

## **Agents of Change: A Critical Analysis of Governing Actors in Alberta's 2030 Higher Education Reform Plan**

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### Article abstract

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## **Agents of Change: A Critical Analysis of Governing Actors in Alberta's 2030 Higher Education Reform Plan**

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### **Abstract**

Every province and territory in Canada has the authority to oversee higher education policies. In recent provincial and federal policy reforms, neoliberalism and academic capitalism have been gaining influence in Canadian higher education. This particularly applies to the policy reform plan *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs*, which was issued to develop higher education in the province. This paper critically analyzes the recent 10-year plan to reform Alberta's higher education by combining Bacchi's (2009) 'What is the Problem Represented' (WPR) approach and Chou et al.'s (2017) multi-actor framework. The purpose of this analysis is to provide insight into the actors and agendas affected by market-driven ideologies (i.e., neoliberalism and academic capitalism) on higher education policy in Alberta, Canada, with a focus on the abovementioned reform plan. The analysis underscores that the shift toward a profit-oriented approach challenges the traditional notion of higher education as a public good. This paper also discusses the implications of the reform plan and recommendations for its application.

*Keywords:* academic capitalism, neoliberalism, Canadian higher education, policy reform

### **Introduction**

Over the past decades, economic neoliberalism has become an increasingly dominant ideology that has affected all sectors, including higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Accordingly, the economy has become the focus of development that has transformed higher education into a large enterprise (Altbach, 2009). Neoliberalism is an ideology that places an emphasis "not on social welfare for the citizenry as a whole but on enabling individuals as economic actors" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 20). A facet of neoliberalism in the higher education sector is referred to as academic capitalism (Jessop, 2018). Academic capitalism has forced higher education institutions to be more competitive globally. This pressure has positioned higher education as a key indicator of the national economy's competitiveness in the global market, as reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017). Placing economic competition at the center of higher education policy implies a new direction in higher education toward a knowledge economy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In response to these international economic demands, many countries, including Canada, have implemented policies and initiatives to reform their higher education.

This paper examines one of Canada's higher education reform plans using a critical policy studies approach and its impacts in the context of economic neoliberalism and academic capitalism ideologies. In the last few decades, these ideologies have contributed greatly to some significant changes and transformations in higher education policies in Canada (Fisher et al., 2009). Constitutionally, each Canadian

province is responsible for overseeing higher education policy. In Kirby's (2011) review of recent policy reforms in Canadian higher education, the role of market mechanisms in shaping these reforms, implemented at the federal and provincial levels, was significant. Policy makers have treated Canadian higher education as a means to eliminate social inequalities, a tool for workforce development, and an independent market (Fisher et al., 2009). The nature of Canadian higher education as a market is not completely competitive, so it is better described as a quasi-market environment since market dynamics are more constrained (Lang, 2005).

In particular, this paper looks at higher education policy discourse at the provincial level in Alberta. The policy here is regarded as a "value-laden, complex, and messy" process which requires analysts to "decipher" its applicability and implications (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1076). This definition of policy emphasizes the significant role of power, governance, and shifts in education policy. As such, this analysis is situated within critical policy analysis, which is associated with postmodernism (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). An important aspect of critical policy analysis is determining which voices are represented and which voices are absent in policy discourse (Gale et al., 2017).

The Government of Alberta (2021) released *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs* (hereinafter referred to as *Alberta 2030*), a 10-year plan to reform the province's higher education sector. The key goal of this policy plan is to equip students with the skills needed to compete in the global job market. Despite the idealistic nature of this plan, it is controversial, as demonstrated by the support of many education leaders of the largest universities in Alberta (Parkland Institute, 2021) and the opposition of other academics who warned against its implications (e.g., Harrison & Mueller, 2021; University of Calgary Faculty Association, 2021). In light of the aforementioned context, there is concern that Alberta's higher education system is being reformed by economic drivers. As such, this paper identifies the voices, actors, and powers behind and the implications of the proposed plan. It answers the following research questions:

1. What forces are driving Alberta's higher education reform plan?
2. What are the implications of Alberta's higher education reform plan?

The research questions were addressed through Bacchi's (2009) 'What is the Problem Represented' (WPR) framework. The WPR approach is a critical policy approach to discourse analysis that examines the way in which policy making is carried out (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi (2000) defined policy proposals as discourses that encourage deeper reflection on problematizing a particular phenomenon.

The 'multi-s' framework developed by Chou et al. (2017), specifically the multi-actor aspect, was also applied to provide a deeper lens in examining this policy proposal.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part outlines four main ideologies that interrelate with the research questions—neoliberalism, globalization, economic knowledge, and academic capitalism—as well as their impact on higher education. The second part outlines the conceptual framework for critically analyzing the potential key actors, agendas, and implications of the *Alberta 2030* reform plan. The third part presents the analysis, implications, and recommendations within the context of Alberta's higher education.

