - I guess that's kind of what we - that's the summarized version of what we get to. What I'm looking for is an itemized assessment of what student assistance values each life expense or school expense for students that contribute to providing that value at the end of the day, or that amount at the end of the day.

KEN BYRON: Certainly. We could list all of those. For students, it's essentially the actual cost of tuition. That's what the student's being charged, so it's not a universal. Living costs are a universal amount. Textbooks and supplies are a universal amount. We can certainly follow up with those line items, as well as the ones that are individually assessed, like tuition.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you very much. Appreciate that, folks, through you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to touch on MSI coverage for a little while. I bring this up fairly humbly as a member of the former government, and acknowledge that this was, frankly, something that's been advocated for since I was a student leader in a similar position to where Lydia has been, and Ben is actively: MSI coverage for international students. Perhaps the Department of Advanced Education can weigh in here and chat a little bit about their understanding of why this is such an elusive item for successive governments, and whether or not this is something that's on the department's radar in terms of rectifying.

NANCY MACLELLAN: Currently, Nova Scotia Medical Services Insurance or MSI is administered by the Department of Health and Wellness. International students do have a 12-month waiting period before they're eligible for MSI coverage, and they cannot be absent from Nova Scotia for more than 31 days. The former Department of Labour and Advanced Education did raise this item with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Wellness, I understand, back in 2008. Since I've been in my role, we have been doing a bit of research with Lydia and Ben and beyond to determine what would be the impact - how many students, how many would take up that option - because we do know that it's a very small number that do take up the option even under the current eligibility requirements.

We have reintroduced that conversation with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Wellness. It is definitely on our radar as a priority that's been raised by Students Nova Scotia, and so we are pursuing that conversation. Greg, is there anything that I missed that you would want to add or share?

GREG ELLS: I don't think there's much more I can add. I think the deputy minister's captured everything. As she said, we've been having discussions on this issue with the Department of Health and Wellness for a number of years now, and one of the concerns that keeps coming up in the discussions is an equity issue. If this adjustment is made for international students, would there also be a demand or expectation for other internationals coming into the province - for example, temporary foreign workers - to be covered as well?

We are now making progress. We have a meeting coming up in the next few days with our two ministers and deputy ministers and staff to further discuss the opportunities here.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome, you have four minutes remaining.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you. I just wanted to dive directly into the mandate letter. The discussion of affordability is a paramount one. It's an obvious one. It's been heightened and exclaimed more distinctly due to the causes of the pandemic. We know that it was pre-existing, but the pandemic has stressed things significantly. I do appreciate the government's recent acknowledgement of that through the \$800-plus grant that's gone out to students.

I would note that there's really not a ton of anything here - I'm just double checking so I'm correct - that would indicate that affordability is a priority for the minister. I'm wondering if the deputy minister can comment on whether or not we may or may not see the concept of affordability for students reflected in the upcoming budget.

NANCY MACLELLAN: In my vast five months of experience, we've had a chance to really do a bit of an onboarding related to affordability for students. As you point out, and others have pointed out, it is a function of both cost and resources. In student assistance world, that's the grant that was recently announced for students in receipt of Nova Scotia assistance.

We do have the housing work that is under way, and a housing strategy for students that was announced in alignment with our colleagues. In addition to that, we've had a lot of conversations and the minister's been very vocal about work-and-learn opportunities - integrated (Inaudible) and learning opportunities - and how things like co-op education and paid co-op work can help to supplement both the student experience and enhance the student experience, but also enhance their ability to earn money and to be able to afford their education.

We also know, in the last couple of years, that the availability of part-time jobs in the service sector, where students would normally be able to supplement the costs, have been quite limited. Our student loan program continues to work on issues of affordability. We do talk a lot about income testing and needs testing programming so that we're able to serve those in the highest need. We're also constantly working with our colleagues at the federal level to make sure that we're aligned with the federal loan program so that we're able to serve students as best we can.

I don't know, Greg, if there's something you want to add about, more broadly, affordability.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ells.

GREG ELLS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The only thing I'd add to the deputy minister's comments is that under our memorandum of understanding with the universities, we have had tuition control in place for probably 15 years now. The maximum amount of tuition increase that can be applied by the universities per year has been capped at three per cent. More recently, that capping has been focused only on Nova Scotia undergraduate students. That is a reflection of our concern around affordability - to try to keep tuition increases under control.

[10:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: With two seconds left, that would conclude the first round of questioning for the Liberal caucus.

Moving on to our NDP caucus. Ms. Hansen or Ms. Coombes.

SUZY HANSEN: I can speak to that, thank you. We know that international students add so much to our province. They are forced to pay, on average, over double the fees that domestic students pay, and their fees are not capped in the current MOU between post-secondary students and the Province.

My question is to Students Nova Scotia. What is the impact of high and unpredictable fees, and what other challenges do international students face?

LYDIA HOUCK: Thank you for that question. I will say the predictability of tuition and the high cost of tuition in the first place for international students is certainly a large concern. We've already touched on the MSI piece of the conversation, and even for international students around things like housing. We've heard more and more concerns recently from international students who are coming to the province without even an idea of where they'll be able to stay because of the challenges of finding housing in Nova Scotia, which is certainly a concern as well.

Something I wanted to highlight on that predictability piece of the conversation is something that Students Nova Scotia has previously brought forth. It is the possibility of some sort of cohort tuition model to increase predictability for international students. There are some other places across Canada that either have this or are exploring this. Essentially, it would be a case in which a student would pay a fixed rate of tuition over the course of their degree that the institution would be estimating the total amount of tuition revenue and then dividing that across the years.

It would mean then, in follow-up years, that rate could still be increased for incoming students, but it would provide more predictability. On that cohort piece in particular, that's something that could be of value on the predictability side of the conversation, but certainly acknowledging that a lot of the challenges domestic students face are really exacerbated for international students.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you for that. I love the idea about the cohort model. When we think about being a student and how expensive everything else is - I mean, if you're not a student, housing is expensive. We have to look at all these options, and we want to make sure that our students graduate. We want to make sure that they can work in Nova Scotia and continue their work here.

We already touched on the additional challenge about health coverage and MSI coverage to all residents and international students. I was glad to hear that Mr. Ells had mentioned that they're pursuing the conversation around MSI coverage for students. When we think about the time that they spend in classrooms or on campus - when we think about that time lapse in between, how expensive health care can be for someone who doesn't have the money to pay for that, let alone school, let alone books, let alone all these additional expenses.

As an NDP member, I will continue to advocate on behalf of those high expenses and the MSI coverage because we know. We've been doing this for many years - especially with previous government - to make sure that our students' voices are heard because we know that it is expensive to be a student, let alone an international student. I was glad to hear, Mr. Ells, that you're going to be continuing that conversation. I can follow up with that at a later date.

