



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 24, 2023**

**SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY**

**12:42 P.M.**

**CHAIR**

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will come to order. It is now 12:42 p.m. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Advanced Education as outlined in Resolution E1.

**Resolution E1 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$707,234,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Advanced Education, pursuant to the Estimate.**

I will now invite the honourable Minister of Advanced Education to make opening comments for up to one hour if they wish, and to introduce themselves to the Committee.

HON. BRIAN WONG: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to present to you the budget Estimates for our Department of Advanced Education.

This is the second budget for this department, first formed in August 2021. I am tremendously proud of the work my team has done. My team is all sitting beside me and behind me. We've had an amazing year, and I am looking forward to presenting what is upcoming and to answering your questions.

The upcoming budget is, in many ways, an extension of all the hard work that we've done. It reflects how our Department of Advanced Education is supporting the government's promise to fix health care. It is my hope that as I walk you through our investments, our programs, our priorities, and plans for this upcoming year that you will be inspired as I am inspired by the hard work of my team. The ideas and stuff that are going forward, the collaboration, the innovation, and all of the research that is under way right across Nova Scotia through our post-secondaries. If anybody needs a snack later, I have one here for you.

[12:45 p.m.]

Our work continues really to support the strong, sustainable, vibrant post-secondary system that we have, always with the needs of the students, thinking about the labour market, what the needs are and how we move forward. Before I continue, there are a few members on my team here with me today. It's like having your linebackers - they are all in back of me. I would first like to introduce Deputy Minister Nancy MacLellan, the deputy minister of Advanced Education, and Wanda Fletcher, executive director for Finance Advisory Services with the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. That is a really long title. I have several members behind me from Post-Secondary Accessibility Services, Student Assistance, from programs - our health programs - and Executive Director Greg Ells. We are here to answer your questions. I will answer questions as fully as I possibly can with my team's support.

The Department of Advanced Education is very fortunate to have a dedicated and committed team. We are, as you know, a new department as of last year breaking off from the Department of Labour and Advanced Education, and our team works hard. It has taken a long time to really get us to where we need to be and to get our focus, and we believe that we have the team together right now that is going to move us forward over the next two to two and a half years.

Being an educator for 28 years before taking on this important role, I feel very fortunate to have the privilege to lead a department where education, training, and students are at the centre of absolutely everything that we do. Anybody whom I've been in front of, whether it's students or faculty or leadership or anybody on the street, will tell you that I take the role very seriously. I have always looked at what is in the best interests of the student and in my mind, when making decisions, it is always at the end of the day when you have to make a tough decision, it's what is in the best interests of the student.

I am proud of the work we are doing. I am excited to share the progress we've made over the next little while. I will highlight the work under way to fulfill the goals of the department over the next year. In particular, I will focus on investments that show we are listening to students and contributing to the government's commitment priority to fix health care. We have done that recently, we will do that going forward, and it is one of the most exciting things that we do as a department - and progress on important items within

my mandate and key investments in the 2023-2024 Budget, including investments that will enhance the student experience and inspire continued growth right across the sector.

When our government created the standalone Department of Advanced Education, we sent a clear message: A message that fostering a high quality, inclusive, accountable, and collaborative post-secondary sector is a priority. This government understands that to reach our goals we need our post-secondary system, our training and education arm, and our students. The future workforce and heartbeat of this province are at the centre of our department's priorities and work. When I think about our ten universities, our 14 Nova Scotia Community College campuses, our private career colleges, our language schools, our Post-Secondary Accessibility Services division, and everybody working together - we are attracting students from all over the world - my hope is that we make them feel valued and we make them feel comfortable.

We already know we offer them a first-rate education compared to anywhere around the world. We are known as a province where first-class education is offered from one end of this province to the other. The hope is that once they are here we are able to keep them here to find jobs here, to create jobs here, to create businesses.

This government understands that to reach our goals we need the system to work together, and we have done a lot of work in really trying to promote the idea that the Nova Scotia Community College is a viable option for students who want a post-secondary education. We want to make sure that somebody who is living in Yarmouth and maybe wants a business degree doesn't necessarily have to move to Halifax or Cape Breton or to Wolfville or to St. Francis Xavier University in order to get that education. They can spend their first two years living in Yarmouth or they could be living in Amherst and do the same thing. We are really trying to get our system working collaboratively together.

The department strategy map aligns with government's plan and gives us a defined focus for the students and the people we serve. Our mission - sounds like a mission impossible - our mission, if you will allow me - is to facilitate a proactive and inclusive post-secondary system through which people learn, grow, and thrive.

Our mandate is to facilitate a post-secondary education system where learners receive a high-quality education that meets their learning needs and allows them to thrive as members of vibrant communities and a successful province. Things have changed. Things have changed over the last decade, over the last two decades, over the last 50 years as to what is needed in the province. We are at a time right now where we are at a historic low rate of unemployment. We are at 1 per cent. That is virtual zero. That means that anybody who wants a job and is able to work has the ability to have a job.

We ensure that post-secondary education is accessible to all by removing barriers, including financial. By ensuring the system is equitable, diverse, inclusive, and by advancing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action for

post-secondary education. To do this we work in collaboration and partnership to support research and innovation and ensure our post-secondary education system proactively addresses the changing needs of the economy and contributes to social and economic growth.

There are jobs out there today that weren't there yesterday. There are jobs that are going to be there tomorrow that we can't even dream of, and we have to be reactive, proactive, and be flexible in moving forward.

We know we need students and the institutions who train them now more than ever to meet the unprecedented labour market demand in health care professions and to keep the commitment we made to all Nova Scotians to fix health care.

International students have always been an important part of this plan. They support our economy, make our communities better, stronger, and more diverse. I think none of us will forget the story from past September after Hurricane Fiona. A group of international students in Cape Breton from Cape Breton University came together to feed their community. Even though they were far from home, even though they had just experienced an incredibly powerful storm - some for the first time - even though they had no power, they responded by starting a community kitchen in Sydney. When asked by media what inspired them to do this some said they began cooking for the community to thank them - to thank Cape Bretoners who made them feel welcome.

It is a pretty common story, not just in Cape Breton but from all around Nova Scotia, where international students are coming into our communities and making communities better. They are also filling jobs in our workforce. They are contributing to community-led events. They are getting involved in community. They are playing on sports teams. They are bringing their families.

The whole demographic of students has changed. Students aren't just students coming out of high school at 18 years of age and looking for an education. They are coming from all around the world to Nova Scotia, some with families. Some are coming here and they are opening businesses. They are doing graduate level work. They are doing graduate level research and contributing to really expanding what our goals are as a province.

Yes, indeed, Nova Scotia is better because these international students choose to come here. They choose to come and study at one of our internationally renowned institutions, and there is no disputing the number of international students that we have coming into our province and the best form of advertising is word of mouth. They go back home and their friends and family follow them.

We are seeing some of our best years yet in attracting international students and our focus is on helping them stay here in Nova Scotia. One of the ways we get them to stay here in Nova Scotia is to make sure that they do receive the quality education that they came

here for. The next way is to make sure that we have the graduate work for them that they are looking for - the opportunities to do research, to not only do research but maybe they can open up their own business based on the research that they are doing.

As minister I have the opportunity to speak to students frequently. It's the favourite thing that I do. Anytime I go to a school, or I go to a function, my comfort zone - my favourite spot is to talk to students. I ask them about themselves. I ask them where they come from. How did you end up here? What do you want to do next? I speak to very few students who don't want to stay right here in Nova Scotia, finish their education, get a job, raise a family. Regardless of what we hear, and we hear a lot of noise about all the negative things that might be going on in the province that international students wouldn't be interested in, but they are. We have a lot to offer here in Nova Scotia.

Some key themes I hear from students that can help with attraction and retention are the opportunity to study at leading institutions, providing supports for diversity and inclusion, encouraging research and work-integrated learning opportunities, and addressing all the needs of student housing.

I'd like to take a few moments to speak to each of the items and how we and our team are working on solutions.

Firstly, on the opportunity to study at leading institutions. Earlier this month the Department of Advanced Education and the Premier's Office announced significant new investments at three of our post-secondary institutions. These investments are a direct reflection of this government's commitment to fix health care. They support our action for a health plan. Action for Health is our government's road map for a health system where Nova Scotians can access world-class health care in a timely manner.

It is our plan to provide Nova Scotians with access to better, faster care. We announced \$58.9 million, a huge investment for a new medical campus at Cape Breton University. Included in that is a new collaborative care clinic and an expansion of CBU's Nancy Dingwall Health and Counselling Centre. CBU will be working in partnership with Dalhousie University's Faculty of Medicine to train 30 medical students each year who will work in family medicine in rural parts of the province.

Not only that, they will focus on Indigenous health for our Mi'kmaq communities around the province, and their work on our African Nova Scotian and Black communities' health, and focusing on specific things outside of what we would normally have in an urban setting because rural communities are different. They do have different needs. They have different community makeups and it is important. Once it is established, we will have 30 new doctors in the province spread out from one end to the other every year, once we get rolling. That's amazing.

In addition to that, in order to see Dalhousie University and Cape Breton University collaborate on something that they see as a priority for Nova Scotians, that's progress. That's progress in the post-secondary sector. That is progress, and kudos to the department for working with the universities in order to make this happen.

We also announced a \$25 million investment to establish new health data analytics and health system administration programs at Saint Mary's University. The students to whom I spoke at this event were excited. At the end of the announcement there were probably 25 students from one of the programs - the Computing and Data Analytics program - and they were so excited to see another stream of potential work for them. Of every student who was there, I asked them all specifically, What are you studying? What year are you in? What are your plans once you graduate? They all want to stay right here in Nova Scotia.

[1:00 p.m.]

They want to stay in Nova Scotia because they see opportunity. They see another stream of work looking at health care data analytics, and health care analytics gets big because right now we have a system - we have the infrastructure of systems of 80 different ones that do not coordinate at all or don't coordinate well. So by using data analytics and having all the information, we can make better predictions of how to solve some of our biggest health care challenges. We know what we need, when we need it, and where we will need services, equipment, and resources. You can make better predictions. Right now, just using data and using technology - One Person One Record - that's major.

If I look at myself, I am 60 years old - thank you very much, I know I don't look 60. If you go back and you try to trace what my medical history is since I was born, you can't do it. I've seen multiple doctors, been to different hospitals, had multiple surgeries, but it's not all in one place. If you can imagine having data - if you are an ambulance driver and you are going to a call and you know the person's name, you can look it up. You can have their medical history at your fingertips. With data analytics, moving forward with IT, it's a big investment. The medical community to whom I spoke about this investment work cited a health care data analysis can transform patient care.

Finally, we announced \$37.4 million at St. Francis Xavier University to establish the Institute on Innovation in Health. The institute will focus on the root causes of poor health and related issues. Specifically, it will look at ways to improve health promotion, wellness in rural communities, including chronic disease prevention and management, rehabilitation, and aging in place. StFX is one of the centres across Canada that look at the - it will come to me in a second. My goodness, it's funny when I start looking at these things, and I've dealt and worked with it for 20 years, and I can't remember the name of it. It'll come to me, and when it does, I will just blurt it out and it will be like a half hour later and you will say, Ah, that's what he was trying to talk about.

In total, these announcements provided \$121.3 million from the Department of Advanced Education's 2022-2023 budget for more solutions in health care. It is part of a long-term plan for health care because we know that the best way to recruit more workers is to train them here at home. The idea of attachment at home - a lot of people will likely stay where they are educated. We have a lot of students who come from other provinces and other countries, and they choose to stay in Nova Scotia.

This funding will also help attract the best and brightest. Students tell me that they want to study at the best schools. When they have a choice of where they can go, they want to go to post-secondary institutions that are among the best in the world. They want to go to schools that have new, modern facilities and institutions that are charting new territories. Nova Scotia's institutions will be a magnet to draw in students because of these investments.

These are not just investments in health care, they are also investments in students today and tomorrow. I said earlier - and I will probably say it several times - that at the end of the day it is what's in the best interest of students, because students are the ones who today are going to help serve what I am going to need in the future, especially with health care, but they are the ones who are going to be in these seats tomorrow.

Equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are at the core of our work. The students I speak with tell me how important it is to them that they feel safe, supported, and included while they study here. The Department of Advanced Education is committed to making sure post-secondary students have the support they need to do their best work. This is how we create a post-secondary system that allows students to thrive.

We know we have more work to do in this area and we are committed to doing things differently. By looking at health analytics, by opening a new medical school, by opening an innovation centre at StFX, it is doing things differently than we have ever done before. We need short-, medium-, and long-term solutions and this is all part of that. For example, our expert staff at the Department of Advanced Education are moving forward with our comprehensive plans to support the recruitment and retention of Mi'kmaw and Indigenous post-secondary students.

I am particularly proud of our announcement in partnership with the Department of Health and Wellness to open a new practical nursing program that will train 30 L'nu students at the Nova Scotia Community College. Starting in September 2023-2024, Mi'kmaw learners who want to study practical nursing can learn as part of the Mi'kmaw cohort at NSCC's Pictou Campus - social determinants of health. Thank you very much. That's what I was trying to think of earlier. I told you it would just pop in. I couldn't think of the term. (Laughter)

StFX - they are a centre and it is really going to enhance the centre because they are working on the social determinants of health and I just couldn't think about it. I've worked with it for 20 years.

We know that cohort-based learning is a supportive learning style that helps students succeed. The program will offer a custom learning experience through curriculum that is developed with the Mi'kmaw and Indigenous lens. Similarly, in January we announced a new social work cohort for Black and African Nova Scotians. The Africentric Bachelor of Social Work pilot cohort program will welcome 35 Black and African Nova Scotian learners from across the province to be part of the three-year part-time cohort.

Both of these cohorts help to address under-representation of professionals in the health care and social services system. I am thrilled at the level of interest these programs have generated. In fact, we increased the number of seats from 25 to 35 seats for the Africentric Bachelor of Social Work program based on the strong interest.

My work as an educator in the West Hants area - we really depended a lot on our social workers and it was very difficult to have social workers go into a traditional African Nova Scotian community - a white social worker who really didn't come from the community, understand the community, understand the dynamics of family and the generational impact that our systems - our school system, our health system, our justice system has on those communities. So when I saw this come forward, I was really excited to see all the work that our team put into this to get this going and working with Dalhousie University to get it going. To see it go from 25 to 35 just shows how important it is and how needed it is.