## Neoliberalism and Higher Education

*Neoliberalism* is a philosophy or a discourse of market-based practices and policies that define "individual and social agency ... through market-driven notions of individualism, competition, and consumption" (Giroux, 2002, p. 426). Neoliberalism encourages free trade, limits government intervention, and emphasizes private enterprise, resulting in "deregulation, decentralization, and privatization" (Fisher et al., 2009, p. 549). The rise of neoliberal notions reflects the emergence of "the hegemonic discourse of western nation states" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314). Hence, the most influential economic institutions of our time were formed by neoliberal ideology, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the OECD, leading to the development of neoliberal policies across the globe (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012). Such dominance of neoliberalism in global economies and policy discourses has impacted other ideologies such as globalization.

Neoliberalism is evident in its relationship to globalization, especially at the economic level. Olssen and Peters (2005) defined *globalization* as a social phenomenon that has been influenced by technological and scientific advancements that have brought the world closer through the use of technology.

They further proposed that neoliberalism is an integral component of globalization that shapes local and international economic relations. Technology facilitates the sharing, application, and generation of information, which becomes essential to economic and social development in the information economy (Bastalich, 2010). In light of this, globalization can be viewed as a broader phenomenon than neoliberalism. Many aspects of our lives are impacted by globalization as it adds an international dimension to them (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). For instance, as Alderman (2001) noted, the process of globalization in higher education has driven local institutions to reach beyond their geographical boundaries and connect with international markets. As such, globalized higher education has become an industry worth billions of dollars (Alderman, 2001), demonstrating the influence of the neoliberal economy. Globalization and neoliberalism are intrinsically linked to the extent that they can be seen as two-way streets (OECD, 2017).

Higher education is one of the organizations impacted by the values of neoliberalism and globalization. As Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) explained, the traditional paradigm for higher education envisions higher education as an intellectual and social value that enriches society while remaining completely autonomous. Although the common good paradigm is still promoted by higher education, it is redefined by economic growth (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Thus, a new paradigm of knowledge economy has emerged (Drummond, 2003). The term *knowledge economy* was introduced by the World Bank and the OECD to describe the relationship between industry and education (Olssen & Peters, 2005). According to the OECD (1996), in a knowledge economy, emphasis is placed “on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information” (p. 7) since knowledge is viewed as “the driver of productivity and economic growth” (p. 4). This has been further defined as “a meta-narrative that assumes the commodification of knowledge in a global system of production and competition” (Ozaga, 2007, p. 65). In response to the rise of the knowledge economy paradigm, most higher education global policies and reform plans have emphasized higher education’s role in creating knowledge-based capacity to compete globally (Jessop, 2018). Other forms of knowledge economy presented in global higher education policy include promoting technological research, enhancing industry-based research, and producing “knowledge workers” who can use their skills to address issues and meet organizational goals (Bastalich, 2010, p. 845).

In such an economically driven system, competition has become one of its primary objectives (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). The term *competition* has a positive connotation because it “builds character and produces excellence” (Kohn, 1992, p. x). This view of competition corresponds to the traditional goal of higher education that is to create a better world. Higher education competition was further enhanced by New Public Management (NPM) principles. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) noted that NPM promotes efficiency and accountability, leading to a shift in how organizations are led and recognized. The prevalence of NPM principles has led to the dominance of the latter view of competition as the rationale for advancing education for economic growth (Sahlberg, 2006). Higher education competition, in the context of NPM, implies outperforming others by being “competitive, entrepreneurial and work-market oriented” (Sum, 2009, p. 197).

Changes to partnerships between institutions have occurred in response to this shift, allowing them to meet the demands of the market (Hazelkorn, 2015). Consequently, higher education institutions are under constant pressure to make an impact beyond the national level (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009) and to create graduates with skills to be able compete in the global market (Polster, 2005). In addition, they are expected to predict and develop skills demanded not only locally but also globally (Riddell, 1996, as cited in St. George, 2006). There is concern that relying too heavily on market-driven priorities could undermine education’s traditional purpose (Deem & Brehony, 2005). These pressures have transformed higher education into “an input–output system which can be reduced to an economic production function” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). Due to this, higher education has shifted from being autonomous and social-democratic to being competitive and neoliberal (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

### Academic Capitalism in Higher Education

In response to neoliberalism, globalization, and the knowledge economy, higher education has moved toward academic capitalism. *Academic capitalism* often occurs in a context where economies are dominated by capitalism (Jessop, 2018). The three main sources of academic capitalism are the knowl-

edge-based economy paradigm, neoliberalism, and financial crises (Jessop, 2018). As discussed earlier, the first two sources—the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism—have dominated government policies worldwide (Metcalf & Fenwick, 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Jessop (2018) argued that identifying financial crises as the third source suggests that the neoliberal agenda can take advantage of any crises to demand cuts in some areas. According to the academic capitalism paradigm, higher education is supposed to provide a skilled workforce to meet the demands of the labour market and provide enterprise services (Jessop, 2018; Metcalfe, 2010). Furthermore, the paradigm advocates the development of entrepreneurial intellectual capital among stakeholders on the ground, such as students, faculty, and researchers (Jessop, 2018).