We know that other critical structures for students in Nova Scotia is finding and keeping a place to live. We touched on housing just previous. I read in the 2020-21 Students Nova Scotia's Advocacy Week document that rental costs have increased by 4 per cent last year alone. This is to Students Nova Scotia as well. Can you talk about the housing challenges faced by your members overall?

LYDIA HOUCK: Absolutely. I might actually pass that over to Ben, if it's okay, to speak to the St. FX context. I know we talk a lot about the challenges in urban areas, but I think it's just as real, if not more so, often in rural areas of the province.

BEN FAIRHURST: Thanks a ton for the question. Definitely, and looking at it from a student perspective, housing has been one of the massive concerns for students this year. It comes in many different forms. You have the potential for students to be living in unsafe conditions, where they're living with many more students than the house is actually built for in the first place. You could have students going into tenancy situations in which they don't actually know their tenancy rights - so making sure that information is out there and available.

Then at the same time, due to many expensive units and a lack of supply of affordable ones, students are either choosing something that is far out of their price range just so they can make it through this year, or taking a spot that's much further out, requiring many more transportation costs to get to the university, adding all of these additional

concerns in terms of affordability and accessibility of post-secondary education. It really can end up being the difference maker.

SUZY HANSEN: Following up to that, I just want to point out that - and I said this previously - we are in need of these students to graduate. We are in need of people having careers to work in Nova Scotia and to continue to be here. I was glad to hear that the deputy minister had mentioned that there will be new residences being built for the students to offset the cost of housing - the rental market outside of student housing.

I know that this may be something we need to look into a little bit further, but my question is: When we are going to have these student housing facilities built, are we going to look at maybe in a sense of the same way the market would be - i.e. what's affordable or rent geared to income - based on those numbers that you guys receive, i.e. their expenses and all these other pieces? As a student - and I know this as a struggling student, it wasn't that easy to afford all those other things in life, because we have a lot of other pieces on our plate as students.

My question is: Will it be affordable for students to be able to live comfortably and safely, or will it be just another building set up, in the sense that it's there, if they can afford to live there?

THE CHAIR: Who was your question for?

SUZY HANSEN: That one's to the deputy minister.

NANCY MACLELLAN: Thank you for that question. It is early to answer the question, because we are now with our colleagues doing the housing needs assessment. There's an RFP for some expertise and some help to be able to do a province-wide needs assessment that will include a lens for student housing.

Our intention, certainly, is that it be affordable. Some of the conversations we've had already about the three residences that have been announced are very much related to what the students will pay and how to make sure it's affordable, while we also make sure that the building can be maintained and sustained, and that it is there for people long into the future.

One of the other things that we're considering - certainly I have this experience from my last life - is that there is an ebb and flow to student population, and we have learned from COVID-19 that we're having different models of learning. We're having students and instructors come in for a couple weeks at a time and leave. How do we build a level of flexibility into the housing situation so that a visiting instructor, a clinical instructor or a nurses can have a place to live for a couple of weeks in a rural or more remote community while we're making sure that we have a level of stable and consistent affordable housing for students?

The other thing I think is great about the approach that we're taking is that as we look at the needs, we'll be looking at the needs in an area, not by school. Where you have multiple sites of universities, like CBRM, where there's a community college, there's CBU, other post-secondary students who are there - how do we make sure that we create student housing infrastructure that has that flexibility but isn't necessarily tied to a single institution but can be tied to a student?

Also looking at what the student need is today - emergent and into the future - for students with families, students with children. How do we make sure that we're focused on the model of housing that students would be looking for today? I'm not that old, but in my day, it was a 12 by 12 room shared by two people, and a bathroom that was shared by 12. That's probably not going to be a model that's desirable for students into the future, and certainly less desirable by students who come to Nova Scotia with families.

All of the options are on the table, but to your point, we have already had conversations about affordability and making sure that it's safe, affordable, and accessible for students.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to pass it off to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you very much. I want to go back to a topic that's very dear to me, and that's tuition fees. As mentioned, Nova Scotia has the highest tuition fees in the country. The Loan Forgiveness Program, as mentioned, provides some relief, but the program does not cover students in most graduate or professional programs, students who take longer than five years to complete their degree, or students who don't complete their degree.

The 2020-21 Students Nova Scotia Advocacy Week document also points out that the average tuition costs have increased by 16.9 per cent since 2017, and the weekly allowance has not kept up. For me, that just seems unattainable and unaffordable. To Students Nova Scotia, can you talk about the impact that lower tuition fees would have on your members?

LYDIA HOUCK: Absolutely. I think I can speak to that within the context of the conversation we've already had about the need for an equity-focused approach to supporting students financially. As opposed to lowering tuition or increasing tuition costs across the board, by taking that needs-based approach and targeting up front to support those demographics that need it the most, we would actually see larger positive impacts on students. That's why we have brought forth those incremental recommendations around increasing the maximums, and that sort of thing.

We have seen other jurisdictions bring in measures around targeted free tuition which, again, would still be charging tuition costs, but it would also be providing increased up-front support based on a level of need that a student has. As you mentioned, tuition is certainly one of the largest costs facing students. Anything we can do to reduce those costs is hugely beneficial for students but ensuring that instead of doing across-the-board changes to tuition costs, we're targeting our resources toward those groups with the highest level of need. It's certainly our largest priority. I'm not sure if that answers your question. I'd be happy to follow up with more specifics, if that helps.

KENDRA COOMBES: No, thank you very much. This is to the Department of Advanced Education. Has the department been asked to work with universities and colleges to reduce tuition fees and look at other models? Are up-front tuition fees charged by the post-secondary institution? Have you been asked to look at either reducing fees or look at various models to reduce them?

NANCY MACLELLAN: The MOU that governs our funding arrangement with universities does have a cap on tuition fees, as was mentioned already. That MOU carries us to 2024, I believe, which maximum tuition increases one per cent, which does at least make the tuition expense not get any higher. As you and Lydia have mentioned, we are also focused on needs-based programming so that the dollars that we do have go to those who need it the most.

We have not been specifically asked to look at reducing the cost of tuition. We are looking at a number of mechanisms for students to be able to enhance their ability to afford the tuition costs as they are today, including Work Integrated Learning Program options, as well as the student assistance programming that was spoken to earlier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I would argue that even though there's a cap on the percentage, there are many students - as noted by Students Nova Scotia today - who cannot afford to even go to university, or even think it's an option for them.

