

# Joint Benefits Committee

ANNUAL REPORT

CO-CHAIRS

RUMI GRAHAM & HEATHER EVANS

## Joint Benefits Committee (JBC)

### Annual Report- 2025

#### Background

The Joint Benefits Committee (JBC) was established as of December 1, 2022 through an [MOU](#) signed in November 2022. The MOU was based on the recommendations of the Joint Academic Benefits Working Group, which met from May to September 2022 to investigate the feasibility and desirability of creating a committee of representatives from the University of Lethbridge Faculty Association (ULFA) and the Board to oversee the benefits plans for academic staff.

This report of the Joint Benefits Committee covers the period January 2025 through to December 2025.

#### JBC Membership

The Terms of Reference of JBC provide that the committee comprises three ULFA representatives and three Board representatives.

Current JBC members:

Board members: Heather Evans (Associate VP, Human Resources), Helen Wolfe (Director, Pension & Benefits), Nicole Eva (Associate University Librarian). Support provided by John Fehr (Pension & Benefits Coordinator)

ULFA members: Rumi Graham (University Copyright Advisor & Graduate Studies Librarian), Paul Hayes (Professor, Chemistry & Biochemistry), Rick Mueller (Professor, Economics). Support provided by Aaron Chubb (Executive Director, ULFA)

#### JBC Mandate and Scope

As indicated in the [MOU](#), the mandate of JBC is to engage in constructive dialogue on matters regarding benefits provided to academic staff, such as dental, vision, and mental health care; extended health coverage; life and disability insurance; and flexible spending accounts.

The scope of JBC includes receiving costing and usage information and recommending benefits plan changes to ULFA and the Board for possible consideration in collective bargaining, but JBC does not participate in decision-making concerning benefits.

## JBC Activities

### 1. Employee and Family Assistance Program Review

Throughout 2025, JBC conducted an in-depth review of the Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) to better understand ULFA members' experiences with the program, identify the satisfaction level of ULFA members who have used EFAP services, and consider whether a change in the EFAP provider could improve the quality and effectiveness of this benefit. The EFAP survey drafted by JBC in Fall 2024 was finalized in early 2025 and issued to all University employees from late March to mid-April 2025. JBC analyzed survey responses from ULFA members, who were tracked in three main categories: continuing and tenure-track/tenured, term, and sessional appointments. Key areas of concern arising in the ULFA survey responses included delays in accessing counselling, poor counsellor matching, inconsistent quality of service, and satisfaction levels that were lower than anticipated.

On the basis of the EFAP survey results, JBC began to explore alternative EFAP service providers with the assistance of Mercer, a benefits consulting firm. Three providers were selected to present to JBC and representatives of other employee groups in July 2025: Greenshield, Kii, and Homewood Health (the current provider). Following the three presentations, JBC sought further clarifications and additional information from the three providers. JBC's debrief on the EFAP provider presentations included discussion of provider capacity, counselling hour limits, cost, and what a process of transitioning away from the current provider might look like. JBC will continue to be engaged on EFAP provider decisions in 2026.

### 2. Group Benefits Usage, Costing, & Plan Design

Over the Winter 2025 term, JBC continued the work begun in 2024 to examine the structure, sustainability, and coverage levels of various aspects of the health benefits plan for ULFA members, with the goal of finalizing a set of improvement recommendations to be forwarded to the parties at bargaining toward a new Academic Staff Collective Agreement (ASCA). JBC considered effective ways in which to increase access to, and coverage for, high-use paramedical services, key medical devices, and other health benefits, such as vaccine coverage.

JBC also sought and examined further information on multiple strategies to improve the drug plan and manage costs. These included mandatory generics, prescriber override options, generic pricing with authorization, step therapy, managed formularies, and possibly introducing a direct bill drug card. Requested information supplied by Alberta Blue Cross (ABC) included costing estimates, special authorization approval rates, prescriber override criteria, and mechanisms to appeal managed formulary decisions and protocols. JBC considered the implications of implementing the various contemplated drug plan changes regarding coverage, convenience, safety, administrative burden, and anticipated impacts on new and continuing employees.

Discussions focused on ensuring adequate access to necessary medications without creating undue or inequitable barriers. Concerns raised in these discussions included off-label uses, high-cost drugs, and the risk of delayed treatment under certain control strategies. JBC considered the experiences of non-union groups who were transitioning to a fully managed drug plan and whether a similar model could be appropriate for ULFA. Overall, the JBC sought to balance cost containment with transparency, safety, and a positive member experience.

### 3. Benefit Plan Design Recommendations

With the assistance of detailed costing information supplied by ABC to support potential benefit enhancements, JBC investigated a wide range of improvements. These included upgrading coverage for mental health and other paramedicals, increasing the hearing aid coverage, adding coverage for glucose monitoring sensors and vaccines, and adopting more current fee guide rates for paramedicals, medical durables, dental care, and vision care. JBC finalized a set of ULFA [Benefit Plan Design Recommendations](#) on March 21, 2025, which were forwarded to the Board and ULFA Executive.

### 4. Member Education

JBC discussed implementing training sessions led by ABC to educate ULFA members on aspects of their benefits plans, including plan usage, drug plan controls, and new claim submission processes (such as reinstated receipt requirements). An agreed timing consideration for such sessions is to schedule them in a manner that aligns with bargaining timelines to ensure that information provided remains accurate once contract negotiations conclude. Three offerings of an ABC-led webinar on the Flexible Spending Account were communicated to ULFA members in November 2025.

Additionally, the committee worked to enhance transparency by agreeing to promote new guidance documents, such as the Study Leave Guide, through platforms like the Pension and Benefits website and ULFA's website. The intent is to ensure that ULFA members who plan to spend part or all of approved study leaves out of province know how benefits coverage and access will work and will be able to navigate benefits confidently.

### JBC Goals for 2026

Areas identified for continued work in 2026 include the following:

- Improve discoverability and accessibility of benefits resources
- Create an FAQ page regarding the changes to the benefits plan in 2026
- Host information sessions for ULFA members on the updated benefits plan
- Improve clarity of benefits information to enhance understanding and informed usage
- Continue to be engaged in EFAP provider decisions

- Continue to look for fruitful ways to improve the benefits plan.

Submitted by:

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April 10, 2026