Academic capitalism as a paradigm has both positive and negative aspects. One of the advantages of academic capitalism is enabling higher education to expand its financial resources during difficult economic times and to recruit top-notch scholars. In contrast, adopting this paradigm can deepen the divide between “treating knowledge, education, and research as public goods or, alternatively, as private or club goods whose restricted circulation excludes many from their potential benefits” (Jessop, 2018, p. 104). As a result, higher education will be re-measured in terms of profit (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, marketing ideology (i.e., the commodification of education) will become a crucial element of higher education (Drummond, 2003). Hence, education leaders have begun to act like managers and fundraisers rather than academics (Giroux, 2002). Having considered the advantages and disadvantages of academic capitalism, it is worthwhile to examine its effects on higher education in Canada, particularly in Alberta which is the context of this study.

Higher education has been affected by academic capitalism in different countries, including Canada. Nevertheless, Canada has historically resisted such influence on its higher education sector (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, as cited in Metcalfe, 2010). In reviewing academic capitalism in Canadian higher education, Metcalfe (2010) observed that teaching and research have become commercialized and aligned with private interests. Some Canadian faculty members have resented the shift to the commercialization of higher education, while others have considered it a central activity of universities (Metcalf, 2010). Despite this controversy, commercialization has been creeping into the North American higher education system since the late 1980s (Metcalf, 2010). The emergence of commercialization in Canada was evident in the 1980s when the Canadian government formed a partnership with the business sector—by establishing the Corporate-Higher Education Forum and the National Council for Science and Technology—that encourages private corporations to fund university research (Metcalf, 2010).

Furthermore, higher education in Alberta, which is an oil-rich province, is heavily influenced by its economic direction. For instance, Alberta’s Ministry of Advanced Education is committed to preparing a knowledge-ready workforce (Xiao, 2020). The Government of Alberta released three foundational policy documents to guide higher education in the province: (a) *Campus Alberta: A Policy Framework*, which was published in 2002; (b) *Post-secondary Learning Act*, which was published in 2003; and (c) *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework*, which was published in 2007. Examining these three documents, Xiao (2020) reported that they aim to boost economic growth in Alberta by improving the higher education system. In these documents, the Government of Alberta commits itself to ensuring that higher education is responsive to the needs of the province’s diverse economy (Tamtik et al., 2020).

Thus, the growth of academic capitalism can be seen in Canada in general and in Alberta in particular. Saunders (2007) warned that by avoiding confronting the impact of neoliberalism on higher education, any future solutions would be insufficient. Hence, considering Saunders’ warning, urgency should be placed on critically examining higher education policies now rather than waiting until related challenges become difficult to solve. Thus, this study aimed to critically examine the *Alberta 2030* reform plan.

### Conceptual Framework: Poststructural Policy Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem representation outlined in *Alberta 2030*, with an emphasis on examining the possible voices, actors, and powers associated with this policy, as well as its implications. These objectives situated the research questions in the poststructuralism paradigm that is in line with Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach. The first five questions in the WPR approach were used as the broad conceptual framework to critically analyze the policy. The ‘multi-s’ framework developed by



Chou et al. (2017), particularly the multi-actor aspect, was also applied to provide analytical precision for thinking about multiple actors.

The WPR approach is a framework and a systematic methodology for critically analyzing policies by using a “problem-questioning” paradigm rather than a “problem-solving” paradigm (Bacchi 2009, p. xvii). Bacchi (2009) based this framework for policy analysis on Foucault’s (1984, as cited in Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) poststructural theory. The concept of poststructural theory is based on the idea that there are no absolute truths but rather a variety of discourses that reflect the perception of different actors of the world. On this idea, McMorrow (2017) noted that “poststructuralists always call into question how certain accepted ‘facts’ and ‘beliefs’ actually work to reinforce the prevailing power of particular actors within international relations” (p. 56). The WPR approach examines the “deep conceptual assumptions” that underpin policies by problematizing the problem representations in such policies and discourses (Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii). Two major advantages of this framework are simplicity and transparency (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This framework consists of six questions (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*WPR Framework*

Number	Question
1	What’s the problem (e.g., of “unskilled workforce,” “insufficient workforce to meet market demands,” and “lack of economic competition”) represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2	What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the “problem” (problem representation)?
3	How has this representation of the “problem” come about?
4	What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be conceptualized differently?
5	What effects (i.e., discursive, subjectification, and lived) are produced by this representation of the “problem”?
6	How and where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?
Step 7	Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.

*Note.* Adapted from “Analysing Policy: What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” by C. Bacchi, 2009, p. 297. Copyright 2009 by Pearson Education.

This approach begins by asking about the proposed solutions in a policy and then to use those solutions to identify the underlying problem by tracing it backward. Next, the policy analyst conducts an in-depth examination of “rationales for the proposal, deep-seated presuppositions underpinning the proposed change, possible silences in the understanding of what needs to change, and the effects that are likely to accompany this understanding of the ‘problem’” (Bacchi, 2009, p. x). The seventh step allows the policy analyst to apply these five questions to their own proposals to explain their position on the policy being discussed (Bacchi, 2009). Bacchi’s (2009) framework premise is that the “taken-for-granted assumptions” are challenged by “problematizing the representations of the problem” (p. xv). Based on this premise, the first five questions of Bacchi’s (2009) WPR were employed to analyze the policy plan.