I want to talk about wages. Students are more likely than other workers to work for minimum wage. With living wage being \$22 per hour in Halifax, \$18.45 per hour in Cape Breton, and \$21 per hour in the Valley, students who are trying to balance the cost of housing, tuition, and essentials are in a real tough spot here. Just recently, the government finally agreed to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, but not until 2024. My question to Students Nova Scotia, where students are more likely to work minimum wage, what would it mean for your members if the minimum wage were to be increased to \$15 per hour tomorrow?

LYDIA HOUCK: It's a great question. We know there are lots of costs and the more dollars we have in students' pockets, the better. I also recognize there are a lot of considerations involved in that minimum wage process, and it's not necessarily as simple as just flipping a switch or anything like that, because there are a lot of processes involved

in that. But I think certainly anything that puts more dollars in students' pockets feasibly is something that's beneficial. We support supporting students up front but it is a complicated consideration, I know.

[11:00 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes - and you have approximately four minutes remaining.

KENDRA COOMBES. Then I will go to my longer question first. The legacy of colonialism and failure of the Canadian federal government to fulfill the responsibilities to ensure Indigenous peoples have access to education has left a startling gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Educational attainment levels among Indigenous people remain significantly lower than the non-Indigenous population. This is why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action No. 16 says, "We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages."

This is also why the Canadian Federation of Students - Nova Scotia has recommended that the Province increase funding for hiring Indigenous faculty to create more teaching capacity. My question is to the department: What work is under way at the department to address this gap in post-secondary education?

NANCY MACLELLAN: I'll start, but first let me say that the tuition increase amount is three per cent, not one per cent as I stated before - I was corrected by one of my colleagues.

We recognize the enrollment of Indigenous students in post-secondary education is consistently lower than the Canadian average, and these students and other racialized and marginalized students face additional barriers to attending. Over the last number of years, we have been focusing efforts on recruitment and retention of Mi'kmaw and Indigenous students to post-secondary education, and the MOU between the Province and the universities commits to increasing access and affordability for these underrepresented groups.

We do have a strategic plan for the recruitment and retention of Mi'kmaw and Indigenous post-secondary students, and that was designed and directed to fulfill the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action for post-secondary education. The goals in this framework include improving Mi'kmaw and Indigenous student data and research enhancing the ability of Mi'kmaw language courses and teaching Mi'kmaw language certificates as well as Mi'kmaw recognition of prior learning.

We also have a number of other initiatives under way. Cheryl, I don't know if there's more that you want to add.

THE CHAIR: Ms. To.

CHERYL TO: Thank you, Deputy Minister and Mr. Chair. I just want to highlight a few other initiatives that the department is advancing in regard to improving the participation of marginalized and racialized populations. We are a key partner in the newly established African Nova Scotian Advisory Council, which was really formed to address the parity of education equality for African Nova Scotians and all people of African descent. This group will be focused on developing a framework to enhance their retention as well as addressing anti-Black racism in post-secondary education.

We also work with our university partners. Dalhousie Medical Sciences has a cohort that attracts and supports Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian students to the Medical Sciences B.Sc. program. Also, our nursing schools - Dalhousie, St. F.X., Cape Breton University - have seats that are prioritized for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw students. The Province also supports an Indigenous Blacks & Mi'kmaq Initiative at Dalhousie's Schulich School of Law where seats are targeted to that population as well as wraparound supports.

Lastly, I just want to highlight that the department also supports the Dalhousie Transition Year Program. This is a one-year academic program that prepares individuals from Mi'kmaw and Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities for university studies. We often recognize that there is a gap and they need further support to make that transition.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the NDP's allotted caucus questioning time for the first round. We'll move on to the Progressive Conservative caucus, starting with Ms. Sheehy-Richard. I'm having a hard time finding people on Zoom. My apologies. Mr. Ritcey, did I see your hand?

DAVE RITCEY: Yes, I'll go first. That's fine. Thank you so much for coming on today. I do have a couple of questions that will go directly to the Student Nova Scotia group and then on to the department.

My first question: We know that access to mental health services is very important to students. Could you talk to us about some of the barriers usually faced by students trying to access these services? That's directed toward Ms. Houck or Mr. Fairhurst.

LYDIA HOUCK: Absolutely. I really appreciate that question. As we know, mental health was a big issue for students across campuses even prior to the pandemic. Over the course of the past two years, we've really only seen that continue to grow with the isolation and that sort of thing.

I think among the largest barriers it wouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that the wait times on campus and off campus for mental health supports continue to be an issue.

We do have Healthy Minds NS, which is the online collection of tools to support students 24/7, 365 online, but there are cases where folks really do want to have that in-person support. The challenges in ensuring that there are sufficient resources available to students quickly on campus continues to be a priority, absolutely.

I think I'll pass it over to Ben to speak a little bit more about that as well, if that's all right.

BEN FAIRHURST: I really want to hit a couple of the key comments that Lydia was talking about there and kind of bring in a bit of a personal side from what I've seen as a student here at St. F.X.

Mental health was one of the big reasons that I wanted to get involved in student politics in the first place. There have been a bunch of studies recently that have shown how crippling an issue this really is. There was a national survey this year that reported 84 per cent of post-secondary students had reported a new or exacerbated mental health challenge. We know this is a massive issue.

I think one key priority to keep in mind is also concrete data collection, having a framework by which to target these services and kind of figure out where the gray areas exist. Coming into this, you'd think, where are the gaps? What needs to be done better? Everyone around the table wants to do better for students. It's one thing that we've seen. We just need to understand where the gray areas are and where the gaps in service are.

One way by which we could do this is through the auditing tool within the new post-secondary mental health framework. This could be used to audit the gray areas, the gaps within post-secondary mental health services, and identify where we can improve our services to better meet the new standards.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you for those answers. This is Part B of my question, and this is directed toward the department members. If the department could weigh in on this as well, can you speak to the work being done around supporting students with their mental health and wellness?

NANCY MACLELLAN: I appreciate that very much. This has been a rocky time for students the last two years. It's really taking its toll - being in the classroom and out of the classroom and being home. I've observed it. One of the first things Minister Wong and I did when we became minister and deputy minister was get on the road and visit campuses around the province this Fall and meet with Students Nova Scotia and other groups to talk about the experience of students.

We really do put the experience of students at the centre of all that we do and all that we talk about and all that we plan for. They're the reason that the department exists. I am reminded that this government, by creating the stand-alone Department of Advanced

Education, really has signalled that this is a priority, that there are a dedicated deputy minister and a dedicated minister, which there had not been before. That's the blessing and the curse for the folks who have worked in the

There's a dedicated deputy minister and a dedicated minister, which there had not been before. That's the blessing and the curse for the folks who have worked in this area for their careers - that they have the focus of a full-time deputy and a full-time minister.