Another investment the department made this year in students was a commitment for an additional \$13 million in funding for the Mitacs internships. Mitacs is a national not-for-profit research and innovation organization that helps Nova Scotia businesses, health care operators, municipalities, and not-for-profit organizations tap into the student talent in Nova Scotia's world-class institutions. Through these internships, students are doing incredible work. Some students are working at the Shannex Insights Lab on solutions to help seniors. I actually met with them and saw their presentation and I urged them, I said, Please go fast because I am going to be there soon.

Others, like the founders at Axem Neurotechnology, are developing first-of-its-kind medical devices. Through the Mitacs Accelerate Entrepreneur project, Axem developed a wearable device that helps stroke survivors and their caregivers understand treatment response. The company got its start in Volta right here in the Maritime Centre and now they have grown into a new facility based in Dartmouth. They've hired three additional post-secondary researchers through Mitacs.

In total, Nova Scotia's investment in Mitacs over the next four years will create up to 3,200 more paid internship opportunities for post-secondary students. This is just



another example of how we can attract and retain students in Nova Scotia. In all my opportunities to speak to students, they tell me these investments make a real difference.

The Mitacs program - our \$13 million investment this year over the next four years, actually leveraged over \$18 million in federal funding. We have brought ourselves up to par with bigger provinces right across Canada with these Mitacs investments. There are a lot of businesses right across Nova Scotia that have grown out of Mitacs researchers that are - and for the businesses themselves to grow other businesses outside of them. There are little things that you really don't know are going on in your own communities, no matter where you are in Nova Scotia. You could be in Cornwallis Park and there is great research going on there that uses our Mitacs grads.

We have Scotian Gold in the Annapolis Valley that uses Mitacs grads. We have Shannex right across the water. We have Graphite Innovation and Technologies that uses them as well. They are all over the place, they are making businesses grow, they are making businesses thrive, and some of these interns are going out and starting their own businesses.

There are other investments that we are making, and student housing will make a real difference. Students tell me how much they are struggling to find housing. This issue has been growing for years due to lack of foresight and a lack of investment. Our government is listening and doing something about it right now.

Within the first few months of our mandate, our government announced it would develop Nova Scotia's first province-wide student housing strategy. The team at the Department of Advanced Education has been working incredibly hard in collaboration with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and we have identified short-, medium-, and long-term solutions that will help students.

What I really liked about the way that this was being developed is that they looked at the art of the possible and we did speak with students, we did speak with communities, we did speak with parents - we spoke with everybody in order to get ideas. Sometimes you hear ideas, but nothing really happens. We took everything that we heard and it went up on a wall.

It is amazing how they were sorted and then they were looked at if it were possible, looked at the costing, and I am really looking forward to sharing that with you when we release that later in the Spring. To see the whole way they took that really humanistic, social approach to developing what we will have coming soon was just amazing to watch. It was very artful.

These solutions will also benefit all Nova Scotians because more student options will free up housing stock and alleviate some pressure in the housing market. I am looking forward to releasing Nova Scotia's first province-wide student housing strategy and in the

meantime, we are not waiting to act on housing solutions for students. We are moving on building the necessary housing infrastructure to meet the evolving needs of post-secondary students. In 2022-2023, we advanced student housing projects and made significant investments in infrastructure currently under construction.

Progress is under way right now on the three projects. Ivany Campus with 200 beds right across the way - my son goes to Ivany and gives me an update just about every day. He comes home and says that they've got the fences up, they are starting to get the walls up. So that should be ready to go in 2025.

[1:15 p.m.]

We have Akerley Campus right across the way and that's 300 beds right here in the Metro area; that is expected to be ready in September 2024. The walls are up - it's funny, they have these tip-up walls and when you go by you see nothing, and the next thing you know, the whole thing is up. The progress on that is going very well. Then at our Pictou campus in Stellarton that is for 50 beds. In total we will have 350 beds that will relieve the housing market across the province.

In Cape Breton we announced \$5 million in funding to help support the Tartan Downs housing project, a mixed-use development that will include student housing. That's been a piece of property that's been there for a lot of years now. They've been working on ideas on how to move that forward as a housing project. We were very pleased to be able to get an influx of money in there to make sure that student housing is a priority.

The Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax received \$3 million to preserve and maintain student accommodations. These rooms house students from several nearby institutions in Halifax and will increase the number of beds from 65 to 97. These housing solutions are all part of a larger plan, and we are not done yet. A larger plan that incorporates feedback from post-secondary students, feedback from community, feedback from post-secondary institutions because we truly are listening.

In order to capture a wide range of perspectives, we worked with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to reach as many Nova Scotians as possible through a housing needs assessment and public survey. We received feedback from every demographic, including from students. I would like to thank everyone who took the time to fill out the survey. You will have helped to inform our work.

At the Department of Advanced Education, hearing directly from students is critical to our work. We meet regularly with student groups through two government student round tables - one for university students and the other for NSCC. These round tables include representation from Students Nova Scotia, the Canadian Federation of Students, and an individual student union-elected leader from each campus. We always gain valuable and important insight into the student experience through these channels, and

I am very proud of the strong collaborative and trusted relationship we have already built with student groups across the province.

I will continue to do site visits of post-secondary institutions where I can meet with students from universities and NSCC campuses province-wide. I gain so much insight from meeting with professors, faculty, and in particular, from students. One of the key things that I find is important and I enjoy doing - I don't just speak with student leadership - and I think it is important, whether it is through a video chat or it's getting in the classroom, is talking to students who are not necessarily student leaders. Sometimes they have different ideas, they have different challenges, so I make sure that I talk to students on the ground as well, not just in leadership positions.

It was NSCC in Cape Breton at Marconi Campus that was my first foray into speaking with a class, and it was the electrical trade - I think it might have been their second year. I believe there are approximately 28 students; and there were four women. Three of the women came through Women Unlimited and it was such a great program that they really talked it up. I didn't know a lot about the program at the time, but it's funny - when people started talking and asking me questions, it was the women who really stepped forward because they were so proud of being in the program and talked so highly of the Women Unlimited program.

To hear the perspective and hear where these students were coming from - and one of the things I am always curious about is: How did you get there? How did you choose electrical at NSCC? Did you come out of high school? Were you out into the workforce? Then I ask them about: What are some of the challenges and stuff that you may have? The things I hear - several did come directly out of high school but we had several family people there who were married and they had children, trying to balance - how can I go to school, work at the same time, balance family life? It is interesting to hear the stories because it gives us a perspective from everybody, not just the traditional student that we thought of in the past.

Students have changed and therefore the way that we do student housing has changed, because we do know that when we construct student housing and some of the ones that have been constructed do accommodate for that. We are always looking for different models. By speaking to students - and every now and then - it was an international student at Mount Saint Vincent University just said straight up, You know what? I'm an international student from Brazil and I have difficulty affording to go to school right now, but if I could work more than 20 hours a week, then I think I'd be able to support myself.

Those are the messages that we take back to Minister Balser. Minister Balser works with her federal counterparts. We were very pleased to see the advocacy work from our province with the federal government to say that if you are an international student, you can work more than 20 hours. That means a lot to international students, and it also means a lot to our employers that are looking for workers, because we have tens of thousands of

international students right across this province and a lot of them want to work. If they can work more than 20 hours a week, then we are filling the need for the student and we are filling the need for employers.

I lived in France for two years and they had the same type of agreement where you could only work 20 hours. It does handcuff you to a certain extent when you really need money. Your hope is always, when you go to a country and you are living for a couple of years, that your budget works out, but your budget doesn't always work out. I think it was great progress. It was a great thing for international students. Kudos to our team and kudos to Minister Balser's team for really advocating for that with the feds.

Also on my first tour I was thrilled with the number of students who told me they planned to stay here in Nova Scotia after graduation. I did mention that earlier, but they see Nova Scotia has plenty of opportunities and they want to start their careers here. When we look at a lot of the places where students are coming from - our number one country right now goes between India and China - the opportunities that we have here are so much greater than what they have in their homes. I also mentioned earlier that word of mouth is our best advertiser and that is one of the reasons we are seeing so many international students who are coming to Nova Scotia.

These students are our future doctors, nurses, CCAs, paramedics, skilled trades professionals, teachers, early childhood educators, and more. They are our future neighbours, colleagues, and friends. These are our province's future, and continued and open dialogue with them is so important and I am absolutely committed to doing that.

I will get into the meat of our budget Estimates next, but I would like to take a moment to share some of the progress and key milestones of the Department of Advanced Education's broad and diverse mandate, as highlighted in my Mandate Letter.

We are growing a progressive education model for continuing care assistant programs and we are seeing tremendous results. Working with the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, the department introduced a progressive education work-and-learn model that includes tuition support. The progressive education model allows CCAs to enter the workforce earlier than in a traditional CCA program; that helps them understand the work very early in their education journey. The aim is to increase the number of CCAs receiving training and working in the health care system.

I am so pleased to share that the plan is working. In January we surpassed more than 1,000 students signing up to become CCAs. We are proud to be more than halfway to our goal of reaching 2,000 CCAs enrolled in these programs across the province. In 2023-2024, the Department of Advanced Education will continue to support private career colleges, NSCC, and Université Sainte-Anne as they deliver or prepare to deliver a progressive education and training model for CCAs to meet our target.

Our Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care and I attended a graduation for a private career college in the Spring and had wonderful conversations with students and how excited they were about the progressive model, because the ability to be able to work and still earn some income while you are going to school truly makes a difference. That first cohort that went through, we really did try to work out what some of the unforeseen things or unintended consequences are, and we were prepared to maybe do a major shift in the way we do things. At the end of the day, it was like, Wow, this is awesome. This is showing that it's working.

We are also working with the Department of Health and Wellness to increase medical school residency seats. We funded five additional medical school seats in a pilot program between Cape Breton University and Dalhousie University. Together they are training five students who will complete their residencies in rural parts of the province.

We announced the establishment of Nova Scotia's second medical school campus, which I already mentioned. It will provide an additional 30 residency seats per year every year. By the time it is fully operational, 120 medical students will be studying through the additional medical school offering. These are formative years for students to be studying in our rural communities where they can form lasting connections and have the option to take over practices from retiring doctors.

When I think about doctors going to rural Nova Scotia, it has to be a focus for us. It has to be a focus for what we are looking at the Department of Advanced Education and the province - every community is going to grow. Not every person who moves to Nova Scotia wants to come to the urban centre. They don't necessarily want to be in Halifax and Dartmouth. They do desire maybe to live on the water. Maybe they do desire to live in the Valley or in Cape Breton, and they are becoming more and more popular as destinations to live because as we all know, we have 13,000 kilometres of coastline. You can drive anywhere within an hour and hit the coast. I don't know if you know it or not, but we have amazing golf courses right around Nova Scotia, and culturally we are growing. We are growing everywhere.

The Acadian culture has been here for decades. Our Indigenous cultures are showing off their culture more and more and really making our communities more vibrant. We are really working with our African Nova Scotian communities - our traditional communities, but we are not going to be our traditional communities anymore because we are welcoming so many newcomers into the province.

We are finalizing the development of our sexual violence prevention policies. In 2022-2023, we worked with universities and the NSCC to continue the implementation of existing sexual violence response and prevention policies and programs. We began working with private career colleges on the development and implementation of sexual violence prevention policies and we are pleased this important work will be finalized in 2023-2024 because everyone should be safe from sexual violence.

We have reviewed university acts, governance models, and structure, which was a big part of my mandate. In 2022-2023 the department completed its mandate to review university charters and acts with respect to their governance models and structures. The review included a jurisdictional scan that looked at university governance and structure. Our review helped identify other areas to explore further such as research priorities. This work provided a foundation for the department's strategy map and was discussed as part of the MOU renewal in 2024.

These are some highlights of work the department has completed and that are listed in my mandate letter.

[1:30 p.m.]

We are committed to the mandate work and our team is excited about the next chapter and our role in Nova Scotia's success. We will continue to work collaboratively to achieve the key deliverables outlined in my mandate letter and beyond to set our province on the path to further success and growth. Now I will move to talk about my department's 2023-2024 budget.

The Department of Advanced Education's Budget Estimate for the upcoming 2023-2024 fiscal year is \$707,234,000. This estimate represents an increase of \$30.6 million from the department's 2022-2023 Budget Estimate. I will outline factors that contributed to this increase as I walk through the Department of Advanced Education's budget details. This total budget includes 74 full-time equivalent positions that support our critical work.

In 2023-24 we are committing to increase NSCC's operating grant by \$1,144,000 to help them deal with inflationary pressures. This helps to avoid costs that would otherwise be passed on to the students and keeps the option of studying at NSCC more affordable for students.

In this year's overall budget, the Department of Advanced Education received a \$30.6 million increase which includes \$2.8 million to continue funding the nursing seat expansion. This supports a total of 80 Bachelor of Science, Nursing seats and is the second year of a four-year commitment. Since adding additional nursing seats, we are really pleased that all seats have been filled at Dalhousie University and Cape Breton University. There are still some opportunities at St. Francis Xavier University for interested students in the coming academic year.

There is a \$900,000 increase for ongoing funding to the Dalhousie Faculty of Medicine. Combined, these two investments represent a \$3.7 million increase in platform commitments to fix health care. A total of \$14.3 million increase will help deal with major pressures in post-secondary. This includes a \$3.8 million increase in operating grants to the province's ten universities. This is a fixed increase of 1 per cent annually, as prescribed in

the memorandum of understanding that is in place until 2024. We look forward to working on a new agreement with universities this year.

There is \$1.1 million to provide funding to NSCC for inflationary pressures; \$3.5 million in additional funding for loan forgiveness; and \$1.3 million in repayment assistance programs. The Repayment Assistance Plan is a debt management tool made available to borrowers who are having difficulty repaying their student loan debt. This plan makes it easier for student loan borrowers to manage their debt by paying back their student loan at a rate they can reasonably afford based on their income and family size. This year alone the plan helped over 9,000 students.

We are increasing the annual income threshold from \$25,000 to \$40,000 for a single student. Thresholds will increase based on family composition. Basically, we really align that with what is going on federally - that students don't have to start paying back their portion of the univ. It was at \$25,000 and now they have to make over \$40,000 before they have to start paying back the Nova Scotia portion.

There is an \$845,000 increase to provide funding for the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary Program. Under this program, every student resident who attends a Nova Scotia university receives the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary of \$1,283 annually, based on full-time study. This is money that is taken directly off the student's tuition invoice and doesn't need to be repaid. We are seeing an increase because more students are enrolling.