The multi-actor framework is one level of the ‘multi-s’ framework developed by Chou et al. (2017). This framework is based on three key features of higher education governance: multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-issue (Vukasovic et al., 2017). According to Chou et al. (2017), policy makers use these characteristics to hide their agendas to achieve their goals. The ‘multi-s’ framework consists of the multi-level aspect, which is concerned with the distribution of power across governance; the multi-actor aspect,

which refers to participants and influencing factors from both states and non-states; and the multi-issue aspect, which refers to agreements and disagreements between higher education institutions and other institutions (Chou et al., 2017). This framework allows examining policy at one level as well as across the three levels (Vukasovic et al., 2017). They further stated that unpacking the three levels can give insights into the aspect examined. In this study, only the multi-actor level was used to analyze the policy.

### **The Context of *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs***

The change in policies across time and place demonstrates the importance of contextualizing the problem representation (Bacchi, 2009). For this reason, identifying the context of policies is fundamental to understanding issue representations (Bacchi, 2009, p. 11). Thus, to contextualize the problem representation, this paper will first respond to Bacchi's third question: "How has this representation of the 'problem' come about" (p. 2).

The Government of Alberta has been overseeing higher education, including internships, international programs, training programs, and community learning, since 2004 (Xiao, 2020). The ideology of neoliberalism in higher education emphasizes market-driven principles and practices, such as globalization, corporatization, privatization, and productivity (Apple, 2001). Since the neoliberal era, the Canadian government has channeled funds indirectly into higher education, which has given them power in postsecondary education (Hauserman & Stick, 2005). During the 1970s, however, these funds declined dramatically and continued to decline later, forcing higher education to adapt to the knowledge economy ideology (Hauserman & Stick, 2005). Thus, higher education institutions are under constant pressure to redefine their missions according to market needs (Hazelkorn, 2015; St. George, 2006).

Alberta's recent funding cuts illustrate this scenario best, as the government received a reduction in funding "from \$2.68 billion in [2019–2020] to an estimated \$2.36 billion (nominal dollars)" (Harrison & Mueller, 2021, para. 4). However, Canadian universities do not rely solely on government funding, as they raise funds from paid services, tuition, and other student fees from credit and non-credit programs as well as funded research and private sector investments (Hauserman & Stick, 2005). Nevertheless, Schmaus and Wimmer (2013) reported that higher education institutions in Alberta "are put in the unenviable position of fulfilling dictated mandates with fewer and fewer resources" (p. 103). In addition, the recent pandemic has strained the financial situation of higher education in the province (Government of Alberta, 2021).

These financial pressures prompted the Government of Alberta (2021) to release the *Alberta 2030* higher education reform plan, aiming to enable the province's economy to compete internationally. The purpose of this plan is to revamp higher education with a focus on building workforce skills for students through six objectives: (a) "improve access and student experience," (b) "develop skills for jobs," (c) "support innovation and commercialization," (d) strengthen internationalization, (e) "improve sustainability and affordability," and (f) strengthen system governance" (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 6). The scope of the document focused on the 26 publicly funded postsecondary institutions in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 5).

### **Higher Education and Global Competition**

By examining Bacchi's (2009) first question in the reform plan, this study identified the problem representation and revealed what is behind such representation and how the proposed solution in the policy informs us what and who is the problem. The vision and objectives of the document show the main problem represented as the lack of skills, knowledge, and competencies for postsecondary students to compete in the global labour market. The plan clearly states that having such a problem prevents Alberta's economy from adapting to changes in the global economy (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 6). The next step in the analysis was identifying possible key presuppositions that underpin the problem representations as suggested by Bacchi's (2009) second WPR question. These key presuppositions can reveal overlooked issues that policy makers take for granted (Bacchi, 2009). The main themes that appeared in the document, as well as the literature reviewed above, suggest two presumptions. First, that higher education plays a crucial role in creating a skilled workforce capable of competing in the international marketplace. Second, it contributes significantly to the economic growth and competitiveness of the local or provincial economy.

A key part of the reform plan stresses that Alberta needs a workforce that is competent, skilled,

educated, and trained to compete globally. To achieve that, the plan proposes ensuring student access to higher education as a first strategy. In this strategy, the underlying idea is that those with access to higher education will be able to compete in the global job market. By having better career opportunities, they will have a better standard of living. Different extracts from the document demonstrate this assumption (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Higher Education Facilitates Student Success*

Number	Extracts
1	“To do everything we can to ensure that more of Alberta’s youth and workforce set bold aspirations and are well-positioned to succeed in rewarding careers today and tomorrow.” (p. 5)
2	“Develop Skills for Jobs: Ensure every student has the skills, knowledge and competencies to enjoy fulfilling lives and careers and that they have greater transparency around labour market outcomes.” (p. 6)
3	“Global trends are reshaping post-secondary education and the skills our students need for success, around the world and right here in Alberta. Rapid technological change is poised to disrupt the labour market as many Albertans currently work in careers that may face disruption due to automation.” (p. 4)
4	“Alberta’s world-class post-secondary system will equip Albertans with the skills, knowledge and competencies they need to succeed in their lifelong pursuits. The system will be highly responsive to labour market needs and, through innovative programming and excellence in research, contribute to the betterment of an innovative and prosperous Alberta.” (p. 6)
5	“Alberta 2030 is about moving us forward to give the current, and next generation rewarding opportunities and jobs, so that they know Alberta is where they want to be, now and in the future.” (p. 10)
6	“According to RBC’s 2019 report Bridging the Gap: What Canadians Told Us About the Skills Revolution: ‘Equipping the next generation of Indigenous workers with future-proof skills is vital to supplying tomorrow’s economy’ (p. 12).” (p. 20)

*Note.* The extracts are from “Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs,” by Government of Alberta, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Government of Alberta.