There have been additional challenges faced, and HealthyMindsNS which Lydia mentioned, is one of the programs that we have invested in. There's annual funding of about \$600,000 that goes to e-mental health supports. While I know that it is sometimes desirable for an in-person connection, we also know that the pandemic taught us all to get a little more comfortable with online and e-supports.

HealthyMindsNS does offer a suite of e-mental health resources that are free for university and NSCC students and apprenticeship learners. It's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It includes Togetherall, which is an online peer support platform moderated by mental health practitioners, and an online mental health library that includes self-help modules and mindfulness exercises that can be used independently or in combination with counselling. There's the Crisis Text Line, and the Good2Talk post-secondary helpline, which is an anonymous, confidential phone help line that provides professional counselling and information.

We do have a significant focus on (Inaudible) In addition, (Inaudible) Health and Addictions have had some conversations in making sure that (Inaudible) student experience is front and centre as mental health programming is enhanced throughout the province. I don't know, Greg, if you have (Inaudible) share on that.

GREG ELLS: I would like to add that under the HealthyMindsNS committee, which does have representation from students - Lydia sits on the committee - and also from every university, and the NSCC, as well - under that committee, we have two subcommittees. One is for evaluation, and one is for marketing.

The evaluation committee is constantly looking at the products that we are supporting with our funding to ensure that those products are indeed performing as we hoped they would and providing the services that students are seeking. We're always looking at the products. In fact, within the past six months or so, we have switched out of two products that we thought were not really hitting the mark and moved into purchasing Togetherall in place of those two products.

The other committee that exists is a marketing committee that is constantly striving to ensure that all the students in post-secondary are aware of the services that are available. We want to make sure that everyone knows they're there, if and when they need to use them.

DAVE RITCEY: I have one more question, then I'll pass it off to my colleague. What efforts are being made to increase the number of health care workers being trained? I guess that's directed to the deputy minister.

NANCY MACLELLAN: We have all hands on deck working to expand health care workforce issues in the province. In collaboration with the Department of Health and Wellness, we have been able to put in place a number of initiatives that are helping address workforce issues for the health care sector and student affordability issues.

The first one I'll talk about is the continuing care assistants' progressive education plan. This is a work and learn model of delivery that was developed in response to workforce need. After completing a foundation model online - I think it started in December - students are able to work as continuing care assistants starting in a limited capacity and building more skill as they acquire more hours in the classroom and in the workforce experience.

Students are paid a salary, so it's helping them with affordability and with their living costs. Government's making an investment of \$22 million over the next two years to cover 100 per cent of tuition costs for over 2,000 students in continuing care assistants' programs.

This is also augmenting some difficulty in labour shortages in that sector as a result of COVID-19 and as a result of the most recent wave.

In early November, we were able to address the funding gap for students in the nursing school program - which we talked about a little bit earlier - so that students in the accelerated program were able to maintain student assistance for the full 34 weeks of their program, rather than 28.

There's also been an announcement by this government that all nurses graduating from Nova Scotia universities and the Nova Scotia Community College for the next five years will be offered a job in the province with the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the IWK Health Centre or in the continuing care sector.

Building on our relationship with post-secondary institutions, we were able to work with our post-secondary partners to have nurse learners have their clinical placements in long-term care settings. This again is to be able to augment some difficulty and challenges that are occurring with staffing in long-term care and to make sure that students had a path to their graduation and their learning clinical placements where acute care placements were limited.

We also recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the Michener Institute of Education at UHN, which is an allied health school. We're looking at how we

can accelerate training in the health care sectors for Nova Scotians to be able to be in the workforce sooner.

[11:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard, did I see your hand go up?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm having a little bit of a connectivity issue here, so I hope that I stay with you all.

This topic touches me because I do have a son who is a graduate from NSCC and working in his trade, as well as one who is in his third year at Dalhousie University. So I'm happy to be here today discussing this with all of you.

I'd like to start with the department. It's evident that students are the very heart of your department and we're here today talking about affordability. What does your department do to engage with the students?

THE CHAIR: Ms. MacLellan.

NANCY MACLELLAN: I'll start but I no doubt will miss some of the things that we're doing so I'll invite my colleagues from both Students Nova Scotia and from the department to augment my initial comments.

We have student round tables that take place - I believe it's four times a year. We've done these with post-secondary students and with NSCC students. It's an opportunity for students to come together with us and let us know what their issues are, in addition to meeting regularly with Students Nova Scotia and the Canadian Federation of Students. We've had a great working relationship with Students Nova Scotia. I know that they are in regular contact with our staff and our offices. They've done an amazing job of articulating key priorities that they are hearing from their members.

In addition to that, the minister is very interested in hearing from students directly. He's kicked off a virtual tour of student classroom visits where he's going to pop into classrooms - not unannounced, planned ahead - and just have a chat with students and hear directly from them about their experience.

I have been in service delivery all of my government career. I was at Service Nova Scotia and I was at the Department of Community Services, and then as I mentioned, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Making sure you are conscious of who you're serving and having active channels to listen to them is at the heart of being a good service provider. We do want to make sure that we keep those lines of communication open and that we're able to address the issues that are raised in a timely and effective way.

Greg, Cheryl, I don't know if you have anything more to add.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Houck.

LYDIA HOUCK: I was just going to jump in quickly and echo what Deputy Minister MacLellan has already said. In addition to the government-student round tables, there are advocacy mechanisms. We've been fortunate to have a really productive and open relationship in bringing forth any concerns that might be on our radar in relation to what we're hearing from students, and certainly value that student voice and appreciate the fact that it's recognized.

THE CHAIR: Ms. To.

CHERYL TO: Thank you, Mr. Chair and Lydia. Good to see you and Ben again. I just wanted to echo what the deputy minister said. We recognize the importance of hearing from students and including students in our conversations to really ensure that their perspective and their voice is reflected in our work.

I would just add on to what the deputy minister said to say that The Partnership Committee - which consists of the university presidents and various deputy ministers - meets annually with the student leaders to discuss the implementation of the priorities in the memorandum of understanding, and also to obtain student input. I'd be remiss to say that we also have a number of working groups that involve student representations, including the HealthyMindsNS working group that Greg mentioned earlier.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Ms. Houck, this is for you. It's lovely again to see you, as I said earlier before we were on camera. You mentioned what your 2021 advocacy work was: the needs-based funding to enhance student assistance, the cost of textbooks, and the health care for international students in particular. I was curious what your 2022 advocacy work will focus on this year.