There is a \$3.8 million increase for zero interest student assistance programs. The increase in this budget item is due to the increase in interest rates and an anticipated increase in the amount of provincial loans negotiated due to the federal government reducing the value of the Canada Student Grant from \$6,000 to \$3,000. This is in anticipation of the federal government no longer doubling the Canada Student Grant, which is expected to end in July 2023 and higher interest rates.

In 2023-2024, \$5.7 million is allocated for wage increases to the NSCC and civil servants, \$1.2 million increase for the Canada Student Grant for services and equipment for persons with disabilities. This helps advance the province's accessibility goals under Access by Design 2030. There is \$2.7 million to adjust amortization funding in the 2023-2024 budget, and \$48,000 to renew the service provider contract for the Nova Scotia Student Assistance program.

Our budget highlights some of the exciting things going on at the Department of Advanced Education, but I'd like to take some time to share some details of our core programs in four minutes. For those of you who may not know, the Student Assistance program provides need-based financial assistance to eligible Nova Scotia residents who would be unable or unlikely to pursue post-secondary education otherwise due to insufficient resources.

Proudly, Nova Scotia has one of the most generous student assistance programs in the country. Nova Scotia Student Assistance has been significantly improved over the last ten years, providing \$30 million for Nova Scotia students in need, but we know these are extremely challenging times for students and we are doing more. We recognized students needed help and early in the year my department made a \$6.2 million investment in thousands of eligible Nova Scotia students in the greatest need.

We issued a one-time, non-repayable grant of \$550 to about 11,000 students to help them with the rising cost of living. Students have said this grant helped reduce their anxiety and worry about how they would pay their rent or cover cost of food, or stay in school, allowing them to focus more on their studies. At the time of the announcement, the Chair of Students Nova Scotia said that this investment came at a critical time when students were wondering how they would make their next rental payment or keep the lights on for the winter term. Our key focus is supporting students with the greatest need and making sure education is accessible and affordable. We also want to help reduce student debt loads and make it more attractive for students to stay in Nova Scotia after graduation.

The Nova Scotia Loan Forgiveness Program has been one of our biggest success stories under this effort. Under the Loan Forgiveness Program, eligible Nova Scotia students can have the entire provincial portion of their student loan forgiven upon graduation if they complete their program within five years. Since its inception, loan forgiveness has saved over 13,000 students close to \$89 million in student debt. Loan forgiveness is just one example of how we are enhancing programs to help students. Earlier I talked about increases for the repayment assistance programs and the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary program. In total, Nova Scotia students can receive over \$40,000 in non-repayable assistance through these financial supports. We know affordability is an important consideration for students when they are deciding where to go to school.

The Department of Advanced Education is committed to making sure post-secondary education is accessible to students by removing barriers including financial barriers. We continue to make investments in student assistance to support students in need. We will continue to make investments that can help graduates who are entering their repayment. We will continue to create opportunities for students to earn while they learn. These are all components of solutions that encourage people to pursue their post-secondary goals right here in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Chair, thank you so much for your time and attention. I know I have given you lots to digest. I hope these remarks reflect the extreme pride that I have in working with my team and the mandate of my department. Our work is important and is necessary. I am now happy to take questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for your remarks.



According to the practice that has developed in the Legislature, Opposition caucuses will take turns asking questions for approximately one hour each. During caucus, two of the members may go back and forth within the caucus to ask questions. Only the minister may answer the question and caucuses are expected to share time fairly with the Independent member.

To begin the examination, I now recognize the Official Opposition.

The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I promise my examination won't be too intimate. (Laughter)

Thanks to everyone for your time and for the opportunity to ask some questions. Minister, congratulations on another year in your department to his wonderful team of staff. I know how hard all of you are working to make sure that the minister is prepped, and the department serves the direction of the government. It is clear that you have had some new responsibilities dropped into your lap collectively as a department through the government's efforts around health care, and I am sure that is all exciting, difficult, and fun at times. I wish you Godspeed as we collectively try to tackle the province's health care woes.

I come from a background of student government. Shortly before I was elected to office in 2013, I was a student leader and hoped to find myself in this position of critic for the Department of Advanced Education when former Premier Iain Rankin was at the helm. Now through our successor leader, I asked for the position once again. I do feel strongly about the value of education - post-secondary in particular - and its ability to impact not only individual students, but communities and our province. Certainly, without a doubt, Nova Scotia has a profound place in the country and the world as a resting place for post-secondary students.

It's a great tool that we have to attract new Nova Scotians and I am pleased to see that there is some acknowledgement of the importance of making sure that we have opportunities to land new Nova Scotians and ensure that there are opportunities for them beyond their time studying at one of our many wonderful post-secondary institutions.

Minister, you covered a lot. I will do my best to keep up with you and try to ask some questions that perhaps you didn't cover. The first line of questioning, as a former student leader and as someone who actually is actively a student - I'm studying at Mount Saint Vincent - shout out to my future alumnus, I guess, at the Mount.

Tuition is certainly a big component to any student at any level considerations when it comes to choosing and going through post-secondary. A particular question that comes to mind: As we know, the feds do not intend to continue to double their grant

amount and I know that this budget does afford some money to try to support this blow. I am wondering how much of the increase to the budget will be dedicated to address the shortfall that will exist because of the change in tone by the feds.

[1:45 p.m.]

BRIAN WONG: I do appreciate your background in student leadership, and I do appreciate that you are a student at Mount Saint Vincent. I happen to have two degrees from there so we will share something in common when you finish. I think we already share something in common.

There is no doubt that when students go to school, one of the things they need to have is predictability. One of the things that has been in place under the existing MOU is that student tuition is capped for undergraduate degrees at 3 per cent. That is predictable for students, which is a good thing. If you are a Nova Scotia student going to a Nova Scotia university, we do have the \$1,283 - based on a full course load - that is taken off your tuition directly. Students don't even see it, they don't have to pay it, they don't have to worry about it. That is automatically paid.

The COVID-19 money that was coming from the federal government was in one-time grants, but we have done some things around student assistance because one of the things upon graduation is that you do have to repay your loan. Our Student Assistance Office, and some of the folks are sitting beside me - when it comes time for the Repayment Assistance Plan for those who are having difficulties, they do everything they absolutely can in order to make it work. We want our graduates to be able to find jobs, move on to the next stages of their lives in order to do that. Increasing the repayment threshold from \$25,000 to \$40,000 is a game changer for a lot of students.

For our students who need the most assistance - in 2021-2022, we were able to offer them \$875 in a one-time grant and then last year we were able to do similar at \$550. Anytime that we can do that it helps students and it helps them get over a hump. The Loan Forgiveness Program for students who graduate from a Nova Scotia university within five years - they have the full amount of their Nova Scotia Student Loan that is written off. It's theirs. That is a big, big piece of the pie that a lot of people don't realize when they stay here in Nova Scotia.

We did have an overall increase in student assistance of \$10.4 million, showing that more people are using student assistance.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you to the minister for that response. Where do I go with this? There's a lot to cover here. You mentioned it, and it is certainly something that creates, as you say, that level of predictability and it is an important tool - be it the tuition cap, and given that the MOU is right around the corner - can you speak to whether or not

that cap will be lifted, grown, reduced, or what the expectations around a tuition cap will be for you as minister in government at the next go-round of MOU negotiations, please?

BRIAN WONG: The MOU is really interesting but when we finally defined what we are going to do and how we are going to move forward with it, by doing that jurisdictional scan and looking at what each school is doing, how are they doing it differently, how are they doing it similarly, what are the best practices, it was a really good opportunity for us to start thinking about what is the art of the possible. At the end of the day when we sign the new MOU, we need it to be in the best interests of students and the best interests of Nova Scotians.

When we start looking at the priorities of the province, the priorities of students, what they are looking forward to - what are you getting out of an education? That needs to be included in the MOU. We are in constant discussions with our universities in order to try to figure out - well, what does that look like? What does that look like in Cape Breton as opposed to Clare? What does that look like in Antigonish as opposed to Wolfville? Does it mean something different in Halifax itself? We are really trying to look at the full picture - look at the art of the possible and say, Does the MOU actually lead us to a better place? We know we are going to sign an MOU for several years, and at the end of that MOU whatever is included needs to make sure that the best interests of Nova Scotians and students are looked after.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate the complexity and the variety of programs and needs and abilities and priorities of our different institutions. I think that that's - it's clearly important to people who go to each different school. It is something that despite having a number of primarily undergraduate schools, we give - at Acadia we give St. Francis Xavier a hard time and vice versa, but we are both very tied to the personal fabric, the culture that exists on respective campuses. This is why, over the years, there has been a very important discussion about Nova Scotia institutions remaining intact and having that ability to remain independent of one another.

I know that there is collaboration amongst universities with respect to sharing some degree of services and finding common denominators where efficiencies can be had, and that is initiated by respective institutions but not forced by a government or anybody to do so. To my question, I had asked if there would be any movement with respect to the tuition cap. I'd like the minister to clarify whether he intends or sees the possibility of an increase to that tuition cap, or based on that notion that each institution has different characteristics and needs, could we see something to the effect that each university might have its own respective tuition cap that would reflect on-site needs and wants?

BRIAN WONG: It's important to me that students can go to post-secondary. It's important to me that if your parents always dreamed of an education - my dad, that's all he wanted. He wanted his kids to have a university education because he didn't have the

opportunity to do it. It's at my very core. It truly is. He sacrificed a lot. I have four degrees, so I think I took it to heart.

When I look at the MOU and I look at tuition, I look at the whole thing. I look at our student housing strategy. You can't separate student tuition from student housing from cost of food - it is all one big umbrella. It all has to work together. You can't think about what it costs for an education and just talk about tuition and not talk about housing or not talk about transportation. It is bigger. It is probably bigger than we thought because it is important that we haul other entities in - other departments and stuff in to try to find a solution. That's what is so beautiful about the student housing strategy is that we are working with other departments in order to really try to solve some of the issues that are facing students and there is always a balancing act. So where is the balance of affordability for students to get an education - a quality education - and the balance of making sure that our university system or post-secondary system stays viable?

I have looked at all kinds of different ways - like how could we possibly get a student who lives maybe only 45 minutes away to be able to come into the Halifax area to go to either a university or NSCC? Unless you have a vehicle, it is really, really tough. So we have to look at transportation. If I want to get a four-year degree, maybe it's a business degree or maybe it's in technology, how can I afford that when my parents don't have the means? I live so far away. There are lots of ways to mitigate it. Some of it is promotion because we already have some of those structures in place. I mentioned that if I am living in Yarmouth or I'm living in Amherst or I'm living in Digby or in Cape Breton somewhere, there is an NSCC just about everywhere across this province within an hour's drive to somehow get you there.

They have over 70 programs and a lot of people don't know it. Students don't know it in high school, parents don't know it, a lot of educators don't know it. If you live in Yarmouth and you want to do a business degree or you want to do an IT degree or you want to do culinary arts and change that to a degree or forestry management, you can do two years at an NSCC in your hometown or within an hour's drive, and then you can get credit for that at various universities around the province or in other provinces where you can get a four-year degree. Therefore you can live at home, you can eat your parents' food, you can live under their roof, and you can probably afford to pay the NSCC tuition - for most programs it's around \$3,700.

In addition to that, by the time you move out of your parents' home, if that's where you are living, you are a little bit more mature. You probably know what you want a little bit better, and then you will have more success by the time you get to your third year. I've had more than one university president say to me that some of our best students in third year come from NSCC. That says a lot. Some of those structures are already in place.

I also think about choice, and I think about transitions and about affordability and I think about four-year programs. Why are they four-year programs when they used to be

three-year programs? Why does it take six years to become a teacher? We are looking at this whole thing about affordability and getting the workforce what they need.

If I'm an elementary school teacher and - by the way, I am an elementary school teacher - why do I need six years of education in order to do that? Do I need to go do a BSc or a BA in history or child studies for four years and then do two years of education? I'm not sure, but I think there is a better way forward. I ask questions. Why do we have our post-secondary - for the most part, most programs go from September to April and then you can do electives or you can pick up odd courses from May through to August. Well, why aren't we offering more? Why aren't we making it part of what students do? Why aren't we making that part of the culture? Because right now, if I threw that out there, you'd be thinking, Oh my God, I worked from May to whenever to make money. Well, I think that's awesome. Why don't we start thinking bigger and thinking differently and think work-integrated learning? Why don't we have more co-ops? Why don't schools offer more co-ops that go in May, June, July, August where they are actually getting paid for doing a course?

[2:00 p.m.]

When we do our jurisdictional scan, a lot of schools - they do work-integrated learning, but they all do them differently. Sometimes you work for three months and you get one credit, and some of them you have to do three different co-ops to get a credit. We have the tools. They are already there. We just need to do them better. If we can accelerate a program from four years to three years - I'm not even talking about students doing fewer courses. I'm just saying make it available somehow.

It costs the average student, if they are in student housing and they are paying for a meal plan, over \$14,000 a year. If you can accelerate that by one year, you save them \$14,000 in living fees, food costs, and you get them into the workforce one year earlier. The opportunity cost of staying in a program one year longer is massive. If it's a \$60,000 a year job, it's a \$60,000 opportunity cost. If it's a \$40,000 job, it's a \$40,000 opportunity cost. Then there is the cost to the employer who needs workers now. I'm not sure if when I did my first four-year degree - and I will admit it took me six years to get it - I'm not sure if some of the courses I took were of value to me or not. I don't know that. I don't think they were.

I think when I did my education degree, I was the last one to do a one-year education degree at Mount Saint Vincent before they turned it to two years. They were the last school to turn it to a two-year education degree. I did it in the last year. I could have gone to Acadia and done two years or I could have gone to Mount Saint Vincent and done one year. I don't think there is anybody out there who is going to say to me: Man, you sucked as a teacher because you only did one year - I don't think. A lot of the teachers who I started with came through Nova Scotia Teachers College in Truro, three-year programs.

Some people would say some of the best teachers they ever worked with came from that school.

So when we talk about the MOU, when we talk about the costs, when we talk specifically about tuition costs or specifically housing costs or food costs or any of that, we can't talk about it in a bubble. We have to talk about it as that big umbrella piece. When my team, the people who are surrounding me, are working on solutions, we are working on that big umbrella. It's bigger than just that one little piece, and it's complicated and so we keep consulting. We keep coming up with ideas. We keep going back to the universities and talking to students and throwing things out there.