This assumption concurs with the dominant discourse that people without access to higher education will have lower incomes and fewer opportunities for social mobility (OECD, 2017). This logic stems from the belief that higher education prepares students for work in an era of rapid scientific and technological advancement, as argued by Powell and Snellman (2004). With reduced funding for education, the higher education system is expected to increase enrollment to fill the funding gap by raising fees. However, this rise in tuition can discourage students from enrolling in higher education, contradicting the very goals that this policy aims to achieve. Therefore, it is pertinent to consider several questions. How will higher education raise individuals’ life standard? Also, who can compete globally? Who does this policy serve? Another assumption is that higher education could advance the province’s economy to compete globally. Different extracts from the document demonstrate this assumption (Table 3).



**Table 3**  
*Higher Education Facilitates Economic Growth in Alberta*

Number	Extracts
1	“A growing shortage of skilled trades professionals also threatens workforce shortages in key sectors of our economy, and the skills demands of employers...” (p. 4)
2	“As Alberta’s government moves forward with an ambitious strategy to create jobs and to build and diversify our economy, it is essential that we build a highly skilled and competitive workforce, strengthen innovation and the commercialization of research, and forge stronger relationships between employers and post-secondary institutions.” (p. 4).
3	“Our system will be highly responsive to labour market needs, allowing our programs, services and policies to keep pace with the changing needs of industry and our economy.” (p. 4)
4	“The MacKinnon Panel underscored that Alberta’s future prosperity depends on having one of the most highly skilled and well-educated populations in the world, and that our post-secondary system lacks an overall direction.” (p. 5)
5	“In an environment where many organizations are transitioning to a more highly skilled workforce, worried about impending retirements, and competing with other firms for skilled talent, Alberta employers are seeking post-secondary-educated recruits to meet their future skills needs.” (p. 9)

*Note.* The extracts are from “Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs,” by Government of Alberta, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Government of Alberta.

According to the plan, providing students with access to higher education will enable the province to achieve better economic, political, and social outcomes. Evident in the second and fourth strategies—strengthening internationalization and developing skills for jobs—the ability of higher education to attract human capital and retain skilled workers was closely linked to the province’s ability to compete globally. The OECD (2017) holds a similar view that countries with increased access to higher education are more developed economically and socially. Xiao (2020) noted that Alberta’s higher education maximizes the existing and potential workforce in the province, which contributes to the transition to a knowledge economy paradigm. In concurrence with Xiao (2020), both assumptions suggest that higher education in Alberta will be explicitly adapted to the knowledge economy paradigm. The plan implicitly suggests that the lack of accessibility to postsecondary education impacts individuals and the province, yet underlying actors and agendas remain unproblematic or unconsidered.

### *Major Actors at the Micro, Macro, and Meso Levels*

The underlying actors and powers that influence the problematization were revealed by answering Bacchi’s (2009) third question: “What is left unproblematic in the problem representation?” (p. 13). In addition, Couch et al.’s (2017) multi-actor model offered a deeper examination of the multi-actors and forces that drive the present policy plan. Building on this, the next section of this study answers the first research question: What forces are driving Alberta’s higher education reform plan?

Several key actors appear to be driving the *Alberta 2030* reform plan. The plan appears to be driven by provincial and federal governments and corporations. In the evolving landscape of higher education, different levels of government and external actors have played different roles in determining its priorities and focus. At the governmental level, higher education responsibility is often shared between federal and provincial authorities. Even though higher education institutions are not under federal jurisdiction, the federal government utilizes higher education research as part of its economic approach to remain competitive in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century (Larsen & Al-Haque, 2020).

In this context, the federal and provincial governments in Canada have largely focused their policies on advancing the economy following neoliberal globalization (Xiao, 2020).

Beyond the government, other external actors, such as corporations and high-level business leaders, impact higher education. Education has become more market-driven due to a knowledge-driven global economy. As such, high-level business leaders and powerful corporations with a profound impact on economies are expected to acquire a growing influence on higher education. Their growing influence appears in the form of pressure placed by high-level business leaders, politicians, and economists. For example, Gates (2010) accused higher education of not preparing young generations to cope with rapidly changing economic demands. In addition, high-level business corporations and organizations can influence research initiatives aligned with industry needs through funding. Thereby, governments become involved in transforming higher education into a tool to help businesses achieve corporate objectives. A strong indication of this is the fact that the plan put “industries and employers,” along with “post-secondary board chairs” (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 11), at the top of the list of eight groups whose feedback was sought. Furthermore, a good example of corporate influence is seen in the second strategy of the reform plan, which focuses on preparing students for specific careers and jobs to meet employers’ immediate needs (Government of Alberta, 2021). The University of Calgary Faculty Association (2021) expressed concerns over this strategy because of its narrow view of education, stating that these strategies will allow employers to control the skills taught at higher education institutions based on industry needs. Considering the above, these two actors can be considered as driving forces in the shift of Alberta’s higher education toward academic capitalism and knowledge economy.

