

April 22, 2016

To: The Honourable  
Rachel Notley  
M.L.A. for Edmonton-Strathcona  
Premier of Alberta  
Strathcona Professional Centre  
Suite 101, 10328 - 81 Avenue NW  
Edmonton, AB  
Canada T6E 1X2  
[edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca)

Dear Premier:

On behalf of our respective Postdoctoral Associations we request a meeting to discuss the concerns and aspirations of the >1000 postdoctoral fellows / scholars ('postdocs') who work at the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Postdocs are highly skilled individuals with a PhD, MD or equivalent qualification, who engage in research, community service, and other scholarly activities (e.g., teaching), across all academic disciplines. We tackle complex research problems and play an essential role in the advancement of knowledge at Alberta's top post-secondary research institutions. Many postdocs are not originally from Alberta, but wish to make this their home, and through these connections increase Alberta's capacity for national and international research collaboration. Furthermore, all Albertans benefit from our work, as we play a key role driving innovation that is essential for a diverse provincial economy. Despite this, the status of postdocs in Alberta remains poorly defined, as postdocs are not included in the current provincial legislation governing post-secondary institutions (the Post-Secondary Learning Act, or PSLA). We believe that this oversight exacerbates the challenges faced by postdocs in Alberta today. Addressing those challenges will improve the capacity for research and innovation in our province, facilitating economic recovery and growth.

In surveying the members of our respective associations, the following three major concerns have been identified:

**Status:** At the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge, postdocs are considered 'trainees' rather than employees. In the absence of any meaningful provincial or federal legislation regarding the status of postdocs or funding specifically geared to provide benefits and services to postdocs, Alberta's research institutions have struggled with the question of whether postdocs should be treated as students or employees, which has resulted in postdocs generally being treated as an ill-defined mixture of the two throughout the province. As one consequence of this, unlike other essential groups in the academic workforce (e.g., graduate students or academic staff), postdocs in Alberta are not allowed to contribute to Employment

Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan, leaving us without the standard social benefits provided to nearly every other group of workers in Canada. In addition, our trainee status often makes postdocs ineligible for many of the resources that are available to staff or students, such as resources for assistance with immigration issues, access to career services, and access to on-campus health and mental health programs.

**Basic rights, representation, and benefits:** Postdocs are generally under-represented on the councils, committees and boards that govern our institutions, because postdoctoral associations are not guaranteed such representation by the PSLA. The PSLA also establishes the rights of academic staff and student groups to self-govern and negotiate employment agreements. In the absence of such consideration, postdocs are unable to bargain for improved benefits as a group, and each university is left to set its own policies with no obligation to consult their respective postdoctoral communities. As a result, health and dental benefits provided to postdocs vary widely in Alberta, and in the absence of full scholarships from the tri-council or other agencies (e.g., Alberta Innovates Health Solutions), we are often left without paid coverage for maternal and paternal leaves of absence.

**Funding and professional development:** Traditionally, postdoctoral positions involved one to two years of additional training, which facilitated being competitive for university faculty positions. However, the availability of new faculty positions has decreased dramatically over the past few decades, leading to an increase, up to five years or more, in the duration of postdoctoral training required to be competitive for these highly-coveted careers. As a result, fewer than 20% of Canadian postdocs go on to faculty careers today. The remaining 80% of postdocs represent a large pool of talented and motivated individuals who are ideally suited to leadership and high-level decision-making roles in industry, government, or the private sector, but who may struggle to make the transition due to a lack of support and guidance. Despite this reality, the majority of funding for postdocs is front-loaded and designed to increase the recruitment of new postdocs rather than provide long-term support and career development. Funding should be put in place to sustain an adequate period of career development for postdocs, with increased focus on academic and non-academic professional development, job-seeking, career placement, and support for navigating the challenging transition out of academia.

In addressing these concerns, Alberta has the opportunity to be a leader in Canadian postdoctoral policy, and set a new standard for other provinces to follow. This will serve to attract even more high calibre postdocs to our institutions, increasing the research reputation of our universities and the quality of Alberta's workforce. We strongly believe that this support will pay large dividends for the province, in terms of our reputation as a world-class training environment, our capacity for research and innovation, and our long-term economic diversity.

The Vice-President Academic from the Postdoctoral Fellows Association at the University of Alberta, Dr. Richard Kanyo, recently had a brief conversation with The Honourable Marlin Schmidt, Minister of Advanced Education, where a number of these points were raised. We think this is a very positive first step and we look forward to working with you, and other

members of the legislative assembly, to develop effective solutions to the challenges faced by postdocs in our province, for the benefit of all Albertans in the years to come.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Ann Revill

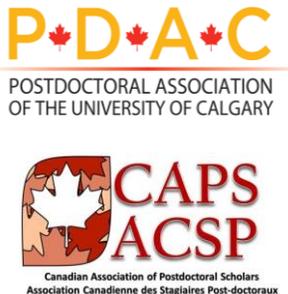
President,  
University of Alberta  
Postdoctoral Fellows  
Association (PDFA)



Dr. Joseph S. Sparling

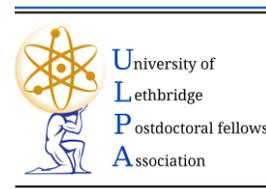
President,  
Postdoctoral Association of  
the University of Calgary  
(PDAC)

Chair, National Advocacy  
Committee, Canadian  
Association of Postdoctoral  
Scholars (CAPS/ACSP)



Dr. Senthil Kumar Duraikannu  
Kailasam

President,  
University of Lethbridge  
Postdoctoral Fellows  
Association (ULPA)



cc: The Honourable Stephanie McLean, MLA for Calgary-Varsity, Minister of Status of Women and Minister of Service Alberta

- Ms. McLean's riding includes the University of Calgary and her Status of Women portfolio includes gender equality, which is directly relevant to the challenges faced by female postdocs

The Honourable Shannon Phillips, MLA for Lethbridge-West, Minister of Environment and Parks and Minister Responsible for the Climate Change Office

- Ms. Phillips' riding includes the University of Lethbridge

Mr. Rod Loyola, MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie

- Through his roles at the University of Alberta, Mr. Loyola understands well the concerns of postdoctoral fellows

The Honourable Marlin Schmidt, MLA for Edmonton-Gold Bar, Minister of Advanced Education

- Mr. Schmidt's portfolio includes post-secondary education