The group that I introduced yesterday from Johns Hopkins University, it's a second-year master's-level policy class that they are doing. Most of the students from that program are going to be working in government working on policy. We had two big problems that they offered their help. We gave them two questions to research. The first question was transitioning. When you transition from high school, what are the best practices? What is the jurisdictional scan? What are people doing that are helping kids transition better?

I have conversations all the time with parents and with students. What are you doing next year when you graduate? My son just graduated. I had all kinds of conversations over the last two years. I was at Lockview High School talking to students last month and I asked all kinds of questions. A lot of students, they will say, I'm not sure what I want to do but I am going to go to pick a school. I can pick StFX or Cape Breton or Dalhousie, but I am going to go for a year and check it out, see what I like.

Our attrition rate, on average right across Canada, is almost one third of students who drop out. Can you imagine if it costs you \$25,000 a year and you don't quite know what you want to do and then you drop out in your first year and it costs you \$25,000? My first year of university at Dalhousie, I lasted three months. Now it didn't cost \$25,000 but it cost my parents' dreams - what on earth is Brian going to do now? It costs money, it costs self-esteem, all of those things that go with, I'm a failure. I did great in high school. I played sports, I did all of these things, and I dropped out in three months. What a loser. How many students - are we putting 33 per cent of our students going through that same emotional thing?

Then, if you look at the cost of an education - a cost of living for one year, that is catastrophic. That is a disaster. We need to improve. We are never going to get it perfect, but we need to improve it somehow. That could be through curricular changes, it might be by how we are offering it, it might be by doing better transitioning.

If I am in a trade - even if I go through a skilled trades program in high school, or I don't - but I say I want to be a welder. Not a lot of our schools offer welding as a skilled trade - but I want to be a welder. There are great jobs. I can go to the shipyard; I can go

anywhere in the province and I can be a welder. It's great. You can do a one-year program or a two-year program at NSCC. Some of those programs have a higher attrition rate than 33 per cent. Why? It's because the kids were never, ever exposed to what welding is.

If you have to put an acetylene pack on your back and go into a confined space, it's like, no thank you. I'm in school for three weeks, four weeks, five weeks, I've paid my tuition and I drop out. I drop out because it wasn't what I thought it was going to be because we didn't have proper transitions. How do we do that better? Maybe we have to work with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Of course we have to work with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Do we have to work with NSCC? Of course we do. Do we have to work with Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency? Of course we do, but we have to do a better job of doing transitions. That is why we had Johns Hopkins University here doing research for us on the best practices to transition because we can save students and families money, heartache - and also those students, since NSCC is first come, first served, if you apply first you will get in first. We can open up seats to kids who have a better understanding of what they are getting into right across the board.

Did I answer your question in that somewhere?

BEN JESSOME: I can appreciate the complexity of the household budget and different opportunities to alleviate financial pressure through a variety of different streams. It seems to be the consistency of this government to talk about programs and opportunities that fall outside of the fundamental piece to budgeting and finance. The example I will use is we talk about investments with respect to low-income Nova Scotians and heat pumps and a \$1,000 rebate, but if you don't have a house then you can't access that rebate. We are talking about something over here and the problem is, in this case, we don't have any increases for income assistance, which is the baseline component to a vulnerable Nova Scotian's household budget.

Now we are talking about housing over here and we're talking about building 350 new beds for X number of students across the province, so there is a gap there. The fundamental piece - that income assistance piece in the student assistance world - is tuition and how much the baseline tuition is going to cost. It will, in many cases, dictate whether a student can or cannot go to a school. It will dictate whether or not a student will choose school A, B, or C - maybe here, maybe elsewhere. I don't want to belabour this too much because in the back of my mind I am thinking the negotiations haven't started yet and perhaps it's not an answer that I will receive specifically today. I think the minister needs to be acutely aware, and I am sure that he is, and I will trust that he is, that that cap on tuition is mission critical in ensuring that what universities and colleges leverage as what is required to make up any funding gaps is that tuition piece. Ensuring that that component of the MOU remains intact is truly critical.

In the minister's previous response, he referenced the importance of co-op education and ensuring that those types of professional experiences are paid and there are opportunities for them. I am wondering why this year's budget lacks - with respect to expanding the scope of the available co-op opportunities in the province when schools like Mount Saint Vincent, continue to advocate for enhancements to co-op education with respect to the number of co-ops that are out there and the opportunities to be compensated for them are. I'd like the minister to weigh in, as he suggests co-op education is certainly so valuable.

BRIAN WONG: Just to go back a little bit on the tuition piece where you stated that that is the pinnacle piece of whether or not a student can afford to go to a university or post-secondary institution - I don't quite agree with that. I know that tuition cap is important, and I know it is important for that predictability piece and say I know what I'm going to pay. I think if I am looking at tuition at \$9,500, if I can save \$15,000 by being able to live at home and eat at home and stay with my parents - one of the things I always look at is if all else stays exactly the way it was last year, what are ways that we already have built within the system that we can make it more affordable for a student? That's where we talk about housing, and transportation, and looking at alternative ways to get a university education, if that's what you wish - or a college degree, or a private career college. I think it is a little bit bigger than that.

When you talk about co-op - I don't look at co-op as being the one-and-done piece, I look at it as that general programming, as work-integrated learning. It is important because it only makes sense that students whom we have in our system, we attach them somehow to that next step, whatever they're doing. Whether they are going to work in the private sector, the public sector, a not-for-profit, or whether they are going to go on to further education, they need to touch it and they need to feel it and they need to understand if it's for them or not.

There is nothing better than somebody who has picked a program who goes to do a work-integrated learning jaunt and finds out, Oh my God, I absolutely love it. The next best thing to that is for them to say, I absolutely hate it, because it gives them the opportunity to pivot before they spend another three years or two years or whatever in their program to have that experience. It is so important for students to get out into the workforce.

Given that, where you didn't see anything in there that specifically said co-op, where our big investments happened for students is in Mitacs. We increased it from \$1 million a year to \$13 million, which leverages over \$18 million over four years with the federal government. The internships are now potentially 3,200 internship units out there as opposed to the previous 250. Those Mitacs internships are vital to our industries because these students are doing research with them. They are getting paid to do the research with these companies. Very often the companies are hiring them in order to do the research for them and then once they graduate, they hire them to stay on full-time.



What's as good as that or even better? A lot of these students who are working in Mitacs programs for these companies are going off and opening their own businesses and then they are hiring more people. They are contributing to the economy. They want to stay here in Nova Scotia. It's amazing, the whole focus of that as it moves through.

[2:15 p.m.]

When we look at our sandboxes and we start with our sandboxes - I think Dalhousie has three sandboxes, NSCC has a sandbox, there is a sandbox at CBU, a sandbox at Acadia - they bring in high school students. The sandboxes are areas where a student, while they are in a program, can start tinkering with some ideas that they might want to turn into a business. Once they get that and they solidify it enough, they move up to the next level where they might be in one of the innovation centres, they might be at Volta where they can really build on it, or they might get a Mitacs internship. We have actually invested \$13 million over four years into Mitacs for work-integrated learning.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate there are opportunities out there so maybe I could be more specific. What is the change in budget for experiential learning at the Department of Advanced Education from last year to this year?

BRIAN WONG: For the work-integrated learning, that would be the Mitacs, that is \$3.5 million for this year's budget.

BEN JESSOME: That is \$3.5 million this year. What was it last year, please and thank you?

BRIAN WONG: Last year it was \$1 million, so it's an increase of \$2.5 million.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, Minister, and all the staff for being here. I am also the housing critic for our party. Obviously the housing pieces of this are really interesting to me. I think, as the minister said in his opening comments, issues around housing are affecting everyone in our province from the youngest to the oldest. Certainly students are no exception and are probably, I would say, particularly vulnerable, because in most cases they are not working full-time and their earning potential is not what someone 30 and up would have, generally speaking.

I am just curious: You mentioned three projects in particular at NSCC campuses, Ivany, Akerley, and Pictou; 550 beds in total between those over the next two and a half years or so. I'm sure those are great investments, absolutely necessary. I am just curious what the department's assessment is for housing need at universities. Think, for example, at Cape Breton University, given the real success they've had with international students,

which is wonderful, the down side of that is that the housing market there certainly has not been able to keep up by any means.

Just last night I was speaking to a student at Dalhousie University who is in her first year. She is from Ecuador, actually, so she is an international student at Dalhousie, living in residence at Dalhousie. She told me that all of the second-year students who were in her residence who wanted to stay there were basically told that you can't stay at the residence this year because we need the spaces for first-year students coming in. Obviously those second-year students are scrambling and having a really hard time.

What is the department's position on housing need at universities beyond the NSCC projects, and are there any plans to do something similar at other institutions?

BRIAN WONG: Student housing is always on my mind. We do have the student housing strategy that we are diligently working on, hoping to get it out very soon. Our focus is truly making sure that we have short-, mid-, and long-term solutions for student housing. We have done some things while we are in the process of doing this, and of course, the three NSCC student residences are certainly part of that. We are not really waiting until we get it done. If we see ideas and we are able to do it, we get them out there as quickly as possible.

When you talk about Cape Breton University, they have done a wonderful job, as you mentioned, at tracking international students. Part of the issue this year is that we did have two years of COVID-19 where students who were previously accepted over those two years who didn't come all came at the same time. They did have a massive influx coupled with - there were a lot of Cape Bretoners who used to open up their homes. They used to rent a room or rent a space in their house to an international student or a student who is in the area but that closed down and they have never recovered from that either.

We had a bunch of things that came together. This year - last year now - we did invest \$5 million in the Tartan Downs project. We want to make sure that students have a place within that Tartan Downs project, and they will. Very recently Cape Breton University also announced that they have a building that they are converting, and I believe it is for 200 rooms for student housing which is really going to help as well. I think we also see the private sector starting to step up a little bit. That was one of the announcements two weeks ago in the Port Hawkesbury area, where there is a private company that wants to open up housing for students and for workers because of all the development going on up there.

Also, a little bit more locally, we put \$3 million into the Atlantic School of Theology to upgrade that building, in order to have more students in there as well. The student housing strategy is really going to encompass a lot of different things, a lot of different ideas to fit a lot of different demographics of students. We are talking with every

school. We are talking with every school right around this province to say: What is your need? How's it going to fit within the community? It's important.

As I mentioned, the demographic has changed. It's not just a student going in and having a one-bedroom or you have two beds and a desk in there. Things are changing and students demand something a little bit different. We are working. We are working hard, and I look forward to sharing with you, sooner rather than later.

THE CHAIR: Just a reminder, the Official Opposition will have until about 2:41 p.m.

The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just to clarify the point - and thank you for the answer - any additional projects of this nature, new housing for post-secondary institutions, if they are to happen, will be outlined in this housing strategy? And you expect that to come out, I assume, this year at least, based on what you indicated there?

BRIAN WONG: Our hope is to get it out this Spring.

BRAEDON CLARK: Well that's good. Tomorrow it is, then. (Interruption) Yes, June 21<sup>st</sup>. We'll wait. I'll mark that down.

I do think that is good to hear and very critically important because when students go to university or community college or wherever they go to study, they go there to study. To have something as fundamental as your housing situation be uncertain or beyond your means is incredibly stressful and obviously, in a worst-case scenario, leads to them having to leave and not complete their education or they are not doing as well at school because they are stressed about, Where am I living, what am I doing? I think it is a huge issue within the student population. As I said, I was just talking to a student last night about this exact thing.

I am also curious - you talked about the housing needs assessment and a survey that was done, as well. I am just curious - do you have the numbers available as to what the response rate was for that? How many students did you hear from? Do you have that?

BRIAN WONG: We just really did get the results. We are still compiling them, but my understanding is that we did get a significant response to that, and I look forward to sharing those numbers with you as well.

Going back to something that you did mention earlier: For every student housing unit that we produce, it does relieve the market otherwise. With the student housing strategy we are looking at short-, medium-, and long-term plans. Once we release that

strategy there are items in there that will make an immediate impact on students finding housing.

BRAEDON CLARK: Changing tunes here a little bit, I just wanted to ask about something that came to us, and I'm sure the minister and the department would be familiar with this as well, because I am sure you had the same meeting with Students Nova Scotia that we did over the last little while. I am talking about open educational resources, AtlanticOER, an open-source textbook replacement strategy. Perhaps in some ways - you know, we all remember spending \$175 for a 75-pound textbook that killed your back and you barely used, and at the end of the year, you sold it for \$20 and you felt terrible about the whole process.

Not to slag off textbook publishers, but I just wonder, from the little I know about it, it seems like an interesting pilot project that's done some good to save students money and kind of democratize education. I am just curious what the department's position on that is. My understanding is that the pilot project is expiring soon, if not already. Is there any possibility that it may continue in a more permanent fashion?

BRIAN WONG: CAAL, the Council of Atlantic Academic Libraries, did run the pilot project and it is due to - I think it's almost done - I, like you, had big books like that. Paid \$275 and used one chapter of it. It is very frustrating and I understand the plight of students. I do get that once it is up and running it will be a very valuable tool. The items and whatever materials, questions, are all peer-reviewed. It is nice to be able to work with - for us it is a little bit more complicated than just saying yes, we are going to throw money at it. It really does have to be coordinated with other provinces and other schools in order to make it work and make it viable. It is something that is absolutely top of mind for me. I look forward to maybe - hopefully later we will have something. We are working on it.

BRAEDON CLARK: June 22<sup>nd</sup> or around that area. (Laughter)

Thanks to the member for Hammond Plains-Lucasville for having better research than I do on hand. According to Students Nova Scotia, they are looking at maybe a little under \$300,000 a year which, from what I understand, the department has to do due diligence on all this. I do appreciate it would be logistically not the easiest thing in the world to do, but I liked what you said earlier, minister, about innovation and changing things. Why do things for four years if you can do it in three, why do this instead of that?

One of the worst offences for any position or policy is: It's just the way we've always done it. So I appreciate that perspective. I think this is a good example - a good practical example of a way to make student life more affordable, easier, and more convenient that is not as vast or as all-encompassing as housing, for example. I appreciate your comments on that.

I also wanted to ask quickly about the announcement at Saint Mary's University. I guess this was earlier this month, perhaps? Yes, earlier this month. The data analytics investment that I think was \$25 million or so. It feels, based on some comments that were made at the time, that it came together very quickly. I am just curious if you could explain the speed with which it happened and perhaps what it is going to look like, what the program will actually do and look like. We had comments here from the VP of Academic and Research at SMU saying: "This announcement came very suddenly and so now we have to consult with our faculty who design and deliver these programs. So we will know that in a few months time in terms of where we're going with that."