The discussed economic rationalization of higher education in Canada is closely associated with the pervasive neoliberal ideology adopted worldwide and promoted by international organizations such as the OECD. Rawolle and Lingard (2008) pinpointed that the OECD does not only form policies but also influences national and provincial education policy development. Such influence on Canadian higher education is evident in Alberta’s adoption of the OECD’s (1996) suggestions to devise policies that foster knowledge capitalism. *Knowledge capitalism* refers to the capacity to learn, to use tacit (know-how) knowledge to transform codified knowledge (OECD, 1996). In the present plan, terms such as “knowledge economy,” “academic capitalism,” “knowledge capitalism,” and “corporatization” implicitly appear in the document, reflecting the influence of the OECD as another driving force. Different extracts from the document demonstrate this assumption (Table 4).

**Table 4**  
*Actors and Agenda*

Number	Extracts
1	“...it puts pressure on businesses, institutions, and government to adapt, and can also lead to new opportunities to work together to find solutions. In this respect, post-secondary institutions, employers, and other key stakeholders have critical roles to play as we align efforts and reposition for success.” (p. 8)
2	“Public funding remains under pressure. Public investment as a share of total spending on post-secondary education has been steadily declining here...” (p. 9)
3	“Together, we must face the accelerating financial pressures, shifts in learning and delivery models, as well as the demand for skills, application of research and new opportunities. We must work together to shape our future.” (p. 10)
4	“Alberta’s government and post-secondary institutions are facing increased fiscal pressures.” (p. 9)
5	“...Alberta’s entire system needs a new level of responsiveness to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.” (p. 13).

Number	Extracts
6	“Stakeholder suggestions included supporting faculty with more resources (such as grant-writing support and commercialization training) and time to pursue research. Stakeholders also identified the need for adequate funding, identification of priorities and the specific need for more public funding for innovative projects that may not attract private investment.” (p. 14).
7	“...to compete in the labour market is a valued outcome for our students. According to a 2016 Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) report, ‘preparing for a specific job or career’ was selected as the most important reason by the highest number (44%) of first year students (pg. 12)” (p. 19).

*Note.* The extracts are from “Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs,” by Government of Alberta, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Government of Alberta.

As reviewed in the literature, higher education worldwide is increasingly focused on the knowledge economy and academic capitalism. As a result, education is increasingly politicized (Bussemeyer et al., 2013), suggesting that higher education governance is influenced by different actors. Among these actors are non-state and state actors with different policy agendas as the multi-actor framework (Chou et al., 2017) illustrates. The analysis identified three key actors intertwined in this reform plan. As the three actors come from national and international levels, there is a relationship between multi-actor aspects of this reform plan. At the macro level, the dominant actors are global corporate ideology and international organizations such as the OECD. At the meso level, the dominant actors are provincial government policies and provincial corporations. National corporations can influence education policies at the provincial level, while global corporations indirectly have influence on education policies through global initiatives and funding. At the micro level, actors including faculty members, students, and administrators do not appear to be the dominant driving force for higher education policies. Diem et al. (2014) noted that policy makers tend to ignore some voices and perspectives. Furthermore, they suggested that policy makers should include frontline stakeholders in a democratic critical policy context, which would have yielded deeper insights in this reform plan.

### *Commercialization and Privatization*

Based on the above actors and their powers to direct higher education toward knowledge economy competitiveness, two agendas were identified. The two agendas are commercialization and privatization, which are considered hallmarks of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2002). *Commercialization* refers to business-related endeavours of higher education leaders to provide services to generate financial resources for their institutions (Giroux, 2002). The agenda of commercialization of postsecondary education is common. In fact, it is a key element of the Alberta higher education fund. This agenda is evident in the third strategy “support[ing] commercialization and innovation” (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 24) proposed in the reform plan. The second agenda is *privatization*, which refers to the conversion of public resources into private ones (Ball, 2007). Similar to the commercialization agenda, it is also common with the rise of profit-driven education institutions (Ball, 2007).

A key rationale for commercialization and privatization can be found in the concept of academic capitalism (Jessop, 2018; Metcalfe, 2010; Schulze-Cleven, 2017). Jessop (2018) noted that one of the main reasons behind the spread of academic capitalism is financial challenges. In other words, governments take advantage of crises as an opportunity to demand cuts in some areas. It can be argued that the recent decrease of 11.8% in government funding for higher education in Alberta in 2021–2022 (Hauserman & Stick, 2005) could be intentional. As a result, Alberta higher education gets forced to invest in commercial activities to generate funds and develop revenue streams. By following this path, higher education will probably rely more on corporations and private funding and become adapted to academic capitalism.

