

Report from 01-14-2026 Engagement Session with Don Avison

Written by: Rosemary Webb, UVIC GSS Chair on 01-14-2026

Present: Don Avison & Kashi Tanaka (notetaker); Sameer Ismail (BCIT); Jess Lamb (SFSS); Michael Caryk (UVSS); Solomon Yi-Kieran (UBC AMS); Kody Sider (SFU GSS); Bilal Faheem (UFV); Rosemary Webb (UVIC GSS)

Meeting start: 9:00AM. **Meeting end:** 11:15AM

Meeting structure: Slightly guided round-table discussion with some space for each student union to respond. We did not go through each of the 10 review questions (provided in the appendix) in order, nor did we hit all of the topics, but the student representatives present made sure our primary concerns were voiced, and asked Don direct questions in line with our concerns.

A note on language: “Ministry” will refer to the Ministry of Post-Secondary and Future Skills. Likewise, “Minister” refers to Jessie Sunner, the current Minister of PSFS. “Representative(s)” refers to the invited student union representative(s). “PSI” is an abbreviation for post-secondary institution. “Province” capitalized refers to British Columbia.

Major themes

- The **timeline and timing** of the review means that meaningful consultation was never an option.
- Commit to maintaining the **2% domestic tuition cap**. The post-secondary education sector will not be sustainable if that cap is removed.
- “**No new funding**” is untenable in the long term. The Province must see new/increased funding as part of the solution.
- **Administrative bloat** and capping **executive suite salaries** are logical places to start making cuts.
- Greatly concerned about **mergers** and maintenance of student unions, and equitable numbers of **student representatives** on Senate, Board of Governors, Institutional decision-making committees.
- Post-secondary education must be **accessible for all**, particularly those in rural/remote areas, people with disabilities, people with learning differences, international students, etc.
- **Student services and supports** must also be a part of this conversation, e.g. Wellness Centres, Centres for Accessible Learning, Foodbanks, etc.

Detailed notes

These are loosely broken into themes. There was, understandably, much overlap between the different themes and so there is some repetition.

Timeline

Don asked the Ministry for an additional 3-5 weeks to complete the review. He encouraged us to continue submitting written feedback in that time (but did not give a new close date). When asked if that extended review time would include more consultations, Don said it would depend on his scheduling but he hoped to do follow-ups with some of his consultees.

Don acknowledged that this review was poorly timed and slow to start. He agreed that institutions should have been given more notice, and more time for consultation, and this was a failing on part of the Ministry. Don also informed us he was approached by the Ministry in regards to this review in June 2025.

Representatives emphasized that the Province wounded themselves with how they decided to conduct this review. Student unions, and likely the faculty and staff at PSIs as well, have lost trust in the government. It's clear that the review was not designed to respect our voices. The Province has a lot of work to do in the future to build that trust back up. Generally, this consultation feels like a PR move for the Ministry to say "we consulted our stakeholders!" before making recommendations and changes that were determined before the consultation process even happened.

After the review concludes

Don said that he "feel[s] the weight of the obligation to get this right." He doesn't believe that any recommendations which may come out of this review can or should happen overnight; however, that's the Minister and Cabinet's decision to make. He said that they would likely try to make some changes faster than others (but did not elaborate on which). Any recommendations which concern allocation of resources won't be able to be enacted until 2027, as the 2026 budget will have already been set by the time this review concludes. The consequences of this review will carry forward past its conclusion.

Don believes that once the review concludes, there will be an opportunity for students, staff, and faculty to review the report and provide feedback. He did not say if consultations were to be scheduled once the report is publicized (though he was not directly questioned on this). Don will be writing the report with the assumption that it will be made public, but that is the Ministry's decision. Representatives in the meeting expressed their concerns that the 2022 review being shelved and never made public leads

us to believe a similar thing might happen with this review. Representatives also asked if more of that 2022 review results might be made public (as [what was released through the Freedom of Information request](#) was heavily redacted, and not easily readable). Don told us that was not his responsibility and that it is a question for Don Wright (who led the 2022 review).

Representatives had many suggestions for how to go about work like this in a better way, in the future. Much of this related to timelines and timing of a review of this scale. Students must be consulted meaningfully. This includes giving each student union their own space, rather than having 7 of us in one meeting (originally scheduled for only 90 minutes). One option may even been to have an “island” meeting and 2-3 “mainland” meetings to control number of attendees and ensure all voices are being heard.

The 2% domestic tuition increase cap, affordability generally

Don was asked directly, multiple times during the meeting, if he would be including in his report a recommendation to not remove the 2% tuition cap. His response was that he “will report everyone’s concerns,” as he has heard at every consultation that this is a major concern. One representative articulated that the tuition control policy attracts students from out-of-province, thus bringing in skilled minds to drive our economy. Another representative spoke to the flip side, that if the Province were to remove the tuition cap, there is huge potential that it will drive current residents away (current students, prospective students, and recent graduates). All representatives emphasized that PSIs cannot rely on students for their revenue, and cited the decrease in Provincial funding over the last 40-50 years alongside the increase in percentage of revenue from student tuition. Representatives said that we are all concerned, along with other provinces, that the “sugar high” of gouging international students for high tuition revenues put blinders on to funding domestic students, or simply to injecting any sort of provincial funding support.