[2:30 p.m.]

Again, I am not saying that it was a bad investment or that it didn't make sense. I'm just curious why it seemed to come out of left field perhaps a little bit for Saint Mary's. It is a big amount of money to turn around in a day. I am curious how that came together and where that program is going to go. How do you see it fitting into not just the advanced education space but also health care which is what it is designed to do, I presume?

BRIAN WONG: You know what? This initiative and the two others we announced this week - the \$58.9 million for the new medical school in Cape Breton, the Institute for Innovation in Health at StFX, and this health care data analytics program at Saint Mary's - those are three big projects to help cure what is going on in health care and the reason that we have the Department of Advanced Education is to do projects like this.

Every post-secondary institution was asked: What can you do to help us with health care? The schools that came forward with a plan, we worked with them, we helped them tweak them. This was not something that came up at the last minute. This was something we worked with all the schools for a significant amount of time to put it into place. What the person may have been referring to is that once we made a decision we were going forward with it, it was probably a shorter timeline than they probably would have liked or would have expected.

I will just give you a little bit of background into what is happening at Saint Mary's University. It is \$25 million to advance priorities and with the Action for Health plan. It will "develop a diploma program in health care analytics that will help health care workers bring a new level of data-informed decision-making to Nova Scotia's healthcare system" and address factors affecting the health and well-being of Nova Scotians.

The second part of that is to "provide a business administration program for health care administrators, office directors and family doctors" to support the province with becoming a magnet for health provider management and leadership training and to work with the Nova Scotia Community College to expand the university transfer program formerly known as the 2+2 program - options to provide health students with expanded opportunities in health-related professions. This will provide students such as medical

laboratory technologists and practical nurses with a two-year diploma from NSCC with the opportunity to complete an additional two years of university to receive a four-year Bachelor of Science degree in addition to their diploma. This will cultivate excellence on the front lines by expanding students' scope and knowledge and creating accessible pathways for them to enter advanced positions or education within the health care sector.

This is also an example where you can live anywhere in Nova Scotia with access to NSCC and maybe some of the online learning of NSCC to do a two-year program and then go to Saint Mary's University and get a degree.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just to clarify the beginning - the processing of this - Saint Mary's and other institutions were asked what your ideas on health care are and how you can help us on the health care front. I presume they submitted some proposal laying out this vision that you just described and then got notification - I would say quickly - that yes, we want to do this and yes, the funding is there which might have surprised them. Is that what you are saying, minister?

BRIAN WONG: What I will say is that we were working on several projects simultaneously, as we always do. We have ongoing conversations working with all our post-secondaries. At the same time we had two other schools that were not surprised at all when it came up. For Saint Mary's, we'd been working with them for a period of time and the announcement came up and that was probably what surprised them - how quickly they had to put that together.

BRAEDON CLARK: Based on that, when can we expect that program at Saint Mary's will be up and running? Will students be taking classes in this program in September, for example?

BRIAN WONG: The beauty of this - it's funny, I was there. I did the announcement. There was so much excitement in the room and to meet the students and one of their professors - the professor just talked about the potential of the program, because Saint Mary's is known for their data analytics program. So they already have a lot of the things in place. There is equipment that needs to be purchased, there are additional faculty who need to be hired, and even space to run the program, but we are absolutely aspiring to get this up and going for September.

BEN JESSOME: I will just quickly state for the record with respect to the open educational resources line of questioning from my honourable colleague, that the concept did, in fact - I know the minister would have received a letter of support for the AtlanticOER program, so there seems to be collective buy-in from our university presidents. I think that is certainly a complementary step in getting to a system that can work. I do hope that in the future perhaps we will see that opportunity come to fruition.

With respect to the work that our friends from Johns Hopkins University are completing, I do appreciate the importance of any organization to grow and diversify and consider alternatives or efficiencies. Can the minister perhaps table where the requests came from, or what inspired the conversation about shortening the university experience in this case as a means of reducing fees ultimately? Where did that come from? In the conversations I've had with student leaders and students, I don't hear that as a primary objective or an ask of government. I am curious to know where this initiative came from when there are so many other things that are being asked for specifically by students.

BRIAN WONG: We actually spoke about this last year when we met. If it is about affordability - accelerating a program will reduce the costs for a student significantly and it is also the opportunity cost. If you can take a four-year program and make it a three-year program, then - well, I'll use the number if you're in residence and buying food, but it is over \$14,000 a year. If you could actually finish in three years, you save the monies that you would normally spend on housing and food and you are in the workforce a year earlier. There is potential for the student to be making money earlier, and it also solves our workforce problems by getting students graduated earlier and into the workforce.

Those conversations and that idea came from speaking to students, talking to parents, talking to leadership - some of the things that probably came into my own head when I really started thinking about it. Years ago we had three-year degrees. There are actually some universities that are offering three-year degrees right here in Nova Scotia. A three-year degree or an accelerated program, whichever way you look at it. That is why we had Johns Hopkins look at it to see what is going on out there. What is going on, not just in Nova Scotia but in Atlantic Canada, in Canada? What's going on in the U.S.? What's going on in New Zealand? What's going on in England? What's going on in countries that share a lot of similar demographics and stuff as us for accelerated programs? We already have accelerated programs. Our nursing program at Dalhousie University is an accelerated program.

If you can save students money, I think it's great. Getting them into the workforce, I think is great. Is it for everyone? Probably not, but I think it can help a lot of students. I think we have - we grew up in a culture of doing your post-secondary education from September to April and then students finding jobs for May, June, July, and August trying to fund their next piece of it. I think if we can change the culture in saying, Hey, I'm going to do courses in May and June.

I did my first degree the traditional way - six years for a four-year degree. My other three degrees - I have two master's degrees and I did them mostly on weekends and in Summers and part-time. It's the only way to get it done. If I had waited to only do my other degrees from September to April, I would have never gotten them done, and they were important to me in order to advance my career to get them done. I think, by looking at . . . (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the time for the Official Opposition. It is now the NDP's turn.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Would you like a break, Minister?

BRIAN WONG: Thank you. Yes, I need breaks. I've had three.

THE CHAIR: Maybe we will have a quick three-minute recess? Five-minute recess? We are now in recess.

[2:41 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:49 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. Thank you. It is now time for the NDP.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Maybe I will continue on with some questions about the SMU program. Just a minute, I have to get resettled after our short break.

You talked about the process of talking with universities and asking how you can help in this challenging time. Was there a formal call for proposals developed that outlined what aspects of a program you would be interested in funding?

BRIAN WONG: We have our group that we meet with, the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents, CONSUP, and that is all of our university presidents and the president of NSCC who are on the board. When we talk about what the priorities and stuff are moving forward, that is where we talk to the presidents and say, This is what our government priorities are. What can you help us with? At the end of the day, it's our universities that know what the art of the possible is for them. They are independent, board-run institutions that know what their abilities are and their future and what they want to look at.

It really came through concept and our work with the universities. As far as a formal call for proposals, it didn't happen that way. It happened around the board table and meeting with universities.

LISA LACHANCE: I guess the question of how proposals were evaluated - a similar situation that you might think of is through CIHR. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research set priorities, they share those with institutions, and then they have to have



a defensible, transparent, accountable way to assess those proposals before they are approved.

Was there an assessment process or are there performance targets that you can share regarding this particular project or more broadly with things that you wanted to fund?

BRIAN WONG: One of the things that the Premier has asked and that we also asked our university presidents in concept is that whatever the proposals are, they need to be big, they need to be bold, and they need to be brave, because we do have things in health care that we need to solve.

As far as proposals coming from our institutions - the ideas come from them. I am saying that these are the issues in health care and what can you do to help. Once they had a proposal that was sent to our staff and our staff really looked at what the proposal was, what the scope of it is, and the cost of the proposal, and those proposals were recommended from there.

LISA LACHANCE: I honestly just can't let the statement go by, that how these things were evaluated was whether they were big, bold, and brave. That is not - I have sat on both sides of grant processes in government, in universities, and through non-profit organizations, and I don't know how you could measure big, bold, and brave. That is a concerning description. I think there are ways that we fund initiatives in post-secondary education in this country that are more evidence-based, I guess is what I would say.

Is there a performance framework in place for the \$25 million that you have given to SMU?

BRIAN WONG: Well, when I speak about big, bold, and brave - when we talk about a new medical school at Cape Breton University, that is big, that is bold, and that is brave, and it is thinking differently. It's thinking differently because for decades we had one medical school for Nova Scotia and that's centered in Halifax. We are concerned that we need to satisfy the need for doctors in rural Nova Scotia. We need to satisfy the need for getting more doctors out faster. We need more, we need better, and we do need faster.

A \$58.9 million investment in doctors that is going to help all Nova Scotians, I don't think is a bad decision. Investing \$34 million in Saint Mary's University for health care data analytics is doing things differently. It is really being bold. It is being different. Whether or not I use those three terms, we want people to think differently and health care analytics is definitely a different way. We have never done it before. We have done it in education, we've done it in the private sector - it's been done everywhere but we have never done it with health care.

When they come with proposals and our department evaluates them, they are evaluating based on the impact. What is the impact this is going to have for the cost that it is going to take?

Also, some of the ideas - even when the Premier and the minister toured Nova Scotia, they heard this from health care practitioners what some of these needs were. With our funding letters that we do send out when these projects are approved, they do have regular reporting requirements and evaluations attached to them.

LISA LACHANCE: I am going to take that as a no, that there isn't a performance measurement for work in place that talks about what the expected results are of this project. I guess I don't quite agree that there is no data analytics being used in Nova Scotia. There certainly is - I think there is a whole unit in the Department of Health and Wellness - I mean, there are specialists in this.

You know that I am a proud supporter of the post-secondary education system. I've worked in post-secondary education. I am currently a Ph.D. student. You want to talk about data - I'd love to talk about data. My question is what is the data behind this decision? What do you think we are going to get? What is the impact? What's the need and what's the impact?

Can I add - what's happening in other jurisdictions? Not only have I accessed health data experts through the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the IWK Health Centre, at Dalhousie University, but also across the country, and we can't possibly think that we are so unique that all of our expertise needs to reside in Nova Scotia.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you for the follow-up questions. I am not suggesting that the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness has never used data analytics. There is a department but that department, in order for it to run, runs by bringing people from other countries, bringing people in with that expertise. We have never had a program where we trained people here. The thing is we need to expand it as well - it's not just a one-time event. Data analytics is going to become a bigger focus for health care in Nova Scotia.

LISA LACHANCE: Okay. Just a few more numbers questions. What is the targeted number of students and what do you expect to be the retention rate in Nova Scotia? How many positions are there currently in Nova Scotia who allow you to speculate on how many students you need to finish this program?

The \$25 million - surely that's not going to be spent between like now and September to set up the program. How long is the \$25 million for? What are the expectations of partner organizations when they are given money that they hold across various fiscal years? What happens with the interest? Do they keep it? Does it revert to government? So yes, some more numbers questions.

[3:00 p.m.]

BRIAN WONG: The plan is still in development, and we hope to have that whole plan put together by June. The breakdown of the monies that are being spent is: \$12.5 million is going towards the health data analytics program; \$7.5 million is the management and leadership programming; and \$5 million is to expand the articulation agreement with NSCC.

LISA LACHANCE: And over what time period and what happens to the interest?

BRIAN WONG: The agreement that we are hoping to have in place will articulate all of those details. Once it's approved, the university will receive those funds and they will constantly be monitored by our department to see where the funds are going, how they are being spent.

LISA LACHANCE: Hopefully by the time we come back again next year you will be able to share with us the performance framework, the goals of this project, and what is happening with the money. You know, these are big numbers and, as I suggested earlier in the House today, a lot of this money is being pushed out and is going to sit with partners over multi years.

On the partner side of things, I think that's great because I actually have worked in both government funding where it is fiscal year by fiscal year, and I think that can distort some planning and spending habits. At the same time on the government side, it is very easy to lose track and I am really curious - \$25 million is a ton of money so the interest is a huge question. I know there is some confusion in the agreements that the government has with EfficiencyOne and - I forget the organization's name - but other organizations. Some of them are required to pay back the interest and some aren't. I think this is a very real question for Nova Scotians.

I will turn to the Cape Breton University medical school which - not only do I have a background in post-secondary education, but my in-laws were both highly involved in medical education. My mother-in-law set up the NOSM University residency program and my father-in-law established the Dalhousie Family Medicine Clinics - so years - decades, really, of experience in medical education. There are some questions I have around this idea.

We keep talking about 30 doctors a year. That will be 130 doctors happening - 120 doctors at any one time. Are we only planning to train family doctors? What happens when people choose specialties? There seems to be the inference that all will stay in Nova Scotia and they will all practise rurally. Surely you have given some consideration to what the incentives would be to make that actually happen, because the medical residency process is a national process. In fact, on March 22<sup>nd</sup> we just had the CaRMS Canadian medical residency service results and if you are on academic Twitter or medical Twitter, you can

see everybody saying, I matched with Pediatrics at McGill University or I matched with Orthopaedics at the University of Toronto.

There are 268 unfilled family medicine physicians through that matching process. It's the most they have ever had but the inability to fill the family medical spots has been an ongoing challenge nationwide. Why is Cape Breton going to be different? How are we going to keep 30 people here and not have them want to go do specialties and all those sorts of things? How are we going to get 30 doctors every year?

BRIAN WONG: We all know there is a shortage of doctors. There is a shortage of health care professionals right across the province, rural Nova Scotia in particular. It has a shortage that we need to fill.

We are asking students who go through this medical school to sign a return of service agreement. We do know that nationally there are some hiccups going on as to where people end up. We are certainly going to advocate for the students who go through the program to get placed in Nova Scotia.

LISA LACHANCE: Can you tell us more about a return of service agreement, because that is the first time I've heard of this as part of this deal. Often a return of service offers something to get something. What is the deal in the return of service agreement?

BRIAN WONG: This is really a question for Department of Health and Wellness, but they did provide us some documentation on that, so if there are really any follow-up questions from that, please contact them.

I will just read this to you. For physicians we have three financial incentives; two educational incentives - Practice Ready Assessment Program and Labour Market Priority; and three legacy financial incentives. These programs and incentives require physicians to provide a return of service of between two and five years, depending on the program. There are no bonuses as part of the current return of service incentive programs; however, the Tuition Relief Program, which is one of the legacy financial incentives, a physician who establishes a practice outside of an area in which a regional hospital is located, their tuition relief reimbursement payment will be supplemented by \$30,000.