The purpose here is not to suggest any conspiracy but rather to illuminate Foucault’s (1975/1995) “micro-physics of power” to see the diversity of forces that lead to the production of “things” (p. 26). Olsesen and Peters (2005) warned against the age of knowledge capitalism as it will lead to “education wars”

(p. 340), which refers to a struggle over the value of knowledge. This concern concurs with discussions about how economic interests exert disproportionate influence over the direction of education, potentially at the expense of other critical educational goals. The next section will discuss potential implications and recommendations with the hope of avoiding “education wars” (Olssen & Peters, 2005 p. 340).

### *Potential Implications on Higher Education*

Any “educational policy always sits at the intersection of the past, present, and future” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, p. xi). The future delineated in the *Alberta 2030* reform plan is similar to previous reforms as it seeks to connect higher education with the economy and integrate academic capitalism. The analysis revealed an economic rationale underlying the policy offered in the reform plan. Rizvi and Lingard (2009) found that policy discourses are influenced by various powers and agendas that can include or exclude voices. By employing the multi-actor framework, it was evident how the interconnectedness of powers privileges certain actors, such as the federal government, promoting higher education as an economic venture. Thus, the analysis above pinpointed that the provincial government and corporations following the neoliberal economic model tend to dominate higher education policy in Alberta.

The analysis above suggests a shift in the paradigm of Alberta higher education from a public good to a profit-making enterprise, echoing Ball’s (2007) observation. The potential implications of this shift were the focus of the second research question: What are the implications of Alberta’s higher education reform plan? Bacchi (2009) outlined three types of effects as part of the fifth WPR question, “What effects are produced?” (p. 48), namely, discursive, subjectification, and lived. The discursive effects are the delimitations of the problem representation in a policy, while the subjectification effects are the intended participants in such representation (Bacchi, 2009). The main discursive impact of this policy is delimiting education reform to only develop provincial economic competitiveness. In terms of policy subjectification effects, the plan is intended for all publicly funded higher education institutions in Alberta, including all relevant stakeholders. In the plan, these stakeholders are categorized into eight groups: corporations, higher education board, academics, higher education students, Indigenous communities, K–12 educators, other educational institutions, the public, and members of “the broader tertiary ecosystem” (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 11). In light of these two effects, the lived effects—how these effects get translated into people’s lives (Bacchi, 2009)—can reveal potential implications of this reform plan.

A possible implication is that higher education funding in Alberta could be directed toward higher education programs that are deemed valuable and essential by the corporate and business markets. When economic incentivization favours dominant industries over others, programs that do not receive market or economic support can be undervalued, reduced, or even eliminated as a result. Similarly, scholars or students working in non-commercial areas could also be discouraged. These implications shed light on how higher education can be used to assimilate students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures into a hegemonic workforce dominated by economic power, as Olssen and Peters (2005) warned against. Such implications raise the question about how higher education will be relevant to students’ personal interests and cultural values if it is oriented toward a knowledge economy.

A further implication of this policy is potential resentment from the stakeholders on the ground. This resentment will be a result of developing a policy without engaging faculty, administrators, and students in the process. Resentment of the policy can negatively impact its implementation. Engaging stakeholders on the ground in the process can help avoid potential resentment as it will enable them to understand the rationale behind the policy proposed. A potential outcome of the shift of higher education toward an academic capitalist model might include a redefinition of its goals, emphasizing profit maximization (Brown, 2015). The commodification of higher education will maintain institutions within a quasi-market environment, placing a high priority on meeting the demands of the labour market. Managerial governance can become increasingly dominant in higher education (Schulze-Cleven, 2017). In this way, leaders in higher education will act more like managers and fundraisers rather than academics, as Giroux (2002) argued. They will be competing for consumers, in this case, students (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Managerial governance can have detrimental impacts, including “hierarchization of intellectual labor, loss of professional status” and limitations of academic freedom for the purpose of increasing profits and reducing costs (Jessop, 2018, p. 105).

## Recommendations and Final Thoughts

The analyses presented in this paper are not intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the identified higher education reform plan. Considering the inherent limitations of a market-driven higher education system, it is appropriate to question the effectiveness of this model. A point of concern is that higher education will contribute to the interests of organizations rather than focus on the public good (Ball, 2007; Polster, 2005). Similarly, the University of Calgary Faculty Association (2021) warned that the future economy of the province will move away from oil dependence. Therefore, they advised caution when implementing these policies. Considering the above, this paper proposes the recommendations below.

### *Involving All Stakeholders in Policy Making and Decision Making*

Incorporating all stakeholders, such as students and faculty, into the policy-making and decision-making processes of higher education can lead to a more inclusive and effective learning environment. This approach stems from the notion that using multiple voices can help in understanding issues and identifying potential solutions so that informed decisions can be made. According to Diem et al (2014), including all voices will enable different perspectives to be heard and potential challenges to be revealed. When students and faculty sit at the table, the policies and programs of the institution are more likely to reflect a holistic view of its needs. For example, including stakeholders in budgeting can provide assurance that financial allocations reflect the needs of the academic community. In this way, resources and funds can be allocated more efficiently. In addition, this inclusive approach to decision making can foster ownership among all stakeholders, which harnesses collaboration.