Representatives talked about the implications that removing the tuition cap would have. We are already in a cost-of-living crisis. Students are already experiencing much higher rates of food insecurity compared to the past few years. Students already make a choice between paying tuition or feeding themselves; between paying tuition and living in appropriate housing (with some students even living in their cars while attending school). If the tuition cap were removed and tuitions doubled or tripled like the last time the tuition freeze was removed in 2002, students would be forced either to live in more desperate ways or to drop out of PSIs. People from lower- or middle-income families would lose

access to post-secondary education and it would once again be an option only for the social elite (and often, white).

Student Unions protecting their membership

When government or Institutions step back in funding essential student services, it is the Student Unions who step in to protect their members. A representative gave the example of an institution halting funding for its foodbank. In turn, the Student Unions held referenda to increase student fees to support the foodbank. This is a roundabout downloading of costs to the students themselves.

Student support services

Representatives said that as students continue to feel the effects of a system that does not support them, there will be further impact on student services. For example, student wellness centres (which are already overtaxed) will continue to see increased demand for mental health services in addition to physical health services. Students will be overworked and underfed to an even greater degree if tuition costs rise exorbitantly. Representatives stressed that sustainability is not just about academic programming, but also about student supports.

Access to education for those at the margins

Representatives are deeply concerned about the future of post-secondary education for rural and remote students, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with disabilities. If tuition increases beyond the 2% cap, post-secondary education will not be accessible except by the financially privileged. For remote institutions, prospective students in rural locations will lose access to post-secondary education. Representatives stressed that the province must ensure there are still mechanisms for rural students to access post-secondary education if satellite campuses are targeted. If that looks like online education, we must ensure that students are being taught by humans, and we cannot even think about A.I.-driven instruction. Don acknowledged that there is often already an issue of connectivity for remote learners. Representatives said that maintaining and committing to online learning options is important to allow distanced and/or disabled people the opportunity to access post-secondary education.

Mergers

The prospect of institutional mergers is greatly concerning to students. Representatives spoke about potential loss of student unions, and student representation. If PSIs proceed with mergers, they must ensure that student unions from the component institutions are still active. Representatives at the meeting also encouraged adopting a UBC-O model of mergers, if they must be done at all.

Representatives talked about issues with transfer credits and the movement between PSIs. Students already have problems with ensuring their courses taken at one institution are recognized by another, and are often still made to re-take courses at a new institution. Don mentioned that the [BCCAT](#) is already on his radar during this review. Representatives stressed that there must be clear, efficient, and seamless mechanisms for students to move between PSIs.

Don was asked directly if there were any specific institutions he was considering for recommendations to merge. He expressed that VIU was struggling in a very bad way. One representative mentioned concerns for institutions which are doing alright financially being forced to take the brunt of institutions which are running high deficits, in potential mergers. The UVIC GSS representative specifically cited concerns from UVIC students and staff around being merged with VIU. Don said “If I were at UVIC I would be concerned about this too.”

Administrative bloat

Representatives acknowledged the different roles of e.g. merging institutions as a whole versus structural changes internal to an institution. Structural changes which remove administrative bloat across similarly-governed units (e.g. duplication of academic unit chairs, administrative support staff, etc.) seems a logical and necessary first step to improve financial stability. One representative spoke to this experience at their institution and emphasized the need for substantial consultation of the staff, students, and faculty involved, as well as transparent reporting of the effects of such mergers a few years down the line (e.g. if goals were accomplished, if there was actually financial benefit). One representative mentioned their institution hired ~30 new staff the same year that they made cuts to student services and supports. Representatives called out the fact that some PSI Presidents have a higher salary than Canada’s Prime Minister. Some representatives called for Executive management salaries to be capped.

On Senate and Board of Governors

Representatives said that we must ensure that student representation on e.g. institutions' Senate and Board of Governors is equitable. Already, at UVIC, the BOG only has 1 graduate student representative and 1 undergraduate representative, who must be the unified voice of thousands. Were UVIC to merge with another institution, and we were still allotted only 1 student seat per undergraduate and graduate students, they would now be the singular voice of multiple, distinct student bodies. There is already a deep imbalance when the Provincially appointed members of the BOG have 4x the voting power of students. Representatives suggested structural changes to student representation on Senate and BOG are required; student voices are not heard or respected, and telling non-student members "you need to listen to students more" will not functionally change anything. Students have much less power even when it comes to e.g. bringing items for Senate consideration.