The recently announced medical campus at Cape Breton University will also see students who choose to study there commit to practising in rural Nova Scotia for five years.

LISA LACHANCE: That's helpful, but what I didn't hear in that answer was - you were talking about existing programs, the current tuition relief reimbursement. If you are going to ask people to sign a five-year commitment, what specifically is being offered to students who go to medical school at CBU? Can you walk me through the math?

BRIAN WONG: That is a question for Department of Health and Wellness. Sorry, I don't have that information to share with you.

LISA LACHANCE: You have talked quite a bit about the Mitacs investments and certainly that is an initiative that I am very familiar with. Actually, I was going to tell a long story about its funding origins but I'm not going to. (Laughter) That's okay. It started as the same type of an issue that I managed at Dalhousie as well - the same funding body that no longer exists. Mitacs - I do know about it.

What I am wondering - you shared some great anecdotes, but again, \$1 million to \$13 million is a lot of money. What are the performance measurements that you are looking for? What's the impact? How are you measuring success? How many students' completion rates, retention in Nova Scotia? I am also interested in the demographics of who is accessing Mitacs - gender, race. Are they from Nova Scotia? What do we know about these students?

BRIAN WONG: I am going to read you some of the information. I don't have all the answers as far as the detailed stuff that Mitacs may have, but Mitacs has been running nationwide and is a very well-respected organization. They have their own performance metrics. As far as what we look for in Nova Scotia in our investment, it is really that work-integrated learning experience, that hands-on experience that students are getting from working in businesses and doing the research that is really going to move this province forward.

Let me read you some of the background. I understand that you are familiar with a lot of this:

Since 2018-19, the former Department of Labour and Advanced Education, LAE, has provided \$1 million per year to fund 250 student internship units. The Province announced in January 2023 an additional investment of \$13 million over four years, 2022-23 to 2025-26, to create up to 3,200 more paid internship opportunities. This brings the total Mitacs investment to \$16.976 million to support 4,244 internship units. This additional investment will enable Mitacs to leverage an additional \$19.4 million in federal funding over the same period to support additional internships in Nova Scotia.

This is really big for Nova Scotia, and I know that you understand how big it really is.

Each internship is currently funded in the following ways: \$4,000 will come from the provincial investment; \$6,000 from government; and \$7,500 from industry. An example is Scotian Gold, which I believe I mentioned earlier.

Scotian Gold has partnered with researchers from Acadia University, with the support of the Mitacs Accelerate program, to develop AI technology to aid in the management of high-value apple crops. The method designed through this project consists of inexpensive digital photography paired with cloud-based machine learning and will enable farmers to better predict crop yield. Accurate and consistent estimates achieved with this technology could prove invaluable for rural economies.

The investment from the Province leverages a lot of federal dollars and Mitacs itself has a lot of data on the success with their program and who is doing their programs. They have a good reputation.

There are a number of KPIs and stuff that we have listed in there and I don't have the numbers, but this is the data that is collected. The number of internships or fellowships delivered by program, by discipline; internships that are delivered by whether an undergraduate, graduate, post-doctorate, college, or equivalent; depending on who the host organization is; the interns by institution; whether or not you are an international student; what region of the province you are from.

[3:15 p.m.]

Some of the outcomes and stuff that they talk about is that they do an annual survey result from the interns and the host organizations. They collect the type of skills, knowledge, and experience that has been learned, types of supports provided by the organizations to the interns, labour market tracking, and the financial piece is always tracked as well - where the money is going. Those are just some examples.

Since we don't have those details at our fingertips, if you would like to meet at another time, we can share those details with you.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you, that was going to be my question - if those could be tabled or if I could have access to them. That is very helpful to know, and it will be interesting to see how Nova Scotia's experience compares with other jurisdictions.

Switching gears a little bit, this year saw the inception of a really ambitious continuing care assistant training and education program and I am wondering if you have any information about the retention rate and what that has been from Semester 1 to Semester 2? Have there been any challenges identified in the program and how are they being addressed?

BRIAN WONG: We are very proud of the continuing care assistant program and the uptake and the institutions that have stepped forward to deliver the program. The increase in CCA wages was a really big factor in getting more CCAs entering the program

and going to the workforce. We are on track to train 2,000 CCAs which includes covering their costs of tuition. More than 1,000 caring individuals have already signed up as of Fall of 2022 and we are looking forward to fulfilling and probably surpassing what we initially thought.

The program is new but the initial feedback - the program, depending on where you take it, but at the private career colleges, the program is around 35 weeks. A lot of the graduates - the first graduation, I think, was last Fall in order to complete it, and NSCC is offering programs as well. As far as retention in the workforce, it is really early to know how retention is going because it is too early to collect the data because this particular program is so new.

We do know that some of our long-term care facilities, through the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, have really been working with starting to collect data on the success of the program because it is truly hard to measure it when we haven't been here long enough.

LISA LACHANCE: I guess I was wondering about earlier information that might point to how the program is going. For instance, if the 37-week programs have finished at the private career colleges, what was the completion rate from who started to who finished? At NSCC, what was the retention rate from Semester 1 to Semester 2?

BRIAN WONG: Total enrolment in the progressive education model - that's the work and learn model - total enrolment, whose program began and completed in the period was 348. Total graduates of PCCA students whose programs began and completed in the period was 270. We had a 78 per cent graduation rate.

The progressive education model was unique and that was really hearing from CCAs and hearing how best to graduate students from the program. One of the things about a lot of students is that they don't want to sit in classrooms for weeks and weeks before they get their work experience. The beautiful piece is the work-integrated learning model, which I advocate for at all levels of education. To have two days a week right off the bat that they can work in a long-term care facility or wherever their job ended up, that they can actually try it out and make money at the same time - 78 per cent is a really good graduation rate.

LISA LACHANCE: Just before I move on, what was the goal for completion in that program?

BRIAN WONG: Before I forget it, I guess the success of the progressive education model, we went from a graduation rate of 62 per cent to 78 per cent, from the traditional program. We know that we need CCAs, there was a call, our long-term care was suffering because we didn't have enough CCAs and we didn't have a solid number as to how many,

but we just knew that we needed to move quickly and we needed to get workers into the workforce.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to turn to some of the things that you talked about in the earlier Liberal hour around costs of programs. I have a number of questions related to this, but I think I am going to start with this one. You referred a number of times to the cost savings of someone who stays at home with their parents, and they don't have to pay rent and the parents feed them. I think that is a whole lot of assumptions about who students are, and not only that, who we want to be students.

When I look at things like I talked about in the budget address, when I look at our numbers around our labour market, the fact that it is not an employees' market, but it is not an employers' market either. We are not filling jobs. We have this huge need - labour shortage - across so many sectors in industries that this government's budget documents identified - I think it was the 30-to-55-year-old range - as one of the areas that has fallen and is not budging. So we're not actually getting any greater participation. I think that is on the age front.

Then I think about families who frankly can't afford to have another young person stay at home for much longer. Costs are rising and I think of the former youth in care. I think this idea of staying home with parents - obviously, when I started both my master's and my Ph.D., I wasn't going to move home with my mom. So I'm wondering, what do we know about the composition of the student body in post-secondary in Nova Scotia? What are the ages, race? I know we know this by institution because I can't quite remember what Dalhousie University was, but the percentage of students who are actually from Nova Scotia and who are parents - all those sorts of questions. What do we know about the student body in Nova Scotia? I think if we are going to talk about tuition costs, we need to know who we are talking about. You can't live at home if - I can't move home, my in-laws don't want my kids and me all moving in.

I think you would agree that ongoing education is an important action. So what do we know about them because that's how we plan interventions like student housing or cost of tuition?

BRIAN WONG: There is no doubt that the demographic of students is changing. We have students going back later in life and I am a firm believer in lifelong learning. When I think of the traditional student when I was speaking earlier, I was really thinking of the students who are in their first undergraduate degree. A lot of them are coming right out of high school to post-secondary, so I'm not just talking about university either. I am also talking about NSCC.

We want to make it accessible, and we truly want to make sure that we promote the fact that students can be in post-secondary education while living in their own community. It is possible. Sometimes it might not be the best choice. Some parents don't want their kids



at home and some kids don't want to be at home, and so I look at both of those. It's not for everyone but it is part of the solution; it's not the entire solution. Even when I talked about accelerated programs, that's not for everyone but that is part of the solution - that's for some people. When I talked about the ability to stay in your home community, go to NSCC for two years, and then go to a university, I'm really talking about for some people.

I have friends who made sure that their students - and the students did not want to stay at home - that they're in Ontario, so they got as far away as they can. My son is going to NSCC and living at home, getting home-cooked meals and where he can do his own laundry and he also works part-time. I don't think we can ever put everybody in the same box, and I understand that fully, and I would never proclaim that it is a one-size-fits-all because it is not.

As an adult, I went back to school to do a second degree. I went back as a single dad, and I went back thinking I could fund two years of education where I found out I could really fund one. I know what it is like to struggle, I know what it is like to be on welfare, I know what it is like to know that you can't go to Tim Hortons to get a coffee, and I know about the demographic changes. When we talk about student housing, we do have to change it but if you are an adult and you are in a job, you are making a choice and hopefully you are making good financial decisions moving forward but it doesn't always work out that way - that's why we do have student assistance, that's why we have other things in place.

We do have some demographic data that I am hoping I will be able to share with you about the type of students, but we do know that we have a lot of international students who already have their first degrees. They are coming to do their second degree or a second certificate or they are doing a one-year program or a two-year program. A lot of the students are coming for a short time and then they're opening businesses, they're getting jobs and stuff here, and it's a pathway to permanent residency for some of them, as a matter of fact. Eventually they are going to become citizens and they are going to contribute to our society and our communities.

Talking about the affordability of education for anyone, I go back to that whole umbrella piece. It's not just about housing, it's not just about tuition, it's about a whole bunch of different factors. It's about transportation, it's about all of those things that we really have to wrap our heads around to see how they work together. Phoenix Youth Programs put together a wonderful program at the beginning of the school year and in August they announced that they had room in their facility - I think it was for five, it might have been two. Please don't quote me on it. It's a wraparound service. They would take a student in and make sure that they had access to food, and they knew how the transit system worked, and they knew where to get services when they needed them. Those wraparound services are really important.

[3:30 p.m.]

I think anytime we talk about costs for student housing or tuition, we truly have to look at the bigger picture because it can never be just one item.

LISA LACHANCE: My question was actually about the demographics and who are students in Nova Scotia. Do you have some of that information in terms of percentage of Nova Scotian students, age, information like that? I intended that to be university and NSCC.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you for the clarification. I think, once I got talking, I forgot what you were asking. The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission - there is so much data on their website. I don't have that at my fingertips but that is certainly something that if you have a question, based on that specific data point, we could certainly look that up for you and get back to you.

LISA LACHANCE: You have talked a lot in this session that you have accelerated programs and I have to say, I feel like I hadn't heard that as part of the discussion previously but perhaps I missed it - I've got a lot of critic areas. Is that an official policy of this government?

BRIAN WONG: This is an idea. This is something that we heard from talking to students and talking to parents and talking about different ways that we could reduce the cost of a post-secondary education. We were talking about how to get students into the workforce earlier. The whole idea of Johns Hopkins University doing that particular study - I think I forgot to fully answer it, how it all came about, but it's a nice story and I will work my way back around.

Premier Houston, on a visit to Washington, D.C. as part of his networking event, met with some people from Johns Hopkins University. One of the professors who was teaching a senior policy course for their master's program during a conversation said, You know, maybe we can do something together. That turned into a call from the university - that professor - to our government who said, You know, is there anything that we can do? The Department of Advanced Education stepped up and said, You know what? There are some things that maybe you can help us do maybe a little bit faster. The accelerated programs were certainly one of them.

When I had the conversation with my wife, she said, Well, this is not new to me, I finished my degree in three years. She did her program at Memorial University of Newfoundland but did Summer courses and she finished in three years. A student can choose to accelerate their program already. She got out and she started working right away because she really couldn't afford to be in university for that fourth year.

We have accelerated programs in nursing at Dalhousie University. So we thought, what should they look like? I'm not just saying that we don't need - right now a traditional four-year program has 20 credits. I'm not saying do 15 credits, I'm not saying that at all. I am saying let's look at it and see where the art of the possible is. Maybe with some programs, 18 credits will solve it; maybe you need 22. At the same time I think if we use our infrastructure that is already there, that being our infrastructure at every university, every NSCC, and we utilize them on a fuller, yearly basis, I think that we can benefit a lot of students and I think we can benefit a lot of the workforce issues that we are going through right now.

I can get to some of the demographics you are asking for. It's amazing these electronic devices. In 2021-2022, 30,148 full-time students were under the age of 25; 9,259 full-time students in the same year were 25 years or older - and in the same year, 26,766 females enrolled and 18,348 males. That data is available on the MPHEC website, which is very user-friendly.

LISA LACHANCE: I just wanted to go back to some of the conversation around international students. I have five post-secondary institutions in my constituency, and I have a lot of international students. When I go door-to-door there are basically whole buildings with people of an international status of some kind, but mostly international students, and they are the best people to talk to at the door. They are really very engaged, very interested in being part of this community, very disappointed they can't vote. I think one consistent issue is the question of access to Medical Services Insurance Programs. Given the importance of international students to our communities, I am wondering if the government will consider extending MSI to international students as soon as they arrive.

BRIAN WONG: There is no doubt that international students are important to the growth of our economy, to our culture, to satisfy some of our workforce challenges. International students want to come to Nova Scotia, and they want to stay in Nova Scotia. I understand that in order to do that, that number one, they expect a quality education and number two, they expect that they are going to enjoy their life in so many different ways. Culturally they become part of our culture, we get to share their culture, and they need to be welcome.

MSI is for - every international student who comes into a Nova Scotia university has to have coverage, some kind of insurance coverage. We understand that and students also understand that when they come here, they have to have some kind of coverage. We were able to work with the Department of Health and Wellness this year to change the policy because at one time, if they left the province for 30 days, they would have to start all over again.

We look at that as giving international students the opportunity to go back home and visit their families or to visit other parts of North America and still come back and still have access to their MSI within their 13<sup>th</sup> month and not lose it.