LYDIA HOUCK: That's a great question. I will say that within Students Nova Scotia, our advocacy work is actually informed by our membership which cycles every year. We will have a new board coming in on May 1st, which may have different advocacy priorities and things like that. I would be very confident in saying themes of affordability, accessibility, and workforce attachment, getting students into education, all those sorts of things will continue to be our priorities moving forward, for sure.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It is an understatement to say that the pandemic has been very challenging on everybody, but I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how the students were actually doing last Fall.

LYDIA HOUCK: I can speak to that briefly, then I will pass it over to Ben as well. I think it goes without saying that students have continued to struggle throughout this

pandemic. We've seen many supports come out - including the one last week which is incredibly beneficial - but the reality I think is that students are just burnt out at this point. We're approaching two years of the pandemic and things like that, and as we're moving back to the "new normal" whatever that might look like, I think students are looking for opportunities to get back on campus, and connect with their peers in the classrooms a little bit more.

I will say, beyond the piece about affordability, I think student well-being is certainly a big priority for us right now, and one we'll see only continue to grow. The effects of the pandemic aren't only limited to the duration of it. I think we will see snowball effects that will continue in the long term. That's certainly a priority of ours to keep an eye on as well.

BEN FAIRHURST: Honestly, just to touch on exactly what Lydia was saying there, in terms of that burnt-out feeling amongst the student body - 100 per cent. I believe that's a run-off effect of just a general uncertainty. Everyone has been feeling it in their lives because everything is so back and forth - the online to in-person delivery, financial insecurity leading to mental and physical difficulties.

Across the board, there are many unique challenges that are going on for university students right now just because you are tackling education and living through a pandemic at the same time. Employment-wise is also another big aspect of that.

I think all of this has created an entire feeling of uncertainty, which has led to a burned-out state. It's really nice to be here this morning, speaking on ways that we can help reconcile some of these difficulties for students.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard, you have approximately one minute.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Okay, I'll speed-talk to the department. We were talking about the \$875 grant that you had announced earlier just last week. Can you share with us what that could mean for students, what it could do for them? A lot of the time, challenges are involving long wait times to see funding come through. Can you maybe talk about how quickly those who qualify will receive it?

NANCY MACLELLAN: We were really pleased to be able to get the announcement out about the \$875 grant for students. It will go to about 11,000 students who are in receipt of Nova Scotia student assistance. I think - (Inaudible) pretty quickly - I think that it started to be in effect for some folks as early as last week, or as early as this week. Folks should see that money come over the next week or two, I believe.

Carol couldn't be with us today, she's sick, but she has said over and over again - and I know we all share this - that sometimes these amounts of money make the difference between somebody being able to stay in post-secondary and not. They're that close to the

wire. So they were pretty excited and proud of being able to get that done and to be able to make sure that we're supporting students. The other thing about it is that . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Ms. MacLellan, that concludes our time for the PC caucus.

Moving on, we'll have approximately five minutes for each caucus before we move into committee business. I'll start with the Liberal caucus, please. Mr. Jessome, or Mr. Duale, perhaps.

ALI DUALE: Yes, Mr. Chair. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. This question will be going to Ben. Could you please discuss the rising cost of textbooks and the impact this has on not only affordability but also access to education? When your textbooks are very expensive, and also we know there's environmental incentive - could you please speak to the impact of these textbooks?

BEN FAIRHURST: Thanks for the question, Mr. Duale. It's a great question. Throughout the student body it's been one of the top concerns especially brought to us at St. F.X. this year. Actually, what our senior class decided to do - every year after the X-Ring ceremony, the senior class provides a scholarship for other years that are going to be passing through St. F.X. The senior class decided textbooks had been such an issue that we want to continuously give funds to students coming forward.

The impacts of the cost of textbooks are immense. We actually had a student survey go out last year at St. F.X. In response to what the "give up to get" was for students when buying textbooks, we had a lot who were taking a new class and decided, no, I don't have to buy the textbook, because it was unaffordable for them. We had students who were extending their degree time because they couldn't afford to take a full semester because they would have had to pay \$250 per textbook in every single class, so I'm only going to take four instead of five, and now I'm going to be in school for five years instead of four.

We had students who were changing what they bought at the grocery store. We had students who weren't buying clothes that they needed, or different things for their physical and mental well-being. Those textbook costs, those ancillary costs, they do add up, and they do have big costs in terms of student well-being - so yes, thanks for the question.

ALI DUALE: This question would be to the department. As we're hearing the testimony of the students, I'm wondering if there's anything the department has planned - and also, with the students, Ben, if you can elaborate. We know the impact. Do we have a solution, and where does that solution lie? Thank you.

THE CHAIR: My apologies - who was your question to, Mr. Duale?

ALI DUALE: My question is pertaining to students as well as to the department. The question of the students is: We know the impact. Are there any solutions within the

student leadership that could have a solution, to come up with an idea of how we can solve this problem?

The other question, for the department: Is there any action or idea that has looked at this particular subject matter - how we can save the students this cost of the textbooks?

[11:30 a.m.]

NANCY MACLELLAN: You can probably see on the bookshelf behind me, I kept my economics textbook because it was \$325, and that wasn't yesterday. I do understand. I also have my own kids who have experienced the textbook pain.

We have discussed with both Lydia and Ben and others, AtlanticOER - Open Educational Resources - which is a platform by which folks can share textbooks. There's a licensing and there's all kinds of things with it. We are looking at how that has decreased the cost for students in other jurisdictions. We certainly are looking to evaluate that and to see if it's something that we could do to help offset some of those costs for students. I don't know if I got that right, Cheryl, so jump in if I didn't.

CHERYL TO: Yes, deputy minister, that's correct. We are investigating AtlanticOER. It was raised by Students Nova Scotia. We know that AtlanticOER is currently - the pilot is currently funded by the Council of Atlantic University Libraries for just the pilot. We are discussing with our colleagues of the other Atlantic provinces how we can perhaps have a joint funding model. I also do want to raise that some universities or institutions have also taken advancement in OER . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the five minutes for our Liberal caucus. Moving on to the NDP - Ms. Coombes or Ms. Hansen.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to go back to talking about these fees - and that is not just the textbook fees. We're talking meal plans and lab fees, which are high. We have high tuition - we have these other high fees - we have high housing. What is the department doing to lower these fees regarding - not just the textbooks, but the meal plans and the lab fees? Is there anything that the department is doing to work with the universities to lower these fees for students to make it more affordable?

NANCY MACLELLAN: The issue of student fees has come up a number of times in my time. It is varied from institution to institution. It is something that is done by each school to determine - to offset the cost of providing the education. It is not regulated under the MOU. I'm looking for Greg to nod. You are correct, it is not regulated. It is sort of a not hidden cost - what's the word I'm looking for - a cumulative cost layered on for students and their student experience.

