

February 2, 2026

Attention: Mr. Don Avison, KC

Independent Reviewer: Postsecondary Sector Sustainability

Dear Mr. Avison:

Selkirk College welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Independent Sector Sustainability Review. As the public post-secondary institution serving the West Kootenay and Boundary regions, our perspective is shaped by geographic remoteness, diverse labour markets, and longstanding relationships with communities, employers, and Indigenous partners. Selkirk College endorses the submission to this review by BC Colleges, as well as the seven principles advanced by the post-secondary sector association chairs. This submission is complementary, focusing on three changes that will support the long-term sustainability of rural colleges while protecting and enhancing regional access.

1. Modernize the Tuition Limit Policy While Protecting Low-Income Learners

The 2% annual cap on domestic tuition has been in place since 2005, while inflation and negotiated wage increases have often exceeded that threshold. At the same time, provincial operating grants have declined as a share of college revenues, creating a funding gap that international tuition once helped offset but can no longer fill under new federal limits. This gap limits our ability to maintain program and service quality, renew equipment, and keep pace with evolving standards in high-cost disciplines such as trades and health care that are central to regional economies.

National data show that real tuition has fallen in recent years when adjusted for inflation. Analyses of Canadian tuition trends indicate that average tuition, in constant dollars, is now roughly where it was in 2012 because increases have not kept pace with inflation since the late 2010s. Research also shows that domestic tuition as a share of student wages is at its lowest point in over two decades in most provinces, suggesting room for moderate increases without undermining affordability. Studies from Ontario's Higher Education Quality Council and others similarly find that upfront tuition levels matter less for access when strong, income-tested grants are in place, and that the net price for low-income students can be substantially lower than the posted price.

A January 2026 Globe and Mail editorial captured this context, arguing that provincial governments should empower postsecondaries to raise tuition within reasonable limits to prevent

sudden, larger increases, and that simply cutting budgets is not the solution. It also noted that non-repayable grants now exceed the total tuition Canadians pay.

Selkirk College recommends that the government consider:

- Replacing the fixed 2% cap indexed to a narrow margin above inflation to allow gradual, predictable adjustment where needed.
- Allowing a time-limited “correction window” for clearly underpriced, high-cost programs, with provincial parameters and transparent communication so that students and families can plan.
- Pairing any tuition flexibility with expanded, targeted non-repayable aid for low-income learners, Indigenous students, and rural learners, largely through existing provincial and federal mechanisms, so that net costs for those with the least ability to pay do not rise.

This approach aligns with national evidence suggesting that modest, predictable tuition increases, combined with strong, targeted student aid, can preserve access while providing institutions with the stable revenue needed to sustain and renew programs. Colleges can then maintain and enhance the offerings students and employers depend on, instead of reducing them.

2. Enable Regional Shared Curriculum and Common Program Frameworks

Rural colleges across Canada face similar challenges: each is expected to offer high-quality, up-to-date programs across a broad range of fields, but none has the scale to independently develop and refresh every curriculum with the same depth and speed. This limits innovation, making it harder to introduce or update programs that meet learners’ and employers’ evolving needs, particularly in emerging sectors and specialized fields.

BC already has successful foundations in shared curriculum and collaboration. Selkirk College’s experience with collaborative, blended program delivery – such as the Pharmacy Technician (PTech) Diploma – shows that shared curriculum, supplemented by local teaching and supports, expands access in rural communities while maintaining high quality and strong community connections. PTech uses a blend of online theory courses, in-person lab classes (locally accessible through three college partners), and community-based practicums. This reflects research suggesting that students value both quality and local presence when choosing institutions, particularly in smaller centres. BC can also reduce duplication by moving towards more coordinated regional planning, shared delivery, and system-level incentives that explicitly reward collaboration rather than standalone program growth, including better alignment across ministries so that public institutions are not competing with private institutions and/or WorkBC-funded programs.

Selkirk College recommends that the province consider:

- Supporting a standardized provincial framework for shared curriculum – both credit and non-credit – and common course “cores” in selected disciplines, particularly high-cost, high-demand, or rapidly evolving areas.
- Encouraging institutions within regions to adopt these common cores while retaining local flexibility for regional content, Indigenous knowledge, and community-specific projects and partnerships.
- Providing clear enabling policy and templates to simplify credit recognition, joint delivery, and curriculum sharing, so that students experience seamless pathways across colleges and can stack credentials over time.
- Implementing more robust system coordination in degree approvals: for new degrees and substantial program changes, apply existing criteria more rigorously and require a regional impact/coordination statement for all but truly local, niche offerings.

This approach reduces replication and increases quality and consistency across the system. It allows post-secondary institutions like Selkirk College to focus more energy on teaching, advising, applied research, and community-engaged learning, rather than on recreating similar materials in isolation. It supports union and faculty interests in strong program standards and professional practice, and it increases, rather than reduces, the range of sustainable programs.

3. Consider Regulatory and Reporting Burden Through a Rural Institution Lens

As BC Colleges’ submission notes, public post-secondary institutions in BC submit more than 40 annual reports and respond to frequent ad hoc information requests. For smaller institutions with lean administrative teams, the cost associated with such reporting is disproportionately higher relative to their budgets. These requirements draw capacity from frontline services, student supports, and collaborative work with communities and employers. Similar concerns about administrative burden and “compliance creep” have been raised in other provinces and in national analyses of higher education productivity.

We support the sector-wide call to streamline reporting and mandate expectations. We recommend prioritizing changes that do not require new public funding, such as:

- Moving to multi-year accountability cycles with stable measures, rather than revising frameworks and indicators annually.
- Adopting a “one in, one out” principle for new mandate letter commitments, so that new requirements are matched by the retirement or integration of existing ones.
- Standardizing reporting templates and definitions, and increasing the use of central data sources (e.g., Central Data Warehouse) to reduce duplicative institutional reporting.
- Reviewing BC Student Aid processes to identify policies that limit program innovation, create barriers for underrepresented learners, and increase administrative workload.

We urge the government to apply a rural institution lens to all new or revised operating requirements, explicitly considering whether they are proportionate for rural colleges and whether shared services or consortia can meet their needs more efficiently. This would allow institutions like Selkirk College to redirect more time and attention to learners, programs, and partnerships. It would strengthen the student experience and support regional economic and social priorities without increasing costs for government. It also reflects broader calls from policy analysts to focus scarce institutional capacity on teaching, learning, and student success rather than on process for its own sake.

Selkirk College is committed to remaining a sustainable, high-quality access institution for the West Kootenay and Boundary regions, even as we navigate significant external pressures on enrolment and recruitment. We hope that the provincial government will continue to recognize and support the outsized economic, social, and cultural impacts that community colleges like ours have in their regions. The three recommendations we suggest – modernizing tuition policy with protections for low-income learners; expanding shared curriculum and program frameworks; and recalibrating reporting expectations for rural institutions – align with BC Colleges’ submission, build on emerging evidence from Canadian higher education researchers and think tanks, and will help sustain and enhance the educational opportunities that rural communities depend on.

We welcome the opportunity to work with the Ministry and sector partners to test and implement these changes in ways that protect regional access, improve system efficiency, and help ensure that BC’s public post-secondary system remains strong and sustainable for learners and communities across the province.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Maggie Matear". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Maggie" and last name "Matear" clearly distinguishable.

Dr. Maggie Matear
President and CEO, Selkirk College

References

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