LISA LACHANCE: But certainly they still have to wait 12 months to have access to that. When I started my Ph.D., I could go to the student health office because I could opt out because I already had a health plan - you get the idea. I will tell you that the level of stress of international students around the health office at the beginning of September and the beginning of January is high because they also know that they need to make sure that that coverage is in place, and they are nervous about being in Canada without knowing how their medical insurance works. I think it is still really - it's an additional cost. It's a cause of stress and it is a priority of every single student union in this province. It is a priority of Students Nova Scotia and the Canadian Federation of Students. We really think that the 12-month waiting period is too long and creates an additional burden that would be easy to remove.

BRIAN WONG: Just a point of clarification: The stress for students, from what I understood, is that in that 13<sup>th</sup> month they don't know whether or not they are covered?

LISA LACHANCE: What I have observed at Dalhousie, at least, is when the school year officially starts, whatever that date is - September 5<sup>th</sup>, September 6<sup>th</sup> - students need to be able to prove that they have the private extra coverage that's obligatory for Dalhousie students, unless you can prove that you can opt out. In permanent residents or Canadian citizens cases, it is if you have a health plan - like my partner works for government, so I could opt out - and that reduced my costs.

For international students, they have to pay for that insurance plan until they can qualify for MSI. So it is getting it, understanding it, accessing it, and paying for it. That is a stress. I think the 13<sup>th</sup> month was really not the major priority, certainly not what I hear from student organizations as the major concern.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you for the clarification. It is important when students come to Nova Scotia that they do know that they do have coverage but before they even come to Nova Scotia, they do understand that they have to purchase private insurance - very often through the university - before they do so. There is also a number of students who come here and they already have their own family coverage, regardless of where they are from.

Speaking to the student groups, they were very pleased to see that we had advocated on their behalf with the Department of Health and Wellness to get that changed where they can certainly leave the province. We will continue to work with the Department of Health and Wellness to try to make things better for international students.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island with a reminder that they have seven minutes left.

LISA LACHANCE: You talked about \$1.3 million in this year's budget for a debt management tool. I am wondering if you can tell us a little bit about that. Who is the

provider - I assume it is a third-party provider - and how do students - is it a mandatory tool that you have to use if you are receiving student assistance? How does it work?

BRIAN WONG: My apologies, I'm just looking for clarification. I'm not sure what - could you repeat your question? I am just getting clarification because the \$1.3 million that we have doesn't line up with the initiative you are talking about.

LISA LACHANCE: As part of an earlier discussion, I think you were running through some of what makes up the \$13.3 million, and you talked about a debt management tool. Maybe I have the number wrong, but what is this debt management tool? You talked about thousands of students having accessed it - repayment assistance.

[3:45 p.m.]

BRIAN WONG: If this isn't what you are asking, I will certainly delve a little deeper, but we do have the Repayment Assistance Plan and that is \$1.3 million. It is a debt management tool designed to assist student borrowers transitioning from post-secondary education to the labour market.

Student borrowers who have difficulty repaying their student loans are able to make affordable payments based on their income and family size. The number of students accessing the Repayment Assistance Plan has been increasing prior to COVID-19. What it does is it really looks at what your repayment, based on what your family composition is and what your ability and stuff is. That was a budget line that just really helped take some burden off students once they graduate.

LISA LACHANCE: That is helpful. Just to clarify, I think I heard that management tool and I thought, Oh, it's an app. The \$1.3 million, is that administering the negotiations around what payments are made or is that actually relief to students?

BRIAN WONG: That is a relief for students.

LISA LACHANCE: Last year at this committee I asked about - recognizing that your mandate letter contained actions around sexual and gender-based violence - I also wondered about activity in the department and policy work around the consumption of alcohol and substance use on campuses. I am wondering if there is any work being done within the department on those issues.

BRIAN WONG: I surprised myself at my own memory - as were others. Thank you for the question. It is an important question. The sexual violence prevention programs, that was part - we are actually in the last year of the agreement for that, and I am looking forward to renegotiating to see what we can come up. That was part of CONSUP and part of the innovation team but there was a \$470,000-a-year initiative for that. Each school got a portion of that to have a committee in order to make sure that sexual violence prevention

was a priority at every school. Also, this year we expanded that to the private career colleges.

As far as the e-Mental Health tools for addictions and alcohol, we give \$600,000 a year to Healthy Minds Nova Scotia, which is a suite of mental health tools that students can access, including one-on-one with mental health practitioners, phone calls when they need it, even a texting app that they can use.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island with 30 seconds left.

LISA LACHANCE: How many students access Healthy Minds Nova Scotia each year?

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP has expired. It is now time for the Liberal caucus.

The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I invite the minister to finish his response for the member from the NDP.

BRIAN WONG: That's so nice. We will provide you with that number once we find out.

I also have an update since my microphone is still there. We have an update on the number of students surveyed in the Provincial Housing Needs Assessment: 1,823 respondents.

BEN JESSOME: I am going to dive into a few questions related to the initiatives around expanding the medical schools. I am wondering if the minister can provide any information with respect to - perhaps there's a road map that would detail some milestones so that we, as members and the public, can track the progress leading to 2025.

BRIAN WONG: Would it be possible to be a little more specific as to maybe some specific items that you're looking for?

BEN JESSOME: At the risk of being wise, I have never set up a medical school before. I don't know. Is there anything tangible that could be shared just in terms of the strategy on how we plan to get there, maybe including - maybe I'll dive into my next question and that will help fill some of these suggestions.

One of the biggest issues will be finding faculty to support the learning at the school. How will we go about recruiting those educators, doctors to provide that academic

support, that training, that scientific research support - whatever goes into getting your medical degree. Perhaps that will be first and foremost, through the Chair.

BRIAN WONG: At the risk of sounding smart as well, I've never set up a medical school before either, but we do have professionals who do, and thank goodness for that. We have really good people working at Cape Breton University and we have really good people working at Dalhousie University. Dalhousie has been through this before - they already have a school set up in Saint John, New Brunswick. They have a lot of expertise. They are working with the Department of Health and Wellness, so there is a lot that is going to go into it. It is still in the planning stage. We are very optimistic and really looking forward to the project and starting to roll out doctors.

BEN JESSOME: Okay, so stay tuned for information about the logistics of getting it set up. That's fine. We have identified 2025 as the start date, correct? I am wondering when the minister anticipates that applications and approvals for admittance will be initiated.

BRIAN WONG: Normal procedure is that applications would start one year before the start date of the program. The start date of the program is - we are looking at September 2025 so they would be looking at starting to accept applications in the Fall of 2024.

BEN JESSOME: With respect to the progression through that program, have you had discussions with your counterparts with respect to the availability of residency seats and is there an intention to expand the capabilities of our residency program throughout the province?

BRIAN WONG: We have lots of experts in the field and Cape Breton has taken on Dr. Orrell in order to really start this process, and this process was actually started last Fall. They are looking to find doctors throughout Nova Scotia who are willing to take on a resident. It has been happening, it will still be ongoing, and there are lots of people who are working on it.

BEN JESSOME: That wraps up that particular line of questioning for me. I am going to switch back to a conversation about the consideration that students attending their undergraduate - perhaps that's the focus I will take, as well, or students in general, perhaps - that they will live at home with their parents or that parental income is weighted and factored into their capability to afford school. I am wondering if the minister maintains the policy to consider parental income as part of the student assistance considerations.

BRIAN WONG: I just wanted to clarify. I think what was asked was: Is there a consideration of parental income now for student assistance? (Interruption) Was that the question? Okay. I am assuming, Madam Chair, that the question was: Is there a consideration not to include parental income?

[4:00 p.m.]

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate the opportunity to clarify. It's not an infrequent comment that I receive, particularly from parents who may or may not have a ton of money, and I'll use myself as an example. My parents - don't get me wrong, I was very lucky - but my mom and dad had four kids. Going into school and for them to be considered - for there to be a requirement for their income to be factored into my ability to receive student assistance creates a challenge in that circumstance when there are multiple children in the house who are all moving in that direction. I continue to hear it through this position. I get calls from constituents, parents asking why. What if I didn't have the ability to afford to pay for, or I don't have a strong ability? Given inflationary pressures that every household is experiencing, I guess the concept of independence is another factor. Why is it that we continue to enable, in my view, this restrictive policy with respect to student assistance?

BRIAN WONG: That's a really important question and it is always top of mind for me, because I do know there are families that struggle, there are students who struggle. They want a post-secondary education and our Student Assistance folks - the few who are behind me - they are so good to work with. I think that a lot of families who struggle and have a lot of unmet need are the ones that really stress about - my goodness, it's almost not fair. It's like I can't afford - my kid wants to go to university or NSCC and we can't go, and it's not fair. It's probably not fair, but we do have one of the most generous student assistance packages right across the country.

A lot of parents can contribute something toward their son's or daughter's education, therefore a decrease in the amount of unmet need. There are those students whose parents' income is based on having four children in the family or maybe only one income coming into the house or extraordinary circumstances happen - that the attitude of Student Assistance when they are dealing with students with a large gap in unmet need, it is like - how do we get to yes? The Student Assistance Office will work with individuals to explore every possible option in order to get to yes to give them the student assistance that they need in order to get a post-secondary education.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you and a shout-out to the folks at the Student Assistance Office. I know how hard you work and how important your work is. Thank you for that and thank you for being diligent in finding the best way to meet the needs of students.

Last year we brought it up - the minister has discussed some of those ongoing conversations and some results with respect to the overarching governance review with respect to university charters and some of the findings that came away from that work. I am wondering if the minister can elaborate on what they found out, if there are clear recommendations that have come from that work, and if there is something he can share tangibly for us as members - perhaps he could table it for the House.



BRIAN WONG: I believe I did address that a little bit earlier. The first nine months was really to do a scan or an inventory of what was in the MOUs and that has been completed. We are in the process now of taking all of that information and really trying to use that information to make a map of where we need to go next. That is true of where we are, but our priorities are really looking at what is in the best interests of students. We are looking at curriculum, we are looking at the system of post-secondary, and research. Research has been a focus for us as well.

As you may know, we are also responsible for Research Nova Scotia, which has a \$25 million budget to really help with the research needs of Nova Scotia.

BEN JESSOME: Can the minister confirm that amalgamation is not on the table with respect to that review? Amalgamation of our institutions here in Nova Scotia?

BRIAN WONG: Look, when I was given this portfolio, I was so happy because I truly look at our post-secondary sector as a way to move this province forward. There is no doubt that we need our university sector to make sure that we deliver quality education that is accessible, that students who want it can get it, and every school that we have right across this province is unique and offers something a little bit different that is going to attract somebody different or offer something different.

The difference between St. Francis Xavier University and Acadia University - when I was in university it was often defined by our sports teams. The difference between Dalhousie University - which I also attended - and all the other schools is because of the amazing research and the size of the research and the medical research. We have a lot of research going on at every institution right across this province. There is amazing stuff going on at Université Sainte-Anne. There is a lot of great stuff that is going on at Acadia, StFX and believe it or not, NSCC has some of the leading researchers in Nova Scotia.

We need every post-secondary facility - university - right across the province to make sure that they keep the reputation as being a leading institution, and if everybody is doing everything at the same time in the same way it is not going to work. Amalgamation is not something that ever crosses my lips unless it is to say no.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you through the Chair. I was on the edge of my seat there for a little bit. (Interruption) There it was - the no. For the record, I'll repeat it: The minister said no.

I believe this information is coming from PAC and through PAC from the Construction Association of Nova Scotia with respect to the NSCC and pathways to build up our labour force. The industry requires 14,000 new entrants to the sector by 2025 in order to maintain capacity. Given the current capacity at NSCC, when will we be able to get there?

BRIAN WONG: This is so important. We realize - and everybody realizes - that we need people working in the trades sector. We do work closely with the Construction Association of Nova Scotia. We work closely with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. We are working closely with the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency. We are trying to make sure, as part of that transition piece that I was talking about earlier - one of the things in order to get people through is to make sure that we get the right bums in the right seats. We know there are a lot of students out there who are dreaming about a great career in the trades.

Last year we had a total of 2,009 students enrolled in designated trades. It continues to expand and it's still growing. We do realize that we need more. When I talked about good transitions, we can get more by doing the same, even - if we can retain more students in the programs. That is why we are working with NSCC, we are talking to our counterparts in Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and trying to make sure that we can have higher retention rates based on better transitions.

[4:15 p.m.]

We are looking at everything that we possibly can in order to make sure that we get the tradespeople we need for tomorrow. We are always looking at programs and working with NSCC. One of their strengths is how nimble they are and if we need a certain trade - more of one and less of the other - they are able to adjust to that. They are always working with the sector in order to ensure that they are offering the programs that are needed going into the future. NSCC is a great asset to the province, and we will ensure that we do everything we possibly can in order to get tradespeople out there.

BEN JESSOME: I'm just going to ask one more question and then pass to my colleagues here. We know absolutely that the NSCC does a great job of focusing on recruitment of Nova Scotians. I am wondering if the minister can share anything about international recruitment or a plan to - would the minister give some direction or encouragement for NSCC to build up their capacity to recruit internationally? How does that work?

BRIAN WONG: First and foremost Nova Scotia Community College - even though there are some international students in the programs - is not focused on international students. We have waiting lists for a lot of our programs. More importantly in my mind is making sure that we get the right bums in the seats. Therefore, if we can improve our retention rates - because if you get somebody who drops out in December because it wasn't for them, that means there is somebody else who didn't get into the program.

We will continue to work with NSCC and all of our other partners in order to make that happen.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate the opportunity to just come in for a few minutes. I want to talk specifically about home. As the MLA in Sydney, we are all excited with what's happening at Cape Breton University - I am a graduate of the school myself. It is exciting, but to be honest, we deal with a lot of international students who come into our office who have nowhere to live. They are coming to the community, and we've had students sleeping in cars. We've had situations where they are coming to town and CBU is doing their best but - and it would be no different regardless of who is in government at this point, whether it is any party - but there legitimately needs to be a plan to address how many students are now in the community.

I know CBU is looking at a housing development in the Ashby area. They bought a piece of land which I think could be very exciting and I think could actually do a lot to help the situation, but we just can't let this continue as it is. We want the students to have the best experience possible when they come to the community, but we desperately need places for them to live. My question to the minister, and I appreciate the conversations that we have had in the past, you and I, about anything in Cape Breton but this is a big one. We are getting it in our office big time. There are students with nowhere to live. Can we get some sort of commitment in this budget that student housing or housing in general is an issue?

We're in growth, but student housing in particular, we need to figure out a way to do something to support these students, whether it is that project in Ashby or whether it is some of the other residential developments. I am asking more as a Cape Bretoner, more of a non-political thing. I'm asking on behalf of those students who need a place to live. Can we get a commitment from you and your department this year that we are going to see more student housing options in the CBRM?