It's definitely on our radar because it is part of the student expense. I know our student assistance folks have that on their radar as another factor when determining the costs for students. Greg, I don't know if there's anything you want to add.

GREG ELLS: Just a clarification. Under the MOU, we are concerned around increases to auxiliary and ancillary fees. Ever since we've been controlling tuitions, we've also had a clause in the MOU that speaks to universities not increasing those fees to compensate for their inability to, or their restricted ability to, increase tuition fees.

Each year when universities are preparing their new fees, they are required to submit to us a list of the price changes. We do review those, and if they are being increased by more than three per cent - which is the rate at which tuition can increase - they are required to provide to us a justification for that increase beyond three per cent.

KENDRA COOMBES: I appreciate that information. I asked before about the TRC's Call to Action #16, and it wasn't really answered. My question around that was with regard to the Call to Action #16. It had to do with university institutions creating degrees and diplomas around programs in Aboriginal languages. I'm wondering, what is the department doing to create more teaching capacity - not just the student capacity, but the teaching capacity to teach these students? Is the department doing anything with regard to that gap?

NANCY MACLELLAN: The commitments under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada are very much front of mind for the university leadership and post-secondary leadership. I'm going to defer to Greg on this one because I'm pretty sure it's been part of the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents discussion.

GREG ELLS: We are very concerned about trying to make sure that the under-represented students - Mi'kmaw, Indigenous, African Nova Scotian - have adequate supports within their programs to ensure that they can be successful. The universities and the NSCC have been providing a lot of internal supports to that end.

The other thing I'd like to mention is that within the strategy that's been developed by our Director of Mi'kmaq and Indigenous Post-Secondary Recruitment and Retention is an initiative to increase the opportunities and exposure to opportunities for Mi'kmaw language training. Perhaps I could turn it over to Cheryl, who is more closely connected with that than I am, for perhaps a little bit more detail there.

THE CHAIR: Ms. To, you have about 20 seconds.

CHERYL TO: I was just going to say that yes, one of the first actions under this strategic plan is to enhance the availability of Mi'kmaw language courses and teaching Mi'kmaw language certificates. We do have a lack of Mi'kmaw speakers who are able to

teach, so we're trying to address the Truth and Reconciliation calls to action by firstly ensuring that we have . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the NDP questioning. Moving on to the Progressive Conservative caucus. Mr. Harrison, did I see your hand?

LARRY HARRISON: Yes. Thank you all for bringing your information and concern to the table. The pandemic has certainly forced many to invest in online courses - the technology for those online courses. Do you see more online or blends of online and in-person learning contributing to the future of post-secondary education? Do you think this will help to keep the post-secondary affordable?

THE CHAIR: Is that to Ms. MacLellan?

LARRY HARRISON: Yes, please.

NANCY MACLELLAN: Again, in my short time with this subject matter, this issue of online and blended learning has come up, even with our federal, provincial, and territorial colleagues. One of the areas that we have raised with them is the ability for us to evaluate and assess online learning and that ability for folks to be successful when they've had an online learning experience.

There really isn't any evaluation of that yet at this point, so knowing what the right blend is and having that blend meet students where they live too, because some students - not unlike workers - need the structure of being able to get up and go to a classroom. For some learners, online learning is perfectly fine, and for some, they can pivot and have a blend.

One of the areas that we have talked about is how we evaluate that, but I do think, if I may, one of the gifts of COVID-19 is that it has opened up this new way of learning that for some people will be much more effective and much more accessible. I thank you for the question. We are looking at models of learning and what that can look like for students. Lydia, I think you had something you wanted to add.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Houck.

LYDIA HOUCK: I just wanted to jump in quickly and echo what the deputy minister has said. What we've been seeing on the ground from students over the past two years is that there wasn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Some students actually benefited from that pivot to online, some really felt there was no replacement for that in-person learning. I think the biggest take-away is the importance of student flexibility and choice, and having a range of offerings. There are things we might not have to offer fully online or fully in-person.

I also will highlight, we saw enrollment certainly increase over the past several years, but it was more specifically among students over 25 and part-time learners. We have seen an increase in the less traditional student demographic, and I think a part of that is because of the increased flexibility. I certainly think that's a priority going forward as well. Thank you.

LARRY HARRISON: Again on finances, I'm wondering what is available for students who are not eligible for student assistance. This would be a question to the department.

NANCY MACLELLAN: I appreciate the question. Students who aren't eligible for financial assistance through Student Assistance can be eligible for student lines of credit through a bank. There may be students who have registered education savings plans or other investments that will help, or family resources, or many students have part-time jobs.

Post-secondary students have a lot of scholarships and bursaries available to them through Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions and other organizations. Also, if attending a Nova Scotia university, they are also eligible for the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary program, which provides \$1,283 to all students annually.

LARRY HARRISON: I didn't know whether Mr. MacDonald had a question or not.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald, you have about 50 seconds.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm good, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Well, I guess that would conclude our questioning for witnesses. I would offer an opportunity to provide closing remarks. Is there someone from the department who'd wish to make closing remarks?

NANCY MACLELLAN: Thank you to the committee, Students Nova Scotia, and our folks for this really valuable conversation. As I said when we opened, students are at the heart of everything we do at the Department of Advanced Education, and enhancing affordability and accessibility to post-secondary education is a priority. I hope we reflected that in our responses today.

We are a brand-new department, only five months. But as I mentioned, the creation of the department does send a strong message to our students in the post-secondary sector that they and their work are not only important, but necessary if we want to achieve our ambitious goals as a province.

With a strong, affordable, collaborative post-secondary sector that is safe, diverse, and able to meet the needs of the students and workforce, we'll be successful. Minister

Wong always says that we want students to come, we want them to study, we want them to stay, and we want them to have families and live here and prosper. That's the focus of our work. I'm really grateful for this chance to talk about it with you today.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Houck, did you have some closing remarks? Or Mr. Fairhurst?

BEN FAIRHURST: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to everyone, honestly. As we look forward to what is hopefully the end of the pandemic, now is the perfect time to invest in Nova Scotia's students and post-secondary education. We know that a post-COVID-19 recovery will involve youth and new graduates, and ensuring that the opportunity to acquire an education is open to all Nova Scotians is paramount.

We want to recognize the improvements that have been made and continue to be made in order to better support students, and we look forward to continuing to work collaboratively to further improve the quality, accessibility, and affordability of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia. Investments in students are investments in our province's future, and ones that will be returned with dividends in years to come.