### *Repurposing Higher Education for Epistemological Equity*

With the changing landscape of higher education, it has become increasingly critical to repurpose its goals and methods. Market-driven environments often overshadow students' interests and cultural backgrounds, which can result in a disproportion between practical skills needed for the workforce and the holistic development of students as critical thinkers and responsible global citizens. As Gale et al. (2017) suggested, administrators and curriculum developers across education should consider epistemological equity, a framework that aims to bridge cultural gaps and promote a more inclusive approach to knowledge. The achievement of epistemological equity relies on the recognition and integration of diverse ways of knowing, the acknowledgement of various perspectives, and the recognition that each provides a more comprehensive understanding of the human. By repurposing higher education to prioritize epistemological equity, students' unique backgrounds will be valued and acknowledged, fostering social inclusion and empowerment.

### *Limiting Corporate Influence on Higher Education*

As discussed, academic capitalism has significantly impacted the landscape of learning, leading to concerns about corporate influence in higher education. As noted earlier, academic capitalism could cause "education wars" and devalue knowledge, as Olssen and Peters (2005, p. 340) warned. Academic capitalism might prioritize profit and competition over the pursuit of knowledge and the holistic development of students. As a result, curricula might be tailored to meet market needs, and education might become more transactional and focused on employment opportunities. Therefore, to mitigate these potential negative consequences, the influence of corporations on higher education should be limited. This can be achieved by implementing clear guidelines defining corporate involvement.

### *Creating an Intellectual Governance Structure for Higher Education*

The governance structure of higher education institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping the direction and priorities of academia. Transitioning from a managerial to an autonomous intellectual governance model can help mitigate potential detrimental impacts that arise from profit-driven decision making. Jessop (2018) highlighted the risks of managerial governance, such as the restriction of academic freedom to enhance profitability and cut costs. Autonomy in governance and management in education emphasizes the primacy of education and research as the driving forces behind institutional decisions (Sengupta et al., 2022). In this model, decisions are guided by academic expertise and the institution's mission rather



than solely economic considerations. This safeguards academic freedom, enabling scholars to contribute to the advancement of knowledge without fear of commercial interference. In addition, such a model can enhance collaboration among faculty, administrators, and students, fostering an environment that prioritizes learning, research, and intellectual growth.

### ***Decentralized Governance Model for Postsecondary Institutions***

Higher education institutions often debate whether a decentralized or centralized governance structure is the most effective. There is an intriguing perspective in this conversation when it is suggested that each of Alberta's postsecondary institutions should have its own autonomous board of governors rather than one centralized board. The University of Alberta Students' Union (2020) has voiced concerns that a centralized board might lead to decision-making bottlenecks and hinder the agility of individual institutions. A rapidly evolving education landscape makes it essential for each institution to have the autonomy to tailor its strategies, programs, and policies according to its own needs. This allows for more efficient resource allocation, curricular innovation, and community engagement. By having the board of governors understand the values and objectives of each institution, they can make decisions that are in the best interest of their community. As a result of this tailored approach, students, faculty, and staff will feel more involved in decision making and ownership.

### **In-Depth Research on Knowledge Economy and Higher Education Policies**

An understanding of concepts, such as the knowledge economy, academic capitalism, and knowledge capitalism, is essential in navigating the complexity of higher education policies in the Canadian context, particularly in Alberta. It is critical to explore how these concepts are envisioned and implemented within the Canadian higher education sector to gain a better understanding of what influences curriculum design, research investment, and industry partnerships. It can be helpful to investigate how these ideologies influence policy decisions in Alberta's higher education institutions to gain insight into issues like academic freedom, collaboration within the industry, and the role of higher education in society. Researching these notions and their impacts can help policy makers, educators, and stakeholders make informed decisions about the direction of higher education in Alberta. In addition, such research can provide a better understanding of how global trends interact with local contexts, thereby aligning educational and economic policies with local needs.

In sum, the analysis of the higher education reform plan in Alberta illustrates the interplay of educational and economic factors that influence the direction of higher education. Policy is not constant but rather is constantly in flux, influenced by both national and international trends. This analysis highlights a number of dynamics and their potential implications for higher education. An increasing emphasis on academic capitalism in higher education, as observed in the *Alberta 2030* reform plan, calls into question the prioritization of economic interests over the broader education mission. In other words, it suggests that higher education might become a profit-making enterprise instead of a public good. This shift can have profound effects, from allocating resources to the goals of education institutions. In addition, the emphasis on aligning higher education with market needs can have far-reaching implications. A more market-oriented approach might result in higher education institutions competing for students as consumers.

To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed. These include involving all stakeholders in decision making, repurposing higher education to prioritize epistemological equity, limiting corporate influence, adopting an intellectual governance structure, considering a decentralized governance model, and conducting in-depth research on knowledge economy and higher education policies. In the end, Alberta's higher education future will be shaped by decisions made today. The choices made should reflect a strong commitment to the core values of education. With informed and inclusive policy making, higher education can progress in a way that benefits the individual and society as a whole.

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