BRIAN WONG: You know what, that's a really important question. We realize what is going on in the Sydney area with regard to international students not having a place to live. A couple of things happened to make it probably worse than it would be in other years. The COVID-19 years delayed students who were already accepted to CBU. Therefore those students came this year as well as new students.

On the other side of that, there were Cape Bretoners who used to offer rooms in their homes and used to offer maybe an apartment in their home that probably didn't do that during COVID-19 and haven't picked that up yet. We do know that CBU has a building - I believe there are 200 units - that they are renovating and going to change those into university housing. That is important and that will help. We did make a \$5 million investment in Tartan Downs to see what's possible to make sure that we have student housing there. That project will have - I think it's 430 units in it, and some of that will certainly be student housing.

There is a focus on Cape Breton because Cape Breton University themselves is growing by leaps and bounds. They have good people there. They are finding solutions by working with community, by working with government, and reaching out. There are some things that are happening.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate your answer and really that is why I wanted to come in, at the last here, just to really get that on the record. Everybody is excited about what is happening at the university. Nobody wants to deny that. I attended CBU a little while back now, but at the time there were only 189 international students. To put it into perspective, you go from 189 to thousands. The community just wasn't equipped to house that many people at once, regardless. Even I would argue, even with the double cohort with COVID-19. So it's really more of a plea than a question.

That Ashby project is important. The government put \$5 million into it. That would be a huge help to the community if government looked further into investing in that, whether it is a partnership with the municipality or the federal government. Again, we're in Estimates to hold the government to account, but I think this is one we would all totally support. I wanted to get that on the record that if the department can, through other departments. This is an exciting time in the CBRM. It is the first time I've seen growth in three decades.

The community college move, the university and what they are doing, the hospital redevelopments - all this has drawn hundreds of people back to the community and CBU has also welcomed thousands. They're tough problems but I have also seen the decline. So really, this was my plea. I wanted to come in for a few minutes and, again, I appreciate the conversations we have always had but this is a big one in CBRM, and we have to figure out this housing issue. To help those students would be a huge help. I will leave it there.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you for that. Thank you for the feedback as well. My first visit to CBU, to sit up with President Dingwall and his senior staff and just listening to their optimism and listening to their vision, it was a very different feel than probably anywhere else I had visited at that time. Knowing that they had the passion sitting around that table that they could get things done and I had no idea at that time - you know, 18 months ago - that they could put so much together in such a short time. Kudos to the team at CBU.

The one thing that we have coming out in the Spring, and I know we are officially into Spring now, is our student housing strategy. We really have focused on short-term, mid-term, and long-term solutions. Those short-term solutions will have an impact all over the province and in Cape Breton. Some of the mid-term stuff will as well. The long-term stuff are the actual builds. If we could build something in three months, we would build something in three months, but we just can't, and we all know all the great reasons why - or not-so-great reasons why.

In a sense, when we think, Boy oh boy, we have a labour shortage and we have all kinds of things that are going on, we really need these international students to stay here in Nova Scotia and we have jobs. There are a lot of good jobs and stuff that we want them to stay here for. I've been to Cape Breton more times than I've probably been anywhere else, visiting the NSCC campuses and CBU and it's the people. It is actually the people who really make a difference and the four students who were here - I introduced them yesterday in the House - but there were actually 19 who came from Johns Hopkins University, and four went to Cape Breton. They drove up and they said, Geez, your highways are pretty good here in Nova Scotia. I thought, Geez, I'm not sure what you're dealing with down there. It's one of the things they mentioned; they did.

They came up here and they spent some time in Halifax, and they went to Cape Breton to talk to folks at the university, to interview them, and get some data. They had the same comments. To listen in the news for decades about what was going on and the population decline in - and in Nova Scotia in general - but especially in Cape Breton. Everybody was moving out west and moving off Cape Breton. Cape Bretoners have this - there is something about being a Cape Bretoner that gives you a sense of pride that everybody is wearing CBU stuff when you are around. When you're out in the community and you're from Cape Breton, there is an automatic bond. All of a sudden it's like, We're like brothers and we're like sisters and I'll defend you forever because you are from Cape Breton.

I believe that Cape Breton, with what is going on at CBU and at Marconi Campus, it's attracting people back, and I really think that that area is truly set to become an economic driver again in Nova Scotia. To be Minister of Advanced Education and to be part of that and for you being in community and being part of that in your role in the past, I just think it's a great time. It's a great time to be in Nova Scotia and I'm sure, when I go to Cape Breton, it's like, Geez, sometimes I wish I were born in Cape Breton. I wasn't. Can't even play the fiddle, I can't even play guitar.

Anyway, thank you for your comments. That student housing strategy will have impact for you up there and you will see it.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to say that we will be ceding the remainder of our time to the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island and the NDP caucus.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: We're also very excited about the work being done for student housing in Cape Breton. We're excited about the student housing strategy. Certainly I know from my work with student associations that they are also very keen to see this. Will the strategy include a definition of affordable and how will that be measured?

BRIAN WONG: There is no doubt that part of our student housing strategy is certainly going to increase housing stock in general, and with the recognition that every student housing unit we build through our project is going to relieve the market and open it up for somebody else.

As far as the affordable housing piece, a lot of the definition of that is variable. It depends on whose definition it is, but it also does fall on the shoulders of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and they work very closely with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for the number of units and what they define as affordable housing. The expectation is that when, for example, our NSCC built NSCC we'll be overseeing their student housing projects as far as how much will be paid for each student.

[4:30 p.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: I think one of our concerns is that we keep seeing the word affordable attached to housing that actually doesn't match the CMHC definition. It talks about below market rate or fair market rate, I think, was what was used to describe the NSCC Akerley whereas affordability under CMHC, I believe is 30 per cent of income. I do hope that the government will use the CMHC definition of affordability but I'm not sure that that's been the case thus far.

I'm just going to hop in with what might end up being the last question. In my previous round of questions, I asked about issues around substance use and alcohol consumption on campus, and I appreciate the information about Healthy Minds Nova Scotia, but I was not thinking so much on an individual level but more of a systemic issue.

In 2013, Dr. Strang led a major process about the problematic consumption of alcohol on Nova Scotia campuses. There is a great report - I think I sent it to you - and it's well worth reviewing. There was some work that started around thinking about the culture on our university campuses in particular, and then I think the Liberal government came in and I think we had COVID-19, and so that work-up really dropped. I know it is something Dr. Strang is interested in really revitalizing in terms of thinking about the problematic consumption of alcohol.

Since, of course, we've had the legalization of cannabis in Canada, and I guess what we're seeing in my constituency - although it's not just a Halifax Citadel-Sable Island problem - is the phenomenon of Dalhousie homecoming over the last number of years. It's not just a Dal problem - it's a multi-faceted stakeholder problem. It's not just Dal students, I know that - but it just happens to be branded in that way. Certainly in Wolfville as well, concerns about community behaviour of student bodies associated with universities, and so I am recognizing that it is not all university students.

These are complex issues, they're complicated issues, and no one stakeholder holds the solution and there is no one solution. I am a firm believer that there are a few things that

can be done. I think that we need to really look at the whole question, and that ranges from community-building initiatives in community, between students and their neighbours - so that you are less likely to go and urinate on their front porch because you know them. I also think the reports of alcohol consumption and illegal drug consumption at these events is pretty astounding. I also think there are policy issues to consider.

I'm wondering how the department has engaged in those conversations with universities around their community presence and impact, specifically related to large, unregulated, unsanctioned street parties.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you for the question and thank you for giving your point of view, your perspective around what the problem is because it is a multi-faceted problem. It's not just university students and it's not just one campus. Everybody really does have to pitch in in order to find a solution.

We have been working with all our post-secondaries on this with specific reference to Dalhousie University. We do need to work together in order to help the residents out. It is really tough, and we actually did work with Dal on trying to get better policies and better things in place for the St. Patrick's Day party, and I believe that did go over much better than some of the previous parties and stuff.

My experience as a principal and administrator in the high school system, my work for 28 years, having a 19-year-old at home, and growing up as a teenager, for God's sake, it's like - it's tough. It's tough to be able - you always hope when your kids are growing up that if they are going to drink that they are going to drink responsibly - whatever that definition of responsible is. There is so much more out there these days as far as drugs and the availability than there was when I was a kid, and so how do you keep kids safe? There is an awful lot of stuff that we did in schools and high schools really around the harm reduction piece because if you are never going to stop kids from drinking or trying drugs, how do we keep them safe?

We have to have real conversations and build relationships with these kids and that can't stop when they finish high school. Teachers and parents have this great relationship with these students and all of a sudden they go off to university or community college, they move into the city, and they announce this big party and all of a sudden those relationships aren't there in place. Somehow we have to transition probably a little bit better there.

It's not all students. It's some students. It might be some students from every school, it might be some high school students, it might be just some youths or some young people - and maybe not even all young people. It's a mishmash of different people from different places, different ages that are doing the street parties, and the universities do have to take some responsibility.

I know when I was in university, we used to have celebrations and stuff that were on campus. I'm not saying that there weren't parties out in the streets, but I think with the advent of social media, the ability to call a party on a moment's notice anywhere - it's really changed things. I really do think that schools need to look at their code of conduct and make sure that they enforce the code of conduct, have constant communications with community, with law enforcement, with students, with parents, and to make sure that we can all be in respectful communities.

I don't think all students should be pegged and unfortunately I think they are. They say, You are a student at this school or that school and I can't believe what you guys did, and it's like, Hey, I wasn't in it. I wasn't even there. I wasn't even in Halifax that day. I think it is unfortunate that we have young people who are being pegged as being somebody who went to the party and caused damage. Even the students who are participating in these parties probably aren't bad kids and that's the thing. Students do want to let loose every now and then, and they do want to have fun with their friends but at the same time we truly have to build a relationship with students and to say that it's okay to have fun but it's not okay to cause chaos. It's not okay to damage people's property.

I think, as you mentioned, that it's a community effort. It's sustaining contact and making sure that we provide harm reduction, not just as a tool to make sure that for safe alcohol and drug use - but also harm reduction for our communities.

LISA LACHANCE: I'll squeeze one more in before we give the minister time to have closing. (Laughter) Sorry, I mean, you know, isn't this great? So last year at Committee of the Whole House on Supply - and your memory probably will provide you with this - we discussed the omission of any ministerial mandate letter talking about 2SLGBTQ+ issues, and that was reflected in the priorities that were funded by this department. I don't see it explicitly in any of the budget documents aside from a little bit in Health and Wellness. I am wondering if you can tell us about - give us an update - is there any funding in this year's budget to look at issues for 2SLGBTQ+ students and the issues in post-secondary education?

BRIAN WONG: It is an important question, to make sure that we are as inclusive and diverse in our post-secondary institutions, as well as in our society. We work to make sure post-secondary education is accessible by removing barriers. That is what we are really trying to do and that is physical and mental barriers - whatever it needs to be. Agreements ensure continuity of services to students with disabilities. They're essential to provide quality and equitable access to post-secondary education, and all universities and NSCC have a focus on 2SLGBTQ+ equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

Student Services and executive are keenly focused on safe and welcoming communities, but we know there is always more work to do. We always know that we can do better, and we need to listen, and we need to act.



At the department we do envision a future where learners thrive, and the post-secondary education system is there for absolutely everybody to feel safe and welcome.

THE CHAIR: At this point I would like to ask the subcommittee if there are any other questions.

Okay. Reminder to the minister that there are eight minutes left. I'd like to hand it over to the minister for his closing remarks.

The honourable Minister for Advanced Education.

BRIAN WONG: I thought I still had an hour left. (Laughter)

I do have a follow-up on how many students access Healthy Minds Nova Scotia. We've had 13,500 interactions since its inception. It is definitely being used.

I really want to thank the Committee. You had really good questions. Some were top of mind for me. Some of the data, some of the statistics are tough to come up with but they are important questions; they really are. I think we are all focused on the same thing. We want to make it better for students and if we make it better for students, we are going to make it better for the province. That is the way we are going to achieve our economic goals, our population goals, our workforce goals. That is what's so great about being Minister of Advanced Education. We are on the front lines, and I expect to be held accountable. I expect the tough questions and I also expect the collaboration which has been pretty good.

Going forward, we will take your feedback. We take feedback from students, student leadership, from anybody - from the faculty and even from parents. We are always moving forward with good intentions, spending money where we need to spend the money and I think that is the focus. As things come up we will do whatever it takes because we need students to thrive here.

I really want to thank my staff from the Department of Advanced Education. Not only are they sitting in back being entertained - I don't know why they didn't bring popcorn - but boy oh boy, they have a big job. We have approximately 75 staff, a number who work in the Student Assistance Office, Post-Secondary Accessibility Services, our programs. We have programs and other services. We also have the focus on - that are just looking at our health care file, our private career colleges file, and it goes on and on. It is such a big job for 75 people to pull everything together, to make sure that we get things like the MOU done which is really big - and look forward thinking about what is the art of the possible, and that big umbrella that I keep talking about in order for student affordability. Our student housing initiative is mammoth and there is so much good stuff and to be able to share that in the near future, I'm really looking forward to it.

I always welcome the opportunity to talk about advanced education. Health is always at the forefront of everything that we do, there is no doubt about it. Health care is going to benefit from the work of our department and all Nova Scotians are going to benefit because the Department of Advanced Education is helping to move everything forward.

[4:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I would like to thank everyone on this committee for their wonderful questions and for the staff for being here today and answering so many questions. I am very, very happy.

Excuse me, I'm just trying to get an answer to a question.

Thank you everyone for being so patient with me. I needed to get a response to a question. This is my first time sitting as a Chair for a subcommittee. I was in the middle of thanking everyone and I'd also like to thank the Clerk who just came to my rescue, and of course, the Pages.

Shall Resolution E1 stand?

Resolution E1 stands.

With that, that would be ending our committee. It is now 4:49 p.m. and it will have to end by 4:50 p.m. so we will just kill the 30 seconds, if you will.

The honourable member for Colchester North would like to ask a question and I am denying that. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: Order, please. It is now 4:50 p.m. That concludes the Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply's consideration of Estimates for today.

The subcommittee will resume consideration when the House again resolves into a Committee of the Whole on Supply.

I ask you to please return to your seats in the Legislative Chamber. The Committee of the Whole House must rise and report before the House concludes its business for the day. Meeting adjourned.

[The subcommittee adjourned at 4:50 p.m.]