We are so appreciative of the opportunity to speak to you today alongside folks from the Department of Advanced Education. Thank you for including the voices of students in this conversation. We are happy to follow up with any additional information or to answer further questions that may arise.

THE CHAIR: I want to thank all of our witnesses for taking the time today. It was quite informative and I really enjoyed it. With that said, you're free to leave the meeting and then we'll proceed with committee business.

We do have a couple of items in committee business - I'm just mindful of our time. We have about 16 minutes remaining. The first bit would have been a correspondence everyone would have received, through the Chair, from Mr. Clark and the response.

Seeing no hands. There was a motion which was deferred from a couple of meetings ago, Mr. Duale's motion. Do we have any discussion on that topic?

BEN JESSOME: Can I ask a point of clarification on this?

THE CHAIR: Certainly, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I know I'm coming in pinch-hitting here today, but in the interest of maximizing here, I'm just wondering if this subject matter would be considered an additional training component to committee business, or if this would be an element of the agenda-setting process in terms of bringing that entity in as a witness?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh or Mr. Hebb? Committee members?

[11:45 a.m.]

JUDY KAVANAGH: I'm sorry, I don't understand the question.

THE CHAIR: Myself also.

BEN JESSOME: The question pertains to identifying what considerations and initiatives are in place with respect to ensuring diversity in our ABCs. Am I correct in my understanding of that?

THE CHAIR: Just for some context, Mr. Jessome, there was some discussion about a motion Mr. Duale had put forward a couple of weeks ago. Mr. Duale, did you have any comments?

ALI DUALE: Yes, I do have it. I raised this issue because it's very important, the ABC appointments for our province. It has to be non-partisan, it has to be the most well-qualified people, but, also, it has to reflect our communities and our province. That was the subject matter.

Because of the timing, this morning I just saw Richard MacLean, who competed with me in the riding of Halifax Armdale. I have no objection to his qualifications and his appointment, but these kinds of issues are my concern. That's the reason that I made that motion.

I really believe our mission in this particular subject matter because I want this to be in the public record. The people that we are appointing to public service positions - we need to stay away from partisanship, friendships, and relationships. It has to be well-qualified individuals who deserve to serve Nova Scotians, rather than who's close to me, who's part of my party, or who's giving me a donation. That was the reason.

The outcome should be the reflection of Nova Scotians. What I understand Ben is asking right now is: do we need to bring that committee in the next setting as a witness, and to tell the committee what actions they have to take, what they have in plan, and how they can come up with a fruitful vision for this committee. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I just want to make sure, to be clear, this was brought forward. Did you see that Ms. Coombes had her hand raised, also? I just want to make sure you have her. I see her in front of me, so make sure Ms. Coombes is on your list.

For me, this was based on diversity. The wording of the motion in December, I had some concerns with. I agree that we need to get this right. That's why I'm glad we took a month to deal with it, longer, just because. For me, it's based on finding out what the

committee that are doing this have already in place and have them come at the end of the Spring - I think it's called the Spring campaign, when that's done, for them to come to us. To Mr. Duale, that won't be in six months - it will probably be sooner. That would be my preference. It's not to send them and say, by the way, go do all this. I'd rather them come to us and say, here's what we've done, here's what we're dealing with for it - and they will, once the Spring campaign is done. They are behind, and we need to get these committees filled ASAP. I do not want to slow down these committees. We have committees that right now can't work.

I believe the amendment was shared with the committee - although Mr. Duale, if you want to change your motion to deal with it, I'm happy with that also. The whole intent was to make sure that all those committees are getting diverse for the community they're in. I'm right behind you with it 100 per cent. I just want to make sure everybody has the right order. That was my intent for an amendment that I believe was shared with the group, if the clerk will nod and correct.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald, are you able to read your amendment that was shared?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I would rather wait until after the two other young ladies who have asked to speak before I start talking about my motion, if that's okay.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm having a moment of confusion here, because I am not certain if the Liberal motion is on the floor or not. I'm also not certain if my Liberal colleagues were talking about their motion or were talking about the PC motion that we received earlier. I would like those two things clarified here.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I have the PC motion in front of me. I wasn't trying to get into the content of the motion. I was simply trying to inquire about whether this would be an additional meeting to the committee business similar to a training session that I know other committees experienced in the past, or whether or not this would be a subject generally embedded in the agenda-setting process and bring that group in in that way.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, to your point too, no motion has been made yet. We're on discussion regarding Mr. Duale's motion. No one has made a motion thus far. Ms. Hansen, did you have your hand up?

KENDRA COOMBES: Just one second. I feel like we're putting the cart before the horse, Mr. Chair. We're talking about two motions happening at the same time. Mr. Jessome just told us that he was talking about the PC motion. Mr. Duale was talking about

his motion. I believe, Mr. MacDonald, you were talking about the PC motion. I feel like we're putting the cart before the horse, so could someone please put a motion on the floor that we can have a discussion on, please?

BEN JESSOME: Sorry folks. I thought we were already there. My bad.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh.

JUDY KAVANAGH: Just to clarify things, Mr. Duale did make a motion in the December meeting. It's been deferred to this meeting - it's on your agendas now. It has not been read aloud yet during this meeting. However, in the meantime, Mr. MacDonald has sent a proposed amendment to this motion, which again has not yet been read aloud in this meeting.

What the committee is perhaps going to decide today is whether or not to accept the amendment to the motion, and then vote on the original motion - or the amended motion.

THE CHAIR: Just for clarity, the motion that was deferred from the December 14, 2020 meeting, as everyone has it, is that the committee write a formal letter to the Executive Council Office to request for a strategy to be put in place approaching under-represented communities in Nova Scotia and ensuring more diverse applicants are brought forward for ABCs appointments. The board and commission appointees will also have the Executive Council report back within six months in time for the next agenda-setting. I believe that was discussed but then it was deferred.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: As long as MLA Hansen doesn't have anything to say, I move my amendment, but I do not want to do it until I'm sure everybody's spoken out of respect for her. Looks like everybody's good.

To make it clearer, and I think to get exactly what everybody wants - and just for Mr. Jessome, I would rather it be as a meeting because if it's training, it's not public. I'd like the meeting to be public and if it's training, that would not be public. I don't think any members here want the meeting to happen outside of the public realm.

I would amend the motion to read: I move that the Standing Committee on Human Resources write to the Executive Council Office asking them for the policies, plans and actions they take in order to diversify ABC appointments, and invite the Executive Council Office to appear before the Human Resources Committee after calls for the ABC candidates Spring campaign is completed.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: My question is - and I guess this goes back to what Mr. Jessome was asking previously, before we had this amendment on the floor. Is this an additional meeting to our already-set agenda, or are the PCs looking to put this on as a topic for the next agenda-setting? To me, this looks like we are adding an additional topic from the already three-two-one that we've already agreed to. I'm just looking for that clarification here.