Don asked if the 1-year term that student representatives have on Senate/BOG is reasonable. Representatives made the point that due to the length of student degrees (often 2 years for e.g. BCIT programs, graduate programs), a 1-year term is the only option. However, representatives said that better onboarding for student representatives, or at least grace and understanding for new members as opposed to outward dismissal of questions, would be a minimum level of change. Representatives also pointed out that the student seats on Senate and BOG are not specifically for elected members of the student unions, but for the student body at large, and so may be filled by people with limited understanding or interest in the conduct of PSIs. Representatives emphasized that these student body seats are important for a variety of voices, but suggested that there be student seats set aside for both the general student body as well as elected members of student unions. This may mitigate the gap in experience and understanding between students.

Representatives said that PSI Senate and BOG must be maintained and controlled as separate entities. There must be multiple checks and balances for proposed changes to institutional governance. A representative also brought up that at least at their institution, the BOG does not have a conflict-of-interest policy for its members, and raised concerns about the ethics of someone from the President's office serving on the BOG.

Degree completion times

The discussion veered into a tangent on degree completion times (which was not a part of the 10 guiding questions). Don asked if the Ministry should be engaged in

questioning how long it takes students to complete degrees. Representatives emphasized that the same answer will come up institution to institution: it's about the money. Students are working full-time jobs or more during their education since they cannot afford PSI costs, housing costs, food costs. The picture of post-secondary education has changed, and the economy has changed. For many years, it has not been affordable to attend PSIs without working. Representatives said that we must strengthen workforce-readiness training, and work-integrated learning within programs. Often, co-op or placement terms are appended to the end of a degree, and not within "regular" program length. This can make it difficult for students to access and to feel fully trained, experienced, or more hireable when they complete their program.

In addition, representatives mentioned that now more than ever post-secondary education is more accessible to people with learning differences, people with disabilities. With a wider population at PSIs, you will naturally get people with diverse skill sets and diverse needs. We are seeing this with increased demand on institutional accessible learning centres. This increased demand has come at a time when institutions are being mandated by the province to be more accessible, in line with the Accessible BC Act. However, institutions are not being given more resources or supports in this mandate and increased demand. The decisions are being pushed to people with often little to no training on accessibility, which is a great disservice to students with disabilities. Students who are unsupported will obviously not be able to complete their degrees within 'normal' timeframes.

Final thoughts

Don was asked directly which policies he was looking at during this review, and what his main considerations are so far. He said his report will speak directly to the reduction of provincial funding support over the years and what effects that has had. He said he will be reporting on positive and negative aspects of institutional mergers, with context-setting from historical mergers in BC. Don said he will be addressing administrative bloat. He also mentioned looking at competition between institutions with similar program offerings, for example questioning if the lower mainland really needs three different business programs. He said he will be thinking about how to get Indigenous post-secondary education into these conversations, while recognizing and respecting the need for autonomy and internal policy. Don admitted that the government failed in some ways in 2008 with the change in status of some PSIs to "special purpose teaching universities," and there has been significant mandate creep in the years since (which was brought up by representatives). He also acknowledged that it is difficult to claw back policy which is

already in place, but that he will be thinking about how to better serve special purpose teaching universities. Don also continued to emphasize that he will report the concerns with the 2% tuition cap, but did not say whether he intends to recommend that tuition policy continue to be in place.

Appendix: 10 guiding review questions provided to consultees

1. What do you see as the fundamental purpose and value of the public post-secondary education system? Does the purpose/value change in the context of our shifting landscape right now (i.e., swift technological advances, evolving societal views and expectations, demographic changes, economic trends and future of work expectations, etc.)?
2. Given that additional provincial operating funding is not anticipated for the foreseeable future, what measures do you see as necessary to stabilize the system over the near term and, further, to work towards sustainability over the longer term?
3. How would the system need to change in order to reduce competition between institutions? What are the opportunities for collaboration across institutions?
4. Are there structural and/or governance changes that may be necessary to increase the potential for longer term system sustainability? How should these changes be actioned and sequenced?
5. If government was prepared to consider consolidating some institutions, what are some key elements of a well-functioning consolidated system structure? What are the principles and considerations that should guide such a process? How should government approach this?
6. Are there any legislative changes to the *University Act* or to the *College and Institute Act* that would assist institutions in being more responsive to government priorities and more nimble operationally?
7. What impediments exist to limit greater use of shared services amongst post secondary institutions – in both administrative and academic spheres? How might those obstacles be addressed?
8. With advances in online learning, and with the emergence of A.I.-assisted methodologies, are there alternative program delivery models that could assist with maintaining and, where possible, extending the reach and effectiveness of post secondary institutions? How can we leverage these opportunities?
9. What are the effects of government's limits on tuition increases over time? If government was to consider adjustments to current policies to address anomalies, what considerations should be taken into account?

10. How can we better support underrepresented groups in engaging in post-secondary education and training opportunities? How should these groups be supported through any transition coming out of this review?