

BUILDING a BRIGHTER ALBERTA



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RECOMMENDATIONS

AFFORDABILITY

Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees

Regulate Mandatory-Non Instructional Fees (MNIFs), allowing for fee increases or the introduction of new fees only after student approval either through referendum or, at minimum, a vote at students' council.

Tuition

Put the tuition cap back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act and tie future tuition increases to CPI to ensure post-secondary education remains affordable and predictable for Alberta students and the families that help support them.

International Student Tuition

Ensure that future increases to international tuition are not made mid-program and investigate mechanisms for ensuring tuition is affordable for international students while still covering the portion of costs that is not offset by Alberta taxpayers.

ACCESSIBILITY

Rural & Aboriginal Bursary

Establish the Rural and Aboriginal Bursary promised in the 2012 election to improve participation rates amongst these under-represented groups.

Upfront Grants & Bursaries

Establish new forms of non-repayable student aid such as upfront, needs based, substantial, and universal grants to assist in reducing student debt levels, bringing the student financial aid system back into balance, and encouraging greater participation.

QUALITY

Student Employment

Start a new student employment program in Alberta that builds off of the successes of STEP, while refocusing on a core mandate of assisting students to gain employment and build skills in areas related to their program of study.

Open Educational Resources

Undertake and open textbook initiative through Campus Alberta and work in collaboration with the federal government and the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada to implement a national open textbook strategy.

Student Mental Health

Ensure that all brick and mortar Campus Alberta universities are part of future mental health funding initiatives and that the funding made available in 2013 is continued after the initial 3 years at an equal or greater rate.

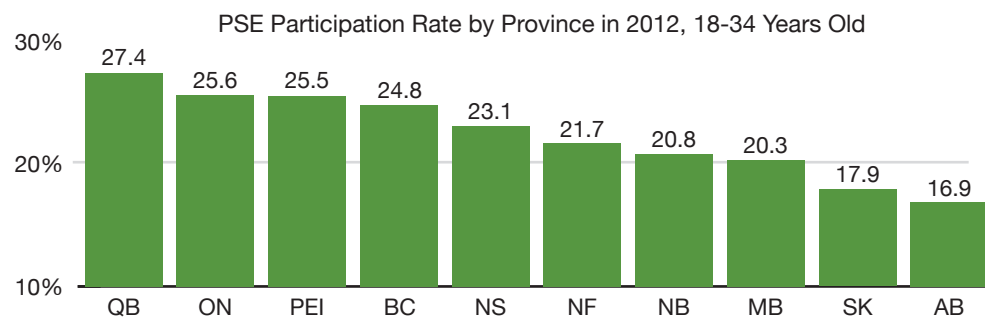
INTRODUCTION

Alberta has many challenges in the near future - a growing economy and a province with unlimited potential also needs to make strategic investments to ensure our future remains prosperous. Post-secondary education is one of those strategic investments, and the return on that investment will pay off for generations to come.

Budget 2014 has helped to at least partially restore the cuts made to post-secondary in the previous year, however, universities in Alberta are still dealing with the impact of the largest funding cuts to their operating budgets in the past twenty years. In the lead up to the 2012 provincial election, the Progressive Conservatives promised that these cuts would not fall on “the backs of students”, however, the most frequently raised issue by students in focus group conversations conducted by the student-led Ignite Alberta initiative were the recent cuts made to provincial funding of post-secondary. Students are worried about the long-term effects the cuts will have on the quality of their education and at the same time are being asked to pay more for their education due to the introduction of, or increases to existing, non-instructional fees.

At this point in Alberta’s history we find ourselves at a truly unique juncture. The Premier of our province, Dave Hancock, is also the Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education. This is also not his first time as the minister for the post-secondary education portfolio. In 2006, under the leadership of Minister Hancock, Alberta Advanced Education ushered in ‘A Learning Alberta.’ After extensive consultation with the public and a broad range of stakeholders, ‘A Learning Alberta’ put forward a bold 20-year strategic plan with six key goals at its core. One of these goals was to move from what was then the third lowest post-secondary participation rate in Canada to the highest. Unfortunately, Alberta has since slipped in its post-secondary participation and now holds the lowest rate in Canada while continuing to decline.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS), which now represents over 100,000 students after welcoming both Mount Royal University and MacEwan University into our organization this year, is making several recommendations under the three themes of affordability, accessibility, and quality that we think are a crucial part in strengthening post-secondary education in Alberta and turning around the downward trend in participation.



