

## **Interview with Honourable Greg Weadick, Minister of Advanced Education and Technology**

**February 10, 2012**

Following the release of *Alberta Budget 2012* on February 9, The Students' Association of NorQuest College (SA) interviewed the Honourable Greg Weadick, Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. The SA asked the Minister about the issues surrounding post-secondary education that are relevant to NorQuest students and all Albertans. Here is a summary of the interview.

**NorQuest College students are currently scattered across six aging facilities in Edmonton. NorQuest's North Learning Centre will enable the College to consolidate its campuses into a single location and better provide relevant and accessible training and education for students. What is the status of funding for the North Learning Centre?**

**Greg Weadick:** I have met with folks from NorQuest to talk about some of the College's challenges. Our team knows that some NorQuest classes are cramped and that the College is very busy. After visiting NorQuest's Westmount Campus recently, I recognize that some of your facilities are getting older and that it's time to plan for something better. However, at the moment, there are no new capital projects in the existing budget. While there are no immediate plans for the construction of the North Learning Centre, NorQuest has received funding to work on the planning process for the centre.

The Government of Alberta is also continuing to work with NorQuest to ensure all impediments to construction of the North Learning Centre can be dealt with. For example, I know there are some issues around land that the City of Edmonton owns which will need to be acquired. As well, decisions need to be made on the proposed LRT station (*adjacent to NorQuest's Downtown Campus Main Building*) and the movement of some utilities. Down the road, when funding becomes available, we can look at getting the North Learning Centre completed (*Get more information on the North Learning Centre by visiting <http://www.norquest.ca/ourquest/campusdevelopment/index.asp>*).

**Where does NorQuest's North Learning Centre currently rank as it relates to post-secondary capital projects in the Edmonton region?**

**Greg Weadick:** The North Learning Centre's ranking corresponds to our new system of results-based budgeting. This means we'll weigh each post-secondary capital project on how much we need the programs it will deliver. We will also look at opportunities, like in NorQuest's case, to save money being used in older buildings by building a newer, more energy efficient building (*the North Learning Centre is planned as a LEED Silver building – More information on Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is available by visiting <http://www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CategoryID=19>*)

In Edmonton, there are a number of post-secondary capital projects that need to be built. Some are focused on health and trades training while others are focused on academic upgrading and English as a Second Language education. Depending on community needs and the results-based budgeting process, we'll determine the most appropriate time to build each project.

**According to the Government of Alberta, the province is facing a labour shortfall of 114,000 workers over the next decade. Many of these jobs can be filled by new Canadians and people who are currently underrepresented in our labour force, like Aboriginals and people with disabilities. From an education and workforce training perspective, can you briefly discuss how the new budget supports these groups?**

**Greg Weadick:** Building the workforce of the future is one of the most critical pieces this government is working on. Premier Alison Redford has asked us to do a variety of things to address the province's workforce challenges, but among the most important is how we can increase high school completion rates and transition students into post-secondary. I am working closely with Minister of Education Thomas Lukaszuk on processes that could smooth out and ensure this transition. That would be our first goal.

Our second goal is working with Alberta's Aboriginal population. Premier Redford has asked me to focus on our Aboriginal students and how we can help them transition into post-secondary. You are right; Aboriginal people are underrepresented in our workforce and we have to fix that. They are critical to our future workforce. So, that's one of my challenges.

Interestingly, when you think of a place like Fort McMurray, the communities in that region have much higher employment rates for Aboriginal people compared to the rest of Alberta. Some of them have very good jobs, which is exciting to see. We're partnering with a number of Aboriginal communities on career training for heavy equipment operators and other kinds of training that could be very significant in helping Aboriginal people enter the workforce.

**As a Comprehensive Community Institution and Regional Steward, NorQuest is responsible for facilitating adult learning opportunities for rural communities in the Edmonton Region. Can you briefly discuss how the new budget supports regional stewardship and adult learning in NorQuest's stewardship region?**

**Greg Weadick:** Probably the biggest support across all Campus Alberta post-secondary institutions is that they now have stable three-year funding from government. With the new budget, there's actually an increase in funding. Originally, it was proposed for a zero per cent increase in post-secondary funding for the coming year. Our post-secondary institutions are now going to see a two per cent increase next year and for the following two years, as well. This enables them to plan into the future and provide opportunities in their institution and within their stewardship region.

**Many of our students require grant funding. What provisions have been made in the budget to ensure Albertans can access the education they need with grant funding to fill jobs?**

**Greg Weadick:** We have \$71 million in scholarships going to about 37,000 students – I understand that Alberta's scholarship funding is more than all the other provinces combined. We have \$129 million to help support students through bursaries, remissions, repayment support and the Alberta Centennial

Education Savings Plan. Then we have another \$274 million that supports student aid and finance. Between those programs, that's just under half a billion dollars to support students in Alberta.

**With respect to student financial aid, does that include the Alberta Employment and Immigration grant funding?**

**Greg Weadick:** That kind of funding is a different support mechanism. Funding from Alberta Employment and Immigration, now known as Alberta Human Services, provides supports to people who are either training for work or looking for work. Advance Education and Technology works closely in partnership with Human Services because many of these programs are delivered at the post-secondary level. NorQuest, for example, would deliver some programming that Human Services would be paying for. That would often support upgrading, job readiness and some training opportunities.

*(For more information on the Ministry of Human Services, visit <http://humanservices.alberta.ca>)*

**Given Alberta's projected labour shortfall, there is a need for Government, post-secondary and business to work together to determine the solutions. How does the new budget strengthen partnerships between these sectors?**

**Greg Weadick:** You've hit the nail on the head. Partnerships are one of the most important things we need to become better at. If we're going to be successful in the future, then collaboration across ministries, with our institutions and with industry is going to be critical. One of the things we do now is work with industry to determine the numbers and types of employees they're going to need. For example, some of the work we're seeing around power engineering education in post-secondary is strictly because our business partners have told us they're going to be critically short of power engineers in the future.

Another example is in the health-care industry where we recently ramped up to provide training for 2,000 registered nurses per year. This came about as a recommendation from the health system and dealing with organizations like the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta. They've suggested that 2,000 is about the right number of nurses to train to replace those who are retiring and such.

Another example: when we're trying to determine the correct number of physicians to train, we work closely with the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons. This year, with their input, we will train the most physicians we have ever trained in Alberta. We will graduate 360 physicians this year in Calgary and Edmonton.

**Thank you for taking the time to speak with us, Minister Weadick.**

**Greg Weadick:** Thank you. And thanks to Alberta's students for continuing to work with us. A lot of the good ideas we use in government come from students.

For more information on the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology, visit <http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca>.