THE CHAIR: Do we have any other discussion? Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Staff may be able to help me with this: when is the next agenda-setting meeting for this committee? They're saying after Spring, which I'm just trying to figure out, if this would be part of the second - I get exactly what you're saying, MLA Coombes. To me, if it's getting added, it's getting added to the bottom - or preferably, it would be better to have it in the next one. It may delay it, in having it out. I'm good either way, to be honest.

Even though it's a Liberal motion and I'm amending it, I don't think we want to take from anybody's list and say, okay, well, what I'm going to do is take half of mine and half of - I would rather it be added, if everybody is in agreement that this is something we should be doing. I think all three parties are agreeing unanimously that this is what we should be doing. I think those are the things we should not worry about, is it mine or yours. But that's just my opinion.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh, did you have a comment?

JUDY KAVANAGH: I was just trying to figure out when the next agenda-setting is due to happen. It really depends on how long the House sits. If the House continues to sit through to the end of April, then it will be October before the next agenda-setting, so we're looking at the Fall, either way. We can't get through the topics we have before September.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I guess it would have to be on the next list if we're already that maxed out, unless people want to have an extra meeting. But again, the House is - outside the House's sitting, if we can deal with this motion and then deal with it at the next meeting as to whether we should add a meeting to this committee or not, I leave it to the committee's decision.

THE CHAIR: Just conscious of everyone's time, we started a little late, and we have about four or five minutes remaining. There's always an option to defer to another meeting, but that's at the discretion of the committee. Ms. Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I thank you for the clarity piece, going through the motion pieces. I do want to say that when the Executive Council came and spoke that day, they did say that by the time it gets to us, by the time the names come to us, it's already gone through a

screening process of whatever choices that looks like. So yes, I think what strategy they use in order to make these decisions on deciding who comes forward, obviously should be something that's transparent to us, 100 per cent. But I'm not sure if that's even a meeting process.

[12:00 noon]

When I think about how people are decided upon, it's like a resume. It's like an essay. It's a huge undertaking, which for some communities can be a barrier. So I think it's just figuring out what that strategy is and having them give us that information, and then we can give feedback or whatever that looks like. I'm not sure if it's a full meeting for us to have strategic planning, because that's their expertise.

I just look at it in the sense of this, this motion is just asking for specifics, asking what is their strategy? Maybe there are things we could come up with that we know about that we can add into their particular strategy as an Executive Council.

I took the motion in a different way, not looking at it like having a specific meeting and an update. More of, like, what's your strategy, these are some things that might work within all of our realms of communities, and then we can get follow up from them. That's just my take on that.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Chair, I'm going to ask for extra time for this meeting.

THE CHAIR: We have 10:03 a.m. - I know I have additional meetings today. Others may.

KENDRA COOMBES: Five extra minutes. I think this conversation deserves it.

THE CHAIR: Is everyone okay to extend the meeting by five minutes?

BEN JESSOME: I am. I did have a motion that's been circulated based on some of the content that we discussed in today's meeting. It shouldn't take long to discuss - I just wanted to make sure that we get this on the record today.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh, just a point of clarity. Is this by unanimous consent that we need this?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Doesn't have to be unanimous.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The meeting will be extended by five minutes. Is there further discussion? Did someone have their hand up?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Can I call the question, Chair?

THE CHAIR: The question has been called. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next on the agenda, we have our venue for the 29th of March meeting. Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Don't we have to do the original motion, because that was an amendment?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh.

JUDY KAVANAGH: I'm sorry, what did the committee just vote on?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: We voted on an amendment, so we now have to vote on the amended motion to MLA Coombes' point. I now call the question on the amended motion.

JUDY KAVANAGH: So, Mr. MacDonald's amendment has been accepted, and now the committee is going to vote on whether to pass that amended motion.

THE CHAIR: The question has been called on the amended motion. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. The world of Zoom.

Next on the agenda, we have our venue for the 29th meeting. Is there discussion? Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you, and thank you, Ms. Coombes, for catching that. I missed it.

As everybody's aware, Doctor Strang has already announced that we're coming out of phases from the COVID-19, effective February 14th. As the next meeting is for March 29th, I move that we move that the Human Resources Committee resume in-person meetings beginning with the meeting scheduled for March 29th, which I believe will happen in the Committees Room.

THE CHAIR: MS. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I have a question with regard to that because, although I have no problem going in person, we still don't know how we're going into the Legislature - as of right now, as I'm aware. I'm wondering if we could actually have the concept that we're going to go in person, however, be polled closer to the date. I'm just going to amend your motion by saying that we're going to go in person.

The idea is we go in person, but also have the clerk poll us closer to the date as we don't know if we're going into a hybrid or we're going in, full-person, into the Legislature. If some people are going hybrid, then it may not be feasible for members to get to the actual Legislature for the hour meeting. I'm wondering if that's feasible for Mr. MacDonald.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald, we have two minutes remaining.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I can make it even quicker: that's fine with me. If you wanted it, I'd consider a friendly amendment if Mr. Hebb would nod his head yes, and then we'd only have to do one vote. Mr. Hebb nodded yes, so I would consider that a friendly amendment, which means we would only have to vote once for it.

Mr. Chair, I'd agree with that as a friendly amendment, and that way I call the question on the full motion amended by Ms. Coombes as said.

THE CHAIR: Could you read the amendment one more time, Ms. Coombes?

KENDRA COOMBES: It would be that although we are agreeing that we are going to go in person, we'll be polled closer to the date, as we don't know how we're going into the legislative session.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Would you like me to read what I think you mean so I can do it once?

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, go ahead.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I move that the Human Resources Committee resumes in-person meetings beginning with the meeting scheduled for March 29, however the clerk will poll the committee members as we get closer to confirm we are able to by Public Health. Does that work?

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Our next meeting will be Tuesday, March 29, 2022, 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. With that said, this meeting is adjourned.

BEN JESSOME: Mr. Chair, I did circulate a motion and I mentioned I did have a motion I'd like to get on the record before the end of the meeting.

THE CHAIR: The meeting has been adjourned, Mr. Jessome. The five minutes has expired.

BEN JESSOME: If I had a nickel for every time we extended the meeting for the Progressive Conservative Party over the last several years out of courtesy for members and what they wanted to discuss, we'd be pretty rich right now. Anyway, if that's the case, I'll suck it up and we'll move on.

[The meeting adjourned at 12:07 p.m.]