Source: Campus Alberta Planning Resource 2013

AFFORDABILITY

Key to ensuring a brighter future for our province is making post-secondary education affordable for all those who are interested in attending. Stable, predictable funding for post-secondary institutions is also of the utmost importance as it generally translates to stable, predictable tuition and fee increases for students, allowing them and the families that support them to better plan for a future that includes attending a post-secondary institution. If Alberta is to increase its participation rate, affordability must be a core guiding principle for Campus Alberta.

Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees

When the first Mandatory Non-Instructional Fee (MNIF) that covered a “basket of services” was brought in at the University of Alberta in 2009 it was intended to be simply a one-time fee to cover a gap in operating costs for the upcoming academic year. However, over the past several years, institutions have become reliant on the revenue generated by MNIFs and as such these fees are now a regular, annual part of the student financial landscape.

While it is extremely ambiguous as to how funds garnered from MNIFs are being spent, it is clear that students are increasingly being asked to foot the bill for core institutional obligations such as security and insurance. Unlike tuition, there are currently no regulations surrounding these fees, so institutions are able to increase them by whatever level they deem appropriate. This year, for example, students at the University of Lethbridge saw an increase to their MNIF of 300 percent and students at Mount Royal University paid a new \$240 Mandatory Non-Instructional Fee for the first time.

Recommendation

Regulate Mandatory-Non Instructional Fees (MNIFs), allowing for fee increases or the introduction of new fees only after student approval either through referendum or, at minimum, a vote at students' council.

Tuition

With the tuition fee regulation set to expire in August 2016 and an ongoing review of both the funding framework and tuition and fees, the time is right to re-commit to securing future tuition increases to CPI to keep education affordable for Albertans.

Since the 1990's tuition in Alberta has more than tripled in real dollars, controlling for inflation. Acknowledging the impacts that these massive tuition increases had for students, their families, and the province as a whole, the government tied tuition to inflation in 2006. This policy has helped to provide a measure of predictability in the cost of post-secondary over the last decade, allowing students and their families to plan for costs. This predictability is a true Alberta advantage, as other provinces across Canada experience drastic fluctuations in tuition costs due to frequent changes between increases and freezes.

Recommendation

Put the tuition cap back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act and tie future tuition increases to CPI to ensure post-secondary education remains affordable and predictable for Alberta students and the families that help support them.

International Student Tuition

This year at the University of Alberta, international student tuition was increased by 5 percent despite projections that only a 3.5 percent increase was needed. Additionally, the increase was not grandfathered in and thus takes effect mid-program for many students. With other institutions considering where to price their international tuition rates relative to the University of Alberta, now is the time to set the rules right.

International students should not be treated as “cash cows” and made to bear the burden of our institutions’ financial deficits, yet university administrations continue to paint a bleak picture of what the future holds for international students studying in Alberta. The federal government is looking to double international student enrolment within Canada by 2022 in an effort to increase jobs and stimulate the domestic economy. The risk of escalating tuition for international students is that instead of serving as ambassadors for Alberta they will tell friends and family not to come to our province in pursuit of post-secondary education or employment to fill Alberta’s growing skilled labour shortage.

Recommendation

Ensure that future increases to international tuition are not made mid-program and investigate mechanisms for ensuring tuition is affordable for international students while still covering the portion of costs that is not offset by Alberta taxpayers.

ACCESSIBILITY

At each of the institutions where Ignite focus groups were held, making Alberta’s post-secondary system accessible was the most frequently mentioned priority among current Alberta students. Accessibility was thought of both in terms of costs as well as geographically having access to the courses and programs of study that students are interested in.

Rural & Aboriginal Bursary

The mandate letter given by the Premier to all Cabinet members on June 4, 2012 contained the ambitious goal of closing the participation gap between underrepresented groups in post-secondary. Key to making progress on this initiative was the promise of a new bursary program aimed at rural and aboriginal students. The program would start at \$18 million in 2013/14 and grow to reach \$25 million by 2021/22. However, the program has yet to be implemented.

Aboriginal Albertans are our fastest growing population of any demographic group in the province yet, as of 2006, they lag 17 percent behind in post-secondary educational attainment. When it comes to rural students, about half

of the Ignite Alberta focus groups indicated that geographic access to post-secondary education acted as the main barrier, mostly due to the extra costs incurred by students needing to move further away from home in order to attend an institution offering their desired program of study.

Recommendation

Establish the Rural and Aboriginal Bursary promised in the 2012 election to improve participation rates amongst these under-represented groups.

Upfront Grants & Bursaries

Over the last several years, Alberta has been shifting away from a mixed system of loans, debt relief, bursaries, and grants to a system focused primarily on financial aid in the form of loans and student debt. These changes have not stopped the decline in Alberta's post-secondary participation rate. While significant and welcome changes were made to the loan program, such as eliminating parental contributions, improving need calculation, and introducing a completion grant for borrowers, new loans do not address the problem of student debt.

Recommendation

Establish new forms of non-repayable student aid such as upfront, needs based, substantial, and universal grants to assist in reducing student debt levels, bringing the student financial aid system back into balance, and encouraging greater participation.

QUALITY

Within post-secondary quality can refer to many things. Most obvious is the quality of teaching and research and of the learning experience for students. However 'quality' also encapsulates the broader experiences that students gain from their time at a university campus and also speaks to the value for investment for students and their families.

Student Employment

Originally introduced in 1972, the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) was suspended in 2013 after providing Alberta's students with temporary full-time summer employment opportunities for over forty years. Alberta is now the only province without such a program.

By encouraging employers to create good paying summer jobs offering valuable work experience and an opportunity to receive training in applied skills, STEP provided students with the ability to further their work place experience as well as put any modest savings during summer months towards their next year's tuition. STEP also provided the relevant work experience many students needed to quickly make the transition after graduation to working in their fields of study and contributing to Alberta's economy.

Recommendation

Start a new student employment program in Alberta that builds off of the successes of STEP, while refocusing on a core mandate of assisting students to gain employment and build skills in areas related to their program of study.

Open Educational Resources

Over the past two decades, students in Alberta and across Canada have been burdened with increasing costs well beyond what they can afford. The cost of obtaining a post-secondary education is not limited to tuition and supplementary fees: textbooks and supplies have become an increasingly significant burden for students.

The cost of textbooks and supplies for a full-time student in Alberta can often exceed \$1200 and a U of A study conducted between 1995 and 2004 demonstrated that textbook costs increase at 2.8 times the rate of inflation. British Columbia recently undertook an open textbooks initiative, introducing 40 open textbooks to BC post-secondary students, which helped over 300 students each save an average of \$146 on textbooks for the fall 2013 semester.

Recommendation

Undertake and open textbook initiative through Campus Alberta and work in collaboration with the federal government and the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada to implement a national open textbook strategy.

Student Mental Health

In January 2013 the Government of Alberta announced that the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge would each receive \$3 million over the next three years to put towards improving student mental health. This funding is already having a positive impact for undergraduates on our campuses, but there is still more to do. Furthermore, the ground that has been gained will only be maintained if funding continues after the initial three years.

Mount Royal and MacEwan undergraduates face the same pressures as their peers at the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and University of Lethbridge yet their institutions were not part of the university mental health funding initiative. CAUS believes all brick and mortar universities in Alberta should be a part of any future mental health funding initiatives. We would also like to see collaboration between our institutions in sharing best practices and success stories, as well as any formal evaluation tools used to assess the funding initiative be made public.

Recommendation

Ensure that all brick and mortar Campus Alberta universities are part of future mental health funding initiatives and that the funding made available in 2013 is continued after the initial 3 years at an equal or greater rate.

COUNCIL of ALBERTA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

CAUS represents the interests of over 100,000 university students across Alberta. We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, MacEwan University, and Mount Royal University to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders.

